AS THE OWL DISCREET

Essay towards a conversation

— and —

CARLY'S DANCE

A novel

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a novel entitled *Carly's Dance* and an essay entitled *As the Owl Discreet*. Although separate works, a line runs through them that might be described as an urge to connect; each work, although self-contained, is concerned with the co-existence of opposites, or more precisely, apparent opposites. The essay's title is ironic, borrowed from Hillaire Belloc's perverse verses collected as *Cautionary Tales*. Discretion is exactly what the thesis tests the bounds of, as do the characters in my novel. And so do I, in using family history to motivate my research.

As the Owl Discreet comprises a series of nine short essays joined by a mesh that frames the essays as creative writing research. Thus, one aspect of the essay moves to establish a way in which to read the thesis in the light of institutional expectations, and another aspect illustrates "creative writing research" in a way that serves my thesis. The essay series begins with thoughts on how to approach an essay in a creative writing degree, and an examination of four postgraduate writing degrees in Western Australia. My arguments acknowledge and seek to assimilate the paradox of the creative writing essay, an example of apparent opposites co-existing within this thesis, and, I would argue, the discipline. The following essays look at other examples of opposites co-existing, through explorations of clashes between self and other suggested by "family history" and "the Australian Family", and the role creative writing can play in negotiating this fraught territory.

Carly's Dance blends fiction with history, especially local history, in fact it focuses on my family history and the lives of my grandparents who were active members of the Communist Party in Perth during the nineteen thirties and into the nineteen fifties. This blend is reflected in the novel's structure, which alternates a story about the McKinnon family set in 1954 with a story set in 2004 narrated by Carly McKinnon, the 1954 McKinnons' granddaughter. It soon becomes apparent that Carly is the author of the 1954 story: it is her attempt to recreate the family history using her grandparents' journals and scrapbooks as well as scholarly texts such as those I have used for research in this thesis.

Carly's work is plausible, source-driven and whimsical in tone, as befits the era of romantic radicalism in Perth around the time of the Second World War. In 1954, over six months of the McKinnon family's lives, we see clashes between radical and conservative political elements, between matriarchy and patriarchy, and between conflicting notions of good Australian *character*, with all the ambiguity that word implies.

Carly's incidental story records her life as a single mother of a young child and her newfound fascination with researching the family history. But not far behind this lies another story concerning Carly's mother, who left her when she was small. This family history is unknown, but is it unknowable? Little by little, this other story demands Carly's attention. Her will to create draws the two family stories, the McKinnons' and her mother's, into a single, oscillating line.

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 in made in the text;* or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

Vahri McKenzie

* For the creative component of this thesis, some further acknowledgments of such material need to be made. It is difficult, however, to judge how much information to include, given the nature of text to replicate, multiply, adapt, invert; these are matters of degree. Therefore, I have made an arbitrary choice to acknowledge here those sources from which I have employed ten or more words in much the same order and sense as the original. As my essay will illustrate, many other sources are used in smaller pieces and these are all acknowledged in my Complete Bibliography.

Acknowledgement of sources

p. 113 — song lyric accompanying Miles Davis' 1964 album *Four and More*, from Real Vocal Book Press (c. 1971, p. 137). This is an illegal though well-known publication and will not be found in a reference library. A legal version has recently been published by Hal Leonard Corporation (2006). My Complete Bibliography lists both versions.

p. 123 — Menzies' quotes from October 1952 and November 1953 editions of *Australia Today* cited in Murphy (2000, pp. 125 & 127).

pp. 190–191 — Stewart Enrights' dialogue adapted from "About *Quadrant* Magazine". Retrieved December 31, 2007, from *Quadrant* website http://quadrant.org.au/php/about.php

p. 247 — radio news adapted from Menzies' announcement on April 13, 1954, cited in Murphy (2000, p. 127).

p. 252 — Don Ditchard's stump speech adapted from "There is a plot", 1954 Communist Party campaign material, in the *Cameron Collection*, Box 28 (Espionage), Folder 92. See Cameron (1919–1995).

p. 265 — PJ Pound's dialogue taken from a pamphlet in the *Cameron Collection*, see Miles (1943, p. 9).

p. 284 — Menzies' dialogue adapted from 1949 speech on the Communist Party, quoted in Murphy (2000, p. 97); from his "forgotten people" speeches quoted in Murphy (p. 26); from his announcement on April 13, 1954, cited in Murphy (p. 128).

p. 284 — Isabel Matthews' speech adapted from speech given in Melbourne for a meeting of the Peace Council, transcript in the *Cameron Collection*, see Vassilieff (1954).

p. 303 — verses from Introduction to Hillaire Belloc's *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts* (1896), collected in *Cautionary Verses* (1939). For a contemporary reference see Belloc (1997) in Complete Bibliography.

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As the Owl Discreet

essay towards a conversation

INTRODUCTION

This essay can be thought of as a conversation that establishes the ground for a further conversation, with the novel that follows. Then, the novel itself can be read as a conversation, between the protagonist and her family, between the years 1954 and 2004, and between competing ideas such as “history” and “fiction”.

A conversation implies dialogue, indeed my thesis is built around notions of dialogic argument, a paradoxical concern given the monological nature of the work. Contradiction is held within dialectic, thus an overarching direction guides this conversation. It moves towards practice: what begins with methodological enquiry and genre categorisation moves through literary criticism and literary comparison to a novel, which carries on the conversation.

My methodological research into postgraduate creative writing degrees in Western Australia examines the discipline’s situation in terms of significance and professional emphasis. This leads me to argue for a new understanding of the genres involved in the production of the creative writing thesis, and the relationship between them. I propose that an oscillating or iterative approach to the writing of the thesis accounts for the paradoxical relationship between the parts. I expand my argument into the broader question of contested space between public and private, particularly as it manifests in the confrontation implicit in “family history”.

My family history is an explicit theme in this work, as is the broader understanding of the public family, the “Australian family”. This direct encounter between my private world and the public world contests ethical grounds where I test myself against the world I know. I know this world, beyond my own experience, through stories of the past. Without some means of assimilating these historical stories into my present, they lose relevance and as I grow older, will fade into nostalgia. In my thesis, fiction facilitates the integration of historical stories into the present. The creative journey is paramount but remains indebted to memory and its endlessly written reflections.

Thus my thesis concludes with a novel that is both independent and interdependent. It *is* self-contained, and yet, very much a product of a postgraduate creative writing degree. I ask: How could it not be?

ONE — A METAPHORICAL ARCHITECTURE

Dr. David Mason cleared his throat and said, “Let’s just stop there a minute, Carol.”

I looked up from my reading and waited for him to continue. He was staring out the window of his second-floor office onto the grassed area below. Students sat in small groups, smoking and talking. I guessed he was around fifty but seemed somehow to be much older. Neat hands and feet were tucked obediently on the desk, under the desk, acquiescing in their limited role in this life, so much heavier was David’s head. The weight of knowledge wrinkled his brow.

“You are writing a history thesis, yes? Provisionally titled *Home and Away: Social and Domestic Communism during the Cold War*, yes?”

I nodded.

“You cannot have these — ” David waved his hand about as he sought for the word, and then it returned immediately to its place when he found — “Incidents, these imagined incidents! The cooking, the shopping, entertainments and socialising… Ahhh, Carol, ahhh, no, no, no, this is not good history.” David shook his head sadly and stared at his hands.

Even though I’d foreseen David’s resistance to the somewhat unconventional style of my research, I felt rather angry and drew a few deep breaths to calm myself, saying, “David, I think it’s important to explore what kind of people the McKinnons were. Ken’s personality helps to define how he operated within the Party, and Elsie’s state-of-mind shows she’s suffering from a kind of domestic mania. These things affect the choices they made and the way ideas spread within the Party and back to Head Office.” I thought to myself, what does he mean, not good history?

David nodded his head knowingly throughout my speech and I wasn’t sure whether this meant it was worthwhile having rehearsed it or not. But when I finished he shook his head and went on slowly: “I think you’re headed for trouble with the tone of this. These notions are unsubstantiated. You must draw a line around invention.”

“But David,” I protested, “This is a valid interpretation of a wide variety of sources and scholarly works! The ideological issues in Elsie’s life were mediated through her personality, determining the kind of communist she was. Elsie’s domestic role, analysed alongside her absent mother…”

I trailed off as I suddenly remembered the load of nappies I'd left in the washing machine at home. Damn! They'd be soured and I'd have to do them again. I supposed it was too much to hope that Dad might have thought to check the washing machine and hang them out.

David gurgled a little, vacillating, and said: "I remain unconvinced. But leave it for now, and we'll see if it's relevant to your study."

I was annoyed at becoming distracted and thought I ought to concede his point, though at that stage I had no intention of changing anything. "OK, David. I'll think it through again."

* * *

So went a section from an early draft of my novel; I'm happy to find another use for it to illustrate my theme here. I want to construct a metaphor, one of substance and weight, an architectural metaphor, perhaps, to establish an idea in space. It has walls, solid walls of brick or rock (very often sandstone). Whether you are inside the space it creates or outside of it, it forms a barrier or container in a larger space. This metaphor signifies many things: the university institution, the structure of one's course, one's supervisor, one's sources, a critic, to name a few pertinent to me. The activities I've undertaken to produce this work — reading, researching, writing — have been shaped and bounded by what the metaphor signifies, as well as producing the metaphor itself.

I'm not interested in whether this is good or bad; they are the conditions of undertaking a postgraduate degree by research. What I am interested in is recognising how the shaping and binding influences me, and in turn, encourages me to look back at the mechanisms by which it takes place. And further, does the stone building resist my examination as I resist its inscrutability? I will focus on two aspects of the metaphorical building: the university institution and the way the discipline of writing is positioned within it; and the essay in the writing higher degree.

Two sets of organising principles operate within this essay, where the first is clearly indicated by the numbered parts One through Nine. The other (boxed, as here) sits loosely atop that, offering a frame through which to read its progress. It could be argued that this metatext is necessary to fulfill the requirements of a creative writing degree by research, which aims to have the last word on the last word. Here is the essay, but why stop there? The essay could use some contextualising too.

My first organising principle in this metaset posits the creative writing essay as research in the field of creative writing and leads directly to the question: what is creative writing research? In their opening chapter, "Towards Creative Writing Research" (Krauth & Brady, 2006), Tess Brady and Nigel Krauth suggest the evidence points in several broad directions for creative writing research. These include creative writing pedagogy, creative writing research methodology, cultural studies, genre studies, meaning studies, as well as the more traditional aesthetic focus of literary criticism. From this list it can be seen that writing research is well positioned to frame the humanities and communication disciplines, indeed the notion is explored in Claire Woods' chapter in their book. Woods argues, "because texts and textual culture are central to how lives are conducted, a focus through writing creates the opportunity for a genuinely transdisciplinary exploration which can re-invigorate humanities education" (ibid., pp. 126–7).

My research is guided by the particular needs of my work in the university context, that is, as an essay and novel, and draws on theories from most of the research areas listed above. Thus my first organising principle in this set is concerned with the breadth of the field of creative writing research. My second organising principle seeks a way through this range through an examination of methodology. What is the plan or the process in undertaking creative writing research? This brings me back to a preliminary examination of the questions of creative writing in the university institution, and the essay in the creative writing higher degree.

TWO — CREATIVE WRITING DEGREES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN UNVERSITIES

There are four universities in Western Australia offering a higher degree in creative writing. I might have undertaken my degree at any one of them, but with the pressure of making a fast decision, my choices were limited by what information could be gleaned in a couple of phone calls or a quick meeting. What I would have liked to know as a prospective student is only clear to me after much research; my contention is that my experience is indicative of the under-theorised nature of creative writing research and pedagogy, particularly as it pertains to postgraduate writing degrees.

I will now sketch a brief history of the writing degrees offered at each of the four public universities in Western Australia, focusing on the discipline's place within each. I will also assess the indications regarding degree structure and examination criteria as given in university handbooks and rulebooks, supplemented in some cases by personal communications with academics at each of the universities. After looking at each in turn, I will focus on two lines of analysis across the universities. These might be described as two spectra: a Disciplinary Identity Spectrum, suggested by how writing is positioned in relation to its neighbouring disciplines; and a Professional Focus Spectrum indicating how the degree values the roles of author and academic.

The University of Western Australia is the oldest of WA's universities but was the last of the four to begin a creative writing Doctor of Philosophy program, in 2001. However, undergraduate courses and the Master of Arts (Creative Writing) were developed around the same time as those of other WA universities, that is, the mid-nineties. At UWA, the University General Rules for Academic Courses that apply to the MA (Creative Writing) recognise the dual nature of the thesis, but there is no equivalent ruling for the PhD (Creative Writing).

In recent years UWA has developed a fairly strong identity for the discipline: Creative Writing is available as an undergraduate and postgraduate course alongside Communication, Theatre and Women's Studies, which fall under the discipline of English and Cultural Studies, in the School of Social and Cultural Studies. Other disciplines in this

school include Anthropology, Asian Studies, Communication Studies and so on, reflecting a change of alignment for English and Cultural Studies since 2003, more toward the social science disciplines and adjacent to the "sister School of Humanities" (UWA, SSCS website, "Welcome"), where the disciplines of History, Philosophy, Classics and so on, are found.

By looking at its faculty structures, the second oldest of WA's universities, Murdoch, is seen to be more aligned with the tradition of UWA than the other, newer universities. But unlike UWA, creative writing at Murdoch does not appear to have made a strongly writerly response to its disciplinary submission to English. Creative Writing is only available as a minor under English, in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities. Murdoch does offer a PhD in Creative Writing, but there is no information in the university Handbook separate from that of PhD programs in other disciplines in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities such as History and Asian Studies, which don't require two separate pieces of work in the form of a creative project and an accompanying essay. The creative writing thesis is to be examined, as others are, in terms of originality, significance, context and methodology.

Edith Cowan University is the youngest of Western Australia's four tertiary institutions considered here, a 1991 amalgamation of teachers' colleges and art schools, yet its writing program was among the first in WA. Writing has a strong identity with its own disciplinary area alongside English, History, Anthropology and so on, and its parent School is International and Cultural Studies. Adjacent disciplines such as Visual and Performing Arts are located in the School of Communications and Contemporary Arts. This is worth mentioning because higher degrees in this school also involve the production of creative work with an accompanying essay, however, they are offered as the Master or Doctor of Creative Arts, whereas higher degrees in International and Cultural Studies are the MA and PhD. While originality and a contribution to the discipline remain the focus of the Communications and Contemporary Arts courses, students "will also be expected to provide an appropriate record of their research through a written thesis or exegesis based on their research activities, their artistic ideas and the exploratory processes" (ECU, *Postgraduate Course Guide*, 2007, p. 147). In effect, candidates are to provide a commentary on the main event, the creative work, where the essay is secondary to the

creative product. In addition, courses in context and methodology are offered to supplement what primarily remains a "practice in a given medium" (ibid.).

At ECU, the discipline of Writing is clearly different from the Visual and Performing Arts, which focus on craft and technique. In the Course Guide, however, a sense remains that the postgraduate Writing essay exists to supplement the creative product, which itself:

> … will be a substantial, original work which is publishable.
>
> Included in the assessment of the thesis is an essay … which may involve one or more of the following in relation to the writing project: relevant theoretical issues; its conceptual and/or cultural contexts; its aims and methods; its relation to other writers or writing within the genre (ibid., pp. 174-175).

That is, discussions of the *creative work's* context, the *creative work's* methodology, or comparison with other *creative works* of the same genre.

Curtin University began as an Institute of Technology and restructured as a university in 1987. This history fostered humanities disciplines with a focus on technique and craft, as well as gradually assuming more traditional areas of study. Curtin places Creative Writing in a strong disciplinary position, alongside Performance Studies and Professional Writing in the department of Communication and Cultural Studies. Although this is the same department to host Literary, Cultural and Australian Studies, wherein a higher degree is a PhD, postgraduate creative writers will undertake the Master or Doctor of Creative Arts. This sets Curtin apart from the other universities, aligning its Creative Writing courses more with the technique and craft of ECU's visual and performing art courses, particularly with regard to their focus on practice in a given medium, where Creative Writing's medium is text. As with ECU's DCA, Curtin's degree offers coursework "to assist candidates in contextualising their research question and devising appropriate research methodologies by providing study in relevant history, methodology, theory and criticism" (Curtin University, *Courses Handbook 2007*, "Doctor of Creative Arts (Communication and Cultural Studies)"). Just as in other institutions, Curtin's rules regarding thesis examination require the parts to be assessed together as one, and the thesis must likewise demonstrate significance and originality in its field and an understanding of context and methodology.

Despite their differences, the DCA is equivalent to the other institutions' PhD: they are both research-based postgraduate degrees, so the degree is not the contentious issue. Rather, it is this: at all institutions there is a problem with assessing the creative writing thesis in terms of its two constituent parts. The meaningful differences between the four institutions' degrees boil down to how they answer two questions. Firstly, how does the creative writing thesis fit within the university's definition of research? And secondly, what is the relationship between the creative product and the essay?

Curtin University attempts to define some terms in its Courses Handbook. The thesis is "a creative body of work and a written exegesis, which together form complementary responses to a clearly defined research question" (2007). This goes some way towards answering the key questions, in that the parts of the thesis can be seen to relate through the research question. But this generates another question: what is a research question in this context? Extra interpretive information for Curtin's degree includes a useful 2004 article regarding the relationship between the creative product and accompanying essay in Curtin University's DCA. Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo commend the changes that were made to the Regulations for Higher Degrees by Research to accommodate the new award structure in 1998, nominating the two parts and setting word lengths. But, voicing a common concern, they lament that while the Regulations recognise the two halves they don't indicate how the two halves are to interact. Milech and Schilo's discussion of the Research Question Model and its alternatives, the Context and Commentary Models, provides some useful groundwork from which to look more closely at the essay in the writing higher degree, so I will summarise their framework here.

The Context Model is the most commonly used in Australian postgraduate writing courses, probably because of its ambiguity, Milech and Schilo suggest. This model takes a broad, contextualising approach that recognises creative production *can possibly* be a research thesis in itself, and where the exegesis "accommodates normative university definitions of research as work that deals with theoretical, historical and disciplinary matters in a fashion that contributes to knowledge in the discipline" (Milech and Schilo, 2004). This breadth offers much scope to candidates to pursue areas of interest to them, but the Context Model is limited, argue Milech and Schilo, by its failure to articulate the way

the essay is to relate to the creative work. This begs the question, in a creative writing degree, what is the essay for? The Context Model undermines the status of the creative work as a research thesis in its own right by shoring it up with conventional research. These institutions have a bet both ways: by offering postgraduate degrees by research in creative writing they suggest creative production is itself research, but by failing to articulate the role of and reason for the essay, the creative work's status as research is undermined. The Context Model thus falls back on conventional university expectations of what constitutes research.

The essay, within the frame of the Commentary Model, might be defined as the story of the creative work. There are strong and weak versions of this model, where the strong version tends towards the traditional research thesis in its commentary on the creative work, placing the creative work in its disciplinary and intellectual context. The weak version might tell how the creative work came to be written, but with insufficient demonstration of the use of various research skills expected of a postgraduate thesis. Both versions of the Commentary approach, say Milech and Schilo, treat the essay as secondary to the creative work, as an explanation of the creative work. This approach treats *all* creative works as research theses in themselves; the difference between the strong and weak versions of the Commentary Model, they argue, is that the stronger version "offers a more cogent means of demonstrating" that the creative work fulfills the normative university requirements for research (ibid.).

Clearly, if one were to read the theses produced, there could be an overlap in subject matter between the Context and strong Commentary Models. These models are nonetheless useful ways of describing *different approaches* to creative writing theses, where the strong Commentary Model approaches the essay solely in response to the creative work, and the Context Model approaches the essay in response to the creative work *and* normative university definitions of research. The models are a way of framing a thesis, not describing a thesis. It is important to remember that such models, although abstract and less ambiguous than real-life situations, nevertheless reflect real structures set by university regulations, not by each candidate in response to the needs of their work.

Comparing the two, Milech and Schilo show that, unlike the Context Model, the Commentary Model offers a clear relationship between the creative work and the essay,

where the essay proceeds from the creative work. However, the Commentary Model could be described as an uncritical inversion: where the Context Model implies the creative work needs advocacy, the Commentary Model implies the creative work is sufficient unto itself, regardless of what the creative work consists of. Milech and Schilo's main objection is:

> … that the Commentary Model, in both its weak and strong versions, like the Context Model, preserves the theory-practice divide. Certainly, there is an advance — the binaries of theory and practice … are reversed, so that creative and production practices are the primary terms and academic writing is the supplement. Still, the binary remains in place. As a result … the creative work [does not stand] independently as research (ibid.).

But there is a problem here. If the Commentary Model frames *all creative production as research*, how can the opposition between creative production and research be said to be preserved? Thus, Milech and Schilo's "answer" to the "problem" of the dichotomy is weakened.

Milech and Schilo offer an alternative — the Research Question Model — which they claim mediates a solution, a middle road that "undertake[s] to honour two masters — the disciplinary forms and languages of fields of study relatively new to Australian universities, and the understanding of research embodied in the genre of the traditional written thesis" (ibid.). In this model, "[b]oth the written and creative component[s] of the thesis are conceptualised as *independent answers to the same research question*" (ibid., authors' italics). The research question is "posed, refined and reposed by the student across several stages of a research program" (ibid.).

It seems to me that the Research Question Model is not significantly different from the Context Model, neither of which deems all creative works as necessarily valid research theses in themselves. Milech and Schilo claim that the Context Model does not adequately describe the relationship between the two parts, and that this implies the essay's role is to guarantee the validity of the research thesis. The Research Question Model only avoids these objections through its ambiguous concept of the research question, which appears to perform the same act of implicit value judgement:

> To be research, a creative work or production piece must meet an "entry" condition — it must be practice conceived and reflected upon in the interests of answering a carefully and clearly defined research question framed on the basis of a sound working knowledge of a particular field, and in the interests of contributing new understandings to it (ibid.).

What, then, is the purpose of the new model? In other degrees, guidelines suggest that the creative and essay parts of the thesis must relate, whereas Curtin's Research Question Model emphasises that the parts relate *through* the research question. This certainly offers clarity but is also prescriptive in that it comes close to the relationship between the parts *becoming* the thesis. The Research Question Model relies on a set of circular definitions revolving around "research".

Milech and Schilo hint that, where other institutions make a "writerly" response to an "academic" starting point, Curtin formalises an "academic" response to an arts praxis starting point. In other words, there is an awareness of the need to compensate for an actual or perceived disadvantage amongst creative production research candidates. This is revealed in Milech and Schilo's final paragraph when they write, "the 'novelty' of creative and production-based research theses … requires an array of support mechanisms for both students and supervisors in those areas" (ibid.). Curtin's postgraduate writing program is supported by coursework in context and methodology: twenty-five per cent in one reference and one third in another (Curtin University, *Courses Handbook 2007*, "Doctor of Creative Arts (Communication and Cultural Studies)"). There is a possibility that candidates might find the compulsory coursework redundant, and the Handbook itself is unclear about exactly how much is required.

I'm not sure that the discipline of writing is well suited to Milech and Schilo's "two masters", where academic context is more faithfully served than creative production. I appreciate the attempt to negotiate a way through the theory/practice divide and offer independent but equal status to both parts, but their case is not a strong one. Is there even a case to answer, however? Could Curtin's "research question" be no more than a strategic piece of edu-speak that is just as malleable as "exegesis"?

It becomes clear that any adequate comparison between the universities along my spectra of examination — Disciplinary Identity and Professional Focus — will centre on a discussion of their treatment of the essay. Two stone walls of my metaphorical building — the essay in the writing higher degree and the structure of the writing higher degree — form a corner. Milech and Schilo's models make a good start but my analysis is better served by my spectrum models, where the "writerly" end of my Professional Focus Spectrum is

reflected in the Commentary Model and the "academic" end is reflected in the Context Model. Both concepts are ways of expressing the founding opposition evident in writing higher degree courses.

Curtin and Murdoch sit at the "academic" end of my Professional Focus Spectrum. Curtin's degree has a quite well articulated position on the roles of writer and academic (or creative work and essay), which, through the research question, employs normative university definitions of what constitutes research and therefore values the role of the academic over that of the writer.

Murdoch University's degree is further along this Spectrum, with its creative writing course undifferentiated from other research degrees. Creative Writing is not presented in the Regulations, and in the Handbook it is treated as part of the discipline of English, thus it has no disciplinary identity beyond that of the individual academics who represent it. In answer to my enquiries, one Murdoch Creative Writing academic stated: "We attempt to train students in skills required of both academics and writers." But for the prospective student there is no accessible information about how this attempt is to be made. In the absence of a disciplinary identity in the Regulations, Handbook, and School of Social Sciences and Humanities website, Creative Writing relies on English for its critical methodology, with little or no "writerly" concerns. That is, the academic background of English dominates, with its focus on theories of reading, at the expense of theories of writing. The reading/writing divide is another way of expressing the founding binary evident in writing higher degree courses.

Edith Cowan University sits towards the "writerly" end of my Professional Focus Spectrum, as evidenced by its "Guidelines for Examination of PhD (Writing)". Of the four institutions, ECU is the only one to offer interpretive information to examiners, detailing its concerns independently for the two halves of its award structure, the creative work and the essay. The two sets are somewhat the same, both focusing on conventional university expectations for research such as originality, significance and cogency. Where the guidelines differ, Writing at ECU is revealed to be more "writerly" than "academic". While the creative work ought to be concerned with readership and publishing, the essay ought to be concerned with methodological issues and the link with the creative project. Publishing and readership are not considered in regard to the essay, which supplements the creative

work. The essay looks back to the creative product but not the other way around. These guidelines are an important contribution to a considered position on how to assess the thesis given its dual nature, but the fact that they are provided to examiners and not to applicants or candidates undermines the potential of their contribution. The document is freely given if sought, but it is not considered to be part of the necessary information a candidate requires to produce a thesis.

The divide between "writer" and "academic" at ECU is wide: "writer" is valued over "academic", which suits the needs of some candidates, but is less suitable for those interested in the essay's broader applications for research or preparing for an academic career. ECU didn't model its Writing degree on that of the School of Communications and Contemporary Arts' DCA in Visual and Performing Arts, which tends more towards what Milech and Schilo would describe as a weak version of the Commentary Model where students are vaguely required to "provide an appropriate record of their research". The Writing degree has greater concern for academic context within its basically creative-production-led framework. The essay comments upon the creative work, but both are concerned with context: literary context in the case of the creative work ("Knowledge of generic conventions"), theoretical context in the case of the essay.

However, at no point is the opposition implicit in these models accounted for or theorised at ECU, in contrast with Curtin's degree, which perhaps goes too far in its attempts to pin down the paradox. Is it the job of the candidate to do this accounting and theorising? In attempting to do so in my own candidature at ECU, I come up against this contradiction: the degree's writerly focus on readership and publication of the creative work sits uncomfortably next to the institution's or examiner's understanding of what constitutes an original contribution to knowledge. There is no significant market for critical monographs and the market for literary fiction is similarly small, so there is little value in using "publishability" as a criterion in the assessment of creative writing projects in postgraduate writing courses. The concerns of this supposed market are at odds with the academy's valuing of an original contribution to knowledge, where there is a distinct possibility that "publishability" can slide into "commercial appeal", working against originality.

Of the four universities, UWA falls further toward "writer" on my Professional Focus Spectrum than any other. UWA's postgraduate writing degrees maintain a bias towards writerly concerns over those of the researcher or academic, exemplified by their entry requirements. The General Rules for Academic Courses specify special admission requirements for postgraduate candidates in the field of creative writing: for the MA, an applicant must submit "a folio of creative writing, at least one third of which has been published by recognised publishers, amounting to between 4000 and 5000 words", as well as "a 2000– to 3000–word critical essay on an aspect of the writer's craft" (UWA, *Handbooks 2007*, Rules, "10.1.2 Master of Arts (Creative Writing)"). For the PhD, in addition to the usual prerequisites, one must also have previously published a book-length creative work, which sets the bar very high. But it also excludes a section of their graduates from pursuing further studies in creative writing, which is a questionable practice for an institution of education. Sensibly, perhaps, it attracts candidates who have already learned to write in a creative style at a very high level. These candidates are still required to write an essay alongside their creative work, despite having proved themselves professional writers, and not always academic writers.

There are no formal guidelines for degree requirements in the PhD (Creative Writing) in the General Rules for Academic Courses at UWA, as there are for the MA. In practice, both higher degrees are assessed as other research higher degrees are, that is in terms of originality and significance. This "academic" approach is firmly and consistently countered by UWA academics who position their degree as "writerly", where the essay is understood in de/re-ference to the creative work. Personal communication with UWA academics listed as contacts for Creative Writing enquiries on the department website report that there is nothing in the course literature regarding the essay component of the PhD in Creative Writing. It is understood, says one, to be a "25,000 word 'thesis' relating to the theme of the creative work, or the form, or both." Another says it is "a critical essay of 25,000 words on a theoretical and/or critical topic related to one or more aspects of the creative work," and emphasises that the point is to avoid prescription. Prescription is avoided, but so too is an adequate definition of the creative writing thesis as research. In this strongly writerly context, a publication record becomes the new benchmark. These

degrees do have the value of consistency, however, between their writerly choice of candidates and a writerly focus in course structure.

My other area of interest across the institutions, the Disciplinary Identity Spectrum, appears to bear no relationship to my first area of interest. The four institutions fall into two groups of two, where UWA and Murdoch sit next to each other at the lower end of the Spectrum. That is, they have a generally more diffuse disciplinary identity than their counterparts that come from a more praxis-based institutional history, as determined by their lack of recognition in regulations and handbooks, and presumably flowing on to funding considerations. Murdoch's degree is the lower of the two, a subject within the discipline of English, although a Murdoch academic reports that a restructure is immanent so maybe this will be different in the near future. Within their disciplinary areas, these two institutions with similar disciplinary histories made different responses to the changing needs of their students, UWA applying a more writerly approach than Murdoch, which made no regulatory changes to identify creative writing as separate from English.

Curtin and ECU sit at the other end of my imagined Disciplinary Identity Spectrum. Like ECU, Curtin positions Creative Writing strongly, with recognition in the Regulations and a prominent disciplinary place in relation to neighbouring disciplines. But each offers a differently inflected writing course that is inversely reflected in their degrees. Curtin's Doctor of Creative Arts would seem to esteem creative production above all, but the degree structure is at pains to maintain high standards of contextual academic discourse. ECU's Doctor of Philosophy (Writing) would seem to empower a "writing about writing" but guidelines provided to examiners spell out criteria and the distribution of marks that clearly value creative production first and foremost.

My research assesses the information available to a diligent applicant comparing writing degrees in one geographical area. Of course, my analysis doesn't account for the impact of the intentions, preoccupations and specific skills of individuals within the universities, which can be inestimably significant. This further study, beyond my scope here, might be coupled with an assessment of the "success" of the higher degrees in writing, as determined through comparisons of graduate publications, relevant employment and graduate satisfaction. Another area of research that is of significance to my thesis (but

cannot be pursued here) concerns the awarding of points to those applying for scholarships for past professional undertakings, which, depending on how the university awards creative productions, may introduce a bias into the set of candidates accepted into a degree.

Some awareness within institutions of the kind of qualitative and comparative research I've undertaken here is the information I would have liked to have had four years ago, in order to make an informed choice between courses. Information for this methodological research into the creative writing discipline and creative writing essay was not easy to access; I suspect this is because the questions I am asking are not commonly asked and the answers not well practiced.

My analysis reveals a lack of consistency between degrees and a lack of understanding of the inconsistencies within degrees, or a failure to respond to inconsistencies. Perhaps this is not unusual for so new a discipline, but it points to some concerning things. It could be argued that contextualising one's research is a normal part of a higher degree, thus the inclusion of the essay. Which begs the question: if the creative work itself does not demonstrate evidence of research, how can it be considered as part of a thesis in a higher degree by research? How each degree frames the essay gives an indication of its attitude to the discipline; not necessarily how important it considers the discipline to be, but certainly whether it considers the discipline to be more concerned with creative production or with contextualising research. It is interesting that Curtin has the clearest and easiest to access guidelines and rules for creative writing higher degrees (as specified in their Guidelines and Handbook, available online), and also the most developed theoretical position on the roles of creative production and exegesis, leading, in the end, to the inclusion of Creative Writing with those disciplines that offer a DCA. Ironically, Curtin was the only university reluctant to discuss their writing degree without a formal meeting with applicants, so in the rush to submit my proposals, Curtin's was the only writing course to which I didn't apply.

THREE — THEORIES OF WRITING AND THE WRITING HIGHER DEGREE

I sought a higher degree in writing, not from a writerly perspective, not from a burning desire to be a Writer, but from that of an Arts student beginning my tertiary education at UWA in the mid-nineties, just as creative writing degrees there were being developed. In the institutional setting, Creative Writing and I grew apace, thus by the time I came to undertake an Honours year it was possible to submit a thesis that was two-thirds creative work and one-third, essay. This combined form of writing challenged me in a new way, in a way I could see benefiting both modes of writing. In addition, as I considered postgraduate studies, I realised that for me there was something untenable about pursuing a specific field of cultural studies or literary criticism, something dishonest, or even cowardly, about retreating into criticism without attempting to *do* what I had been taught to so assiduously *undo*.

With no published works I was ineligible for UWA's creative writing degree, despite gaining First Class Honours with a creative writing project at that university. I was advised to apply for a scholarship anyway but to call my project "fictocriticism", conducted within the discipline of Communication Studies. This was the same project, the same proposal, for which I was accepted into two creative writing postgraduate degrees.

My understanding that creative writing theses required a lengthy essay alongside a creative work led me to propose to write about an aspect of my recent family history, principally because it was already situated in a readily accessible textual array including published autobiographies and family histories. Well educated in the reading theories of an undergraduate English degree, I took it for granted that a critical exegesis regarding one's own work would turn neatly upon a tightly bound series of self-and-family texts. In other words, my project was *always already a creative-work-plus-essay*. Whether I wrote this as one fictocritical work or a two-in-one-novel-and-essay was not the point. Yet when my proposal at UWA was accepted and I had to decide whether or not I wanted to take my project through a "fictocritical" process, I faltered. What would this entail, exactly? Conventional referencing, suggested one academic. What? Break in upon every revelation to announce its antecedents? Time was short, answers were inadequate; I decided not to risk my ideas in an explicitly boundary-testing context. What follows is an excerpt from

Chapter 6 of my novel (pages 131–138), with conventional referencing in the form of footnotes: this is an exploration of what such a work might have looked like.

> … She was twenty years old and beautiful, if only she'd known it. She was wearing her other dress, a plain brown pinafore. So rarely did she attend parties that she had nothing to contribute to conversations that revolved around tennis and university and she had retreated into a corner. And then *he* came in, her hero come to life. She recognised him instantly: his lofty and intelligent forehead, a sincere and calm air. With one look from his steady grey eyes she was slain, but he was gone in a moment.[1]
>
> That man became her husband and if Cassandra is right, Ken will be elected Executive Secretary of a new committee this evening. …
>
> Ken and Elsie are among the last to arrive for the monthly branch meeting in North Perth. Often the younger members come early to debate issues among themselves, not yet exhausted with endless committee responsibilities. Some like to use this most sociable of meetings to ask questions of experienced members like Elsie's father, Adam Scrabble, though tonight in a public hall he will be known as Comrade Smith. Pseudonyms are a precautionary measure but necessary in these benighted times.[2] ASIO has agents everywhere. …
>
> When the post of Secretary of the Council for Culture and Justice became available late last year, Comrade Joynes nominated his rather new and very charismatic mate, Comrade Piggot, who was duly elected.[3] … Loyal and hardworking, it should have been Ken's appointment, there being no other Party man with more experience who doesn't yet have an executive position. Ken has known Comrade Joynes for years, he was Ken's mentor when he first joined the Party in '37, but owing to Bill's social habits and Ken's rather puritanical views on indulgence, they have never become close.[4] …

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[1] From *A Fantastic Dad and his Romantic Daughter*: "'With a lofty and intelligent forehead, open and impassioned nostrils, a sincere and calm air and something haughty, pensive and innocent spread over his face.' A pair of steady grey eyes gazed into mine, and I was slain. It was Marius in person. In a moment he was lost to me…" (M. McKenzie, 2005, p. 184). Here and elsewhere, my grandmother misquotes *Les Misérables*, which reads: "Marius was, at this epoch, a handsome young man, of medium stature, with thick and intensely black hair, a lofty and intelligent brow, well-opened and passionate nostrils, an air of calmness and sincerity, and with something indescribably proud, thoughtful, and innocent over his whole countenance" (V. Hugo, 1977, p. 669). My grandfather's photograph in my grandmother's auto/biography is captioned "'Marius' the revolutionary student. Mairi's ideal come to life at Emma's party, 1936" (p. 254). These are examples of the blending of romantic and radical tropes common in my grandmother's work, which I explore in my novel.

[2] Histories of the Western Australian branch of the Communist Party refer to the use of pseudonyms. For example, see *Challenging Faith*: "I signed, and, for Party purposes, adopted the name of Comrade Wilde. My real name would not appear on any party documents and I would be known to other party members by my assumed name. It was a kind of romance in real life" (J. McKenzie, 1993, pp. 68–69). Syd Foxley's oral history identifies my great-grandfather as Comrade Adams: "Richards asked if I knew any of the people there. … Though known as Adams, his correct name was Wignall. I said I didn't know him." (S. Foxley, interviewed by T. Owen, Battye Oral History 33). I use both of these part-identities in my novel, as well building on the theme of hidden identity. (I have found no evidence suggesting pseudonyms for women.)

[3] These characters are, in part, inspired by a situation described in *Anger and Love*: "The usual typewriter had become too hot under the zealous investigations of Detective Sergeant Ron Richards. Nicknamed the 'Black Snake' he had insinuated himself as a drinking companion of Party secretary Bill Mountjoy — something we didn't know at the time" (J. Williams, 1993, p. 92). In my work, however, this fact is foreshadowed by, amongst other things, his pseudonym, Comrade Piggot.

[4] The autobiography of my grandfather is my primary text for the character Ken. I am interested in the impact of his lack of social education, illustrated here: "I was accosted by one in Hay Street, who asked me for money for a meal. He was ragged and certainly was unwashed, and his breath smelled of beer or tobacco, I

To make matters worse, Comrade Joynes has been coming around to Number 92 quite often of late, unannounced and unsteady on his feet. Perhaps Bill feels he has something to make up for, or perhaps he appreciates Ken's patience and mistakes Ken's silence for acceptance.

"Now Comrade Piggot is a good sport[5]," Bill had said recently, proceeding to tell Ken about a long evening they'd spent together at the Mounts Bay Hotel. "He's become a sort of right-hand-man, indispensable really. … But I've been a trifle concerned since last week…" Bill was silent for some time and Ken made no effort to prompt him. "Perhaps a minor indiscretion occurred. Anyway he got my little secret out of me. You know, mate: my on-going arrangement with Cassandra, on and off since she visited Russia in '31."[6]

Ken had nodded mutely and stifled a yawn. He did not wish to believe any such thing about Comrade Cassandra. Such fantasies must be part of Bill's weakness. …

Ken is brought back to the North Perth Community Hall when the lanky Comrade Piggot gets up on the other side of Comrade Joynes at the card table. … "Loyal comrades," he begins. "It is my sad duty to bring your attention to yet another instance of discrimination against our members. … Fronting as the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA is paying literary magazines to censor any writer or artist that they consider to be too far left. Right under our noses, they have put together the best-funded propaganda magazine this country has ever seen. Loyal comrades, I call upon you to boycott *Tetrameter*![7] …

There is a short pause filled with excited conversation and Comrade Joynes calls for order before the motion to boycott is passed. Despite this positive step forward Ken feels strangely morose and doesn't attend to Comrade Joynes' Secretarial Report, which mostly consists of mumbled announcements from Central Committee. His voice lifts as he makes his proposal for the establishment of a new body, the Movement for Arts and Freedom, to be chaired by Comrade Wilde.[8] Comrade Joynes argues that the new information brought to light by Comrade Piggot indicates a vital need for immediate action, beginning with the election of a dedicated body. He concludes, "In short, Comrade Wilde has the experience and commitment to lead this important new group created to focus on the significant issue of cultural censorship."

Ken's heart races several beats. It is the sound of his pseudonym, Comrade Wilde, so full of the promise of adventure, which brings him back to the present. And then he looks

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couldn't tell which" (J. McKenzie, 1993, p. 67). Through Ken, I explore aspects of character such as naïvety, restraint and caution.

[5] I have found liberal use of the terms "sport" and "no sport" as euphemisms for "drinker" and "non-drinker". They are favoured by my grandmother, as here: "He was a 'Sport.' When the men came in for a tooth pull, he would offer to do it for two shillings, without the needle. They saved sixpence and could buy a beer at the Court Hotel next door and cheer themselves up. Dad let him do it without the needle, but refused to spend the savings on drink. He had heavy responsibilities, he told Mr. Potts. Mr. Potts liked a talk and a drink in company, he was disappointed in Dad and told someone 'He's no sport.' Dad said it was a recommendation" (M. McKenzie, 2005, p. 104). "Sport" functions as a significant social marker.

[6] My character Cassandra is inspired by Katharine Susannah Prichard and takes the sobriquet "the Red Witch of Greenmount" as its starting point (see, for example, D. Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923–1958*, 1990, p. 38). The Red Witch is a powerful symbol of femininity; my character Cassandra enjoys aspects of this power including that hinted at here: "Katharine had to be sweet with Bill because she wanted to go to Russia" (C. Shelley, interviewed by C. Puls, Battye Oral History 171, 1976).

[7] The launch of a new literary magazine with an explicitly anti-communist agenda is based on the existing literary magazine *Quadrant*, which actually began in 1956, not in 1954, as *Tetrameter* did. Other details, such as its funding structure and certain key players, remain the same, in parallel form.

[8] The frequent establishment of new mandate groups, common across the political spectrum, is described without amusement in my grandfather's autobiography: "A messenger came from the Party office to the Teachers College and handed me a sealed letter bearing a red hammer and sickle on the right-hand upper corner. It was typed, and signed my Bill Mountjoy. That night there was to be a meeting to set up a branch of the League for Peace and Democracy, and I would be a 'suitable candidate' for secretary. The League was the new name for the Movement against War and Fascism" (J. McKenzie, 1993, p. 80). This is gently parodied in my novel.

> down and adjusts his glasses while the heat of being seen passes from his face. It is taken for granted by Bill that Ken will accept.

This shows how two texts can emerge out of one fictocritical work with conventional referencing. It is clearly analogous to the creative-work-and-essay, only the minor text (the footnotes) is compelled to follow the chronology of the major text. This only-partly-humorous exercise illustrates some difficult problems. What are the real differences between a fictocritical work in a critical analysis degree and a novel-and-essay in a creative writing degree? It may be a matter of emphasis: in the former, critical analysis may structure creative forays while in the latter, the creative project is generally the main work. Or, the difference may be that between one as a single integrated work and the other as two parts, but my exercise undermines these apparent differences. How well contextualised should one's creative work be before it migrates to fictocriticism? And how much creativity can you add to your criticism before they are forced apart? Is the line between explicit and eclipsed sources clear enough to call?

In another remote corner of my metaphorical building, the walls of fiction and criticism come together. In whose room does the corner lie? Potentially, it is the Communication Studies program at UWA that integrates the two styles while they are separated in the Creative Writing degrees. However, I avoided the perplexities of fictocriticism by opting for the novel-and-essay in a creative writing degree. The creative-work-plus-essay path insists on the genre divide and creates in the process a new, ambiguous form, a single thesis that is near fictocriticism but not fictocriticism, in the academy but not necessarily of the academy. The very notion of a creative work in a university context is boundary testing; perhaps this is its advantage.

"Whatever it is that is happening right now between the academy and writers, between criticism and creativity, is new and startling. They are not one and the same, but they are inseparable" (1999). So writes Eva Sallis, who develops the notion of the genre of research fiction as "fiction which, to a significant degree, expresses the outcomes of a body of research and which is the culminating point of an investigation which could have been written up, at least in part, in academic prose" (ibid.). This implies a blend of creative and critical skills with an emphasis towards narrative. As well as declaring the limitations of academic prose and undermining the genre's apparent claim on authority, Sallis argues that

narrative is increasingly being recognised as a vehicle of good communication by academics and researchers:

> To make living and to make real for the reader are concepts alien to academic prose. However, we are fast approaching a time in which the researcher will be aware, indeed trained to observe, that for some subjects making real for the reader is one of the options they have before them and that fiction is one of several media through which their ideas can be communicated (ibid.).

There is a recognition here of the instability of the binary, but at the same time, the difference is asserted as real. The difference is mediated via the writing's context, which is encapsulated in a choice of genre. There is slipperiness where "real" is aligned with "fiction"; perhaps this contradiction is inherent in the writing of research fiction, which depends upon the ostensible power of academic prose for its research elements. As Sallis comments, "The research we undertake in order to know context and history is itself fraught with the seductions of academic prose and the compelling illusion of objectivity" (ibid.).

Sallis argues that research fiction is suited to writing about contentious issues because it is more honest: errors can be clearly attributed to the author, not hidden beneath the apparent authority of academic prose. Indeed, for creative writers to mimic this style is destructive, and the very worst thing a writer can do, Sallis claims, "is to bow to the prevailing demand for authenticity, demote the authority of the explicitly imaginative and pretend to be more than a writer of imaginative fiction and a researcher making choices about communication." Here the two roles — a writer of imaginative fiction and a researcher — are identified together, but they are separated from the purely academic. Unlike fictocriticism, which pushes from a critical discipline into narrative territory, research fiction pushes the other way. Sallis places research fiction in context with its neighbours on the criticism — fiction spectrum, drawing attention to its reading context:

> Ficto-criticism experiments with the perimeter of academic writing but research fiction goes well beyond it.
>
> The difference between ficto-criticism and research fiction is a matter of degree, emphasis and target readership (ibid.).

By positioning research fiction confidently within the academy but separating it from academic prose, Sallis recontextualises the value of narrative so that authority lies with the fiction genre, not the critical prose genre. But there is a danger that the creative

writing/critical writing distinction is merely displaced onto the idea of genre; research fiction can't account for the creative-work-plus-essay form as a whole.

Sallis' idea of research fiction would suit many, but by no means all, creative writing theses. Despite this, it is taken up by Tess Brady as an apt model for the writing higher degree and used in an attempt to explain the relationship between the parts: "I am asking that we recognise the importance of research fiction, and that both the creative work and the exegesis can stem from exactly the same research, the same concerns, and yet one is not the other" (2000). The postgraduate creative writing essay doesn't have to explain the creative work (a commentary) nor does it have to employ literary analysis (a contextualising study) but it can do either of these or any number of other things, in a critical mode, from the same research that produced the creative work. "The genre chosen changes and modifies the findings of the research so that what is finally presented will posses a uniqueness and clear identity" (ibid.). This is not an argument for dualism, Brady insists, but there is slippage in her argument between the points where creative and critical blend and where they are different. In Brady's description of the writing *process*, the roles of the creative and the academic combine, but in her description of the postgraduate creative writing *degree*, the creative work is distinct from the academic work. It appears that in movement, as process, they can combine, but in static structures such as the academy they separate. It may be that research fiction is more resilient through these contextual changes than other varieties of fiction.

Brady's article preempts both Milech and Schilo's report and (from the same tertiary institution) Brian Dibble's contribution to the aforementioned *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*. Dibble explains the research question approach, as I have noticed is usual, in implicit comparison with the commentary and context approaches: "rather than encouraging the student … to explain the actual genesis of the novel or to offer a technical comparison/contrast of it with some other novel, the research question directs the student toward some pre-existing body of information/theory relevant to both" (2006, p. 113). This explanation of the research question approach is an improvement on those already seen, but it still retains a diversion. Dibble doesn't say how the candidate is to write up the research once directed towards it, if not in a commentary or contextual argument.

Dibble's explanation is an improvement in as much as it recognises that the way the research question motivates writing is through movement: "the process is usually an iterative one of moving back and forth between the two modes, production and exegesis" (ibid.). What is obscured, however, is the fundamental paradox of the writing higher degree which is encapsulated in this final quote from Dibble on the research question: "it has heuristic use when conceptualizing and building the novel and hermeneutic use when informing an exegesis" (ibid.). That is, the model is both investigative and interpretative: investigative research is always understood from within an interpretative framework, which rests on investigative research, and so on, in a version of the hermeneutic circle. The concept of the hermeneutic circle runs through many of the theories I've examined in this essay but remains largely unrecognised, or unacknowledged. Milech and Schilo, Sallis, Brady and Dibble, all want to offer a notion of synthesis regarding creative writing in the institutional setting, but for them all, in their unacknowledged contradictions, there is an evasion of the essentially paradoxical nature of the postgraduate creative writing degree. My synthesis differs from theirs in that I embrace the paradox.

In the twentieth century, theories of language and its structures followed a path of increasing fragmentation, coupled with complex theories of the whole. For example, structuralist theories of narratology, such as Levi-Strauss' analysis of myths into its component "mythemes", was supplemented by Genette's structure of story, plot and narration, where story represents the sequence of component events. Plot is the discourse that organises the components and the narration is the system that makes it possible to understand the relation of story and plot. Structuralist theories such as these are supplemented by post-structuralism's recognition that *any* system requires a further system to explain it.

This pattern of circularity is reflected in the distinctions between critical and creative writing, as well as the context and commentary approaches to the essay in the creative writing higher degree. Also relevant to my research are notions of both chronology and narrative in historiography, and dialectical and rhetorical writing modes. These pairs operate with reference to each other, which undermines their apparent separateness. The process of fragmenting and reassembling in a new whole demonstrates how any apparently

opposed categories will in fact be closely related when a new way of seeing, outside the structure, puts them in a new context. In other words, binary opposites are opposite ends of a continuum, where the continuum is obscured by their apparent opposition.

The centrality of narrative in communication is a persistent feature of contemporary theories of writing. If structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language and meaning are true, and stability of meaning is forever supplanted, the manner of telling becomes more significant. Yet, revealing the way of telling as a concealed metanarrative, a kind of confidence trick, is the key understanding of those same theories. Despite these difficulties, understanding occurs and communication takes place, but it does so, I believe, through a mysterious process that repeatedly leaps between the detail and the whole. The curious motion of the hermeneutic circle could encapsulate Kevin Brophy's study of creativity, as is suggested by this rather poetic quote from his chapter on creative writing in educational institutions:

> Creativity seems to be enacted in the loose play of the bad fit between map and landscape, in that beginning pause which holds for a moment some tension between attraction and repulsion, desire and fear, the known and the unknown, the self and the possible selves (1998, p. 201).

Brophy focuses on the linearity of narrative against his understanding of the wholeness of creative ideas; stories have beginnings and endings but it is hard to write one without knowing the other.

Later twentieth-century developments in theoretical approaches to producing and consuming literature were accompanied by social changes affecting the material situation of institutions of higher education today. The discipline of writing is a flash point for the anxieties such changes bring. Graeme Harper's paper, "Creative Writers on Campus: Dead Spies, Living Lies 1593 to the Present", surveys four hundred years of student/writer — teacher/critic relationships, concluding that the key to the place of creative writing in institutions lies in the relationship forged between teacher and student, but that this is a "dark and sometimes hidden history of our universities," where the relationship hovers "between nourishing and destroying" (2005). The solution-resting-in-ambivalence suggested here seems a little disingenuous, pushing theories of postgraduate writing in institutions back into the private and unexamined space of a personal relationship. This confusion is disguised with rhetorical questions such as, "Does the relatively modern

formation of named courses and degrees in both criticism and creative writing alter, in essence, a long established learning environment's intention?" (ibid.). Clearly, given the topic of his paper, Harper thinks it does not.

But I do not think good intentions, to nurture and foster the creative writing discipline, are sufficient to dispel concerns surrounding its disciplinary and institutional place. Harper's next question is more anxious and its answer less resolved. "Why now do we find the situation in which creative writing in the company of academe is portrayed as something relatively new, something which many writers on campus feel we must somehow further define?" (ibid.). He hints at Western prosperity and technological progress without elaborating on what the impact of these factors may be, and insists that it is the formal and informal writer and critic relationships that make the discipline relevant. I'd like to take Harper's suggestion one step further and suggest a causal link between the professionalisation of the discipline and Western progress: *because* university culture is being eroded (through growing numbers of paying students and shrinking numbers of paid teachers), a culture that *used to* support creative writers through a personal relationship between teacher and student *has had to* professionalise, to formalise access to a teaching and learning dynamic that cannot, in today's corporatised universities, exist without a structure and fee.

At the same time (pushing the causal link back the other way to form a loop), creative writing has been accepted as a discipline by the institution, a container within which to hold worrying questions around fiction and narrative. For example, if the author as a reified subject is dead, who are these people who call themselves writers? And, if writing across science and humanities disciplines is somehow creative, do creative writers have more to tell us about writing generally than many might think? Again, Kevin Brophy is useful here when he points out that the author-function (Foucault's term for the many-faceted-fractured-yet-unified role that used to be known as "the author") can be separated from the practice of creative writing (1998, p. 40).

My project includes a novel that certainly falls within the definition of research fiction. And the research question approach could be seen to apply in so far as I am concerned with family, the "Australian family" and my own family. Furthermore, my

project was conceived with research questions in mind and I write up my research in the form of a novel-and-essay. Indeed, I have argued that my work was always already a novel-and-essay and that this reflects the internal logic of the degree structure. On the other hand, my enthusiastic embrace of an academic approach is countered by my writerly-focused course which favours a cause and effect relationship between creative work and essay, implicitly encouraging safer writing options with clarity of genre. Just as too narrow a research question focus may inhibit a project, (my novel and essay do not relate *only* through the question of family, and are no single answer to a single question), too writerly a focus can cut off the cyclical movement between boundaries that motivates me.

The research question approach to a postgraduate degree in creative writing provides a rationale for a demonstration of a thesis' original contribution to knowledge. Similarly, when fiction is placed within an academic context, not all fiction is equal: research fiction is more easily assimilated than more imaginative fiction in a postgraduate research degree. My work stands to benefit from any implicit value judgement that positions research fiction over imaginative fiction, but leads me to further questions: Do degrees with research question rationales encourage research fiction? What is the place for fiction that doesn't fit so easily? If creative writing degrees were to be streamed, would they be divided along research fiction/imaginative fiction lines, or, as Nike Bourke and Philip Neilsen suggest, along academic student (those who submit an essay with their creative work)/professional student (those who do not submit an essay) lines? (2004). As I have argued elsewhere, these attempts to divide the writing discipline, although well intended, replicate and supplement the theoretical division that troubles postgraduate writing degrees (McKenzie, 2007). Resisting division is the writing discipline's strength, whilst recognising the inherent contradiction of this position is its strategic edge.

Can the presentation of the outcome of the postgraduate research in two genres (relative yet distinct) acknowledge the relativity of all writing and relocate authority with subjective narrative rather than objectivity? Unless the creative-work-plus-essay form is recognised as an interdependent one, however, movement between the modes is lost, and the discipline's strategic advantage in making an original contribution to knowledge is lost in the constraints of normative university definitions of research.

The essay in the writing higher degree might be presented as a space for candidates to probe the grey areas of our discipline, a space to question its necessity and function and to explore more general questions of creativity and assessment. This space ought to be a broad one: to tie it into my metaphorical building, the corner room might be seen as common space, or a community room, offering a place for creative works born within the academy. Taking advantage of the ambiguity of the creative-work-plus-essay form offers candidates the freedom to tailor a degree to a particular thesis' needs, but requires an awareness of the dynamics involved. A very writerly approach will anticipate marketing categorisation for the novel, while a very academic approach will assure significant research.

At this time there is no consensus on what the creative writing essay constitutes and no history of contextualising undergraduate writing courses to prepare postgraduate writing students. There are a number of reasonable explanations for the presence of the essay in the writing higher degree as it is currently imposed within the creative writing discipline. These include: a guarantee of a thesis' critical rigour; to help determine the contribution to knowledge a thesis might make; to help the candidate understand their work in the context of a broader field of knowledge, as is expected of all PhD candidates. It is also reasonable to conclude that these explanations would be unlikely to apply in a discipline with a long institutional history and a well theorised pedagogical approach. The critical rigour of such a discipline would be self-evident, and one could reasonable expect a student trained in such a discipline (as an undergraduate, to a certain extent; as a postgraduate, to a greater extent) to understand how it related to other disciplines in the field. I am suggesting that, in the future, it is likely the essay in the higher degree will remain, but its reason for being there will have more to do with the possibilities of writing and less to do with institutional justification.

Changes I envisage to postgraduate writing degrees will recognise (the paradox) that creative-work-plus-essay is one work composed of two works, one of which tends toward narrative, the other toward criticism. Displacing the distinction onto a different binary doesn't address the fundamental contradiction that is important in creativity, a contradiction encapsulated in one thesis. To lay out what I've looked at so far, another spectrum is called for. On one side sits critical prose, or facts, chronology and the like. On

the other side sits fiction, narrative and the imaginary. One vector of the spectrum holds fictocriticism, on the critical side but moving towards fiction, and research fiction sits opposite. I would like to position the creative-work-and-essay in the middle, a pivot point between critical and creative. Ideally, degrees will offer a sliding scale proportioning word length and assessment values of each. The works need not be critical prose and imaginative fiction, but any two styles along the vector, one from the left and one from the right.

My methodological research into a way of constructing a postgraduate writing project represents one aspect of the origins of my thesis and illustrates how the disciplinary context of a writing degree influences the nature of the work produced. This research has pointed to other influential theoretical frames that might be broadly described as a study of genre, which, together with the tendency of creativity to escape categorisation, is my next concern.

Behind my comparison between the four Western Australian universities is an assumption that it is better to attempt a negotiation between the opposition of creative/critical, or writer/academic, than to settle into one or the other. And in my discussion of the essay in the creative writing higher degree I favour methods that recognise the significance of movement between boundaries in writing. This reveals my third organising principle, at the point where methodological research into the context of creative writing research gives way to a pattern of action, a way of doing, a praxis.

In my interactions with the university institution, the postgraduate writing degree and my supervisor, my processes appear as a dynamic negotiation of these boundaries, drawing closer to them and then away, submitting to their guidelines and then questioning the limitations they impose. This charts a territory, creates a dialogic space where two oppositions draw closer together. This praxis can be applied to my approach to writing in general and this project in particular: novel, essay and novel-and-essay; my attempts to articulate my praxis and its benefits are a response to the very confines of university, supervisor and so on. The intractability of the walls of the stone building encourages my process, at the same time as the walls resist my examination of them.

This praxis is not unlike a dialectical form of reasoning, where answers are sought through a process of question and counter-question to continually refine different points of view. In a Marxist sense, contradiction is inherent in dialectic, as in Marx's understanding that society is composed "of the relations between individuals, but individuals' powers are restricted, and to some extent given, by their place in these relations" (Collier, 2004, p. 125). However, my praxis is as much rhetorical as dialectical and my questioning, therefore, is intended to persuade. A dialectical approach holds within it a rhetorical element, in that it has an overarching direction; again the notion of the hermeneutic circle is relevant here. The unfolding implied within creativity resides within the tension between these opposites.

FOUR — THE MUTABILITY OF GENRE: FICTION AND HISTORY

My second major theme in this essay, following that of postgraduate creative writing degrees in Western Australian universities, is one that also uses the notion of a drawing together of opposites: it concerns a negotiation of family and politics. As I have pointed out, oppositions can be expressed in various ways whilst gesturing to the same argument, and this one could as well be nominated the personal and the public. These themes are taken from my "family history". In this seemingly banal phrase there lies an incitement to negotiate a border. Family implies matters that are private and partisan; history implies the public world: how do they meet? In one sense, this apparent paradox stands for the whole endeavour of undertaking creative work in an institution.

As I have indicated, my novel fits a definition of research fiction to a high degree, where the amount of research any fiction demands must be seen as a sliding scale. A large part of the research is historical in nature, concerned with the literature, culture and politics of Australia in the nineteen fifties. This broader scope requires theories beyond those concerned with creative writing, consequently, I will look to the discipline of historiography for further understanding of how the opposition between the personal story and public history works.

There are other reasons for looking towards historiography, however. The final essay in Drusilla Modjeska's work *Timepieces*, "The Present in Fiction", traces the decline of work in the fiction genre over the last couple of decades and the subsequent turn to biography, history and memoir. Modjeska connects this turn with the erosion of certainty in our society: if the lives of those around us stretch our credulity, we are less likely to seek diversion in fiction and will instead seek the authority of facts. Certainly the market is the first mechanism to react to social changes, making it difficult for literary fiction to compete, but Modjeska also connects this trend with the emergence of postmodernism, which began with an energy that soon stagnated in institutions, making a further connection with the institutionalisation of creative writing courses. Work in the fiction genre reflected changes in theoretical approach, becoming "tricksy and insubstantial" (2002, p. 205). Modjeska writes, "As fiction turned its face elsewhere, detaching itself more and more from local

realities and local experience, there was a space waiting, an opening. It was filled by writing that wasn't fiction" (ibid., p. 206).

Modjeska laments that, while novelists' use of history has in the past contributed to our collective cultural memory, novelists now use history as no more than an exotic background. Or, if academically rigorous, the work is inaccessible: "There is a divide I find painful to witness between students doing research degrees which give little attention to ways of writing, and those doing writing degrees which attend to the writerly without sufficient challenge to the quality of content" (ibid., pp. 210-211). It is this divide that Eva Sallis and others see as overcome by research fiction, but that genre remains a minority. As the speed of the world increases and our choices multiply, readers are more likely to turn to a genre that has authority, where writers are trusted by virtue of their genre frame. History, however, has its own problems that are arguably continuous with those faced by fiction. In other words, can we trust historians any more than fiction writers, especially once we realise that history writing is necessarily partial and governed by similar narrative conventions?

Ellen Somekawa and Elizabeth A. Smith grapple with the paradox of historical study and the interdependence of chronology and interpretation: each requires the justification of the other. "'Facts' lead us to 'interpretations' which in turn lead us to search for (and usually find) other facts, and so on, in a process that is finally so seamlessly dialectical that the story we tell seems to be a coherent and obvious whole" (1988, p. 151). This leads Somekawa and Smith to examine the role of the historian and ask useful questions about the relevance and validity of historical monographs and other products of the historian's craft. Especially where radical histories are concerned, these works have such a small readership that their value is undermined. Historians therefore face a dilemma. As Somekawa and Smith ask:

> What then are we to do to make history more compelling to a larger audience? And can we, at the same time, confront the arrogance of history as objective truth? … We are concerned about our own intellectual honesty as historians, but we must also consider the popular credibility and accessibility of what we write. It may be that we need to choose between the two (ibid., p. 157).

One choice, Somekawa and Smith write, is to demystify history through a self-conscious style that challenges the illusion of objectivity, but this does not serve their

agenda for accessibility. Another choice is to use an accessible narrative style to convey radical subject matter, but, not only does this convey a false sense of objectivity, further investigation leads Somekawa and Smith to conclude that the attempt to write radical histories in a narrative style is self-defeating, as there are no tropes available with which to construct the narrative. “A radical interpretation is radical precisely because it challenges the naturalness of the existing order; it could not, by definition, use the explanatory power of myth” (ibid., p. 159). Somekawa and Smith conclude that historians have an obligation to reject the illusion of objectivity yet they must accept the rules of historiography as artificial but useful. This doesn’t, however, address the problem of inaccessibility, and the choice a historian makes — between rejecting narrative and attempting to mythologise radical interpretations — must be contextually determined.

A current Australian perspective on historiographical debate comes from historian and author Peter Cochrane, who recently stated: “For a long time now, the academic history business has been, for the most part, hostile to the narrative form, that is, to the writing of history as a continuous, interwoven drama of human lives” (2007). Cochrane deplores the opposition of what he terms narrative and analytic history in the academy and values a blend of both styles, though the means of combination remains somewhat of a mystery. “Why can’t it be both — story by means of literary performance and scholarship by means of imperceptible stealth?” (ibid.). This is a different approach from Somekawa and Smith’s suspicion of the possibilities of a synthesis. Cochrane is outside, rather than within, an institution, and he anticipates a degree of popular appeal that Somekawa and Smith do not.

Peter Cochrane’s appearance on ABC Radio National’s *Perspective* coincided with the publication of a book by him written in the narrative history style. His isn’t a radical history, but rather a very Australian one of emerging middle-class colonialists, “The artisans, shopkeepers, merchants and renegade gentry”, getting one up on “eminent landowners” connected to “the decrepit Colonial Office in the loathsome little alley-way called Downing Street” (ibid.). One can see how Cochrane saw “great human drama in this story, peopled by a cast of extraordinary characters” (ibid.). He embraces mythic tropes in his history writing and there is no sense of the lack of collectively imagined elements to narrativise this history that troubled Somekawa and Smith’s approach to radical history.

Cochrane breaks his opposition between analysis and narrative further into one between concept and character, where analytic history neglects character. Similarly, current trends in history neglect human drama and history as a literary form. Cochrane is right to point to the style of analytic history as a product of its time but doesn't shed any light on the process of combining narrative and analysis, "a good story and more", where the "more" remains mysterious: "quiet engagement" and "bloody hard work" (ibid.). I think what is happening in this mysterious process is what Somekawa and Smith would describe as a mythologising of Cochrane's interpretations. His success, as determined by popular appeal, is assured by the familiarity of his subject matter. But for many readers, Cochrane's book might not be distinguished from that of a less hard-working historian with a less rigorous approach. On the other hand, given their lack of popular appeal, it is difficult to establish a rapport between reader and historian with histories written in an analytic style, with a peeled back approach to presenting the findings of research.

These issues can be illuminated by Hayden White's comprehensive introduction to narrative in historiography in the essay "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory". Published in 1984, it is no longer contemporary, but explains some twentieth-century developments behind the theoretical directions of the following twenty-three years that Cochrane responds to.

Two broad answers to the question of narrative in historical theory emerge that White discusses around the binary opposition of "ideological" and "scientific". The first term describes the historical account as one discourse among many, with no more privileged access to truth than any other, where any claims to truth are, in fact, ideological, that is, intended to persuade. This comes out of the same tradition that informed the post/–structuralists, and Somekawa and Smith fit here. The second term theorises narrative as the proper mode for the explanation of historical events, claiming a kind of scientific status for narrative history, an accurate expression of the source material. White explores the differences between "ideological" and "scientific" in terms of their approach to discourse. Discourse is not merely persuasive *or* expressive: the communicative meaning determines the use of both modes. Looking at how narrative uses the three functions of discourse: communicative, expressive and conative, "permits us to see how contemporary discussions of the nature of narrative history have tended to ignore one or another of these functions in

order to save narrative history for ‘science,’ on the one side, or consign it to the category of ‘ideology,’ on the other” (1984, p. 17).

White’s insight is to recognise narrative history as one discursive mode among many, but one with a particular place in the description of historical events. The first insight comes from the tradition of structuralists such as Barthes who demonstrated that nineteenth-century “objective” narrative histories and “realist” novels employed the same narrative methods. Rather than the nineteenth century’s clear demarcation between them, history and fiction have been shown to share the same systems of meaning production (ibid., p. 14). Furthermore:

> In other words, just as the contents of myth are tested by fiction, so too the forms of fiction are tested by (narrative) historiography … this should be seen less as an opposition of ‘science’ to ‘ideology’ … than as a continuation of the process of mapping the limit between the imaginary and the real which begins with the invention of ‘fiction’ itself (ibid., pp. 21–22).

In discourse, real events are endowed with meaning in the same way as imaginary events; that makes historical discourse allegorical, saying one thing to mean another. This doesn’t sit well with modern fashion for scientific literalism, White argues.

At the heart of the matter lies a paradox, for “one cannot represent the *meaning* of historical events without symbolizing them, and this because ‘historicality’ itself is both a reality *and* a mystery” (ibid., p. 29). Historicality is both true and at the same time unverifiable. Nevertheless, White asserts that “human beings have a discursive instrument” through which “what cannot be *explained* is in principle capable of being *understood*; and that, finally, this understanding is nothing other than its representation in the form of a narrative” (ibid., p. 30). Narrative, then, is perfectly suited to the task of describing historical events; to experience and retell events over time is uniquely human. The merging of narrative content with narrative form produces the symbol, the meaning. For White, the question becomes one about “the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth” (ibid., p. 33).

Objections to narrative history stem from the difficulty of conceptualising the difference between a manner of speaking and a mode of representation. Narrative is inevitable, as it is the way we structure our experience of the world, but it is becoming increasingly difficult for writers to gain a reader’s trust. Consequently, aesthetic and ethical

questions come to the fore. Criticism, analysis and chronology, with their apparently perspicuous ways of presenting research, may appear to offer solutions, but the prerequisite of specialist knowledges represents another kind of loss of trust.

What is a contemporary writer, especially one within an institution, to do? Modjeska's essay "The Present in Fiction" ends with a challenge to fiction writers. As Modjeska's own *Poppy* indicates, writers of non-fiction are challenging the rejection of imagination that genre traditionally entails. What is the equivalent move for writers of fiction? Here Modjeska's directive is less than helpful: "If novelists take up the challenge to reinvent the reality, it may be they will get up from their desks and rival the journalist on the road, the historian in the library, the observer on the street corner" (2002, p. 218). Surely fiction writers have always combined these skills. Again the distinction between the fiction and non-fiction writer appears lost, but then Modjeska ends with a reminder of the fundamental distinction between the genres: "Fiction is not tethered. It is the imaginative exchange of fiction that has the subversive freedom to create another order of truth" (ibid., p. 219).

Many of the same issues involved in Modjeska's challenge — a commitment to narrative, an interest in history, an obligation to the present — guide and motivate my writing. The broad landscape of fiction offers scope to combine elements of history, biography and political discourse in a narrative that is true to itself rather than tethered to a more restrictive genre. By way of an example I will discuss the provocative effect of the cultural imbalance I perceive in the one-sided approach of Australian literary journal *Quadrant*, evidenced by John Howard's speech at *Quadrant*'s 50th Anniversary dinner, (October 3, 2006) an edited excerpt of which was published in *The Australian* (October 4 2006). In Howard's glowing address, *Quadrant* is not just a literary magazine but also a political ally. In the sixties and seventies, Howard says, "*Quadrant* served as a beacon of free and sceptical thought against fashionable leftist views on social, foreign policy and economic issues." And nowadays, it leads the charge against what Howard refers to as "the black-armband view of Australian history": "Until recent times, it had become almost de rigueur in intellectual circles to regard Australian history as little more than a litany of sexism, racism and class warfare."

Howard leaves himself room for lively exaggeration, ("almost de rigueur", "little more than") but even so, the statement is grossly inaccurate, serving only to link into another issue close to Howard's heart: "*Quadrant* has always been a principled defender of what I might call a traditionalist view of a good education and in opposition to the more fashionable, progressive views that have held sway in schools and universities." These references to the "culture wars" that dogged humanities departments in tertiary institutions prior to and during his period in office, a "war" that Howard saw himself on the "winning" side of, is an example of the wasteful conflict that can result from an inculcated perspective on those contrasting methods and ideologies that will by now be familiar. In the context of the "culture wars", binaries that might be used are writer and critic; narrative and analytic; traditional and postmodern; public and institutional.

Again, Modjeska's "The Present in Fiction" makes useful connections. She writes:

> During the 2001 election campaign, John Howard said that a third term for his government would be a victory in the 'culture wars'. What frightens and alarms me is that the government has managed not only to dismiss progressive ideas as the rhetoric of political correctness and the black armband, but has devalued the currency of language (2002, p. 207).

Modjeska is referring to what has been described as Howard's unimaginative and narrow arguments, as illustrated by his comments on education. Historians who find favour with Howard are represented by Hayden White's final category of narrative historians, outside the ideological/scientific opposition, those for whom narrative is unproblematic. Suspicious of theoretical approaches, these historians embrace "empirical" approaches received as the doxa of their discipline.

Howard's *Quadrant* speech damns his political tradition's historical enemy, communism; communists were "ideological barrackers for regimes of oppression opposed to Australia and its interests." He ends by linking these people to "a new tyranny: the tyranny of Islamist terrorism, one with at least a family resemblance to the great struggles against forces of totalitarianism in the past." In this I agree with Howard; the narratives deployed in the service of raising fears of the communist threat fifty years ago are remarkably similar to those in the service of raising fears of the terrorist threat today, namely a grand struggle against an immoral foe.

For a historical precedent of this we need look no further than the editorial in *Quadrant*'s first edition. "We shall remain suspicious of the idea that the totalitarian Beast from the Abyss is really a big woolly bear which the little men who have had a busy day in this country can safely cuddle as they sink into the dreamland of Peaceful Co-existence" (quoted in Kramer, 1988, p. 208), writes James McAuley at his sarcastic best. But he is sincerity itself a few sentences later: "Automation and nuclear power are launching us into a second industrial revolution whose consequences are incalculable" (ibid.). Grandiose and mocking by turns, McAuley is difficult to pin down in this editorial, but the following quote offers a clue. The threat of "the advance to world domination of Communism", whose spirit will "squeak and gibber in the streets, implor[es] us to maintain the most rigorous neutrality as between the 'warring fanaticisms' of right and wrong, truth and falsity, liberty and slavery, honour and dishonour, resistance and submission" (ibid., p. 209). "Rigorous neutrality" sums up the contradictory accusations of McAuley against communism; these are the strategies that, in recent years, Howard and others have used against progressive ideas.

McKenzie Wark discusses the modern manifestation of this argument: it is posed by those suspicious of contemporary theories (that are themselves suspicious of traditional myths of objectivity), such as White's final group of narrative historians, for whom narrative is unproblematic. Applying the terms "politically correct" and "postmodern" to their rivals, they argue contrary things. "To be politically correct is to dogmatically assert a political truth; to be postmodern is to hold that no political truth is possible at all" (2006, p. 53). This is the same strategy as McAuley's accusations against communists, of totalitarianism on the one hand and neutrality in the face of evil on the other. These arguments were directed at writers on the left within Australia, as much as regimes overseas.

But that was the nineteen fifties. What does *Quadrant* stand for today? The literary magazine's current enemies are "unthinking Leftism, or political correctness, and its 'smelly little orthodoxies'" and "the shoddiness of much current historical and anthropological writing in Australia, particularly on issues of Aborigine [sic] history". Despite this, the "About *Quadrant* Magazine" page on the magazine's website from which these quotes are drawn, claims that *Quadrant* "had no preconceived policy positions

regarding any interpretations." John Howard's influence and unequivocal support for the magazine would suggest otherwise. There is a direct ideological inheritance from McAuley's editorial policy to Howard's view of history, with the implications it had for his education policy, a position that is hostile to mine.

These issues and others like them are at the heart of my decision to "characterise" *Quadrant* magazine in my novel as *Tetrameter*, focusing on *Quadrant*'s history of secret funding from the CIA while maintaining a front of independence. This aspect of *Quadrant* isn't mentioned by John Howard, although the aforementioned "About *Quadrant* Magazine" page has this to say:

> It is alleged by its critics that *Quadrant* enjoyed some kind of funding through the CCF [Congress for Cultural Freedom] from the US Central Intelligence Agency; if so none of its editors ever knew of or were influenced in any way by such funding. It is hardly however shameful to have been indirectly in receipt of funds from the agency of a democratic government rather than the Communist dictatorships which subsidised the Leftist publications.

The funding, which began with the magazine's inception in the mid-fifties and continued until 1972, is not merely alleged but well researched in books as varied as Peter Coleman's apologia *The Liberal Conspiracy* and Frances Stonor Saunders' broad study *The Cultural Cold War*.

The obscure provenance of a not-very-well-read magazine may seem insignificant enough, but the story has a different meaning in my family, where communism was not a fanatical ideology but daily life. My family history troubles the apparent distinction between public history and private experience, and the fiction genre complements my explorations. By using the fictional *Tetrameter* I can critique the hypocrisy of this publication whilst bending such biographical invariables as names and dates, to suit my loosely-tethered narrative's needs. The similarities between the real magazine and the imaginary one are sufficient, I feel, for most readers to make the connection between them and to seek further information if they are inspired to do so. The differences lie in the key identifiers such as names and dates, providing a zone within which my imaginings are merely that. The "loose play of the bad fit" between my novel and the structures that surround it is a creative space, within which I engage my interest in history and commitment to narrative. My obligation to the present might be reflected in this essay,

which provides, for example, an additional story, through the presentation of contemporary critical material on *Quadrant* magazine.

In the context of a postgraduate degree or that of a writer producing a marketable manuscript, the genre choice of a novel is perhaps not a good strategy. Any advantage accruing to the category of biography, such as its supposed authenticity and the marketing angle that implies, is lost. And the "publishable novel", the ideal product of the postgraduate degree in writing, has been sullied with the realities of private family life. At the same time there is much of my novel that is historically accurate, as I've no need to make it up if the story is already true. But it cannot claim the authority of "historical fiction" because I have taken liberties with names, dates and other facts. The genre is interdependent: just as this essay would be subverted without the novel that follows it, the novel might be diminished without the essay.

Reading and writing this project, unavoidable events and themes come up. These themes are relevant to me as a modern Australian woman, complicated for me because I'm a white, Australian-born woman. How do I read the literature of the past hundred years? How do I contribute to that tradition whilst remaining true to my perspective? The stories, histories, theories I consider pass through an oscillating process of objectification and subjectification: Is this me? How is this me? How is this not me? I believe a mode of persuasive questioning can be usefully employed when engaging in issues of communication. Persuasive, because I acknowledge I have a conscious position that will be apparent whether or not I explicitly declare it; questioning in the manners I've described.

If my praxis can be described as a process of persuasive questioning, my fourth organising principle offers this as an approach to creating an ethical discourse. It is worth glancing back at Claire Woods' chapter in *Creative Writing*, where she employs Anne Surma's theory of responsible social praxis to broadly frame the writing discipline. Surma's theory sees writing across creative and professional discourses as social phenomena sharing common aims. Applied to the teaching of reading and writing texts, Woods writes, "how we teach and involve students as makers and receivers of texts should be underpinned by a concern for ethics, and attention to the imaginative and creative process, and the rhetorical praxis of the endeavour" (2006, p. 132). My essay owes something to Surma's frame, where the imaginative and creative process is explored against the constraints of postgraduate writing degrees; my consideration of rhetorical praxis relates to my examination of the questioning process of my writing. A concern for ethics underlies both of these other matters and in Surma's own chapter in *Creative Writing* she reminds us, that "ethics [is] an ongoing practice involving questions rather than answers" (2006, p. 41). The fourth principle therefore, is a commitment to theoretical approaches to reading and writing that consciously work with and acknowledge an ethical position.

FIVE — CHARACTERS AND POWER

Despite the risk of upsetting family members, writing close to home for a first large-scale project not only seemed desirable, but inevitable. The structure and limitations of a doctoral degree in writing lends itself to the structure and limitations of my most well known, most accessible, resource: my family and its stories. But there are other catalysts too. My interest in my grandparents' lives and how their stories fit into a wider Australian story is motivated both by a desire to redress the imbalance I perceive in Australia's cultural sphere and as a personal response to the partialities I perceive in their autobiographies.

The personal and the public, family and history may seem contradictory concerns, indeed this is the appeal to me. The writing process is a conversation, an oscillation between external and internal, hard work and blissful inspiration, research and imagination. I write from within my family as I respond to the way communists and socialists are presented in public culture. I write from outside my family as I respond to my grandparents' limited version of the family history as they present it in their published autobiographies. I am balancing different concerns: to keep close to myself, to what I know, a safely authorised space from which to speak, and to continue to reach out into what is not known and not safe. These negotiations create ethical problems as well as forcing certain decisions upon me.

Lifewriting is a general term encompassing much of the arc along the vector between history writing and fiction writing and although it refers generally to any auto/biographical works, lifewriting is often found in the company of women's history, radical history, domestic and private history. These histories may less often be a matter of public record than private documents and stories, so being "true" to source material is an important aspect of the tangled web of lifewriting concerns. These histories may represent ancestors or family members and representations may differ from those of other family members, even if a writer has the best intentions to represent truly. Other difficulties frequently arise when few sources of information are available. Ought a project be abandoned because there isn't enough evidence? The growing interest in lifewriting

suggests that there are stories to be told in spite of a lack of evidence. As writers, do we do this for ourselves, or for others? Are we allowed to do it? The contradictions implicit in the undertaking can be a source of creative power.

In "Lives and the Writer's Pact", Claire Woods discusses writing what she calls biographical narrative: not wholly biography, but a narrative of lives, where biography itself is already somewhere between a novel and a history. Her project concerns her parents, seen through the lens of their correspondence during the Second World War. Woods' intimacy with her subjects and her commitment to veracity interact to produce questions about her work's genre — "How are the boundaries between biography/auto-biography/lifewriting/memoir to be negotiated?" — and questions regarding the ethics of her writing:

> It is also a world that impinges on the rest of my family, including my siblings. Do they have a different view of some aspects of the telling? … How 'true' or perhaps 'acceptable' is my version of some events and stories recalled from my and their past? Any writer who researches aspects of personal or family history might ask such questions (2004).

The writer doesn't resolve her questions, but rather implies that by engaging with the questions in a public arena she is working towards, if not a solution, then perhaps a new set of questions.

Are ethical issues satisfactorily dealt with for me because my grandparents published their work, putting them in a public arena where I can address them as any critic? Perhaps, and yet these books are clearly not my only sources: how can I discount oral histories and unguarded reminiscence? Other spectra intervene: how closely do my characters represent my grandparents' self-representations? If they have different names, does it matter how closely they resemble? How well do my grandparents' characterisations of themselves reflect the real people I know and love? I can't separate my critical analysis of their writing from my relationship with them: as Woods notes of her own project, "personal and ethical issues flow into each other" (2004).

Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* is a classic example, as Gillian Whitlock points out, of a text that can be described as lifewriting precisely because of its blended genre of fiction and biography. Furthermore, it evades an opposition between the personal and political, through its weaving of different discourses (1992, p. 244). In this way, the importance of the private life as a source of history is asserted. It is ironic, argues Whitlock, that traditional

autobiography is treated with suspicion these days, because the truth of women's experiences played such an important role in second wave feminist criticism (ibid., pp. 246–7). The irony lies in the way genre-value shifts: now that auto/biography has become more attainable, (witness the publications of my former communist grandparents) it is worth less as an authentic historical artefact.

Drusilla Modjeska in *Poppy* describes her writing process as a movement between opposites:

> There were days when I was paralysed by the insufficiency of the evidence. There were days when I was flooded with relief on the same account: if there's no evidence, how can I be expected to write about it? I found myself cheated of my own feelings, let down by memory, pushed around by competing and conflicting stories. Are feelings evidence? Are memories? Stories?
>
> Daughter and historian I oscillated, neither one nor the other, tethered to notebooks and boxes of papers (1990a, p. 95).

And again, "Oscillation; fluctuation. Desire for separation; desire for return. … Did I think I could investigate Poppy's life without investigating my own?" (ibid., pp. 144–145). Like Woods and many others working in the lifewriting genre, there is an acknowledgement that the self is implicated in the text about the other.

The synthesis of personal and political to which Whitlock points, is achieved, I think, through Modjeska's slide into the fiction genre. There is a connection between the oscillation of genres and voices and the release into story and imagination. Modjeska's essay "Writing *Poppy*" discusses her fictional solution to the problem of writing about close family: where early drafts oscillated between an indictment and pleading, the invention of her mother's diary gave a voice that synthesised the discourses:

> It wasn't until I left my own voice and picked up hers that I began to feel her life from inside and reach into deeper layers of the complex of stories that was my material. The diaries came easily and writing them was wonderful. … The diaries felt given to me, and as I dropped into her experience the impulse to explain went away" (2002, p. 89).

The oscillation of self and other finally whirrs into fiction, it has life. Time and again, writing about lifewriting suggests there is something about the process of making stories of one's family that draws a writer in, sets one on a path. Regardless of the quality of the "evidence", patterns emerge out of the sources and make their way into a writer's text, and this offers a different veracity, a different pact. Sometimes we need to imagine beyond our own experience, we need fiction. It may be a conceit to presume to be another

in writing and yet clearly it often works, we are convinced. It may be less of a conceit to write about those you know the best, your family, rather than write about those who are the most different. My main strategy to ameliorate the dangers of writing about family members, indeed family members who are still alive, is to start from the end of the spectrum that terminates in "fiction", and work back into "history", rather than the other way round, as lifewriters undertake to do. And yet, shouldn't we continue to reach out for that other knowing?

How and why do people become characters in auto/biography? In "Resisting Authority", Carole Ferrier offers some ideas when writing about auto/biographical subjects and power, by identifying those who rarely become the subjects of texts:

> The lives of very few people who are working class and/or gay and/or Black or Migrant have been constructed by the institutions of literary production as 'interesting' enough … to be chosen by the dominant practices of biography. And they will rarely have the power to choose themselves, for the question of authority is also a question of power (1990).

Perhaps, now, we are seeing more stories of the working class, gays, blacks and migrants, than in 1990. In Australia however, it still seems the case that "Blacks are a bit trendy … the working class is not very trendy … the Communist Party is not at all trendy … though documenting its demise [was] briefly trendy" (ibid.).

In part, my choice of subject matter for my novel is in the spirit of resisting authority: my novel is loosely based on the lives of my grandparents who were active in

the Communist Party of Australia from the nineteen thirties to the nineteen fifties. Stories in the public arena about the activities of communists portrayed as anything other than treacherous and immoral are not a common part of my cultural heritage. I want to make a story that refracts my response to being brought up in a local culture of socialism and its antecedents. As well as that, my grandparents interest me because they *did* choose themselves as subjects of autobiography, both drawing attention to what made them unusual: radical politics. Having their published works to read is tantamount to an invitation to write back.

My grandfather's autobiography *Challenging Faith* documents his childhood to early middle age, culminating in his decision to leave the Communist Party of Australia, as he previously abandoned the Christian faith of his family. Towards the end of the book my

misgivings regarding his loss of commitment, which coincided with a loss of narrative drive, gave way to a disappointment: the Senior Inspector comes to see my grandfather at the school where he works:

> I asked him point-blank did he want me to resign from the Party? He said, "All I am asking is that you be more discreet. If you persist in public appearances as a communist, you make it hard for me. I want you to think about it. I'll come back tomorrow." I thought it over, discussed it with Mairi, and next day I told the inspector I would take his advice, and thanked him for being very decent about it (McKenzie, 1993, p. 153).

This it true to type: my grandfather is, after all, a humble sort of man. But I felt angry that, in the penultimate chapter of his autobiography, he submitted to pressure in his workplace without a murmur. In my novel, I wanted to give my character who is based on my grandfather more opportunities to resist, a liberty not permitted in the genre of biography. Thus, Ken McKinnon undertakes a special mission on behalf of his Party, but his success is restrained by his characteristic naïvety and modesty.

My grandfather himself is now in a fairly advanced stage of dementia, still living at home and cared for by my grandmother but unsure of who family members are. In a strange sort of inversion, his memory loss has accompanied the writing of my novel, as if my project of recollection is picking up what he sheds, or more disturbingly, sucking it out of him. The disease offers glimpses of a new man; perhaps his memory loss means the loss of social conventions of the unspoken, an unauthorised opening. He speaks with disarming bluntness, like a child, but likewise, with a new selfishness, prone to irrational anger and sudden tantrums. The character based on my grandfather can be read as standing for the forgetful Australian, for whom the past and the landscape are empty. He represents the loss of cultural memory concerning, for example, the massacre of indigenous Australians, which accompanies some versions of Australian history.

Is this new, late grandfather more or less true than the old one? And is my characterisation more or less true for taking advantage of his dementia to illuminate his whole life? The authenticity of my characterisation is many-layered, but ultimately, subjective. In the warping of time at this end of his life, "true" and "false" are insufficient denominators. Meaning will shift and flow, just as it does in the fiction genre, for different readers and readings.

When people enter writing they become “characters” in a novel, or, sliding through biography, they become “subjects” of a historical account. Emily Sutherland offers the following spectrum of characterisation: completely fictional characters; historical characters in fiction; biographical subjects; characters of historical accounts. She concludes that “the process of creating a character based on a person who lives, or has lived, is similar to that of planning, developing and writing a fictional character” (2007). This echoes my experience: my novel combines characters who are based on people who are alive, people who have lived though I never met them, and entirely fictional characters; but once they enter my novel they are all equally my characters.

Fiction acts as a kind of leveller. Regardless of where a representation of a person sits along the spectrum of characterisation, when that singular identity dissolves into words, the same tools of narrative description are used. Whether one is describing something about oneself or describing something about another, narrative is the mode employed. As is the case with narrative in history, there are delicate issues of authority and integrity to be negotiated when narrating characters. These vectors work in similar ways, as intersecting sets of dynamics that throw up ethical questions. There are no reliable rules by which to draw a clear line between differing genres and identities: each situation must be argued in context. I will look at an example that is relevant to my novel.

In 1993, Fremantle Arts Centre Press published two similar autobiographies: Justina Williams’ *Anger and Love* and my grandfather John McKenzie’s *Challenging Faith*. The authors share similar politics, although my grandfather’s commitment to communism lapsed whereas Williams’ did not. Their respective stories cover the same people and places, indeed, they knew each other. Reading these texts side by side helps me to put my grandfather’s writing into context. He is writing history, writing about history, but he is a character in that history, the main character.

Williams and McKenzie offer eyewitness accounts of a particular event in Perth in the late nineteen thirties concerning a female activist at a meeting addressed by Robert Menzies, whose ungentlemanly direction to have her removed was overheard. There are enough similarities, principally the naming of the main players in the event, to conclude they write of the same occasion. But the versions are different all the way through. Williams doesn’t specify when the event occurred but describes Menzies as Attorney-

General and the contention surrounding Menzies' praise of Hitler. This would date the meeting after Menzies' October 1938 speech in Sydney, and before he took over as Prime Minister in April 1939. Williams claims Menzies' Perth address was in the interests of "electioneering", which may mean it took place during his period of absence from cabinet between March and April 1939, after his fall-out with then Prime Minister Joseph Lyons.

My grandfather clearly states the event took place in July 1939, when Menzies was Prime Minister. The contentious issue in this version is Menzies' preparations for war and launching of the National Register. The versions also differ when it comes to describing the dramatic events. My grandfather remembers it like this: "Menzies leaned over and said something quietly to the chairman. The speech was being broadcast and it came out loud and clear over the airwaves, 'Throw that bitch out!'" (McKenzie, 1993, p. 91). As Williams recalls it: "Losing his temper he shouted to the police, 'Throw out the woman in blue!' Haunting his meetings, the 'woman in blue' and her questions were seized on by the newspapers" (Williams, 1993, p. 82). Both writers invoke an authoritative memory by suggesting that the media captured their version of the story. Both recall the tone of the comment requiring an exclamation point. But the versions betray different attitudes to the protagonists: while "the woman in blue" might denote power and influence, "that bitch" is derogatory and implies she made a transgression.

My novel also has a version of this historical event, but if two eyewitness accounts can differ so greatly, I cannot be expected to represent the real story. Instead, I choose pieces of each in the service of my narrative, and abandon chronology entirely. From McKenzie's text, for example, I pinch pairs of male activists bearing placards who begin the interruptions. From Williams' text I take the figure of the powerful feminine and extrapolate into a demonstration of solidarity with a "fainting brigade" that is referred to in other revolutionary literature. The whole episode is interwoven with strands from a wide variety of relevant sources. The historic event becomes a wall for my story to bounce against; different, more distant, from Williams' and my grandfather's versions, but in a matter of degree only, not kind.

* * *

My grandmother's auto/biography is called *A Fantastic Dad and his Romantic Daughter*, the slash and title indicating that the book is as much a hagiography of her father as the story of her own life. This confusion gestures towards the text's catalyst for me in the writing of my novel: despite her obvious intelligence, my grandmother has remained willfully ignorant of feminism. On one level, her text suggests this is because of the urgent imperative of communism, in its masculine, mid-twentieth century manifestation. On another level, my grandmother's loss of her own mother as a child is a wound from which she never healed, although this story is told as much through omission as inclusion. My novel attempts to grapple with these readings, both through the characterisation of my grandmother, which requires empathy and understanding, and through the characterisation of myself as a contemporary relative and reader.

This is complicated by the fact that my grandmother rushed to self-publish her twenty-years-in-the-making auto/biographical manuscript shortly after I began my PhD project that is largely based on her life. Although we openly supported each other's efforts, there was a sense of competition too, which lent itself in my imagination to comparison: who would produce the definitive version of the McKenzie family history? There is never a final form, a final version, but rather texts to be read in endlessly various sequences with other texts, suggesting different meanings and interpretations. I think my novel is, at least, an equally authentic portrayal of my grandmother's character as her self-portrayal, but the fullest sense of her character is gleaned by reading my novel in tandem with her autobiography.

My various identities as auto/biographer and creative writer offer a variety of strategies to create an ethically engaged text, one that poses questions as well as answers, and one that aims for a truth that is waiting-to-find-out. My grandmother's auto/biography is more reliable than my novel if genre is the measure, but this would ignore the deficiencies of her text that my text responds to. She effaces her feelings and fills her book instead with vivid period detail and the doings of the significant men in her life. The subversive potential of her story is undermined by the self-imposed limits of its scope: it eschews the emotional, the physical, the maternal parts of her life, at the same time as it asserts her identity as that of wife-and-mother. In fact, when my grandmother's mother died, my grandmother became mother-by-proxy to her father and seven younger siblings,

so the pattern of her life is represented as mother-then-wife-then-mother. This crossing back and forth is reflected in the structure of my novel that oscillates between a story set in 1954 and one set in 2004. 1954 is concerned with characterisations of my grandparents and their family, 2004 with characterisation of myself as contemporary biographer, negotiating family members, living and absent.

In my writing process I am guided by an ethical consciousness, which is not to claim moral authority but merely an intentional position. Despite the ubiquity of visual culture, text remains a primary mode of transmitting information and controlling power relations. As soon as writing becomes public there are ethical issues at stake. This can be viewed as a sliding scale: the greater the exposure, the higher the stakes. If this is the case, there are only minor interests at play in the work you are now reading. But if the work were to be published, it is worthwhile having looked into some implications for my family and myself.

To return to the overarching theme of parts Four and Five, that of the negotiation of family and politics in my recreation of family history, I will end with a brief look at the State's interest in family. As well as his interest in education, John Howard often spoke of his beliefs regarding family and, as with his accusations against those who opposed his education policies, there is a contradiction here, too. A succinct example comes from a speech he made ten years ago describing Australia as a nation where "the individual is paramount and where the family unit is the corner stone of our nation" (1997). Howard's simultaneous assertion of both individualism and the value of family disguises the ways in which some individuals are considered more paramount than others, as are some families. In a speech called "The Australian Way" given two years later, Howard claims individualism as an Australian value: "I resolve to elevate individuals, their choices, their responsibilities above the interests of institutions and pressure groups because that is what Australians want" (1999). What about those Australians who are members of those groups? For many, the weight of meaning in "Australian values" obscures the fact that institutions and pressure groups are composed of individuals, with contrary and varied ideas of what "Australian values" are.

Carole Ferrier's 2006 essay on Australian families points out that in recent decades, critiques of the family as it was constructed by Howard's government have been marginalised, just as first wave feminism was defeated by a substantial lack of change to the family. The growth of non-traditional families is discouraged by unfavourable welfare policies, as Ferrier makes explicit:

> The 1907 Harvester judgement on the family wage … which instituted men in the family as breadwinners was overturned when challenged, but expressed dominant thinking then in binding both genders into sex roles in the family that recent changes to the Family Tax Benefit do much to reinstate (2006).

Changes in the political environment as a result of the growth of capitalism and market society, are accompanied by changes in the intellectual environment that institutionalise post-structuralism and the fracturing into identity politics. Ferrier relates this trend to feminism and critiques of the family. The momentum that second wave feminism had accumulated in Australia by the nineteen seventies was diminished by the nineteen eighties' shift to identity politics, or difference politics, theories that advocate on behalf of various marginalised groups. This was a natural progression for feminism but undermined contemporary feminist theory by dividing feminists into smaller, and therefore less powerful, groups. Ferrier writes: "Contradictorily, the second wave movement's necessary taking up of racial politics (since gender is articulated so differently for different groups of women) produced some difficulties for the further development of a critique that problematised the family" (ibid.). The isolated nature of the units that compose the capitalist nuclear family makes questioning its power more difficult. Ferrier's essay on the family contributes a timely reminder to remain alert to the State's influence over the meanings of family. The capitalist nuclear family is the favoured model in State policy despite the growing failure of this family in its idealised form. And always, punitive policies are worse for Indigenous Australians. Ferrier writes:

> The oppression of women through patriarchal ideologies and double standards, and through lack of economic independence, is experienced more intensely by those who are not white, and the feminist critique of the family is complicated by the systematic destruction of Indigenous family life throughout white Australian history (ibid.).

For examples of critiques that contest the separation of public and private, Ferrier points us towards literature from Australian women writers of early and mid-twentieth century. This grouping describes some of the literature that I have read whilst writing my novel, and

crosses over with the literature my grandparents read. The next section will turn towards three novels that I have reflected upon during the writing of my project, all of which work with and against the idea of “family”.

The internal logic of this essay follows a process that begins with methodological enquiries, moves through problems in cultural communication and leads to readings of literature. My theoretical contexts take in contemporary feminist and Marxist approaches to reading and writing, and theories of national identity. These are strategic choices that blend and clash in provocative ways and are relevant in a conversation with my novel, in which half my characters are women and female identity is a theme. Most of my characters are communists and familiar with Marx's writing. They are Australian and self-consciously so.

My analysis will focus on three novels from three Australian-born women of roughly the same era, namely Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929), Eleanor Dark's *The Little Company* (1945) and Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986). The novels I've chosen are somewhat arbitrary, given the huge range of texts that have been beneficial to my work, yet they share what I will broadly refer to as a spirit of resistance, and the success of these works must be attributed, in part, to that spirit. They are novels I like from writers I admire, but are very different novels too. Several sweeping patterns follow them and will guide my analysis. Given the novelists' ages and years of publication, they represent an early career, mid-career and posthumous work, respectively. In order of age, the novels move from a very internal and local space (*Coonardoo*'s North West Western Australian desert is relatively local to me), through *The Little Company*'s setting in Sydney and surrounding districts (the cultural capital of Australia at the time of the novel's setting in the mid-twentieth century), to *I'm Dying Laughing*'s international (American and European) perspective. There is a suggestion of an increasingly modern outlook to accompany the outward-looking perspective. This may be considered as a reflection of my own novel, which ends with a gesture to the centre: of the protagonist, of her country and her sense of nationalism.

SIX — *COONARDOO*

As I read my grandparents' autobiographies I compiled notes by making themed headings and listing relevant references under each. My headings included things significant to their lives such as "literature", "religious attitudes", "political attitudes". As communists, they prided themselves on their concerns for justice and equality and as such, I made a heading for "indigenous presence". The only notable thing about my contribution to this section was the large, blank space in between the other teeming headings, which I partly filled with the words BLANK SPACE.

This illustrates something I felt strongly about when formulating my novel idea: what role will indigenous Australians take in my story? Above all I didn't want to replicate the erasure that past generations of white Australians have enacted upon descendents of the original inhabitants of Australia. But what right have I to represent what I am not? Still, from my point of view, a compromise must be negotiated. Aboriginal Australians do not have a unified response to being characterised by white Australians, as one would expect. Given this fraught territory, why would I choose to think and write about *Coonardoo*? To begin with, I was drawn to Katharine Susannah Prichard because of her geographic proximity to my setting, because of my grandparents' personal knowledge of her, because she inspired a character in my novel. And then, I wanted an earlier work, one that would have been well established in the canon of my grandparents' library by 1954. *Coonardoo*, with its challenging focus on Aboriginal Australians and its desert setting, seemed the right choice.

As a historian and occasional literary critic, my grandfather was certainly aware of *Coonardoo*. But his analysis as presented in his unpublished lecture focuses on her authentic representation of the Australian landscape. Through this, a secondary concern is the character of Coonardoo: "Given this heightened sense of place, the portrayal of an Aboriginal woman and her people at the centre of the story became inevitable" (1995, p. 13). Although it is accurate to point out that Prichard's novel gives voice to her Aboriginal characters largely by describing them as part of the landscape, my grandfather is uncritical of this white prejudice, common in the nineteen fifties but still in currency in 1995 and, I think, today. Although he praises critics who saw *Coonardoo* as seminal in the fullness of

its characterisation of Aboriginals, my grandfather doesn't engage with the conflicts the novel raises regarding the situation for Aboriginal women on remote stations at the time, wittingly or otherwise, relying instead on the author's statement that "the story was written in the country through which it moves" (Prichard, 1990, p. xiii), as if this is sufficient demonstration of its authenticity.

When *Coonardoo* was published in book form in 1929 a Foreword preceded the novel (and has been included in every edition since then), written by Prichard in response to the moral outrage the novel solicited in its serialised form. In it, Prichard claims to base her fiction on a close study of Aboriginal culture in the North West region of WA and seems to suggest that this process is clear and straightforward: "Facts, characters, incidents, have been collected, related and interwoven. That is all" (ibid., p. xiii). Prichard implies she had privileged access to the Aboriginals and white pastoralists of the North West district as well as other expertise, and that for the most part, white people have the colonial situation well in hand. Prichard wants to assert that her story is plausible and should be heard; she wants to claim literary authority in defense of *Coonardoo*'s frank depiction of miscegenation.

Miscegenation made readers uncomfortable; appropriation did not. The novel presents a record of Aboriginal songs, but in her Foreword, Prichard extends gratitude to her "good friends" the white pastoralists, the only ones who "can be trusted to know the sound and meaning of words in melodies sung by the blacks." Further on she sums up: "Only people who have had a long and intimate association with particular tribes are able to garner these jewels of the primitive imagination and present them as authentic fragments" (1990, p. xiv). Even though Prichard herself has not had the long and intimate association required, she is the one presenting the songs and claiming their authenticity. It is authenticity by proxy, resting on the authority of the friends and experts she quotes. Throughout the novel, there is confusion around the authenticity of race.

Susan Sheridan points out that Prichard, as well as inheriting romantic and elegiac ideas regarding race, had access to new discourses of anthropology, as is evident in her Foreword where she quotes a white "expert" on Australian Aboriginals. Sheridan makes a connection with the compatibility of the romantic evolutionist discourse and other new discourses on sexuality that Prichard had available to her: these placed Aboriginals "in the 'childhood' of the human race, possessed of passion, intuition and spirituality but not

reason and individuation" (1995, p. 142). Unfortunately for Prichard, the authority of her "expert" is now thoroughly discredited and her statement points to some of the false beliefs she may have held when writing *Coonardoo*.

Although Prichard's intention may have been to establish the reading context of her novel, giving it more authority than that of conventional fiction by suggesting it is not "altogether a work of the romantic imagination", it can no longer be read as more than a white woman's fiction about early twentieth century black and white relations in rural Australia. The Foreword remains interesting, however, as a literary document that sheds some light on the novel's writing context. It points towards reading her fiction with an apparent commitment to veracity, at the same time as her insistence on her authority contributes to the blurring of genre boundaries between fiction and non-fiction.

Prichard had a commitment to reality and claimed authority for her work of fiction on the basis that it was factual. However, Marion Austen-Crowe's unpublished study of Prichard and the writing of *Coonardoo* reveals the partial nature of Prichard's research, with limited or no access to Aboriginal people on their own terms (1996, p. 97). She comments, "Prichard's statement that on pastoral stations in the North West, Aborigines 'are treated with consideration and kindness' … is contradicted by the abuse of Aboriginal women presented in her text. Her statement is certainly contradicted by historical data" (ibid., p. 80). Austen-Crowe provides sufficient evidence of abuses, as does Prichard in *Coonardoo*; why is this denied in the Foreword? Given the denial, a modern reader is likely to ask, how truly does *Coonardoo* expose the conditions of Aboriginal life at the time and how have Prichard's romantic notions of this culture interrupted that truth? Work such as Austen-Crowe's demonstrates that Prichard's realism or naturalism in *Coonardoo* fails to deal with the social reality of colonialism. Even when presented as a kind of understanding, her story undermines indigenous rights to full citizenship and indigenous claims for recognition of the loss of traditional livelihood.

Prichard's engagement with truth and fact is demonstrated in her writing style and public statements and exemplified in her commitment to socialist realism, the official style of Soviet literature that she first learned of during her visit to the USSR in 1932. Although Prichard's formal introduction to socialist realism occurred after the publication of

Coonardoo (1929), the style represented "a strengthening and confirmation of one aspect already in her work" (Modjeska, 1981, p. 120). Adherence to socialist realism was a formalisation of her early writing style that was already concerned with realistic descriptions of a character's surroundings and way of life, including work.

Prichard wrote about her experiences in the Soviet Union in a series of newspaper articles that were published together as *The Real Russia* in 1935. In an essay on socialist realism and Prichard, Cath Ellis argues for the recognition of socialist realism as a mode of creating literature, rather than a way of reading literature, and claims that the term is largely misunderstood by critics and therefore dismissed, along with Prichard's later works. Ellis points out the particular effect socialist realism has on writing:

> It requires fiction, or literature as art, to be more concerned with political and social ideas than with entertainment, as well as requiring it to be of a didactic nature. Thus, fictional writing tends towards being more factual, whereas literature as reportage, or non-fiction/journalism, is required to present events as positive and inspirational this, out of necessity, leaving such writing as tending towards fiction (1997, p. 402).

Reading back to *Coonardoo*, given that the assumption of socialist realism was a continuation of tendencies already in place, Ellis' work offers a way into an understanding of the confusion of genre implied by Prichard's Foreword. Prichard intended her novel to be factual and provided the Foreword to testify to this. But she had a problem, whether she knew it or not: she exaggerated her knowledge of Aboriginal Australians, providing an abundance of now discredited theories and ideas to stand in for her ignorance.

In 1990, *Coonardoo*'s publisher added an introduction by Drusilla Modjeska, which gives some context to Prichard's novel and the claims she makes for it in her Foreword. Modjeska doesn't direct a reading of the text but highlights its contradictions. Ambiguity haunts *Coonardoo* and is described by Modjeska as "a strange case of double vision":

> On the one hand there is the radical and passionate view from 1926, and once again I raise my hat to Katharine Susannah Prichard. On the other hand there are the assumptions and procedures she accepted and we do not, the language she could use and we would not; and the lapses and silences that would not, and could not, have been heard then, but which startle us now (1990b, p. vi).

Ambiguity is also evident in Prichard's Foreword in her simultaneous assertion of the similarity and the difference between white and black Australians, where whites are superior to the "primitive" blacks but nonetheless in continuum with them. Prichard is not

to be blamed for this, Modjeska states; belief in the fundamental difference between white and black Australians was the moral norm when *Coonardoo* was published and any suggestion of similarity was radical. Modjeska's Introduction argues that unconscious assumptions about mysterious black Australia, through a limited white perspective, still have a lot to tell a contemporary reader about attitudes to race.

In the fictional equivalent of the denials of wrongdoing in her Foreword, Prichard establishes an opposition in *Coonardoo* between "here" and elsewhere. Although it is true that bad things can happen to Aboriginals living with whites, these things happen in other places, in the coastal towns and on some degenerate stations. At Wytaliba, the pastoral station of the novel's setting, Prichard creates an ideal version of the colonial pastoral station with a balance of white control and Aboriginal tradition. The colonising act is described like this:

> [O]n these inland plains the tribes were peaceful and conservative, avoided contact with white people, other than those they knew and had become accustomed to. Neither Saul Hardy nor Mumae had ever experienced trouble with Wytaliba folk. Generous, kindly their relationship had been, in an overlordship imposed, gradually and imperceptibly, until the blacks recognized and accepted it, by conditions of work for food and clothing (1990, p. 112).

The injustice of this arrangement working their own land for the benefit of the whites who stole it — goes unremarked and no conflict is registered, which is strange given Prichard's commitment to realism. The romance of the tribes of the inland plains sits awkwardly next to the bald analysis of work for food and clothing. In reality, more often than not the pastoral situation destroyed traditional life. Austen-Crowe writes:

> When Prichard made her field trip to the North West traditional Aboriginal life had all but disappeared as a consequence of the economic development of the region. Of the economic forces causing the disruption to Aboriginal life, the pastoral industry was perhaps the most significant (1996, p. 131).

Anne Brewster has commented upon the absence of a government presence in *Coonardoo*, which was pervasive in reality, whilst recognising that the personal nature of the drama between Hugh and Coonardoo requires a strictly private sphere (Brewster, 2002). But the contrast Brewster draws with Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*

(the subject of her paper) reminds us of a very different drama, even though it is set in the same region, in the same era.

At first, the white station-owner's feelings for Wytaliba are described like this: "Through his love of the country and of Wytaliba, Hugh realized, was woven regard for the people who had grown in and were bound to it" (1990, p. 112). As time passes and Hugh continues to reject Coonardoo, the distinction between Wytaliba and elsewhere crumbles. Coonardoo and the country, symbolised as Wytaliba, live and die as one, despite her narrative role as the source of life and fecundity:

> Coonardoo's spirit had withered and died when she went away from Wytaliba … that withering and dying of Coonardoo's spirit had caused a blight on the place. She had loved Wytaliba and been bound up with the source of its life. Was she not the well in the shadow? (ibid., pp. 224–5).

Prichard didn't have the experience to write adequately of the Aboriginal story on pastoral stations and the fudging, when it occurs, is transferred into a failure of landscape, or failings in the characters of women, particularly Coonardoo. It is as if the act of judgement of Prichard's characters is displaced onto the station and its plains.

Consider the episode linking Hugh's long absence from Wytaliba after his mother's death with his return accompanied by his new wife (end of Chapter XIII and beginning of Chapter XIV). Before Hugh and Mollie arrive, the Aboriginals at Wytaliba are nearly starving because Hugh hasn't been there to dole out rations. Before she died, Hugh's mother told them she would punish them if they stole food. "She said her spirit would jump into a white cockie, and always she'd be flying round to see all was being done as it ought to be — until another white woman came" (1990, p. 89). The Aboriginals will not break the rules and open the stores shed; instead, Prichard has them blame the "spirit responsible for growing kangaroos" (ibid., p. 84) for making the countryside barren at their time of need. Austen-Crowe writes:

> The textual implication is that it is the spirit world which has failed the Aborigines. Thus it diverts attention from the colonial process that has produced the conditions which force the Wytaliban Aborigines to work on their own land for the benefit of their dispossessors (1996, p. 64).

When Hugh arrives with Mollie he gives out rations, treats and new clothes as if it is Christmas, disguising the relationship of control with softer familial intentions. Austen-Crowe again: "Prichard's intention is to portray a beneficent paternalism but the subtextual

message conveyed is that the Aborigines have lost their adult status: childlike they depend on Hugh for food and clothing" (ibid., p. 63).

At the beginning of Chapter XIV, Hugh tries to guide Mollie into her new role as station homestead keeper, with its power relations different from what Mollie is used to in the coastal towns. Hugh tells Mollie that the Aboriginals called his mother Mumae — "father" in their dialect — "It meant mother and father really" (1990, p. 103). Mollie has misunderstood the nature of the arrangement between blacks and whites at Wytaliba, thinking they are servants. "[Y]ou must never work them too hard — specially gins. They're not made for had work, can't stand it. Look at their little hands. Coonardoo's — I've never seen any woman with as pretty little hands as Coonardoo's," explains Hugh (ibid., p. 104). Mollie's response to her husband's questionable comments is to feel threatened, but she resolves to go warily, a forewarning of what is to come.

Subjugation of women and violence against women is a part of Wytaliba, but so casually does it occur that it might never have happened, the implication seeming to be that it is far worse elsewhere. In his jealous rage, Hugh pushes Coonardoo into the fire and banishes her from home and the Wytaliba folk forgive his actions as those of one possessed. When Prichard's experience of Aboriginal relationships falls short, the gap is filled with reference to the spirit world, making *Coonardoo* her most symbolic novel. In this symbolic order, an irreconcilable difference exists between Aboriginal and European family structures, with violent results.

In her essay "A Tragic Convergence", Cath Ellis discusses Prichard's critique of family, or the incompatibility of two family structures, through the character of Coonardoo. Rather than the usual tragic heroine, "Coonardoo is the focus of the Aboriginal and European Australian family structures as they converge and clash" (1995, p. 71). Ellis focuses on the novel's concern with confusions around parentage, proper marriages and improper sexual liaisons and how these events impact upon Coonardoo. "What is important to note is that the Australian Aboriginal family structure is a direct result of a non-materialist, pre-capitalist societal structure in which notions of inheritance have very little importance" (ibid., p. 66). The white family structure with its rules of illegitimacy stands in stark contrast to this and Coonardoo is the symbol of the clash — she may be of mixed race

and her son is certainly Hugh's — consequently her integrity as an individual is undermined.

Although the novel is called *Coonardoo*, it is really Hugh's story:

> [Hugh] can be seen as symbolic of the non-Aboriginal people who have come into direct contact with the Aboriginals. Despite his benevolent desires he is still unable to escape the fact that he is caught up within the class struggle of capitalism. Being a part of this struggle leaves him powerless to act against the forces of this tragic convergence and, instead, establishes him as a destructive operator within it. It is significant that the name he is called by Coonardoo, is Youie, or You. It is almost as if Coonardoo points out of the pages and directly addresses "You" the reader, implicating us in her tragedy (ibid., p. 71).

Because it is Hugh's story, the white materialist capitalist understanding prevails and Coonardoo is sacrificed. But it is also Hugh's tragedy and those prevailing materialist capitalist understandings fail him too. Susan Sheridan argues that the obvious (and alarming, for its original audience) meaning of *Coonardoo* is that black and white sexual relations ought to be legitimated (1995, p. 145). They are not, and Coonardoo remains merely an object of desire. She is the archetypal feminine, but, argues Sheridan, "as 'the well in the shadows' she is container of a desire defined principally from the (white) masculine point of view" (ibid., p. 144). And her Aboriginality is subsumed under her function as the unconscious of white male identity (ibid., p. 150).

Coonardoo becomes more and more a symbol of Prichard's "black woman" through the novel. Her representations of Aboriginals largely describe them as animal or plant-like: Coonardoo's "air of a faithful deserted animal" (1990, p. 8); Warieda's dark arm "like the branch of a tree" (ibid., p. 53). These are meant to be positive metaphors, but they are passive and deny the basic human rights of Aboriginals. Prichard represents her Aboriginal characters as being "of the land" and doesn't question their exploitation for profit. But she also represents blacks and whites as connected through the land, through nature worship, even as they are estranged socially.

This conflict in Prichard's work is well recognised. Karen Barker writes on the schism between the worker and nature in Prichard's writing, employing a pre-Freudian theory of desire to explain those parts that aren't explained by Marxism. Vitalism is a discredited scientific theory of a vital living force, which became a suitably malleable philosophical and literary theory (2006, pp. 45–46). I don't think it is necessary to name Prichard's variety of nature worship, and Barker doesn't write about *Coonardoo*, but a

theory on the rift in Prichard's attitude to nature is useful. Barker writes: "For the vitalists, to be close to the earth is to be close to the movement of life, to the impulse of life itself, expressed in the natural laws and the forces of nature. For Marxism, the natural laws must always yield to social formations" (ibid., p. 55). This is *Coonardoo*'s core, its heart of darkness: Prichard's Aboriginals are passive because they are natural elements, and therefore, expendable, even as they are "loved".

The conflict illuminates a more general trend in Prichard's work, and perhaps in Marx's philosophy itself. Andrew Collier argues that Marx underestimated and didn't account for the power of nationalism in the development of his theories, because he was both within the intellectual tradition of secularism but, as an exile, outside its companion tradition of nationalism (2004, pp. 115–116). This is one way of trying to understand the complexities of Prichard's work, which combines elements of nature worship, socialist realism and a nationalism that play each against the other.

In 1929 Prichard was breaking new ground through her rounded characterisations of Aboriginals, but in the end, her romanticism undermined her realism. Coonardoo is not fully human but spirit and somehow beyond the need for basic human care and dignity. After he'd burnt her and sent her away, Hugh "did not doubt that Coonardoo would come in from the bush one day and live out the life of her people down there beside the creek":

> No harm would come to her out in the ranges. Was she not part of the place and the life? But what a blank her being away made in life at the homestead where she had been! Could you believe it? Could anybody believe a man, a sane man, would feel like that about a gin? (1990, p. 214).

This passage in Hugh's own voice simultaneously marks the novel's emotional climax and its lapse in authenticity. Hugh's behaviour is abominable, but his journey to the question, "Do I love Coonardoo?" (or as close as a man such as Hugh might come to asking this question) is deeply moving and his failure to answer honestly is tragic. Modjeska's Introduction to the novel recognises this. "The result of this denial is spiritual death for them both. What shocked the readers in 1929, I suspect, was not so much the portrayal of the degradation of Aboriginal women, shocking as that is … but the possibility of love between Hugh and Coonardoo" (1990b, p. vi).

Contentious from the beginning (it won a national prize but was roundly criticised), *Coonardoo* remains an important Australian work for its early attempt to grapple with the disaster of colonialism. Today there is a sense the text does more harm than good, in its romantic constructions of remote Aboriginal Australia in the early twentieth century. Anne Brewster articulates the conflict:

> I struggled against being implicated in Prichard's racialised "compassion", which I found profoundly offensive and patronising, but I simultaneously recognised my own inscription in the historicity of the novel's race politics and Prichard's left-wing inflected concern with social justice (2002).

Coonardoo has become difficult: Aboriginal Australians are telling their own stories, and what are white Australians to do? As I described earlier, I'm not satisfied with the response of my grandparents' generation, to express generally sympathetic views towards the situation of Aboriginal Australians whilst ignoring them as makers and consumers of culture. The source material of my grandparents' lives was inadequate for my needs; my plans for a strong indigenous character in my novel had to be abandoned. However, the indigenous presence that I feel is within my experience and imaginative range (minor characters, "off-stage" characters, the narrative's intimation) becomes a significant part of the contemporary half of my novel. Alternatives are fraught, and yet, in the spirit of resistance, I think more white Australian writers need to approach this subject.

Katharine Susannah Prichard was not alone in her well intentioned, patronising portrayals of Aboriginals, and little had changed in 1941 when Eleanor Dark wrote *The Timeless Land*, about the arrival of whites in Australia told from an Aboriginal point of view. Dark's biographers claim: "What Eleanor did is not something a white novelist would do easily now. Now black writers, criticising racism and appropriation, want to tell their own stories; and white writers have been told to examine their prejudices" (Brooks & Clark, 1998, p. 365). Still, novels such as these remain fascinating for white readers, perhaps because they offer us clues to our own implication in racism. The main reason *Coonardoo* has become a difficult text is that so little has changed over the seventy-five years since it was written, and this is shameful.

SEVEN — *THE LITTLE COMPANY*

The Little Company first interested me because its wartime setting with communism as a central issue against a background of family life strongly resonates with the nineteen fifties half of my novel. I particularly enjoy the foregrounding of writing as a response to the circumstances of a war-torn world. Eleanor Dark manages to make her story of war a personal one through the writing life of Gilbert Massey and to a lesser extent, through the writings of his sister Marty and lover Elsa. *The Little Company* frustrated me, however, when it came to Dark's female characters. In Phyllis, Gilbert's wife, with her domestic interior monologue and moral anxieties, there is part of a model for my novel's character, Elsie, but Dark doesn't trouble the connection she maintains between political conservatism and traditional attitudes to gender. Phyllis acts as a vessel to contain nearly all of the questions surrounding the impasse between feminism and nationalism in twentieth-century discourse in Australia. Dark saves her bitterest ends for women who don't challenge the status quo, where political and family choices are lumped together. The more liberal characters, the Marxist characters, have no solutions, either, to the problems of family life, but are mostly free of problems themselves. Although bound by a degree of realism, the women characters in my novel are extended a range not harnessed by most writers of Dark's generation, including my grandmother's self-characterisation in her autobiography. For example, scientific control of female sexuality is a common theme in Dark's fiction, and likewise, my Elsie is subjected to surgery to fix some of the mess that interventionist obstetric practices have wrought. But Elsie's mind remains her own, and the contemporary half of my novel represents the social and public role Elsie grew into in the latter part of life. I should point out that this role — establishing a public museum that has grown into a collection with considerable significance — is not my invention but my grandmother's achievement. This story is not told in her autobiography.

In "Documenting and Criticising Society", David Carter argues that many Australian novels of the pre- and post-World War Two decades showed three general tendencies: to expand their historical scope, to foreground conventionally excluded material and to juxtapose literary with political discourses (1988, p. 385). Prichard was a pioneer of

these effects but Carter suggests that, by the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties, "the interaction between Communist Party policy, socialist realist theory, and nationalism" led Prichard to "the favouring of more orthodox modes of literary realism", positioning herself at the centre of a liberal humanist literary tradition (ibid., p. 378). While Prichard was working on her Goldfields trilogy (published 1946, 1948 and 1950), Eleanor Dark was writing her own historical trilogy (1941, 1948 and 1953), best known for the popular and acclaimed first volume, *The Timeless Land*. Between this and the next volume she wrote *The Little Company*, her most explicitly political novel, which received little critical attention after it was published in 1945. The second edition (1985) included an introduction by Drusilla Modjeska; more has been written about the novel in the twenty years since then than in the forty years before.

In *The Little Company*, historical context is foregrounded with particular reference to characters' political choices, and literary and political discourses are juxtaposed. These techniques are consistent with Carter's observations of effects underlying novels of the period, but he argues further that the novel's self-reflexive use of writer-characters is integral to its political impact. During the novel's course the writers all overcome their creative paralysis (to greater and lesser degrees) and take up similar stories, stories similar to *The Little Company* itself. Carter argues: "its politics lie in reflections on its own status as historical fiction" (1988, p. 385).

Dark's interest in these modernist concerns is epitomised through her focus on the writing process and the written product: they are emblematic of her attitude to the value of being an artist, a producer of meaning. She sets up comparisons between different approaches to writing characterised by the styles of Gilbert and Marty. Gilbert Massey, who enjoys the novel's primary point of view, is a consummate writer. He is successful and hardworking but with the onset of war, he, along with the other writers, suffers a terrible block. His sister Marty describes it like this: "I know you don't like my fanciful way of putting things, but … Our brains are, so to speak, tuned-in to creativeness, and at present the mass-brain is tuned-in to destructiveness" (Dark, 1985, p. 20).

Often we are shown Marty's ways of seeing and writing through Gilbert's consideration of her style. "It was true that her slapdash, picturesque, inaccurate way of saying things often annoyed him. And yet when … she looked at him slyly and said: 'You

see what I *mean*?' — he usually had to admit that he did" (ibid., p. 20). Here he considers Marty's approach to inspiration:

> From this mass you must somehow extract your thought, not building it so much as finding it, whole and inevitable, so that what you feel as it flows from your pen is not accomplishment, but recognition. Perhaps, as Marty seemed to suggest, all this talk of 'technique' was just a frightened denial of so baffling a simplicity? (ibid., p. 90).

Marty is the intuitive romantic to Gilbert's rational thinker, and at the same time, Gilbert borrows from her the idea that the creative impulse doesn't belong to the genius but to anyone who writes, that there is "proper humility" in recognising that:

> … "your" art was not yours at all, but merely a minute contribution, possibly inept, possibly abortive, to a continuous human record. No matter where you begin, someone else has brought the story to that point; no matter where you end, someone else takes over from you and carries it on (ibid., p. 90).

There is nothing so very unusual in Gilbert's process; what is unusual is that the interesting contributions of Marty are not the focus of the book. Marty's notions allow Dark to address inspiration in a romantic way, and at the same time make room for the idea of the writer's insignificance, preempting the writer's death two decades later. There is conflict between the private practice of writing for pleasure and public one of contributing to the human record, but this can only be recognised in the slightly batty Marty, whose ideas are available for Gilbert to selectively pick up. It is very much Gilbert-the-writer, rational and fair, who remains the focus of *The Little Company*.

The creative paralysis that affects them all is particularly painful for Gilbert because, without domestic and financial cares (the family has inherited wealth), he lives through his writing. He negotiates personal relationships using the lessons he has learned from his writing of characters rather than the other way round. Gilbert remains emotionally disengaged from his wife Phyllis, treating her as a character puzzle to be solved through his work: "He came back to himself with a start. He was abashed to find himself concerned with such things at such a time, and yet it intrigued him to learn that no matter what his own mental stress, his writing consciousness stood apart from it, taking notes" (ibid., p. 271). He goes out of his way to avoid communicating with his wife: "Such small manœuverings had been part of his life for a long time now; whether she knew it or not, the outward peace of their domestic scene had rested for years on his conscious policy of being alone with her as little as possible" (ibid., p. 243). At the same time, pages are given to

Gilbert's knowing of Phyllis' mind: "She was drifting, he recognised, into some sort of neurosis" (ibid., p. 236); "That heavy interval of silence was thunderous with her mental manœuverings. He could hear them in his own brain as clearly as if she were talking aloud" (ibid., pp. 284–5). This replaces, for the most part, Phyllis' own internal dialogue and Gilbert's opportunities for self-reflection. Gilbert insists he is not like his brother Nick, a communist, for whom Phyllis would be an abstract problem. He protests, "No, she was Phyllis, bewildered by life into a frenzy, her attempted method of escape no more rational than Elsa's, no more rational than that of a panic-stricken animal butting its head against a wall" (ibid., p. 291). For Gilbert she is a writing problem, already in the past tense. In the end Gilbert's treatment of Phyllis as a character saves her, when Gilbert "becomes Phyllis" in order to find her when she's wandered, deranged, into the bush (ibid., p. 299).

At last, late in the novel, he questions himself:

> Parental failure had been instantly ranged in his mind beside marital failure, and failure in his one belated attempt at a love-affair; yet he found himself confronting these failures less as failures in living than as the ingredients of failure as a writer. Can you fail in all your closest personal relationships, and still succeed in what is essentially an interpretation of such things? (ibid., p. 281).

Dark's conclusion would suggest that the answer is yes. Gilbert eventually overcomes his block but is frustrated by "professional ethics" because his writing idea is taken from another of *The Little Company*'s writer-characters, his lover Elsa. However, when the relationship ends he resolves his disquiet and takes the idea as his own. Dark's treatment of Gilbert suggests that all personal failings can be forgiven for one's art.

In the light of a compelling argument for Dark's appropriation of the frame for *The Little Company* from M Barnard-Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, Ian Saunders comes to the conclusion that through Gilbert, Dark acts out her own war-time experience as a writer. Saunders contends that:

> [T]he process was not a conscious one, but rather a gradual appropriation of the supplied outline. However, the fact that Dark's own difficulties in writing it become a model for Gilbert's difficulties, and that he becomes increasingly concerned precisely with the question of intellectual property, suggests that — at some level, and probably at a [point] well into writing the novel — Dark became aware of the situation (2002).

The final third of *The Little Company* introduces themes of intellectual property and moral punishment, but through Gilbert, the writer's needs trump those of family and

relationships. Gilbert's personal failures, writes Saunders, "are, literally, overwritten, and any scruple about the origin of his novel is erased by the very process of its writing. In the closing stages of the book, then, Dark works through her predicament, and, in the figure of Gilbert, emerges as a writer exonerated" (ibid.).

Gilbert's book is a novel of ideas, mostly political ideas, tied to a man he admired during his adolescence. Elsa's version of the man's story, which inspired Gilbert's, also has a personal stake: the man in question is Elsa's mother's first husband, absent but haunting her own life. Upon visiting the man's old home, now empty, Gilbert fears Elsa's approach will not do the material justice:

> He felt a sudden conviction that if she wrote of this place, and of the life that had been lived here, she would write cruelly, paying off some old score, getting even with something whose nature he could not even guess. She would never recognise, and therefore could never express, the fragment of social evolution which had worked itself out in that man; she would never give his story the dignity of its broad, human significance. She would reduce it to a novel of personalities, a little domestic drama… (Dark, 1985, p. 214).

Emotion, personalities, drama; Gilbert's presumption of these elements in Elsa's work disqualify it from moral consideration. In the same passage as the one quoted above, although Dark has him equivocate, Gilbert can't help but connect to Elsa the words "neurotic" and "hysterical". His speculation on her failure as a writer is tied to his belief in her failure as a woman. In this way, Elsa's less valuable story is written out of *The Little Company* and Elsa herself is married off to an ignorant man (ibid., p. 276).

Saunders points out that the conversation in which Gilbert recounts the end of his affair is the same in which he announces his intention to go ahead with the novel: "an anxiety of discovery of an improper intimacy is tangled with the inspiration for the book; it is only when that intimacy is a thing of the past that the novel can proceed" (2002). I can add that this is the same conversation in which Marty announces her new intentions for a book and supplies Gilbert with support for putting his art before questions around professional ethics or fidelity in marriage (Dark, 1985, p. 277). In both cases the act of writing erases troubling questions, but not all writing is equal: the writing must measure up to Gilbert's new standards of political consciousness. Against this, Marty's is treated sympathetically, but as unimportant, while Elsa's is treated with derision.

Marty also comes to write a book inspired by a person from her adolescence, only her focus is political penetration (or lack thereof) into the domestic sphere of a housewife.

“Down to its most trivial detail this woman’s little life appeared as dominated by remote political forces in which, irritably and impatiently, she proclaimed herself not a bit interested” (ibid., p. 252). The point at which Marty’s novel idea gels is inspired by the coincidental meeting with her protagonist, while each woman is “clogged by her own domestic inertia, endlessly halted by the demands of her own stove and vacuum-cleaner. I’m getting too old, she thought, with sudden despondency, to cope with this splitting of my energies” (ibid.). Gender roles and the duties entailed shape Marty’s novel, accompany its inception and inevitably, limit its execution. “Sentences, whole paragraphs, had formed themselves in that rebellious mind, only to slide away unrecorded, and now forgotten; a tiredness born of the conflict between what she wanted to do and what she must do, made her feel old” (ibid., p. 312). But through all this, the reasons why Marty and her story are burdened by the weight of domestic cares (and on this account made irrelevant) are not examined. Gilbert’s and Marty’s books are two sides to the same story and reflect Dark’s own novel; as in *The Little Company* itself, Gilbert’s story and political questions are treated with greater interest than Marty’s story and domestic questions.

Dark’s American publisher liked *The Little Company* but asked if it was a story of how a family is changed by the War, or about a man breaking the bonds of convention. Justifying the manuscript, Dark responded that her intention was to write a novel where the personal was political: “My thesis was, really, that people have to see their own problems in the proper perspective i.e. recognise them as being symptoms of bigger ones, … they can — must realise that the solution of the major problems at least paves the way for the solution of the minor ones” (quoted in Brooks and Clark, 1998, p. 270). That is, like the protagonist of Marty’s novel, people are unaware that remote political forces dominate their lives. Dark’s focus on writers may have been merely a vehicle for presenting a juxtaposition of the personal and political, but “the personal is political” is also the measure by which the fictional novels are judged. It appears that the relationship does not work the other way round, thus there is a suppression of the politics of the family and the significance of political forces operating in the kitchen. Dark’s unconscious assumptions about what sort of writing is the most important, in her fictional characters’ works and her own, point to a limit in her exploration of the personal as political.

My thesis relates to Dark's concern with how large power structures influence individuals, though my intention is to also examine the small power structures of the family. Thus the domestic sphere and concepts of group affiliation are very much at the centre of my novel, but these strands are contrasted with individual endeavour. This productive confrontation is employed in the novel's structure too: the 1954 story is related in the present tense by an omniscient narrator; these sections are interspersed with a first person narration of the 2004 story, related in past tense. These crossings between times and points of view lend the novel an open-ended texture, drawing in other sources of meaning, including this essay, myself, the writer, and you, the reader. As the first-person narrator accounts for the omniscient narrator, I offer this account for the novel's whole. Paradoxically, the more open-ended the story, the more whole the story.

If Dark uses Marty and Elsa to foreground Gilbert as a writer and character, the domestic narrative is seen through Gilbert's view of his wife Phyllis and daughters Prue and Virginia. Prue is a good girl, she is sensitive to her father's political views and personal choices and runs a bookstore. Virginia is attractive and superficial, not a good girl, her priorities concern her social engagements and aspirations. The domestic part of *The Little Company* is moralistic in its punishment of women who are apolitical or who squander their intelligence, as the varied fates of Prue and Virginia demonstrate.

In her paper "The Rational Natural", Nicole Moore discusses Dark's work against her contention that, in the discourse of pre-World War Two Australia, modernity is negotiated though the management of female sexuality and reproduction. Nation building is connected with scientific sexuality, but at the same time, this "rationalist modernist project … still has a place for … the natural or organic in its constructions of sociality, history and nationhood" (2001). Dark's work appears to uphold Moore's contention and is therefore subject to the same contradictions as other Australian literature of the era, contradictions that appear between the places where "scientific" or "modern" sexuality meets with "natural" sexuality in constructions of Australian national identity.

Moore doesn't deal with *The Little Company*, except to say that Virginia's fatal ectopic pregnancy stands for the breakdown in family and societal relations in wartime, but the novel fits Moore's pattern in its treatment of Phyllis and Virginia. Phyllis and her

daughter are not modern women, alike in conservative political outlook and modest aspirations, but Virginia's modern approach to sexuality conflicts with her mother's traditional silence regarding sexuality and the results are disastrous. After Virginia dies, Phyllis goes mad. All of the novel's discomforts are displaced onto Phyllis, which fits with Moore's argument that Dark's modern woman is in conflict with the image of the mad woman (ibid.).

The consequences of Dark's decisions in *The Little Company* are the sacrifice of Virginia and Phyllis and the displacement of questions of gender into a more general political thrust. For me Virginia's death is the weakest point of the novel, being entirely predictable and unsatisfactorily punitive, and the good health and harmony that the rest of the family return to at the end is rather dubious. "If they wondered … how long poor Phyllis would remain in the nursing-home to which she and her nervous breakdown had been transferred, they never spoke of it" (1985, p. 308). Moore claims there is a connection between these contradictions and Australia's colonial history, where there are "strongly unreconciled antitheses set up by an invader modernity in Australia, between sex and progress, between what is private and what is national, between natural and the rational" (2001). The contradictions Moore identifies are summed up elsewhere as the impasse in Australian discourse between theories of nation and theories of gender.

In her Introduction to the 1985 edition of *The Little Company*, Modjeska points to a reading of the novel as a dialogic text, that is, a network of points of view:

> *The Little Company* is a complex of the responses of progressive intellectuals to the thirties and forties, and … it is also Eleanor Dark's own response. It is not a direct reflection of either, but a series of dialogues. One of the most argumentative of these dialogues is with the Communist Party (1985, p. xii).

Modjeska's Introduction tries to undo some of the criticism she had levelled at Dark's retreat from feminism in *Exiles at Home*. There, she argued that: "Eleanor Dark is impatient with women who cannot or do not overcome their personal discontents and fail to see themselves in a broader political context, and she punishes them with dreadful ends" and, "Acceptance is characteristic of women whose response to oppression is linked directly to their political and intellectual alignments." (1981, pp. 239–240). In 1985 Modjeska softens this to suggest that the way Dark treats apolitical women "is a powerful indictment of social conditions that can result in such maiming of the female self" (1985, p. xv). And further,

perhaps by focusing on Gilbert, a male central character, Dark was seeking a strategy to move through the impasse between theories of nation and gender:

> [I]t is a way of discussing that dialectical relationship between work and love, between conflicting human needs, between the personal and social structures of our lives. By doing this through a male character, *The Little Company* offered a way through the impasse of feminist discourse in Australia during the late 1930s and early 1940s in which gender politics either became divorced from or reduced to the politics of class and nationalism (ibid., p. xvi).

In the end though, Modjeska's arguments support her conclusions in *Exiles At Home*. Female unity is put aside for a popular front uniting those opposed to the dominant stories celebrating war. "Radical writing must confront and counter the conservative narratives, the 'natural' stories of heroism and war. It is part of the struggle for other social meanings" (ibid., p. xvii). And Modjeska's 1981 thesis in *Exiles at Home* is exemplified in *The Little Company*:

> As they extended their protest into a critique of fascism and the failure of parliamentary democracy, the intellectual traditions they had to draw on were antipathetical to feminism. The Communist Party, at that time dominated by Stalinism, could not take feminism seriously; the liberalism of the day was incapable of political analysis that could deal successfully with both fascism and women's oppression. The result was a separation between 'politics' and 'women's issues' which was manifested in uneasy tensions in their fiction (1981, p. 13).

There is a contradiction in Eleanor Dark's politics: she values freedom of expression but doesn't argue how dominant power structures opposed to free expression are to be challenged; she rejects revolution and communism but supports the popular front. Her novels are full of the recognition of the need for collective action, but the focus is on the individual who has to choose between conflicting sets of values.

In setting *The Little Company* in the Blue Mountains during World War Two and focusing on a writer, Dark draws closely from her own experience. Gilbert's work, like Dark's own, had been criticised on two fronts: "To be looked at askance by the conservatives for being a communist, and to be simultaneously regarded more in sorrow than in anger by the communists for not being one, placed a man, he thought wryly, in a very select sort of isolation" (Dark, 1985, p. 66). Upon publication, without apparent irony, Dark's novel was accused of being politically dogmatic by conservative critics while communists considered it unsympathetic to their cause (Carson, 2001). Susan Carson contends that the extent of surveillance and slander the Darks were subjected to during the

nineteen forties and nineteen fifties led to a submerging of political content in her subsequent novels and a turn to privacy.

The Little Company, Dark's most political book, explicitly deals with issues of power and state control. But no resolutions are to be found; the contradiction has deepened. Writing emerges as paramount because it feels good to create. Dark compares the need to create to the desire for sex: you can theorise about it all you like, but at some point desire overtakes you and you just do it. The novel's last words are:

> He felt past all that, just now; he was obsessed by a feverish longing for the physical act of writing down words. … And you can use art as a subject for debate, his mind was telling him irritably, you can make it an excuse for metaphysical hair-splitting; but when the time comes you sweep all that aside, and set up your easel; or sit down at your piano, or reach for your pen…. (1985, p. 319).

It is a powerful argument but it relies on the sacrifice of women: the female characters Phyllis and Virginia and the works of the female writers, Marty and Elsa. I can't claim that my novel solves its contradictions, either, but it carries on the conversation without the female sacrifice.

EIGHT — *I'M DYING LAUGHING*

Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing* is a long and complex novel that was not published in her lifetime. Like most of Stead's material it is concerned with "the institutions that we created but which now seem to dominate us: marriage, the family, money" (Angela Carter, 1994, p. 449). The story involves the rise and fall of Emily and Stephen Howard, American writers whose decadent tastes make it impossible, in the end, for them to maintain political, professional and personal integrity. It also constitutes a history of the political left in the United States from 1935 to 1950 and a satire on historic episodes including communist writers in Hollywood during the War and the McCarthy trials.

The modern style of Eleanor Dark's *The Little Company*, with a self-reflexive focus on writers, multiple points of view and interior monologues that blend with the narrative voice, is extended by Christina Stead in *I'm Dying Laughing*. The text is largely dialogue, always at full volume, broken up with occasional paragraphs covering larger periods of time to push the story along. Stead's text walks a fine line between tragedy and comedy. Consider this typical scene early in the novel, which begins:

> Stephen picked up the evening paper and glanced over the headlines. They began once more to tear at that great wound which had opened in their love, mutual admiration and understanding, and great need for each other. This was an equally fundamental thing, a disagreement about American exceptionalism; the belief widely held in the USA that what happened in Europe and the rest of the world belonged to other streams of history…

And so on, until:

> "Dadd-ee! Mumm-ee!"
>
> Both went up to Giles, put him in his cot and sang the song again, upon request, several times. Emily kissed the boy and went downstairs to get herself another highball. Stephen came down and reproached her. She said "Let me live!"
>
> They went on about the mistakes of policy.

And by the end of the page:

> "You're an individualist; individualists become renegades."
>
> She sprang up from her chair. "Don't you dare call me a renegade! I'll scratch your nose. I won't stand that."
>
> They quarreled so bitterly, and such unforgivable things were said that she got a seat on a plane going east the next morning…(Stead, 1994, pp. 52-53).

This passage demonstrates not only the clash of the tragic and comic, the unhappy happy family, but also the combination of personal and political narratives. Rather, it is one narrative which is both incessantly personal and political. There is continuity between styles and themes, within the contrasting styles and themes.

The extract is taken from the novel's fourth chapter entitled "UNO 1945" which I will look at in more detail. It can serve as a model for the whole book because a version of it was published while Stead was alive, subtitled: "Chapter One of an Unpublished novel" in *Southerly* (1962). It is significant because it was originally the first chapter of *I'm Dying Laughing* and Stead stated in a 1974 interview that she saw it as a picture of the whole book, "I meant it to go on from fire to more fiery to fierier still" (quoted in Blake, 1988, p. 138). The earlier version begins with a few pages about the Howard's political and financial situation at the time of the conference of the title, related through their work as writers. It moves into the family scene described above, but Emily never does get that plane going east: Stephen attempts to dazzle her with an extravagant amethyst necklace — one of Emily's favourite jewels — that he gets from his wealthy sister. This leads to several more pages of fighting, family life, cooking and eating, and then many more pages fighting over their dilemma. Finally, after much frantic work and seeing to her domestic duties (planning the menu, kissing the children), Emily gets to a workers' conference to deliver her lecture on UNO 1945, to great acclaim. Stephen collects her afterwards and asks if she wowed them. In reply, her "laughing turned into uncontrollable sobbing" (Stead, 1962, p. 253).

RG Geering, Stead's literary executor who prepared *I'm Dying Laughing* for publication from Stead's notes, published it with a short preface. There he quotes Stead in an interview towards the end of her life, describing the story as she saw it. It is about:

> … two Americans, New Yorkers, in the thirties. They are doing well, but they suffered all the troubles of the thirties. They were politically minded. They went to Hollywood. They came to Europe to avoid the McCarthy trouble. Of course they were deeply involved. And then, they lived around Europe, oh, in a wild and exciting extravagant style. But there was nothing to support it. At the same time they wanted to be on the side of the angels, good Communists, good people, and also to be very rich. Well, of course … they came to a bad end (1994 pp. ix–x).

The version of "UNO 1945" that appears in *I'm Dying Laughing* has two additional opening pages satirising the snobbery of Hollywood radicals and some extra material on the state of the Communist Party in America under the leadership of Earl Browder. There are

ten extra pages on Emily's writing, mothering and consuming as well as more on the Howard's financial situation and their adoptive children, all of who stand to inherit money from Stephen's family. Stephen Howard is a gentle and ineffectual man; he is heir to a fortune but in the meantime earns no money of his own, living on handouts from his mother and his wife's income. He can be a loving husband and father but is more interested in the grand gesture than in consistency. It is the same with his political commitment; indeed he plays these two commitments, family and politics, off each other. Stephen says of the Communist Party and Emily that "it's not better to love the Party than you — you are two, strongly loved" (1994, p. 131). Stephen is just as enmeshed as Emily in compromise and contradiction but he is not Stead's main focus.

Here, a comparison may be drawn with my novel and its soft-father-figure, Ken McKinnon. Unlike Stephen, Ken is resolutely consistent; in fact, this is his weakness and, paradoxically, it is his steadiness that brings change, enabling both an arrogance concerning his tried and true way, as well as absolute naïvety regarding all that is beyond his experience. This is reflected in, for example, his willingness to believe comrades who claim to represent the Party's interests, coupled with his inability to read social situations that might, to a more cynical or perceptive individual, suggest caution: "Ditchards keeps moving with the crowd and doesn't look at Ken. 'So where to from here, eh? Party line or else, is it?' Ken is attempting to be jocular, making the kind of foolhardy comments he guesses forge mateship" (*Carly's Dance* p. 268).

In *I'm Dying Laughing*, "UNO 1945" spells out Emily's embodiment of what she refers to as the American Dilemma: the desire to be both great and popular (or radical and wealthy) at the same time. This is not just Emily's problem but also the American left's problem and perhaps the nation's problem, Stead implies. This chapter and the following few are biting satires on the social and political hierarchy amongst left-wing writers working for the lucrative movie industry, as Stead herself did in Hollywood for a short time. In "The Holinshed Party" and "The Straightening Out", the Howards are thrilled to be invited to an important social occasion until they realise that the purpose of the gathering is to denounce them as individualists guilty of "petty-bourgeois pseudo-radicalism" (1994 p. 94). Their political writings are lambasted although some appreciation is given to Emily's

humorous "family books", while Emily herself is attacked as disturbed, lacking in self-control and as unfit to be a mother:

> The unreasonable self-indulgence, the exploitation of her own personality for which Emily Howard is known, disturbs the nervous system, if it is not a result of a disturbed nervous system. We do not believe that such a person with no self-control and no self-criticism, a pronounced cult of her own individuality and of all or any circumstance connected with her life, acquaintances, name, pursuits, amounting almost to a delirium of self, can be a good guardian for any child (ibid., p. 100).

Their friend Godfrey reads this indictment from his papers. He goes on:

> … America had entered a fatal struggle against fascism, and our own lives had been knit with that of the nation. During that time Emily Howard had made much money and became known through out the progressive world; one might say, a satisfying, contenting, a healthy factor. During that time Emily Howard had the joy of motherhood, given birth to a boy and had the other joy of giving a home to a lonely child, her adopted son Lennie. To become a mother, surely for a woman is the solution of many conflicts. But it had not sufficed. Her conflicts were deeper still; the subconscious itself seemed to us to be rising to the surface through a profound cleavage (ibid., p. 102).

The Hollywood communists would like to keep Emily a producer of popular family books even as she suffocates under their demands but the Howards will not submit; they burn bridges and flee Hollywood. It is worth quoting at some length from Stead because her style is verbose and layered; slippery ideas are made to stick together through sheer repetition. Angela Carter describes Stead's use of language as never mannered and almost tachist; the overall effect is what counts (1994, p. 450).

As Emily is to *I'm Dying Laughing*, Elsie McKinnon may be considered the emotional centre of the 1954 half of my novel. In part Three of this essay I presented examples in which it can be seen that Elsie's emotional understanding is largely derived from literary sources, often a blend of romantic and radical tropes. Thus, Elsie practices a kind of willful ignorance of facts that might compromise a seamless blend of the two, which is evident to Elsie's granddaughter, but not to Elsie herself. Carly writes:

> Elsie was a model communist woman: politically radical and morally conservative. The "no-man's land" where radical and conservative meet, usually around the stove and washing machine, was sometimes referred to as the "Woman Question". Women like Elsie were expected to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of socialism. In theory, communists supported equal pay for women. In practice, they expected their wives to take care of the unpaid work at home (*Carly's Dance* p. 223).

It is unsurprising that Elsie's body becomes the site where this conflict is fought, through surgical intervention for example, as mentioned in part Seven. Further, the physical

facts of Elsie's labours significantly define her relationships with men: this is bound up in her feelings of shame with her husband; her sense of abandonment by her father; her attitude of denial towards her sons. Similar processes are evident in *I'm Dying Laughing*.

Emily Howard embodies the socialist dream and dilemma, with her success as a writer and in a loving marriage, but unable, in the end, to control her appetites for food, drink, pills, work, sex, children and experience. Her indictment as a renegade cannot be separated from her indictment as a woman and mother and can be read as evidence of what Brigid Rooney describes as a judgement of political error overdetermined by gender. "For many of Stead's generation, heterosexual coupledom seemed to promise, or embody, the ideal society", claims Rooney (1998–99, p. 96). And, "[t]o see this political idealisation of coupledom is also to recognise how Stead's later female revolutionaries, with their deviant sexualities, become the faultline for the collapse of the revolutionary vision" (ibid., p. 97). As a politically committed woman/writer, writing about a politically committed woman/writer, Stead "works within and against" the gendered dichotomies of private and public, personal and political spheres, Rooney argues (ibid., p. 84). This ambivalence is reflected in Emily, who is a success as a writer of lightweight fiction but feels disgusted with herself and dreams of creating the Great American Novel, something commensurate with her politics and vision. In Europe, her model becomes Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* whose protagonist does terrible things in his desire for upward social mobility, yet Dreiser treats him with compassion. The obvious reflection, Stead's portrait of Emily, encourages a sense of empathy for Emily, but gradually, her appetites get the better of her, a process Stead seems to relish.

In Europe Emily's great ambitions become farcical but Stead's treatment of the material as tragedy leads to a mixed genre, what Susan Sheridan calls "tragic farce" (2003, p. 50) and Ann Pender, "satirical history" (2000, p. 43). Pender writes: "With the repeated references to humour, to tragedy, and to so-called 'great satire', Stead attempts to sort out the difference between genres, as Emily confronts the dilemma of not being able to sell her serious political essays and novels, and her immense talent for 'corn'" (ibid., p. 45). While Stead's Emily struggles with the choice between writing that is humorous and writing that

is serious, Stead herself manages to balance unrestrained satire with historical and psychological authenticity. Unlike Stead's novel however, Emily's story is doomed to fail because she loses the balance, giving in to greed and collaborating with her philosophical enemies.

Susan Sheridan's reading of *I'm Dying Laughing* largely concurs with Pender's view on the balance Stead achieved between tragedy and comedy due to her sympathy for her dramatic subjects. Stead and Emily are ostensibly both left-wing writers but Stead gradually distances herself from Emily as she distances herself from American communists. For Stead, both are guilty of a different kind of excess, which makes them excellent subjects for historical fiction. Sheridan draws a connection between Marx's notion that history repeats itself as farce and Emily's deteriorating aims for her work, but the political element Sheridan brings to her analysis does not overshadow the writer's concerns with writing. Sheridan concludes: "This, then, is Stead's subject: not the revolutionary moment itself, but art and politics under capitalism, where heroics degenerate into farce. The degeneration is the tragedy" (2003, p. 50).

A more recent paper by Brigid Rooney than that already quoted from argues that Sheridan's reading of *I'm Dying Laughing* places too little emphasis on Stead's concern with revolution. Rooney asserts that Stead's ambivalent representation of a counter-revolutionary woman indicates both her concern for and conflicts with her political views; she "works with and against" constraints, in the words of the 1998–99 essay. Rooney's 2003 argument may take things too far when she claims that Emily is the shadow of Stead's own unwavering Stalinism (2003, pp. 29–30). Sounding rather like Emily herself here, Rooney nevertheless concedes the writerly concerns of the work: "Emily realises that [in *An American Tragedy*] Dreiser's severe and terrible compassion is the mark of the true artist, the true revolutionary artist who refuses to shrink from the unpleasant truths and whose generosity and courage compel him to convey the wrenching emotional truth of humanity" (ibid., p. 37).

In her earlier essay Rooney observed that "the involvement of writers in the political realm comes to be represented as simultaneously desirable and inauthentic" (1998–99, p. 85). Thus, Hazel Rowley's biography argues that Stead's political writings are polemical tracts interspersed with "pure Stead": keen observation of humanity. Rooney's

critique points out that Stead's work is not homogenous and that her political interests complement her enduring writing interest: recording the lives of the obscure (ibid., p. 91). Here, Rooney reads *I'm Dying Laughing* as politically authentic and committed to Marxist values. The later essay returns to the heterogeneity of her narrative but sees a Soviet moral and political judgement framing the work, the internal conflict of which, Rooney believes, contributed to the novel never being completed by Stead. I can't go along with Rooney's argument that the emphasis on Emily is intended to distract attention from the more threatening failures of Stalinism, so that "an extremely unpalatable version of history" is "both conveyed and obscured" (2003, p. 37). In reading *I'm Dying Laughing* as "evidence of the durability — even obduracy — of Stead's pro-Soviet beliefs" (ibid., p. 30), Rooney seems to underrate the importance of her earlier contention regarding Stead's work, that social and artistic concerns work together towards the same point, and that there is delight as well as conflict in this.

Aside from this preoccupation, the subject of Rooney's 2003 paper — recognition of the significance of the trope of crossing in *I'm Dying Laughing* — is very useful for my purposes. "The idea of 'crossing' presupposes a border or divide — an abyss or gap. As well as the 'abyss' itself, 'crossing' therefore signals the uneasy conjunction of apparently divided states" (ibid., p. 31). Although she focuses on the crossings between revolution and abjection, the rhythm of oscillation that guides the novel could as well be viewed in terms of the dichotomies that have shaped my thesis, those constraining family, politics, history and fiction. Indeed, Rooney's earlier paper touches on these other manifestations in her analysis of the biographical and autobiographical elements of *I'm Dying Laughing*: "writing Emily's narrative is a personal/political project, entail[ing] both investment and displacement of Stead's own biography as woman/writer" (1998–1999, p. 94). My novel-and-essay might be considered a practice and study in the motivation of auto/biographical material in order to convey a broader personal and political story.

Ann Blake's biographically informed study of *I'm Dying Laughing* shows that Stead closely based the character of Emily on her friend Ruth McKenney, an approach consistent with that employed in other novels such as *Cotter's England* and *Miss Herbert*. Despite this apparent betrayal, Stead is revealed to be unflinchingly true to her work and

her vision, regardless of personal and political loyalties. “Her scathing analysis of bogus socialists in her fiction manifests her capacity to write without being inhibited by the harm people might claim she did to the socialist cause. Her first loyalty here, and as we have already seen in other situations, is to her writing” (2003). Blake argues that Stead was motivated by the dramatic potential of Ruth’s life, and that the writer’s integrity is not just a concern of Stead’s, but the primary theme of *I’m Dying Laughing*.

Critics have a tendency to read *I’m Dying Laughing* as either concerned primarily with politics or primarily with a portrait of the writing artist. Given that the novel was published posthumously and prepared by someone else, it is important to think about how that process might have taken place. In a later article than the one already cited, Ann Pender reviews some of the source material that RG Geering excluded from his edition of *I’m Dying Laughing* and reads it against other archival material including letters from Stead’s friend Ruth McKenney. These reveal not only the extent to which Stead is indebted to Ruth for her character, but also Ruth’s approval of Stead’s theme: a complex history of American society from 1930 to 1950. Critics, including Geering, have missed the importance of this in her work, Pender argues. She concludes: “It would seem that the final book reflects Geering’s overarching view of Stead’s fiction as being primarily concerned with ‘character and morality’ as he states in the preface, rather than with politics and history” (2004). Pender argues that this doesn’t reflect the best picture of Stead’s novel, for which she spent ten years providing carefully researched political background to the story at her American publishers’ request. It is ironic that the published version omitted much of this material.

So which is it? Is Stead concerned mostly with character and morality or does she write as a Marxist? Is her first commitment to her art or to historical authenticity? To me it seems clear that Stead was interested in a particular individual that she could both empathise with and distance herself from, that McKenney interested her as she came to stand for America; the novel is about politics and character and writing as they come together. To focus on one aspect at the expense of another is to miss the point, and yet, most critics want to claim one as more significant than the other. The political story is integral to the novel, because the particular dilemma facing Emily Howard would not unfold with the same drama on the conservative side of politics: it would become a

morality tale of good and evil. The history of the political left in twentieth century America is much more ambivalent, involving changing allegiances and more shades of grey.

To return to the theme of crossings, it is clear that my novel shares this flavour of interweaving family with politics, with history and fiction. But rather than the key opposition being that between revolution and abjection, as in Rooney's notion regarding *I'm Dying Laughing*, my characters can be seen to engage with the space between revolution and conservation, or revolution and restraint, or fear. And where Stead intended Emily and Stephen Howard to stand for America, I use the characters of Elsie and Ken to explore ideas about Australia and the politics of families, and the way history impacts upon individuals. All of the emotionally crucial passages for each character in *Carly's Dance* construct a narrative out of these different strands, and it is the combination that gives them their power:

> "The truth, Carly, is that I didn't want to go to Vietnam because I was scared to death of being killed. There was nothing noble about it. How could I be in the army? I couldn't shoot rabbits on Uncle Alfred's farm, how could I shoot people?"
>
> "But…" I didn't know what to say. I didn't expect this revisionist version of Bruce's trial, with toppled heroes and muddied principles. But still, to refuse to fight, for whatever reason, requires bravery, taking a stand. How many hundreds of young men reported for duty because they feared the subtle violence of saying no — the wrath of patriots, military prison — more than the open horror of war? (*Carly's Dance*, p. 241).

Carly's Dance is an Australian story that fits less readily into mainstream constructions of what defines Australian narrative, with its focus on women and a domestic sphere as these interact with a masculine and political sphere.

Stead's writing interests might be boldly summed in the idea of the marginal, represented as the lives of the obscure; or in the hybridity and conflict of American culture; or in the compromise, complicity and collaboration of such marginal characters. A final quote from her story "The Old School", written from the point of view of a child, reflects this abiding interest. In his notes that accompany the 1984 *Southerly* editions dedicated to Stead's short fiction, RG Geering writes, "This reminiscence was one of the last things Christina Stead worked on in the final three or four years of her life" (Stead, 1984, p. 7):

> I was never able to make up my mind about things; and so it is still there, clear to me, the ever burning question of good and bad which (to be fair to the informants) so greatly occupied their minds. I always thought it strange that adults do not notice how profoundly little children are engrossed and stirred by moral debate. They are all the time sharpening their awareness of the lines and frontiers (ibid., p. 15).

NINE — SOME CONNECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is inaccurate to say that the novels *Coonardoo*, *The Little Company* and *I'm Dying Laughing* informed my work, given that deep consideration of them postdated the first few drafts of my novel. The relationship between these works and my own is not a straightforward one, but an oscillating one involving many crossings. There are points of similarity, reference, inspiration, rejection and provocation. As a twenty-first century Australian writer, these works offer me a sense of tradition to work with and against, through the process of creating a novel whilst in conversation with other novels.

A key strand of that conversation involves women, women characters and their significance for real women: this is the Mairi McKenzie/Elsie McKinnon line. My novel is concerned with mothers and daughters, their presence and absence and the bonds between them. These bonds are articulated through the structures of family and it is here, where children are raised and men are related to, that my novel asks questions of the novels that came before. Looking ahead, my novel asks questions of non-indigenous Australian families regarding their relationship with indigenous families. The family is a powerful structure and social reality that is common to all and yet different for different groups. The family operates as a testing ground for an individual's relation to the world, the founding site of self-and-other negotiations.

Another important topic of conversation between my novel and those I've studied concerns history: this is the John McKenzie/Ken McKinnon line. Like the power of family structure, the telling of history is a powerful tool to command, and an indispensable one, given our culture's propensity for forgetting certain deeds of the past. Christina Stead tells us that American culture in the twentieth century presented a similar social phenomenon, and perhaps a patchy cultural memory is common to all societies that have flourished at the expense of others. My novel uses historical stories in the service of fiction to honour some oft-neglected aspects of Australia's cultural past. *Carly's Dance* does this without repudiating political discourse, without rigid adherence to key names and dates. The historicity resides in the patterns of meaning, not in chronology.

For a novel that questions conventional historical narratives, mine is presented in a fairly conventional narrative style. Questions are raised through the process of crossing back and forth, between any of the oppositions that have been discussed in this essay, notably creative and critical, private and public, past and present. Underneath, or against, this circularity, strains the sovereign imagination and the narrative line. The slide between the whole and the detail, that fuzzy creative space (not necessarily warm and fuzzy, but electric) is permitted, but more significantly, facilitated, by fiction.

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Carly’s Dance

The First

Excerpt from the notebook of a senior intelligence agent based in Perth, Western Australia, dated February 11, 1954.

OPERATION PROPHYLAXIS STAGE ONE — Infiltrate Communist Party of Western Australia. Insinuate senior agent into position of influence. Gather intelligence on Party's important figures: level of organisation and militancy, level of community support, evidence of internal unrest. Assert plan of action against friendly *Tetrameter* (which see). Get suitable candidate to Sydney for implementation of Stage Two.

NOTES — I have been able, through that combination of good luck and skillful self-promotion that underlies successful undercover work, to acquire an executive position within the Perth branch. I approached the subject of *Tetrameter* by manipulating highly emotional language, which appears to have worked and the branch members are unanimous in taking a stand against the magazine. Some focused work on Party Secretary Comrade Joynes, a.k.a. Bill Leighton, ensures they think an undercover man is the way to go.

I have identified the individual best suited to carry out our experiment. Ken McKinnon, a.k.a. Comrade Wilde, is a loyal communist who doesn't hold an executive position despite many years working with the Party. At thirty-seven years old, McKinnon has clearly been completely indoctrinated into Marxist thought and is more than happy to expound upon any textbook topic but lacks the initiative of many of his comrades. I believe his colleagues see him as being under the thumb of his wife, a loud-mouthed woman. She's more ambitious than he is but both will jump at the opportunity to act on behalf of the Party.

Bill Leighton is tall and heavy, forty-nine years old, dark hair mostly receded, very red nose and cheeks. A heavy drinker, it is easy to exploit this weakness in order to gain his confidence. I have Leighton convinced that he knows how to get a man into the head office of *Tetrameter* to find evidence of CIA funding and he thinks he thought of McKinnon himself.

The most dangerous Party member I have come across is Cassandra Richards, the infamous Red Witch of Greenmount, who has a reputation for witchcraft and has published a book of poetry. She must be at least sixty but is sprightly and capable of more activity than her grey hair would suggest. She is a close friend of McKinnon's wife but her reputation extends far beyond that, despite rumours of loose moral standards. She is extremely influential within the Party and there appears to be some internal power struggle between Leighton and Richards. She has used that most base of female instincts, sexual allure, to get her claws into the sodden brain of the Secretary. I have succeeded in penetrating the home of the Red Witch, where numerous illicit gatherings have taken place over the years. Not so long ago there were reports of signalling coming from the Witch's hill, but on that occasion the commies got away with it. By the time the local authorities got there, the Soviet Device had been replaced with a simple biscuit tin, reflecting the sunlight.

1 — Carly

February 2004

I'll sing you a song that's not very long, and now my song's begun. There's something I can be sure of: having Skye has pushed my life to extremes. I haunt those ends of the spectrum that don't usually cohabit. Nursery rhymes in the afternoon and political history by night. Absolute engagement and silent solitude. Nappies and news.

I'll sing one at school and look like a fool, and now my song is done. I'm Carly McKinnon. Twenty-three-year-old motherless mother. I didn't plan it this way, but those two words largely define my life now: motherless, mother. Two years ago, in the final year of my history degree, I fell in love and became pregnant. Thought I'd keep it. Why not? Don't think me flippant: it was the least cynical thing I'd done for years.

So I was blessed with my own bit of the sky. Skye McKinnon was born without much fuss. Sure, it was hard work, but nothing a young and healthy woman can't cope with. Not keen to do it again, though. And that's not likely anyway, seeing as though Skye's dad left as soon as I told him I was pregnant and intended to keep the child. He was a Danish exchange student, beautiful and softly spoken, but a coward too. (Exeunt Nils stage right.) I sent a picture of Skye, addressed to his parents (Mr. & Mrs. Strohlm), as soon as she was old enough for her eyes to have cleared to his icy blue.

When Skye was new I spent a lot of time at the home of my father's parents, Elsie and Ken McKinnon. They are getting on a bit and don't go out so much anymore, but I could rely on tea and cake, or something, at their place. They had a lot to say about most things, which sometimes sent me, infuriated, out of the room past musty recliners and fusty photo albums to the garden to chill out. Does age confer authority on matters that occurred in the past? Absolutely not! I got lonely with only Skye to talk to, and even the prospect of frustration in the face of recalcitrance did not deter me from going often to the home of my grandparents, especially in the early days.

They were communists. During World War Two, when it was cool to be a communist, also before it was cool and way too long after it was cool, into the Cold War. I love this about them. There is something redeeming about this activist past, this secret other life of illegal documents and clandestine meetings, of protest in the face of overwhelming

opposition and a nineteen fifties style Fuck-You to Menzies and his cabinet of fat-cats. Imagining their lives during the 1951 referendum to make the Communist Party an illegal organisation helps me relate to these grey-headed old dears doing crossword puzzles in their Jason recliners.

Gran, Elsie McKinnon, is a handful. She is the kind of woman who *always* complains, if the tea is cold, the Christmas crackers don't work, the service is slow, the verge on her street requires trimming. Social liability is an understatement. She speaks too loudly at the movies and boasts about her sex life in the GP's waiting room, laughing uproariously at her own jokes. It doesn't embarrass me anymore, but when I was little I hated to go out with her because I didn't want anyone to think she was my mother. When I was twelve she tried to introduce me to the "facts of life" as she called it, which included advice on how scrubbing floors cures period pain as well as information on workers' comp. When my period came some months later, I went home with my best friend after school to talk to her mother.

"What about your grandmother, Carly dear?" Mrs. Riordan asked.

"What about her?" I replied, rudely. We called my dad and he came to pick me up.

I'd heard Elsie's stories all my life, like other children watched cartoons and high-school soaps. They helped to form the backdrop of the unfolding drama of Carly, but when Skye came my grandparents' histories became something more. Something in me got unlocked: I heard the familiar stories with new ears, noticed the small rents and creases, and finally I could question Elsie like I never did before, maybe leading her in directions she didn't want to go. Once, when Skye was around two, we were sitting in their oversized lounge chairs after a fish-and-salad lunch prepared by Gran. Pop was dozing and Skye was playing at my feet with a shiny cardboard cap and a still-rolled streamer from Christmases past. I sipped my tea from its dainty cup and looked through the rising steam at Elsie, who sipped her tea and looked at my daughter, chatting idly about Pop's digestion and the importance of fresh vegetables. I interrupted her: "Gran, how can you have believed so fervently in workers' rights and unionism and not fought against the domestic slave labour of women?"

Elsie gave me a hard look, duly provoked. “It wasn’t like it is today, Carly, there wasn’t any choice. You young women with your social services can’t understand. We had to support our men so that they might be free, and only then might the women be free.”

I put down my teacup, as if freeing my hands could somehow help me to translate across the generation gap. “But other women of your era, other communist women, made different choices. Put themselves first and left their families to work outside the home, some made new, more fitting families.”

Elsie fumed, “Is one man not enough? Those women were driven by their hormones!” She took my teacup, not yet empty, and went to do the dishes.

The childhood of Elsie McKinnon, as I understood it during my own, went something like this: Elsie McKinnon, née Scrabble, was born in Arthur River in the West Australian Wheatbelt, the eldest of Adam and Amelia Scrabble’s eight children. Soon her family moved to nearby Williams and on again soon after, and so on, for a few years. Adam was a carpenter who learned his trade back in Lancashire and had to keep moving where there was building to be done. Amelia, to whom Elsie referred as “the Mother” and occasionally, with affection, as “the English Rose”, was also from Lancashire. As a young woman she caught influenza whilst working for a florist, cutting flowers before dawn, and her chest never fully recovered. Two years after her beau Adam Scrabble set sail for Perth, Amelia followed him there. At first it seemed the sunshine was good for her, but living in poverty and producing eight children over the next ten years wore her out, and Amelia died, aged thirty-four, with her youngest a babe-in-arms.

Adam Scrabble muddled along for three years until Elsie was thirteen and could legally be taken out of school. Then she became cook, laundress, child-minder and companion to her father and seven brothers and sisters. As the Depression spread, Elsie learned to deal with debt collectors and make the housekeeping allowance last the week, most of the time. Elsie’s younger sisters grew up and got jobs and, occasionally, they went out with young men. But Elsie hadn’t the time for frivolities, she insisted. No! She had responsibilities, and was proud of them.

I could never really swallow that Elsie was denied an education and had her adolescence abrogated but didn’t feel angry or resentful. On the contrary, she adored her

father and didn't question his judgement. Adam treated his eldest daughter as his equal, or at least, his female equivalent. He allowed her to share in his political awakening and accompany him to meetings of the Communist Party and he encouraged her to read voraciously. As a member of the Railway Workers Union, Adam Scrabble had access to the excellent Railway Workers Union Library. In her scant spare time between household chores Elsie educated herself in literature, history and Marxism. Despite Adam's best efforts to keep her for himself, it was through her attendance at Communist Party meetings that Elsie met Ken McKinnon, a gentle and honourable man.

In my memory, Pop has always been quiet and agreeable and perhaps this is all there is to go on, because his memory isn't what it used to be. As fate would have it, Ken McKinnon was also born near Arthur River, on a farm in the Wheatbelt Region, the third of seven sons. His mother, Henrietta McKinnon, also failed in her task. What's worse, apparently, is that her endurance failed not in a physical way, but in *that other* way: despite the blessing of seven healthy boys, she was hopeless, weepy and bed-ridden.

At seven-years-old Ken was singled out to live with his maiden aunt Mildred, perhaps for his reflective, thoughtful qualities. It made sense: she was a spinster with a teacher's income while her brother Alexander McKinnon could not manage to support his seven children. One less for him to worry about, one given a chance at a different life.

After a few years in a bush school, Aunt Mildred was posted to Perth where she took Ken, her special project, and several of the other boys, to make a rather odd but undeniably pious family in Leederville. Mildred had plans: she scrimped and saved to send Ken to a good private school so that he might take holy orders. While his brothers odd-jobbed or worked their trades, whenever they were able during the Depression years, Ken McKinnon attended the free university, the first in his family to do so.

But it was this very privilege that was the undoing of all Mildred's carefully laid plans. Despite his aunt's bitter disappointment, Ken could not become a priest. He had discovered the work of Marx and had "begun to doubt": perhaps he no longer believed in God. He would become a teacher, like his aunt. It's ironic that it was Aunt Mildred's struggle to give Ken an education, working long hours on a spinster's salary that had to feed them all, which led him to a Marxist critique of capitalism in the first place. Ken was

acutely aware that he alone of his brothers was spared the hardships of labouring and the vagaries of farming, trying to eke a living out of an unprofitable piece of land.

In 1937 Ken reached his majority and joined the Communist Party and in many ways the comrades became Ken's family, feeding his soul with their powerful visions and passionate debates. There, Ken met Elsie and although each swore they loved at once, they rarely spoke over the next three years.

The way Elsie tells it, their lives together were a classic love story. The exposition: love at first sight. The complication: for each of them a possessive and overbearing parent. But history intervened: in 1939 the Communist Party of Australia initially supported Australian involvement in the War and then the official directive came to oppose. The Party was outlawed and a spate of jailings in 1940 led to a number of romantic campaign encounters for Ken and Elsie. The denouement: they kissed and pledged to spend their lives together.

The wedding was a quiet affair. No members of the family were present at the service; Comrades Cassandra and Engels witnessed. Adam Scrabble was upset, of course, to lose his housekeeper, but who can stand in the way of true love?

I felt so depressed over Elsie's remark — as if hormones can define one's destiny! — that I groaned with barely disguised contempt and left Skye sitting on the floor with her bits and pieces of paper and headed for the library. When I was a kid and Ken and Elsie still lived in the old place in Mt. Hawthorn, the library had also served as Ken's study and the spare room where I'd slept sometimes. It was a suffocatingly small space; a foldout bed barely fit. The walls were lined with bookshelves on three sides, at the fourth, a desk. But the worst of it was, by night, the books themselves glowed. I suppose it was the gilt colophon and lettering on their spines reflecting the moonlight. As a child they seemed to be queer little faces peering at me.

The potency of that memory was a little diluted in Ken and Elsie's new, considerably larger library where the old fashioned cloth-bound volumes had been outnumbered by more contemporary paperbacks. In my efforts to immediately immerse myself in something, to dislodge the angry thoughts about Elsie and women of her generation, I was drawn to a low shelf under the window that contained an assortment of

leather, cloth and spiral-bound books of differing sizes. A motley crew such as this had the whiff of journals.

The first volume I picked up was a modest looking folder of faded card, once scarlet perhaps, but now a deep pink. It was a scrapbook of cuttings from papers. I flicked through from the beginning and several bold headings caught my eye:

MENZIES SAYS WAR IN THREE YEARS

ALARMING COMMUNIST CONSPIRACY SWEEPS AUSTRALIA

VIETMINH OVERRUN FRENCH GARRISON AT DIEN BIEN PHU

Headlines, articles, photos, reviews. Some events revisited, others singular. It read to me like a story: accidental, contrived, who cares? A story. But I didn't reach the end before I went back for a more personal token.

I was drawn to a cloth-bound volume with a murky brown spine, sun bleached, for the front and back of the book were velvety black. Ken's journal, year of 1945. I opened to a page near the beginning: *February 25th — I now consider it safe to announce the assessment period over and declare the Yukanstae Group an unsuitable candidate for alliance. I have posted the letters to Head Office (Sydney) and Home Office (Perth) this morning and hope to go home next week. I haven't told Rolf yet and Dotty will be heart-broken, as she still hasn't given up trying to woo me. I tell her there is only one woman for me, and her company will be all the sweeter for our six-week separation. No, about all I'll miss of this place are those fellows Flex, Rex and Moody. Oh! What times we've had in the evenings, Rex reciting Genuine Australian Poetry from his own volumes, the port wine going round. For my money I'd have the bush spirit and Australian landscape that those fellows capture so astutely over any Soldier Poet's verse.*

I closed the journal and held it in my hands. Who was this man, so vibrant and alert and involved? Surely not my Pop, who seldom spoke, pottered in the garden, jotted verse? Gran made sure that, lest we forget, fifty years ago Pop had a couple of minor poetic publications to his name, but his efforts were as modest as he was.

I put the journal aside and reached for another. Every volume revealed a new treasure of historical raw material: Ken's poetic works-in-progress, Elsie's recipe notebook. There was something here for me to do, I knew it with fierce and irrational certainty. I

could see a work unfolding that was both a social history of my family and a national story of the issues that surrounded them: communism, aspiration, culture, war.

I was yearning, too, for a family connection that drew my life into a single line, maybe because my grandparents were fading away, or because Skye had arrived or because my mother had never been there. I wanted to draw a map of how I fitted in the world, a word map, a web of stories. This was where I would start.

2 — Elsie McKinnon visits the Red Witch of Greenmount

February 1954

Cassandra Richards, long-time comrade and friend to Elsie McKinnon, lives in those hills east of Perth promisingly named the Darling Range. Perhaps the "Darling" is diminutive, as in "Oh, look at those darling little hills", for in fact the range is a mere six hundred feet above sea level. Elsie shuts her eyes and puts her head back, one hand holding a splayed book covering her face, the other clutching her sizable handbag. She had been attempting to read on the bus, even though experience proves the practice makes her giddy and queasy. She vigorously fans her face with the book but she can feel her sweat rising nonetheless, her face reddening and her clothes beginning to cling to her. The old woman in front of Elsie has removed her hat and is fanning with it, leaving behind a thin cap of fine grey hairs above a tangle at her nape. What a dreadful day, Elsie thinks as they groan past the grand homes on the city's rim and begin their slow ascent.

Cassandra lives alone, her husband is dead and her son grown up, but she's been independent all her life anyway. How old is she, exactly? Elsie wonders. As old as my father? Cassandra doesn't leave the house much anymore, aside from Party meetings of course, preferring to continue her work at home on this modest breast of a hill. Elsie wonders how she manages to provide for herself. There's her war widow's pension, but that isn't enough to live on. There's Cassandra's book but that's out of print. Elsie cannot pin down what it is Cassandra does and she feels foolish, like one of those women who can't explain what it is their husbands do for a living. A woman needs a man in her life to provide security, Elsie thinks. A public service position like Ken's teaching post will provide for us into our old age, whether the revolution comes or not.

Cassandra's loyalty to the Motherland (as she's called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics since she visited Russia twenty years ago) is unquestionable; nevertheless, to Elsie at least, she seems somewhat detached from Party proceedings. The Australian Communist Party attracts a good deal of the radicals, the misfits, the left wing intellectuals and sceptics who question the imperialism of the West. The Communist Party is a catch-all, and like any social gathering, people are variously committed. There are those like Elsie who are born to it: her father was a founding member of the Railway Workers Union and

she grew up hosting study groups in her home. There are those who try it out, are fervent, perhaps, but soon leave the Party, disappear from meetings, resign from committees. There are those who come early and stay late, such as Cassandra. Her ways are her own but her public allegiance is firmly with the Party.

That was how they met more than twenty years ago, when Elsie was still a girl and Cassandra an old woman even then, it seemed. A woman with knowledge and experience; she didn't bat an eyelid when comrades made indecent overtures towards Elsie, who resisted them violently. Cassandra used to call her the Red Virgin and Elsie hated that, but was irresistibly drawn into conversation with her nonetheless. Her ideas were so… provocative, not just about politics, but about people… Men… Ken.

"And are you enjoying the privileges of love, Elsie?" Cassandra had said when she and Ken returned from their honeymoon. Elsie was shocked silent, feeling so innocent still, recalling the hard, narrow bed in the hotel at Arthur River. Ken was far too much of a gentleman to insist.

They call her the Red Witch and it is easy to see why, Elsie thinks as she walks in the front gate to Cassandra's house. Ants' nests, meticulously constructed from graded gravel to give a gradual rise and fall, are adorned with pieces of petal of the flowers under which they lie: yellow spots under the daisies, pink specks under the pelargonium.

"Elsie, do come in, I'm just making some tea," Cassandra calls from within the house as Elsie steps onto the bougainvillea-shaded verandah. She lets herself in the door that leads to a large kitchen. In an old white dress, her bobbed grey hair revealing a long neck, Cassandra leans over her cauldron atop the wood stove and sniffs noisily, murmuring appreciatively. There is a round and earthy smell in the kitchen, sweet, with a bitter twist too. Elsie sits at the kitchen table and sighs as she removes her hat, its band soaked with sweat.

"It's so hot outside. What I really feel like is a good strong cup of tea. *English* tea."

"Now Elsie," Cassandra chastises, "what you like to call 'English' tea is Indian tea. What I have here is more English: meadowsweet, lovage and melissa, one or two other things. Meadowsweet, *Spiraea ulmaria*, whose essence was stolen to put the asp in Aspirin, the 'wonder drug', when I was a girl. Melissa, from the Greek for honeybee, is the lemon-scented balm of rejuvenation, and carminative lovage. They all like the weather to be grey

as England most of the time, and they'll pass their coolness on to us. I have to keep them inside on days like today. But there are also flowers of the everlasting for their volatile oil with the charming name Immortelle. That is for me; you are privileged to share it."

"But what's it for?" Elsie says.

"It is to drink. We'll have it with honey. It's delightful and you'll love it. Now let me tell you about how I came by this honey…"

The tea is delicious and Elsie loves it and soon she begins to relax. In order to do so, she must tell Cassandra about her painful, but really rather typical, day. In the telling it doesn't seem so bad after all and Elsie feels much better, though she wonders how it could be that she gets so tense and worked up in the first place. After all, she doesn't have Ken's responsibilities. Her role is to keep a harmonious hearth and home, so everyday she is up first to light the wood stove.

"Early Kooka, alright. That's me, down on my knees to light the fire," says Elsie. "But I always have the boys' porridge on the table by seven o'clock. It isn't so bad at this time of year, but in the winter, sheer agony. I'm not as young as I was and I've never been the same since the boys were born. I'll keep on at Ken about getting on the gas. Unless *he* wants to get up and cook the breakfast!"

The two women laugh.

Elsie glances around the kitchen and says: "I don't know how you manage with so little, Comrade Cassandra."

"Did you know, Elsie, that in the Motherland, women aren't offered machine-this and automatic-that. They seem much happier for it. I resist the campaign waged by ad-men to turn me into an appliance addict. My fire and cauldron are sufficient for all my cooking and my broom takes care of cleaning. What may start as a luxury quickly becomes a necessity, and there is no end to it."

Elsie insists: "But the washing is so easy with the machine that I've more time for Party duties. Being a mother is a wonderful thing, and being a Party mother is even more wonderful, but I am never free of the blasted chores."

Cassandra smiles. "Yes, my dear, I remember how it was with men in the house. I'll not tell a lie: though I miss them terribly there is no doubt that my life is easier without them. More tea?" And then she looks away, as if she is, indeed, telling a lie. Quickly she

fills up their cups and goes on. “But now, Elsie, I must speak to you about something of great consequence.” Cassandra pauses until she feels sure she has Elsie’s attention. “I’ve heard that there are to be some changes. Ken has been chosen. Important information has come to light about a *certain new literary journal*.” Cassandra says these last four words deliberately.

Elsie’s mouth is solemn and her eyes discreet but her mind is racing. This is why I admire Comrade Cassandra, she thinks. It’s true that Cassandra sometimes frightens me, but she *gets things done*. Elsie’s association with Cassandra’s plans gives her a great deal of satisfaction, not to mention influence amongst the younger Party women.

Cassandra holds Elsie’s eye and speaks with a bite, but quietly. “*Tetrameter* is the wealthiest literary magazine Australia’s ever seen, with large print runs freely distributed, who will publish any kind of rot if it praises America or vilifies the Motherland. Not one article does it contain, not one poem by any writers we are lucky enough to call our own, and who are the best in the country!” Cassandra raps on the table with her knuckles to mark her point.

Elsie knits her brow. She suspected there was something wrong with that rag when she first saw it advertised in the paper: “*Tetrameter* stands for Truth, Liberty, Honour: Free for a short time only.” Her tea is gone and she puts down the cup noisily; her eyes flash to Cassandra’s to see if her lapse in table manners has been observed.

“Listen Elsie,” Cassandra takes one of Elsie’s hands and squeezes it urgently, and Elsie is listening. “Have you heard of Stewart Enright? He is the editor of *Tetrameter*. He is a man who is suspicious of many things, such as atheists, and anarchists, and women who live alone.”

Elsie pulls back her hand and holds it in her other, saying, “You don’t mean the Stewart Enright of the 1944 poetry hoax —”

“Exactly the one,” Cassandra goes on. “Stewart Enright is a proud Cold Warrior. His first article as editor calls communism the ‘Beast from the Abyss’ that will take over the world unless he, and those committed to *Tetrameter*’s cause, try to stop it. We have reliable information that he is receiving money from the CIA.”

“That conceited, Popish poetaster!” Elsie exclaims. “But what can we do?” Her hands are wringing in her lap.

Cassandra reaches under the table to seek out Elsie's hands with her own and squeezes gently. "You *must* put all this nervous energy to good use, Elsie. Are you prepared to take a stand where no-one else will?" Quickly, Cassandra takes up Elsie's teacup from in front of her, swirls the dregs a few times and pours them into her own, empty teacup. The old woman peers into the murky depths, pulling first nearer the cup, then away, to focus.

Elsie has heard plenty of stories but has seen Cassandra do this only once before, in 1943, when she predicted that Ken would be discharged from the Army and sent to Sydney on Party business. Even though all of this came to pass, Elsie considers herself considerably wiser now than the twenty-four-year-old new mother she was then. Still, Cassandra's usually right, so maybe it's the tealeaves after all. She looks exactly the same now as she did to Elsie eleven years ago, with her hair cropped short at the back and longer at the front, framing her thin face, silhouetted in the afternoon sun. They are seated in the same places; maybe she's even wearing the same white dress, loose and slightly transparent, one that Elsie suspects may have been her best nightdress a long time ago.

"I see a journey for you, Elsie. You and Ken together. I see you both finding something new, some valuable information." Cassandra's hands, long fingered with prominent knuckles, grip the cup. "You and Ken bring passion to our principles, Elsie. And what good are our passions unless we move with them?" Cassandra places the cup face down but her eyes seem not to focus on Elsie's. "The time is right to make a change. Ken needs your support, yes, but you have a role to play too. You and Ken must go to Sydney, Elsie."

"Me? What things must I do, Cassandra? Everything is happening so quickly…" Cassandra's eyes are staring strangely. Elsie thinks, Ken and I have built our marriage around passion, for each other and for communism. Both of us are better for it, if only the Party could see Ken's talents. But why must we go to Sydney?

Elsie has never been out of Western Australia. She gulps down some air and tries to steady her breathing. She's thinking of what this could mean, what such a journey might lead to for Ken. Ken's experience is my experience, Elsie has always thought. Education is the key, and just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I don't have a worthwhile point of view. But what will I do with the children?

Thus ran Elsie's thoughts, tangled and tight like her fingers twisting on the table. It is to be this way for most of her life, until the Museum starts to straighten things out a little.

Cassandra's eyes clear, she turns to Elsie and becomes conspiratorial. "This issue is not just about *Tetrameter* and the CIA. At the branch meeting tonight, Bill will propose a motion to nominate Ken as secretary of a new committee: the Movement for Arts and Freedom. I know Ken is the right man for the job, Elsie. The motion will be passed of course, and you make sure Ken accepts. This is a very important assignment. It will mean a trip to Sydney. A chance for Ken to make his mark. Can you manage that?"

"Well, yes, if Ken thinks —"

"Never mind what Ken thinks, Elsie, the Party needs you."

3 — Amy

Skye's birth is the most interesting thing that's happened in my family since my mum left. I haven't seen her since I was seven. She lives on a commune in the South West, I think. She left Dad and me when I was little and for a while she came back every year to visit. She would come in the winter. I remember rain and a green jumper I especially liked, with pink and yellow flowers on it: the flowers were spiky like the V-shape of knitted stitches. And it is my birthday in August, so it makes sense that she'd come in the winter. Aside from a few photos, the only evidence I have of her is a book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, with the inscription: "To my daughter Carly, happy birthday 6-year-old, with much love, Amy." I thought it strange that she both owns me and disowns me in a single sentence. I tried to throw the book away during a teenage reinvention of myself, but Dad must have salvaged it because a couple of years later I found it again on his bookshelves. I don't remember the final visit and the fact that it occurred when I was seven is a figure I've learned from those around me, like my date of birth. I know that one year she just didn't come; my birthday came and went and then it was Christmas and no-one said anything but I knew that was it.

Part of the reason I entered into parenthood so lightly, I think, is due to a piece of distorted logic through which I concluded that, because of the unfortunate pattern of mother-loss haunting my ancestral line, I myself would never become a mother, because then I would begin to cease to exist. Perhaps this licensed carelessness, or a silent yearning to test the boundaries of destiny. Elsie's mother died at thirty-four, leaving eight children. Her death certificate said "Tuberculosis", but now that I've devoted a couple of years to producing a single child, knowing that she had eight in ten years, I have my doubts. Ken's mother had seven and it didn't kill her, at least not straight away, but when it was determined that she was unfit for her role she was sent back to her own people, like a defective household gadget.

Procreation slowed down considerably in more recent generations and if you were to animate our branch of the family tree, you'd see a nuclear family clustered around the nineteen fifties like a wasp gall on a wattle twig: Elsie and Ken, Peter and Bruce. It could almost be a model for the emancipation of Western women during the twentieth century,

where Elsie's survival and flourishing are supported by freedom from excessive childbirth. But the galls inhibit the tree's seed production. What might Amy's disappearance represent, then? Fin de siècle excess, where her further flourishing can only be achieved through utter freedom from the family home? Now here I am, the sole product of the union of two family lines, fooled into single-motherhood. It is tempting to conclude that my family is not very good at family.

Skye and I live with my dad, Bruce McKinnon, and Dad's parents live close by, as does Dad's brother Peter, who never married and lives alone. In many ways I have come out of our shared tragedy better off than Dad, who never got over Mum leaving, never hooked up with anyone else. I was "a sensible child" in Elsie's words, suffered no serious adolescent angst, no major teenage rebellion. But while I have been coping from a young age, Dad can be a bit pathetic, spending hours with his piano, moping in A-flat minor. The rest of them, Ken and Elsie, Peter, silently blame her. I have always seen this but it only started to bother me recently.

We might be lonely and melancholic but by no means are the McKinnons an entirely miserable family. We share a meal every other Friday night at Ken and Elsie's and arguments hardly ever get personal. Dad and I get along and he adores Skye. He works at night, mostly, so when Skye was born he offered to have her for a few hours every afternoon. Dad's a pianist and has a regular gig at a piano bar in the city. Night work suits him really well, and of course he loves that he can make a living from playing. Even when he still had his public service nine-to-fiver I'd find him wandering around the house at odd hours. As long as I can remember he's always slept in bits and pieces, like a baby.

Since Skye was born there's been three of us not sleeping. In the small hours of the morning I have found myself wallowing in pits of sadness, weeping copious tears over my life, my lot, my lack. Sometimes Skye and I take it in turns, for hours at a time. Not so often that it's debilitating, but once every month or so. I've come to realise that, like my father, I'm taking delight in sorrow. I'm willing to revel in solitude of the cruellest sort, where one is not alone but cannot be understood. And like Dad, sometimes there follows a clear and fresh space where I can create music, a poem, a beautiful thing.

Without Dad I wouldn't have be able to research the family history; he is so patient and loving with Skye that I found myself leaving her with him more often. In the early days

Skye was happy without me for an afternoon hour, here and there, and I would catch up on sleep. As we grew stronger and our time apart stretched longer I spent my time off reading. About Australian history, my area of interest, and Australian literature and journals. Then, when I felt confident that I could leave the house for a while without being missed, I used these times to write my responses and speculations about the research I was undertaking, within the McKinnon library and beyond, while I sipped Earl Grey in a nearby café.

Skye was finally down for a morning sleep. Dawn had come and gone but I had been too tired, too distracted, to witness it. The dawn is one of those markers that excited me as a child and I remember trying to train myself to get up early enough to know I had enjoyed the very longest possible day of play. These days I'm often awake in the early morning but usually I feel exhausted from a sleepless night of nursing and sobbing, singing and bouncing. I was too tired to sleep and needed some distraction so I went to put on some music in the lounge. In that place, I am usually drawn to Dad's collection of vinyl rather than something of my own. I selected Miles Davis' *Four & More* and flopped down on the old couch, also vinyl. I heard the muted trumpet shaping words, mournful, and hopeful too, somehow. I know there are no words on that recording, but as it is with all of Dad's music that I've grown up with, I hear them anyway. "Baby, so it's truth, honour and happiness, and one thing more…"

My face felt hot and my eyes were puffy. I remembered feeling hungry earlier on but I couldn't get up. From the couch I could see my reflection in the glossy side of the Ronisch piano. It was only a silhouette but my tummy seemed a bit flatter than it did a few months ago. It was probably just because I was lying down. I have Elsie's figure: a generous bosom, tending to thickness around the middle, long legs. My skin is fair, like Elsie's. I get my eyes from Dad and he got them from Ken. They have a distinctive shape at the corners, almost a diamond. Mine are hazel in colour, while Dad's and Pop's are brown. Still, this seems rather a generous contribution from the McKinnon side of the family. Sometimes it seems that my mother is genetically invisible as well as actually absent.

But there are the lips. My lips are full and positively petulant when I frown, which I catch myself doing more often than I'd like to, as I pass the mirror in my bedroom or the bathroom door is left open. I cannot find my lips in any of the living McKinnons. The few

photos I have of Amy are not much help: one's out of focus and another is at a distance. In my favourite, the one I keep in my wallet for sentimental reasons that I find difficult to account for, she's grinning, so it's hard to tell what her lips are like. I never met her mum and dad, my other grandparents, and now they are dead. Maybe she took me to see them when I was a baby but I don't remember.

I have some photos of Skye's dad that I have filed away for her so she can examine them when she is older for traces of herself. They seem much clearer than mine of Amy.

Having a small child to care for tends to hamper one's social life. Having a small child to care for on your own is more likely to extinguish one's social life. I tried to keep in touch with my girlfriends by phone but when I rejected the invitation to "go out" on the weekend, the conversation would wind down and they hadn't time to talk. I gave it a good go once or twice but couldn't stomach the drinking and found myself coughing conspicuously when anyone lit a cigarette. Suddenly I was someone's mother, and I wasn't invited again. So no more big nights: I haven't been in a scene for a while and meeting men is about as appealing as joining a gym.

My good friend Natalie is more tenacious and we catch up every couple of weeks. She has made the transition into parenthood with me, sometimes envying me and at other times slyly mocking my maternal-singular plight, reflecting her own volatile family dynamic. Nat and I finished our history degrees in the same year and while she went on with Honours studies, I had Skye. We had been quite competitive at uni, trying to out-do each other with the thoroughness of our papers. The rewards for my efforts, little letters on a piece of card, seem pitifully thin to me now. But I could have been her and she me, and whenever we met up for coffee (her) and tea (me), while I bounced Skye on my knee, Nat encouraged me to put her in child care and come back to university. She was now tutoring undergraduates and working towards a Masters degree.

Natalie was pleased to hear it when I told her about my research project. "I can see how Skye keeps you busy, Carly, but you can't devote yourself just to her, she won't thank you for it." Nat's parents divorced when she was very young and fought over her sister's and her care arrangements until Nat turned eighteen and moved out. She always told me

how lucky I was to have only one parent around and I found her cynicism refreshing. I get so tired of people's pitying enquiries when they decide that I was an abandoned child.

Nat asked some leading questions about my writing and although I was keen to share what I'd been thinking I surprised myself by feeling shy. I struggled to explain: I'd begun by writing about what was going on around me, perhaps to prove to myself that I was still part of the world, but as I spoke I mixed up the words and they sounded false. Skye was on repeat: "Mummy… Mummy… Mummy…" exploiting the spaces in my sentences. This was no different from any other day but in my frustration I made it her fault and snapped, "Be quiet, Skye, I'm trying to talk!" We were both shocked but Nat seemed mildly amused. I apologised, I don't know why, to the situation itself more than to Skye or Nat, but it was too late to save the moment and we went home. There are times when I'm glad for the retreat of home. And when I'm not, it's necessary to fill the space between home and the world with words. Sentences expand and contract apace with my desire to lay low, nursing my isolation, and my first, cautious forays back out there.

I remember where I was when I heard the World Trade Centre in New York had been attacked and destroyed: breast-feeding Skye in the red velvet lounge chair, she was only a few weeks old. Uncle Peter phoned and said, "Carly, have you seen the news? The United States is being attacked!" I smiled tolerantly to myself at first, Uncle Peter was a worrier, overly dramatic, but I turned the television on anyway. And could barely believe what I saw. I thought, this means the world will change, we will all have to face up to ourselves. I hugged Skye to my chest and muted the television, watching those few seconds of footage repeated over and over, slowed to give the appearance of the plane hopping casually along, into the side of the building.

Over the next couple of years I watched the international drama unfold from the most isolated city in the world: Perth, Western Australia. I was horrified when the United States of America invaded Afghanistan, using the Twin Towers attack as the most flimsy and tenuous justification. I could see nothing wise or considered in this reaction, just a powerful force lashing out. I felt ashamed and realised that there would be no facing up to anything, only violence to dumb down violence. The tragedy would not become an opportunity for self-reflection and changed behaviour, but a license to extract revenge in whatever currency the United States desired. It desired the slick black currency, of course.

The most isolated city in the world. I remember Mum saying that when I was small, before I knew what it meant. Later I worked out that she thought isolation meant Perth was safe, not likely to be a target of nuclear attack. She was often worried about bombs, I remember. Once when I was very young she cried when I deliberately squashed a cockroach outside. I was shocked at her emotion and then she explained to me — I don't know how I understood this, but I did — that in the case of nuclear war, cockroaches would be among the only surviving creatures. And then I cried too, I sat in her lap and wept. For the plants and animals that would die, for the people that would die, for the cockroach I'd killed, and for myself for killing it. It must have been soon after that she went away.

4 — Elsie and the boys

On the way home as the bus rolls down Greenmount Hill Elsie peers into her bag, pushes aside the stylish magazine Cassandra gave her and gets out her mending. Three buttons missing from Bruce's shirt again. She must have sewn buttons on this shirt a dozen times. She changes buses at Guildford and sits behind two women, around the same age as Elsie's thirty-five years. She can't help but eavesdrop as she continues to stitch and gathers that they are talking about their husbands' new jobs at Boans store.

"I'll tell you, though, I'm real glad for the bit extra in the housekeeping," says the lady on the left.

"Well, you just reek of luck!" says the lady on the right. "I hope it's not too late for Norm to rise up the ranks. Do they promote impotent old fools, I wonder?" She laughs too loudly and her friend gives her hand a consolatory squeeze.

Elsie can't help herself. She sticks her needle into the spool of thread and leans forward over the seat in front of her. She says loftily, too loudly: "Excuse me, excuse me!" until the women turn around. Elsie begins pleasantly. "I don't know whether you're aware of it or not, but the Clerks and Shop Assistants Union are at present striking for a living wage rise. What are their families to live on? Your husbands have got work because the bosses employed scabs at the cheap rate!" Elsie becomes shrill.

The lady on the left is indignant: "It might be cheap to you, Missus, but my Laurie used to get shop floor wages. Clerk is goin up in the world."

"But how long will you last? He'll be sacked when the Union renegotiates its terms. There's security in loyalty, sticking to one job, one employer, one Party."

"Oh, you're a Red, are ya?"

Fortunately for Elsie her stop is coming so she gets up without a backward glance and lurches towards the door.

"Well, the conceit of her!" hisses the lady on the left when Elsie does not respond.

"Didn't ya mother teach ya manners?" the other calls out.

Elsie holds her head up as she steps out of the bus but all the way home she's frustrated. Just last week she made a highly commended contribution to a study class on censorship and socialist realism, but she never knows what to say to strangers after her

initial exclamations. What would her father say? *Men are free but everywhere they are in chains.* Adam Scrabble has given his life in political allegiance to the Party. *Women are the slaves of slaves*, quotes Elsie. Her father has an endless supply of Marxist one-liners and aphorisms celebrating a life of struggle. These have a soothing effect on Elsie, calming her nerves with their familiar commonsense. Her anger subsides as she turns her mind to something useful.

Given the information Cassandra passed on today, there might be a real opportunity to see some action in the Party. Elsie imagines another study class that doesn't come straight out of the pages of the *Communist Review*, say on *Tetrameter*'s editorial policy, which displays a complete lack of insight into the interests of the cultured poor. For far too long now Elsie has seen her ideas frittered away in the mouths of the executives. She frowns as she recalls the numerous ideas that she has floated and promoted — the Singing Vanguard going door to door and "Super Recruiter!" certificates for the older children are but two — only to have them fall at the final hurdle. Now there is to be a committee specifically addressing these issues. "Ken McKinnon, Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom," Elsie tries out. He needs to be encouraged to take a more active role in Party administration, and then perhaps we could reach people like those women, she thinks.

When Ken was overlooked for the executive position that came up late last year Elsie claimed she was relieved: she didn't need Ken out of the house for yet another night. But ever since, she has been deeply suspicious of that Comrade Piggot, to whom Bill handed the position. The drink has made Bill soft in the head, thinks Elsie, to promote that leering Johnny-come-lately over Ken. But Ken does need to be more of a self-promoter, she concedes, reminding herself not to get her hopes up.

Elsie collects the mail as she walks up the drive of Number 92 Wattle Street and lets herself in, dropping the bundle onto the kitchen table. Ken manages the bills, but a folded leaflet catches her eye. She takes it into the bathroom with her to freshen up. Soon the boys will be home and then there's dinner to put on.

“Let’s look out for Australia!”
Are you a Patriotic Australian concerned about the RED MENACE
currently threatening our WAY OF LIFE?
Let’s all work together to remain Vigilant:
report Suspicious Behaviour immediately.
Write away to receive your FREE Anti-Communist Pack,
including tips for Red-Spotting, First Aid information and a pack of cards.
Don’t be complacent in these Times of Peace,
do something for your country and contact ASIO today!
(Authorised by the Australian Government, Canberra)

Elsie snorts with disgust, screws up the leaflet and flushes it down the toilet with her urine. A sharp pain pinches her deep inside and she gasps. If those boys bicker it’ll be the end of me, Elsie threatens herself.

Peter McKinnon is in his final year at Mt. Hawthorn Primary School and Bruce is in grade two. They share a family but have little in common. When Peter was Bruce’s age he was already reading: Elsie used to entertain her woman-friends by having Peter read headlines from the *Tribune*. He has grown into a studious and portly youth who finds his younger brother tiresome. Bruce enjoys outside activities: chasing, climbing trees, singing, ball games. Despite their differences, the boys share an unspoken agreement that for the duration of the walk home, they present a united front. Peter loiters at the back of the school where the upper classes are, waiting for Bruce. He is pleased to have something to do: while his classmates chat in small groups, Peter wrinkles up his heavy brow and looks anxiously around with an air of significance. But he is inevitably disappointed when Bruce wanders along.

Bruce is not yet seven, small and dishevelled. Today at playtime he won three new marbles from Tom, but at lunch Tom took all his marbles and tore his shirt. He is pleased to see his big, big brother Peter.

“Peter,” Bruce says to his brother on the way home.

“Hmmm,” says Peter, without looking up.

“Peter, what’s wrong with my boat, the sailing boat Dad helped me build?” A few days earlier they’d proudly placed the completed model above the fireplace. Bruce had

gone into the lounge room to say goodnight to his dad when he saw another man there, pointing at the boat and yelling, then laughing and punching his dad on the arm. “It’s not above the fireplace anymore. Do you know why my boat has gone?”

“What boat?” Peter says.

“The one Dad got you for Christmas, but you didn’t want to make it…”

“I’m not interested in model boats,” says Peter. “It was the *Santamaria*, Columbus’ ship. Mr. Leighton made fun of Dad about changing sides. You know BA Santamaria?”

Bruce stares at him blankly. Peter sighs and humours his younger brother with this deliberate explanation: “You know how the convent kids yell, ‘What’s that smell? Commie red. You’ll go to hell before you’re dead!’ And how we yell, ‘Catholic dogs, stink like hogs, in and out of hollow logs’?”

Bruce nods: there is a convent school at the end of their street.

“For grown-ups it’s the same,” Peter concludes, resolute.

This doesn’t clarify much at all for Bruce. He doesn’t know why he sings that song, he’s never thought about it before. He can’t imagine grown-ups singing it. And he can’t think what it’s got to do with his boat.

Going home is a haven from the outside world, but Bruce still feels lonely there. Except when Beverly is around. Beverly is his best friend, a few years older than him: she’ll be ten this year. Bruce and Bev begin a singing and dancing game in between the boys’ beds in the room they share with Peter, where he is sitting at his desk reading a book with no pictures, again. Bruce improvises a violin with two coat hangers and sings a tune from his book of Mozart minuets.

Peter sighs noisily and puts down his book. Blast that boy! He thinks for a moment and then pleasantly modulates his voice. “Can I play with you, Bruce?”

“Yes, Peter!”

“I want to play the violin,” says Peter, taking the hangers and putting them out of Bruce’s reach, on top of their wardrobe.

Suddenly, stupidly, Bruce realises that Peter’s tricked him. “Give it back give it back!” he calls.

“Nah nah nah nah nah nah nah!”

Elsie can hear the boys fighting from the kitchen. Her hands tremble as she cuts the skin off a pumpkin. She cuts faster, sharper angles, and larger pieces of flesh come off the pumpkin with the skin. She chastises herself with a click of her tongue — such waste! — and slips with the knife.

"You broke it! You broke my violin!"

Elsie slams down the knife and turns to the sink. The cut isn't large but she grips her thumb fiercely with her other hand then binds it in a clean tea-towel. With the enlarged digit akimbo, Elsie holds on to the edge of the sink and leans into it, feeling faint. A moment later she pushes the fogginess away and gets the rest of the pumpkin into the pot, yelling, "You boys stop it! Stop it now! My nerves can't stand your bickering!" She stamps her foot on *nerves* and *bic* and feels a sudden surging just inside, then warmness down her leg. "For goodnessake!" wails Elsie. "Not again!" She rushes to the bathroom and slams the door. Silence from the boys' room.

Elsie sits stiffly in the cold water of the filling bath, trying not to look at the red cloud misting to pink between her legs, waiting for the heat to subside from her body. She winces at a pinching sensation deep in her belly and then reluctantly finds a new stiff position to hold.

Elsie takes the soap and rubs herself all over, thorough and efficient. I'm going to have to get myself tidied up, she thinks. A battered old enamel mug sits on the side of the bath and Elsie uses it to bail cupfuls of water onto her soapy body from the shallow puddle at her feet, rubbing and slapping vigorously. She thinks, better I manage as best I can. I can't ask Ken for anything else, we're already stretched to the limit. If only I didn't have to get down to light the fire in the mornings: that always makes it worse.

Elsie hauls herself out of the bath and dries off, goes to lie down and think.

Half-an-hour later Elsie emerges from the bedroom to serve dinner to her family, washed and rested, in a clean cotton print frock. When Ken comes in the front door at half-past five she calls pleasantly, "Peter, Bruce, wash your hands and sit up for tea."

"What delight have you prepared for us tonight, my love?" Ken asks, settling down at the dinner table after greeting Elsie with a dry kiss on the cheek.

“Red Army goulash, Mrs. Constantyova sent me the recipe. It’s got mutton and six vegetables: onion, carrot, potato, parsnip, turnip and pumpkin.” Elsie puts down Ken’s half-filled bowl in order to count the vegetables off on her fingers.

Peter has a long face. He invested much hope in tonight’s tea, wishing it would make up for his disappointing day. But here is a mere stew, a sloppy vegetable mush. Hopes dashed, he nevertheless eats his serve with gusto and with a resentful look takes more when it is offered.

Elsie eats very little herself, and what she does eat, very quickly. She replaces the lid on the mustard pot, straightens up the salt and pepper, rearranges the spoon in her bowl, and says, “Ken, I think it’s time you took on a more substantial role. In the Party. We are needed more than ever. If we were on the gas, Ken, I’d find it so much easier in the evenings to cope without you. I think we could manage to pay for it out of the housekeeping.” Elsie gets up and begins collecting the bowls.

Astute Peter groans, knowing that less housekeeping money means less meat and more stews. His parents don’t notice his contribution to the discussion, or they ignore him.

Ken looks up at Elsie keenly, saying: “A more substantial role, you think?” But then his eyes drop and he continues with much head shaking, “I don’t know, Elsie, an executive position might makes things difficult at work, and money is tight. Let’s wait until the washing machine is paid off.”

Elsie directs the boys to leave the table: perhaps talking will be easier without them. Peter pushes the table away from himself and lumbers off. Bruce sits where he is, staring off into the middle distance as if he were somewhere quite other. “Bruce, you may leave now,” Elsie repeats. “Where does your head go?”

“I was just thinking,” Bruce says seriously. He gets down from his chair and skips away, swinging one arm as if holding the hand of another.

The evening tea is completed with a fresh pot of Darjeeling and just a dash of milk. Ken accepts his graciously, “Thankyou, my love,” and reaches across the table to switch on the old radio, from before the War, a black bakelite box. Within the family it is affectionately known as the Ranter.

…but Prime Minister Menzies had this to say: "The Australian people recognise that out of the tragedy and horror of war come our greatest strengths, and the Australian people are determined to fight this evil regime, even if it costs us our brave sons..."

"Oh rubbish! Rubbish, you hypocrite!" interjects Elsie.

"But life, of course, must and should go on, beyond the challenge of Korea. The talk of recession, which so many irresponsible people predicted with almost gloomy satisfaction, is now but a distasteful memory. This is not a time for pessimism, for calamity howling, for croaking like frogs about a depression, which clearly doesn't exist. The crisis is not an internal affair."

"The dirty business of war," Ken says, shaking his head sadly.

"Ken…" begins Elsie.

The Australian economy is doing well in the world market and the price of wheat remains high —

Elsie turns the Ranter off. "I am not altogether well, Ken. I…"

Elsie looks at Ken and he reaches for her hand, giving it quick little squeezes. It will always be like this between them: they will avoid the dark back-ways and walk, hand in hand, along the grand roads.

"It's not like me to complain."

Ken nods soberly and thinks of the letter he received today bearing the Party's red seal in the upper right hand corner, delivered to him at work by the Secretary's wife. He squeezes Elsie's hand again and asks, "What shall we do, my love?"

Elsie takes back her hand. "What about the gas, Ken?"

"What? Oh yes, the gas. Well, we will see, my love."

5 — Family Dinner Friday

My research and writing started out well. Two years at home with no tasks other than feed and clean, fetch and carry, made an opportunity to focus on a challenging project seem like a holiday. I ripped into my hours alone with an energy that couldn't help but backfire and after a few weeks I began to realise the scope of what I'd got myself into. The more I read about Ken and Elsie's era and culture, the more complex the story became, yet the more familiar it seemed. The nature of the bond between my recorded history and me was elastic and I bounded between a defensive detachment and a realisation of ancestral determinism. I thought through various arguments while I was alone and Skye was asleep and often I felt resentful when her crying out roused me from introspection. Increasingly I devoted more time to reading and writing and Skye missed me. Consequently I spent days playing with her when I should have been researching. Upon returning to my writing some time later, I could barely recognise it as my own and then the cycle would begin again. I could see that this verging-on-obsessive behaviour boded no good, so I would stop writing and get stuck into some not-very-necessary household maintenance task like washing the windows or defrosting the fridge.

During one such stasis I made the decision to tell Ken and Elsie that I was writing their history and seek their blessing. I should say, *ask* Ken and Elsie, but I was too far in to pull out now. Nothing short of Elsie admitting I was the product of incest, or something, would keep me from shuffling through my own family's harmless closet skeletons. But I needed to handle it carefully, approach the topic through Ken to seek Elsie's approval, because she was the one who counted. I chose a Family Dinner Friday, some months after my discovery of Ken and Elsie's journals. I'd been borrowing material freely — they'd always said I could use whatever I liked from their library — but I didn't feel completely at ease reading and taking notes from them.

We'd barely sat down when Peter poked at the faintly gleaming pumpkin with his fork. "Mum, are these vegetables roasted in fat?" Peter was tall and thin and quite youthful in his physique, though a slight stoop was beginning to betray his sixty-odd years. Elsie hastened to assure him that it was just the smallest amount of olive oil on the bottom of the baking dish, but he got up from the table with a heavy sigh.

“You know I won’t eat this, Mum. No, no, don’t get up,” he added as Elsie, protesting, pushed back her chair. “I’ll just cut myself some raw salads. Perhaps you can save me some of the fish.”

We got a little way into the meal, with no conversation that didn’t pertain directly to the consumption of food, and I was about to make my opening gambit. I intended to be straight forward, hang it around a few key nouns, but also keep it general, if not to say vague: “I’m undertaking some research into the social history of the Communist Party of Western Australia. I’m particularly interested in your personal experiences after the War.”

But before I could begin, Skye’s interest in her food transitioned from oral to tactile and then Elsie jumped in while I was preoccupied: “I’ve been thinking, Carly, that it’s time for Skye’s first trip to the Museum.”

It was as if she knew, could sense what I was thinking and brought up the Museum as a defence, its stately building a shield of respectability. Or perhaps it was because Skye was busy making pea-and-carrot sausages in her fists. I could hear her thinking: the Devil makes play with idle hands; that child needs educating!

The Museum: once Elsie and Ken left the Party they had to redirect their revolutionary energy somewhere, thus they brought their passion to this rare and valuable collection of objects pertaining to children from the past. Elsie was the original collector and Ken was her faithful assistant, devoting himself to historical research. A shrine to lost toys and lost childhoods, Elsie was inspired by a similar collection she saw in Scotland when she and Ken travelled in the late sixties. When the Museum of Young Australians, as Elsie named it, grew too large for her to manage with her small team of volunteers, and with Elsie herself in declining health, the university was “pleased to receive the rewarding responsibility of curatorship of this important contribution to heritage”.

I nearly choked on my peas when, just as I was warming up to my task, Elsie said *time for Skye’s first trip to the Museum*, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I’d often visited the Museum with Elsie and Ken in my childhood, when it still took up much of their time. The feelings associated with the memories weren’t emotionally charged ones, neither happy nor sad, but thinking about the museum now was unsettling. Quite frankly, it gave me the heebie-geebies, all those dolls’ eyes staring in silent horror: what are we doing here?

I should admit that I couldn't muster the same enthusiasm for the Museum as I could their communist past. I know that their awareness of Marx's critique of materialism, as well as coming of age during the Depression era, made the McKinnons especially thrifty and respectful of objects. Maybe this attitude practiced over a lifetime led to the collection and presentation of things displayed to inspire awe. Various things came to stand for emotional experiences that, outside the Museum, were avoided. Their accumulated objects, from the Coolgardie Safe to the boys' first books, could be organised and understood, this stuff of history spread out around them and became the Museum. But I found it impossible to reconcile the two, revolutionaries turned conservators.

I stared at the blue design, quaint and otherworldly, appearing between the orange wedges and little green spheres on my plate. Would a polite refusal give offence? I didn't want my elderly yet infuriatingly vigorous grandmother to decide when Skye ought to be exposed to the family legacy. Elsie clattered the plates and brought me back to the table; Dad grabbed at a last morsel before his plate was whizzed away. That meant I had as long as it took Elsie to walk to the kitchen and back to complete my grazing on grilled fish and roasted vegies after a leisurely sharing with Skye. Ken and Peter had finished eating some minutes ago, a most efficient way of taking a meal that was learned over years of meals cut short by Elsie's plate-clearing.

When I was at Ken and Elsie's place I was at a distinct disadvantage but nobody else seemed to notice. Ken and Elsie, Peter and Bruce, shared a consensus that was always at least half unknown to me. As a child I longed for a sibling to lead me astray; as a teenager I wished for my mum, or any ally. That soft-yet-ceaseless yearning lessened a little as I got older and a certain detachment took its place. And now I have Skye, on whom I dote. "You're too soft on her," Elsie said on a few Family Dinner occasions.

"The world is hard, Gran, and Skye is soft. Why should I be hard?"

The dining table of Ken and Elsie McKinnon was governed by the time worn rituals of the family nucleus, dictating who does what and how. We always ate early, around five. Gran and Dad would do the dishes while I bathed Skye and settled her in the portable cot that Elsie had purchased for me and kept in the spare room. Afterwards we play cards. Dad leaves for work just before eight and Skye and I go home; the routine varies little from this. It had seemed easy to plan a conversation around these fixed variables. The Museum was

not in my script. I told myself, try again after dinner; for now, prevaricate. Aloud, I said, "I'm not sure Skye would understand the Museum, yet, Gran."

Skye went off to sleep easily that night and I quickly returned to the lounge room where we'd play. Uncle Peter was already at the card table, a highly polished wood to the kitchen table's wood-grain laminate, shuffling and humming to himself. Ken rested in an armchair and stared into space. Usually I didn't attempt to initiate conversation with Pop. His memory has deteriorated significantly over the last few years. Often he seemed to be searching for something by recalling names and singing old songs out loud. Once I remember hearing: "I think we've solved the mystery when you look back at our history…" And from the same song, I suppose: "I've had this revelation all the better to serve my nation, to join my love for you with my love for things!" Ken's voice is very melodic. If I interrupted him he would talk to me but I don't think he knew who I was some of the time. I felt sad about it, but also morbidly fascinated. What drew him back? What memories preoccupied him to the exclusion of details regarding the rest of the world? At Elsie's last birthday celebration, Ken had interrupted the cake-cutting conversation with a bang on the table, saying earnestly, "Does anyone remember that old song, 'Happy Birthday'?" We laughed and sang, but for Ken the song had become one rehearsed only in the distant past, its contemporary renditions being overdubbed.

If Skye wasn't around to distract us, our own funny little McKinnon clown with her predictable-accidental tumbles, I liked to sit close by Ken and sometimes I patted his hand: that made him smile. On this evening, he started to speak of his own accord. Not to me, necessarily, but for me, of that I'm sure.

"Campbell, Earl Campbell, he's a visionary, they said. Campbell's got spirit, Ditchards said. That was a mistake, shouldn't have trusted him."

"Who, Pop? You shouldn't have trusted Campbell?"

"No, no, that Ditchards, and Scott Ranley, they weren't to be trusted. Made a fool of me."

Peter looked up from the cards at the table. "Leave it alone, Dad." He seemed worried but I decided to ignore the heaviness in his voice, his long face.

"So who was that Ditchards, Pop? And who was Scott Ranley?"

“Soldier poets, they were soldier poets, weren’t they? Ranley was a soldier poet, met up with him again after the War. And Ditchards had me demoted. Sure it was him. Undercover, I’d wager. ’Course, Elsie doesn’t like me to talk about it. It’s always the soldier poets.” Ken shook his head sadly.

I questioned him further but he sank back into grey silence and I was left wondering whether I’d witnessed a patch of lucidity in an otherwise darkening horizon, or the fanciful excess of a tired mind.

Peter exhaled through clenched teeth and pursed lips, it made a hissing sound, and he shuffled faster, his thin shoulders hunched. “You’re getting it wrong, Dad. Ranley couldn’t have been a ‘soldier poet’, he was too young to have been in the War.”

“You know this story?” I said to Peter as I sat at the card table.

He sighed and shook his head, but said: “Yes, yes, yes. I remember it; I was twelve. Dad met Ranley in Sydney, in 1954. I’ve got a film somewhere, actually.” Peter raised his brow and lifted his voice a little; both were left hanging.

I was excited by what he said — this could be just the hook I needed to get my writing going again — but I couldn’t let myself appear too curious, because Peter needed no excuse to go on and on. And then Elsie and Bruce came in from the kitchen and Peter said: “Let’s get this game on. Cut for deal.”

I hate to admit that I get a kick out of something so unfashionable, but I love our card game. Five-handed Five Hundred: the competition is fierce. We’ve been playing since I was a child and they’ve never made allowances for my age, none of them. I learned to tolerate Peter’s impatience and Elsie’s roving eyes, Ken’s forgetfulness of the state of play and Dad’s complacency: useless as a partner. Elsie and Peter take it way too seriously, so it’s an especial thrill to beat them. On the occasions I win I experience a fleeting elation, I feel high for about half-an-hour.

That evening I lost. Afterwards as Dad was saying his good-byes to the others, I told Ken I was thinking of going back to university. I had to say it several times to get him to understand me and because it was a bold-faced lie I had to remind myself that he *wasn’t* checking the veracity of what I was saying. But it served a purpose and Ken lit up: “Marvellous thing, education. Changed my life. I would have been a farm hand, a labourer, died young like my brothers. Actually Aunt Mildred had me down for a priest.”

Elsie came in from the kitchen and interjected: “But you’ve paid your dues many times over, Ken, with your poetry, and by teaching and serving the needs of the workers.” She came to the card table and stood behind Ken, resting her hands on his shoulders.

“Yes, indeed,” Ken agreed, patting her hand.

“Well, Gran, interestingly enough, I’m researching that very topic. Yours and Pop’s life in the Party.”

I felt a minute pause in the conversation, but Ken was nodding his head, looking down at the table and cards. “Very good, very good,” he said softly and kept nodding away.

Elsie strode off to the library, calling as she walked, “You know you are always welcome to use our library, Carly. You’re free to borrow anything you like.” She was back a minute later, with a small volume clad in scarlet cloth. “Here is a lovely book of poetry to start you off, by my good friend and comrade, Cassandra Richards.”

Stifling a yawn, I accepted the book and opened it to the contents page. “Ode to the Sun; Forest Giants; Earthchild…” I read out. My eyes were blurring but Elsie needed no encouragement. She began to recite something from memory in her particularly affected recitation voice but got stuck a little way in and had to take the book back to finish the verse.

The night went very well. I’d managed to deflect the question of the Museum and Gran and Pop seemed pleased with my historical interests. This was especially reassuring given that I’d been helping myself to their books and diaries for some time and my writing was already well underway. Peter made some further enquiries about the nature of my project, would it involve other family members, that sort of thing. I answered him vaguely and asked him to tell me about his film, the one with Scott Ranley.

He began: “Well, seeing you asked, I can tell you that I had an opportunity to make two sixteen millimetre films in 1954 when we were visiting Aunty Gillian in Sydney. She provided the camera and materials and, unfortunately, these were the only films I was to make until I bought my own Yasica with a zoom lens in 1963…”

Peter really sounds like this because he mostly learned to converse by reading books rather than by speaking with other people. I could feel my eyelids growing heavy as his voice thrummed away. If wishes were horses I was already tucked up in bed, having snatched my warm bundle from her dreams to fly us both home.

6 — Branch Meeting of the CPWA

Elsie rushes through the dishes then retreats to her bedroom to brush her hair, naturally curly and bright brown, and put on her only hat. She never bothers to pretty herself up for meetings, her dress is old and she doesn't give a hoot. Elsie scoffs at the women's magazines prominently displayed in Boans store that assure her she'll keep her husband if she gets Fem-Line's new range. She is deaf to the radio advertisements that urge her to buy Betty Botter's Body Butter. Oh, that insidious jingle! Elsie thinks with frustration as it comes involuntarily into her head:

> Buy Betty Botter's Body Butter,
> It will make your body better.
> Your husband will be forced to utter,
> "Wife, you used to be so bitter,
> But with Betty's Body Butter
> You look more feminine and fitter."
> You'll be glad you bought a bit'o
> Betty Botter's Body Butter!

Ken comes into the bedroom with a towel around his waist and Elsie's face softens a little. As he dresses she turns her hairbrush over and over in her hand, watching him in the dressing-table mirror, mesmerised with reminiscence. She was twenty years old and beautiful, if only she'd known it. She was wearing her other dress, a plain brown pinafore. So rarely did she attend parties that she had nothing to contribute to conversations that revolved around tennis and university and she had retreated into a corner. And then *he* came in, her hero come to life. She recognised him instantly: his lofty and intelligent forehead, a sincere and calm air. With one look from his steady grey eyes she was slain, but he was gone in a moment.

That man became her husband and if Cassandra is right, Ken will be elected Executive Secretary of a new committee this evening. Elsie allows herself a small smile before she leaves her bedroom and looks in on Peter and Bruce.

Peter is lying on his bed reading *Kapital for Kids*, his ample neck pooling on the pillow. Such a bright young man, like his father, with my father's appetite, thinks Elsie. Such pretty blue eyes but they always seem sad. She says: "Peter, please make sure Bruce

is in bed by half-past seven," and then adds in a stage whisper, "There's pudding on the stove for later." In her normal voice, less conciliatory than insistent, she says, "Mummy and Daddy are doing important work, Peter, working for freedom and justice for all. When you take care of your younger brother you are doing your bit for the Party."

"Bruce doesn't need me," Peter says without looking at her. "He talks to himself. Like a baby. Listen to him…" Peter turns his head and they both listen, but the whispered sounds that went on underneath their conversation a moment ago have ceased.

"Well, goodnight darling," Elsie says, and closes the door on her children.

At half-past seven Peter says, "Bruce, get into bed." But Bruce does not want to get into bed. He is playing with Beverly on the floor on his own side of the room, out of Peter's sight. Bruce can only play with her in this place, on the mat next to his bed, because at dinner they have to sit quietly together. And Bev must go to a different school because Bruce never sees her at his school, Mt. Hawthorn Primary. They make up songs together and sing them, songs like: "Peter is fat, smelly like a rat, we don't have to play with him 'cause we're on our mat." And they're not tired. Not at all.

Peter says again, "Bruce, it's half-past seven, get into bed."

"But we're playing, I'm still playing, Peter."

"You heard what Mum said, get into bed, Bruce, or I'll tell her about you."

"What?"

"About who you're talking to. What you're doing," Peter says.

Bruce and Beverly climb into bed. They can play more tomorrow. They sing one final verse of "Peter is fat" until he throws his slipper at them.

Later, Peter drops *Kapital for Kids* beside his bed and rolls his legs down after it. He stomps to the kitchen and takes the bowl topped with its inverted other from the stove to the table, sits down heavily and leans over to switch on the Ranter. Just softly, he doesn't want Bruce to tell. With a grunt of frustration he gets up again to collect a clean spoon then drags in the chair, its legs squeaking across the daffodil linoleum.

… tuned in for our original radio play, The White Way of Life, *with George Brown and Meredith Fulsome…*

Peter gives the pudding a prod with his spoon. Something new. He's used to being told by Mum what he's eating but more often now she is leaving him a dessert on the stove to eat alone while she is at meetings. A cautious taste…

… We last left Muriel White in a difficult situation: the dishes aren't done and Gregory's parents are walking down the garden path…

Peter sets to work at a furious pace on the wedge of lemon fluff and it is soon gone. He pushes himself back from the table and blinks rapidly a few times, his clear blue eyes glistening.

"Oh Maria, thank goodness you're here. Quick, into the kitchen, they'll be here any minute!"

"But Muriel, what about our crib game?"

"Just whiz through these dishes, will you? Please help me, Maria, I'll make it up to you. And because you're a New Australian, Gregory's parents will think we have hired help!"

Peter snorts and turns the Ranter off. Ahh, uncomplaining, undemanding food! Grandpa Scrabble likes me to eat plenty. And he talks to me like an adult, about the workers and the unions, about everything. When I visit him he talks non-stop. When will I see him again?

Peter sighs heavily and lumbers off to tuck himself into bed.

Ken and Elsie are among the last to arrive for the monthly branch meeting in North Perth. Often the younger members come early to debate issues among themselves, not yet exhausted with endless committee responsibilities. Some like to use this most sociable of meetings to ask questions of experienced members like Elsie's father, Adam Scrabble, though tonight in a public hall he will be known as Comrade Smith. Pseudonyms are a precautionary measure but necessary in these benighted times. ASIO has agents everywhere.

Without a backward glance, Elsie responds to a beckoning wave from Comrade Smith, who has been looking out for her. Ken watches Elsie take the reserved seat and greet her father warmly. Then he weaves his way down the side of the crowded community hall to join those on their feet. He can survey the room well from here and notices all the usual

faces, the staunch rank and file, members of the various executive committees. The venerable Comrade Cassandra is in the third row and that mate of the Secretary's, Comrade Piggot, is next to her. Comrades Marx and Engels, Ken's closest friends, stand together on the other side of the small hall: they give him nods that he returns. And it is impossible to overlook his father-in-law, oldest standing member of the Party, seated regally in the front row next to Elsie.

The patriarch commands such respect from fellow members and extends none of his own, Ken thinks. He looks away. She is so devoted to him still, after all these years as a married woman. Am I not enough for her? Ken asks himself. Then he recalls the letter he received today at work and smiles: Perhaps tonight everything changes, tonight, when I am elected… But he silences the thought so as to stave off disappointment.

All his life Ken has been happy enough. To be saved by his aunt and given an education, Ken has far exceeded the lot he was born to. In later years he will never quite understand that his grown children might feel the same way, with no ambitions beyond avoiding what he embraced so willingly, thinking twice about the mixed blessings of secure employment and steady family life.

Presently, Party Secretary Comrade Joynes ascends a few steps onto the low stage at the front of the hall. Poor Bill, thinks Ken, noticing his comrade's incessant fidgeting. Can't keep still without a drink in him, but his wife, a good woman, a sensible woman, won't allow it. Comrade Joynes is about fifty, overweight and red in the face. His hair, what's left of it, is auburn. His face is friendly and open and must have been handsome many bottles ago. "Proceedings will be opened tonight with a special report from Comrade Piggot, Secretary of the Council for Culture and Justice," he announces, starting off a short round of applause.

When the post of Secretary of the Council for Culture and Justice became available late last year, Comrade Joynes nominated his rather new and very charismatic mate, Comrade Piggot, who was duly elected. In his nomination statement Comrade Joynes had said, "Despite his relatively recent membership, Comrade Piggot has a firm grasp of the fundamentals of Party doctrine and is a mighty promising chap." Loyal and hardworking, it should have been Ken's appointment, there being no other Party man with more experience who doesn't yet have an executive position. Ken has known Comrade Joynes for years, he

was Ken's mentor when he first joined the Party in '37, but owing to Bill's social habits and Ken's rather puritanical views on indulgence, they have never become close.

Elsie had made such a fuss, however, when Bill overlooked Ken for the new Executive Secretary that he had to defend his old mentor and friend, who had more experience in these matters. Privately Ken felt a little hurt and since missing out on the position he has been harbouring a growing dissatisfaction with his role in Party life. Partly it is the faint feeling he gets in the pit of his stomach, one that he recognises from his university days when he first began to doubt. Is it possible that Australia *doesn't* have a socialist future? Certainly the numbers say so: membership has steadily declined since the War ended. Ken likes to imagine there is something just around the corner, some big thing sure to win the people over. Ten years ago it was the Red Army winning the War, five years ago it was defeating the anti-communist referendum, and now Ken hopes that the Party's disarmament campaign will win out in the nuclear race… But people forget, everyone forgets the injustices once they're old news.

To make matters worse, Comrade Joynes has been coming around to Number 92 quite often of late, unannounced and unsteady on his feet. Perhaps Bill feels he has something to make up for, or perhaps he appreciates Ken's patience and mistakes Ken's silence for acceptance.

"Now Comrade Piggot is a good sport," Bill had said recently, proceeding to tell Ken about a long evening they'd spent together at the Mounts Bay Hotel. "He's become a sort of right-hand-man, indispensable really. Since I've had Comrade Piggot around to bounce ideas off, I can walk into the Executive Meeting with some firm policy directions in my head and not be bullied by old Comrade Hannan, the treasurer. But I've been a trifle concerned since last week…" Bill was silent for some time and Ken made no effort to prompt him. "Perhaps a minor indiscretion occurred. Anyway he got my little secret out of me. You know, mate: my on-going arrangement with Cassandra, on and off since she visited Russia in '31."

Ken had nodded mutely and stifled a yawn. He did not wish to believe any such thing about Comrade Cassandra. Such fantasies must be part of Bill's weakness.

"Here I am, pushed around by two women and the second one I can't even complain about, I told him. Comrade Piggot wasn't surprised and didn't judge me, said he'd seen it

all in his days working for a debt collector. It was Comrade Piggot who suggested I wrest back a bit of control from Cassandra and push through some direct action on this *Tetrameter* issue…"

Soon after that Ken had excused himself and gone to bed, suggesting Bill do the same.

Ken is brought back to the North Perth Community Hall when the lanky Comrade Piggot gets up on the other side of Comrade Joynes at the card table. He grins broadly and then wipes his face clear of all good humour. "Loyal comrades," he begins. "It is my sad duty to bring your attention to yet another instance of discrimination against our members. Strenuous efforts are being made to limit the voices of our comrades in the public press." Comrade Piggot pauses and some enthusiastic members oblige him with calls of *shame!* and *corrupt bastards!* "Fronting as the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA is paying literary magazines to censor any writer or artist that they consider to be too far left. Right under our noses, they have put together the best-funded propaganda magazine this country has ever seen. Loyal comrades, I call upon you to boycott *Tetrameter*! We might be a small and isolated branch but we are not without voices! Write to the editor and tell him what you think of this filthy rag, but *do not* give them one penny of the workers' money!" He is shouting and lifting himself onto his toes to emphasise his point. The crowd begins to murmur.

Suddenly the door at the back of the hall squeaks open and an elderly head peaks in. All Party members swivel around and thus observed, the old man says: "Sorry. Here to clean the toilets. Wondered what all the noise was about. Youse aren't Quakers, are yas?"

Comrade Piggot laughs loudly. "It takes more than prayer to fight the enemy we face. Are you a union man? No? Well you should stick around. You might learn something."

"Ahh, no. Me wife's sick. Thought you might pray for her. Never mind. Sorry to disturb." The old man disappears and heads again swivel to face the front but Comrade Piggot has lost his flow and sits down.

There is a short pause filled with excited conversation and Comrade Joynes calls for order before the motion to boycott is passed. Despite this positive step forward Ken feels strangely morose and doesn't attend to Comrade Joynes' Secretarial Report, which mostly

consists of mumbled announcements from Central Committee. His voice lifts as he makes his proposal for the establishment of a new body, the Movement for Arts and Freedom, to be led by Comrade Wilde. Comrade Joynes argues that the new information brought to light by Comrade Piggot indicates a "vital need for immediate action", beginning with the election of a dedicated body. He concludes, "In short, Comrade Wilde has the experience and commitment to lead this important new group created to focus on the significant issue of cultural censorship."

Ken's heart races several beats. It is the sound of his pseudonym, Comrade Wilde, so full of the promise of adventure, which brings him back to the present. And then he looks down and adjusts his glasses while the heat of being seen passes from his face. It is taken for granted by Bill that Ken will accept.

After the vote and several minor items the meeting comes to a close. Elsie jumps up but she can see that Ken is surrounded by young comrades who shake his hand and slap his back in congratulations, looking rather like seagulls at Cottesloe Beach, Elsie thinks. She supposes she will have to find her way home with one of the locals so she looks around for someone who might oblige.

Comrade Cassandra remains seated as the bodies move around her. Elsie waves her hand in the air and is about to call "Yoo hoo, Comrade Cassandra," when she sees that dreadful Comrade Piggot stand in front of her. Why is he addressing her so familiarly? Elsie thinks. A couple of young comrades have begun stacking chairs against one side of the hall and Elsie retreats behind some, peering, straining her ears for the faint sound of Cassandra's voice.

What does Comrade Piggot want? Elsie feels distinctly uncomfortable but can't help but watch. She supposes that some women would consider him a handsome man, tanned and muscled, with lots of fair hair covering his arms, sprouting out of his shirt at the neck. His head is unusually large, thick with sandy-coloured curls. But he is not my type, Elsie thinks, no, not at all. The very image of the Australian Philistine.

She can't see his face but hears in the sound of his lazy laugh that he aims to appear jovial and tame, which makes his real motivations all the more sinister, as far as Elsie is concerned. Then Cassandra laughs and stands up, running her hands over her legs,

smoothing her long skirt. Why does she humour this leering upstart? Elsie wonders. The man is disgusting, a lecher of the worst kind. Perhaps I should rescue Cassandra… But she remains where she is.

A voice from behind makes her jump: “There you are comrade! You must be so proud of Ken. Let me take you home, you’re on my way.”

It is Sasha Hapfield, the wife of Ken’s friend Fred, Comrade Engels. Sasha is no threat and Elsie recovers herself. “Thankyou, comrade. Ken lost no time in taking on his responsibilities as Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom, did he?”

7 — Peter's Riddle

Uncle Peter's duplex reminded me of the Museum of Young Australians. It had the Museum's sense of otherworldliness, of self-containment, as if to enter it was to step into a display. The rooms seemed bound by a décor of deliberate retardation, lacking the self-consciousness of retro. Peter's few appliances were virtually archaic but he treated them with the reverence others offered to the newest and best. In the lounge and kitchen area downstairs there was little variation in colour (even with the television on) except for the glass ornaments. These must have been cold and heavy but I'd never touched them. They were of the kind that, in isolation, were considered a treasured find in an op-shop or second-hand store, to be taken home and placed in a context of studied irony.

Perhaps what I felt was simply the essence of someone who lives alone, maybe all those who live alone gather this aura of exclusivity about them and their space, not a smell exactly, but a palpable sensation. Essence of Peter, undiluted, 500m^3. A simple is more overpowering than a blend.

Peter greeted me warmly with the customary kiss on the top of my head that neither of us had managed to outgrow. He took my bag and ensconced me at his small kitchen table but I got up to browse through his extensive collection of vinyl records. I did this as if I were in a museum, bent at the waist with my hands folded neatly behind my back so I wouldn't be tempted to touch. The records were grouped by composer and if there was some significance to the order of the groups it was lost on me. There was a good ten centimeters of Beethoven, almost as much for various Russians and much else besides.

While Peter made us tea he said, "Thanks to the national broadcaster I've been hearing those marvelous pieces of music all my life. When I was a boy, every Saturday night the symphony orchestra in Sydney or Melbourne was broadcast literally live via telephone cables to Perth. Of course, I was too young to appreciate it then." Peter paused between his sentences but he wasn't waiting for a response, he was observing me closely as I carefully pulled certain records part way out to get a better look at their covers. He went on, "I've been collecting since I was eighteen. That's when I began to be passionate about orchestral music, especially the Romantic Era, 1825 to 1899. Orchestral music came of age in the Romantic Era, which makes sense because eighteen is a pretty romantic age."

Overwhelmed by choice, I finally selected a record at random and took it from its sleeve, saying, “Can I put this on?”

In a few quick strides Peter moved from the kitchen to my side, took the record from my hands and said: “I’ll do that if you don’t mind, Carly.” He began to put the record on, moving slowly, step by step. Then the moment before he was to set the turntable spinning, he stopped, reversed his deliberate movements, chose his own record and went through them again.

Something for piano, Schumann, I guessed, with the volume low enough to be no match for Peter.

“Mussorgsky,” he corrected my unspoken supposition. “‘Pictures at an Exhibition’.” I went back to my place at the kitchen table.

We drank tea and shared small talk about Skye’s irregular sleeping and incessant growing, then Peter clapped his hands together enthusiastically and said, “Carly, I’m going to give you a little test,” which didn’t frighten me very much. Little tests and puzzles and quizzes were a big part of my childhood with Peter, the playful counterpart to the more serious side of the McKinnons’ striving for education. I’d made it clear that I was principally interested in watching the films he’d made in 1954, but when he invited me for the day I understood that a lengthy tutorial on something of interest to Peter was the price of admission. I was happy enough to play along.

Peter collected some props he’d prepared earlier, a couple of light cards upon which were pasted hand-written verses. So the test was this: he was to read me parts of a pair of Australian poems, “an essential introduction to the times,” and I was to discover the writers. I didn’t believe him regarding the necessity of the game but was prepared to sit through a bush ballad or two. However, I was truly perplexed and pleasantly surprised when Uncle Peter passed me the cards and said ominously, “One was written by a young man who died before it was published and both were written by a Catholic Cold Warrior. Who are the writers?”

Peter cleared his throat and I listened closely while he read from a book whose identity he kept secret with a newspaper folded in front of it. First there were several verses of a rhyming poem, the first verse of which he wrote down on one of my cards:

The genuine poem is never a prophetic vision;
True poetry's formed by the process of crafting the art.
With power unbounded if captured like nuclear fission,
The sovereign intellect making the final decision,
Young acolyte: study the classics in order to start.

"Is this a joke?" I asked Peter when he finished. He flashed me a glance that said *don't interrupt* and simply repeated the riddle. Then he went on with the poem on the other card from another book disguised like the first. It began like this:

If, after all, you find yourself empty of
Meaning, devoid of all dangerous belief,
Rake your fingers across the hollow
And follow the song lines into the distance.
Transformation complete,
Meaninglessness made more of.

I read my copy while Peter read his aloud and despite his raw rendition, all rising inflection and stilted pauses, I could feel a kind of ponderous beauty. I didn't know what it meant but I liked it better than the first, didactic piece. Peter finished by repeating the quiz question once more and put down his newspaper-covered book with high-drama mysteriousness.

I nodded and said I'd work on it, handing the cards back to my uncle. He said I should keep them for my research. I had to cover a smile: clearly Peter didn't understand the implications of the internet for investigation. Simply keeping the titles and authors' names and his source books secret didn't stop me searching for the poems line by line.

I wanted him to expand on what he'd told me at dinner the other night, about Scott Ranley and Don Ditchards, but Peter had more to say about the poems. Every time I asked a direct question, he shushed me and went on, as if from a prepared speech. Peter was careful not to give me any clues as to his puzzle's solution while at the same time setting the scene with not inconsiderable animation. The poems he chose encapsulated the cultural struggle of the era, he said. A sectarian battle dressed up as intellectual debate. Eventually we did get to Ken's Soldier Poets.

"The 'soldier poets' were young men who'd been in the armed forces and took to writing poetry. It was a fashion, like…" Peter searched for something fashionable to simile.

"Skateboarding?" I offered.

“Or country rambling,” he tried. “All the young men were doing it in the forties. The soldier poets were part of a larger network of conservative anti-modernists and later, fervent cold warriors. Loyal to the Queen and increasingly, Uncle Sam. On the other hand, there were groups like Alcheringa, with a different kind of nationalism, looking to the Australian land for inspiration.”

OK, this is closer to what I’m looking for, I thought. I got out my notebook and pencil case and jotted down a few key words. “So there were Soldier Poets and the Alcheringa Group.” It seemed a very straightforward interpretation. I asked Peter, “Did anyone *not* write poetry?”

He replied quickly: “Well, it wasn’t as simple as all that. There were Communist Party writers too, and Catholics, and lots in between. What you’ve got to remember, Carly,” and here Peter tapped his forefinger on the table, “is that poetry was much more important in those days. It was a way of showing where your loyalties lay, and loyalty to your group was very important.”

“Oh,” I said, making amendments and further notes. It was hard to tell if Peter was being critical of this sectarianism or nostalgically mourning its passing.

“It wasn’t as simple as all that,” he repeated but made no effort to explain further.

I pictured Ken as a young man, mid-twenties, newly married. He was at a dance with other young people and as they moved around the floor in tidy couples they shouted challenges out across the room to each other: “Dylan Thomas is a drunk!” “Yeah? Ezra Pound’s a fascist!”

I asked Peter, “Which was Pop?” and he responded keenly but chose his words carefully.

“Dad was a communist writer, a teacher during and after the War and particularly loathed by the local soldier poets. He had a few early successes with some poems that were published by the Alcheringa Group, around the same time as the second poem in your puzzle, actually...”

Peter gave me one of those looks that begged me to enquire a little further, to license a barrage of information, one of those looks I’d gotten used to avoiding, or diffusing. I was about to dismiss this tone with a new line of questioning — “I can’t believe Catholics and communists hated each other so much: where did all that anger go?” — but

stopped myself. Today was for following Peter, for where would imagination be without memory?

I'd seen Ken's poems in the Alcheringa volumes. I said, "Was it 1944, 1945? Isn't that when Pop left the Army?"

"Yes! Dad was discharged from the Army, supposedly for health reasons, something like 'acute softening of the heart'," Peter was getting quite excited.

It's a strange term, *discharged*, I thought as I wrote it down. Like pus, or semen. I'm sure there are plenty of both in the Army. Pop was proud of his Army experience as a general idea but vague on the details and never spoke of these things. "Acute… What?"

"'Acute softening of the heart'." Peter gave a bemused snort. "That's the reason the Army gave for the failed medical of 1944 and Dad's discharge. That's absolute rot: he was strong as an ox. It was because of the unofficial additions to the teaching program he was running at Rottnest Island Barracks for the men who were off active service. He taught socialism alongside literature and poetry appreciation. Dad didn't try to hide his colours; the Red Army was winning the War for them and the men were very receptive. Central Committee didn't care what happened on a tiny island just off the coast from the most isolated city in the world. But closer to home, some lieutenant, a soldier poet of course, took offence and had Dad's medical rating dropped from A1 to B2, so he wasn't re-enlisted."

I got up to get us another cup of tea while Peter carried on with the story. I didn't like the economies he brought to tea making (re-using leaves, over-brewing), which offended my sensibilities towards *Camellia sinesis*. I wanted to keep him talking so I kept the questions going. "What did Pop do after the War? Was he able to resume teaching right away?"

"No, there was no teaching work until later. Communist Party membership was at an all-time high. Perhaps they had more money than they knew what to do with. Anyway, after the War the Party sent him to Sydney. But that's all I'm going to say today." Peter folded his arms and stared off into space.

"The lieutenant who didn't like Pop, do you know his name? Could it have been Ranley?"

Looking back at me, Peter laughed and said, “Don’t be taken in by that. No, Dad’s forgotten where he met Ranley, along with everything else that happened in Sydney in 1954. Including my interest in films: never again was I given the opportunity to make films after Sydney, 1954.” Peter went quiet. We slurped our tea.

I waited a few moments before asking, “What else happened in Sydney?”

“A lot changed after Sydney. I was preparing for high school. Dad was really putting the pressure on me and since he’d stopped going to Party meetings there was nothing else to distract him from the urgent task of educating me!”

Peter’s voice squeaked a little at the end, as if this was the punch line, and his childhood the butt of some Dickensian joke. But, selfishly I suppose, I ignored this and followed what I considered the more interesting story.

“Hang on, do you mean that Ken and Elsie gave up communism after Sydney, in 1954?”

“Sometime soon after that. We all travelled the Nullarbor and Sydney was where Dad got on to Campbellism, which was the beginning of the end of his Communist Party career.”

Symmetry was emerging out of my limited strains of story. “Don’t you think that Pop might have been suggesting his visit to Sydney in 1945 and ousting from the Party after Sydney in 1954 are related events, soldier poets or no soldier poets?”

“To be honest, I never really thought about it,” Peter said. “But I know Scott Ranley was a young man in 1954 and didn’t fight in the War.”

So 1954 was an important year in the McKinnon family. They drove over the dusty Nullarbor Plain to Sydney. And sometime after that they stopped being communists. The strains of story were swelling into melodies. I scribbled a few more notes in my book. “What about Don Ditchards?” I asked Peter.

He got up and washed his hands carefully before changing the record. “I’ve heard of him. I’m not sure where from. Party member maybe?”

Later Peter prepared lunch for us and I quizzed him further on his life in the fifties. I was curious about the 1951 referendum to outlaw communism and asked him what he remembered of the “No” Campaign. He was silent for a few moments, carving away at a

ripe tomato and I wondered if he was too focused on the task at hand to hear me. But then he told this story:

"I was nine years old, old enough to be taken out campaigning, when I wasn't at school. I remember being dragged around to some factory gate meetings with Mum and other comrades. They'd push together a few wooden boxes and give speeches through a loudspeaker, do little skits and chant ditties like 'Ha ha ha, ho ho ho, me and my wife are both voting No!' Mum seemed to get a kick out of it. They always got cheers. Glad for any distraction from the tedium of factory work, I suppose."

Peter dealt with the salad vegetables as he spoke, with nowhere close to the care he summoned for his machinery. It was as if he were punishing them for all the effort Ken and Elsie put into Party work. They were destined to lie for a short while in the company of sliced low-fat cheese on brown bread, no butter, before being compressed, bisected and devoured.

"I remember another occasion, too. One night, it must have been around the same time as the factory gate meetings, Dad and I were out letterboxing in Mt. Lawley. To save time we'd take one side of the street each. He'd drop me at the top with a fistful of leaflets and drive to the end, walk up the street as I walked down. I was scared stiff to be left alone, but he wouldn't hear it, the streets were safe and all that. Once I heard some clattery heels coming up behind me, coming closer and faster. Dad was down the other end of the street and I was terrified of being nabbed by an ASIO agent. It was a young woman, she overtook me and walked on, but I couldn't. Dad didn't understand why I hadn't done my side of the street and we drove home in silence."

Peter's story made me sad, sadder than any of Elsie's or Ken's misfortunes, which they bore so well. It was a combination of feeling the futility of their efforts along with the impact it had on their children. And yet the campaign was a success…

"How do you know all this, Peter?"

"I've the best memory in the family!" he boldly claimed, and I believed him.

"And what about the rest, the things that happened when you were a baby?"

He didn't respond for a while, poured himself another cup of tea and stared into his cup, alternately slurping and swirling the contents. "She used to confide in me. Mum did, when I was a boy. She talked to me about the Party, the poets. It was Mum who encouraged

Ken to supplement the teaching program for the soldiers, she even wrote some of the material." Slurp. Swirl. "But it all changed as I grew up. She wasn't so interested in me anymore, didn't like the way I was turning out, I suppose. I was so angry, so unhappy."

I didn't know what to say. Usually Peter and I didn't talk like this. He must have remembered that too because he jumped up and crashed down his cup onto its saucer, uncharacteristically left the lunch things where they lay and went into the adjoining room.

"Well, let's get this projector set up. I first handled a movie camera and projector in the fifties. I thought they were wonderful. It was on our trip to Sydney in 1954."

The emotional moment had been circumvented and Peter proceeded to set up the projector with practiced ease: hand movements of fifty years' refinement. Peter was whistling as he put up the screen, the tune was the main theme from Beethoven's Seventh, a favourite of his. I willingly suspended disbelief under the spell of this movie magic, taking hold of Peter's rapture in manipulating the equipment, the soothing whir of the motor, the darkening room.

8 — At Home with the McKinnons

It is Saturday afternoon, a hot one, but not a stinker. No reason for Ken not to go out after lunch and help to digest those cheese and ham sandwiches by digging in the vegetable patch at the back of the house. He harvests the bright tomatoes flung among the dying bushes, the plump pumpkins and ripe melons. There's not much to be done at this time of year except cut back the old growth and use it to mulch the new. Ken hears Bruce beginning his piano practice, late again he suspects. There goes the first rickety scale, struggled through and then abandoned. Ken sighs and turns back to the garden.

Plants make sense to him: you give them water and manure and they offer beauty and food. Ken remembers when, as a youngster living with Aunt Mildred, he realised the garden was trying to talk to him. He'd been sent out the back to collect seed for storing over winter and using next spring. Carrot and cabbage and other reliable garden crops that opened up umbrellas in late summer to disperse their progeny far and wide, unless they were intercepted by Ken. They were fiddly little things that were too fine for Aunt Mildred's failing eyesight. Ken enjoyed this task, touching and coaxing each plant to give up its seed to him, gently twisting the sun-dry tops and catching the seeds that fell with a satisfying plink-plink onto the tin plate he held underneath them. He was utterly lost in the sensations of the sun on his back, the cool earth under his feet, the little crispy crescents that promised new life. A crow sat watching him from a nearby weeping peppermint: *Caw!* It rudely interrupted his quiet thoughts and Ken started up, spilling seed onto the dry ground. Aunt Mildred would not be happy. He kicked dirt over the evidence and tramped it down with his bare feet. But next spring an irregular patch of *Daucus carota* grew higgledy-piggledy, creating a cornucopia for bees and other insects. Aunt Mildred grumbled but food was too scarce to risk uprooting and moving the offending carrots into their proper place. It became Ken's favourite spot in the garden, its existence reminding him of his serendipitous spillage. Somehow, he knew, it was what the garden wanted.

Bruce is making a terrible mess of his pieces. Ken is not Bruce's teacher, he goes to a woman in Tuart Hill, but Ken likes to assist his son's practice when he's home on the weekend. When Ken was Bruce's age he was playing at a far higher standard under Aunt

Mildred's tutelage. But practice is the key! I must remind Elsie to make sure he practices, Ken says to himself as he puts away his tools and stamps the earth out of his boots.

Ten minutes earlier, Bruce had come screaming home on his bike a little after three o'clock. He slammed the kitchen door and went straight to the bathroom to wash his bloody knee and black sandy hands. From the kitchen Elsie called out: "Peter, turn the Ranter off now, my nerves can't stand two rackets in the house at once!"

Bruce had scampered up the piano stool and raced through a few scales, more or less right. He hurried on to a jaunty, rhythmically irregular version of "Edelweiss". Then he slowed down a little for a laid back rendition of "Greensleeves", the arpeggio bass following a fraction behind the melody. He was still thinking about riding. The two-wheeler was Bruce's Christmas present. It's heavy, but he's getting used to it and he loves riding around the area between Braithwaite Park and Eucla Street. Other boys ride around too, boys from school, with their brothers. Some of them know him, or know who his mum and dad are, anyway. Today he was riding along Kalgoorlie Street and a kid, he must have been twelve at least, skittled his bike. Bruce wobbled a few times and fell, gashing his knee on a slab and slamming into someone's sandy lawn. When he picked himself and his bike up, the older kid was there.

"Bloody reds," the kid spat. "Bloody, bloody reds!"

And then he rode away. Bruce looked at the blood running down his leg. His bike was red, too. He waited a quarter of an hour before riding the shortest way home.

Bruce jumps when the back door bangs and his dad comes in from the garden. He quickly opens to another piece in his book and begins it. Soon his dad is behind him, hanging over him and saying, "Your timing is out."

"Yes, Dad." Bruce looks back and up at Ken, resting his fine forearm on the keys. Waiting. There's sure to be more.

"When I was a boy, awards were given for full attendance at lessons. Simply being here is the first step along the lifelong path of your education. You'll never learn to keep time if you can't get to practice on time, Bruce."

“Yes, Dad.” Bruce’s face is open, his brown eyes serious. He truly wants to please his dad, but can’t seem to ever get it right. Will I ever be clever like Peter? he wonders, and frowns.

Ken cannot see that the piano is Bruce’s garden.

Elsie leaves off drying the dishes from lunch and slips up the passageway to her bedroom unseen. There are no Party obligations tonight and although there is still dinner to prepare, she walks down to the chooks at the very back of the garden with some stale bread and the copy of *Tetrameter* Cassandra had given her. She opens the magazine and examines it carefully, finding on the first facing page an editorial policy in fine print. She fishes a hunk of bread out of her sturdy apron and hurls it at the chooks, who rush upon it and tear pieces from it with a fury. Elsie reads, “At *Tetrameter* we have no prejudices but maintain a sceptical approach to unthinking Leftism. While we are at the forefront of civilised debate on the dangers of domestic Communism, we have no preconceived policy positions regarding any interpretations.”

Elsie snorts aloud. Here, prejudice against communism is not even prejudice, she thinks. She turns to the poetry section of the magazine and shakes her head sadly as she looks at the contribution from Mr. Rex, one-time comrade, now in the pay of the CIA. It is often the ex-Party members who end up working for ASIO. If *she* were the new Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom, Elsie would devote a special study-session to the work of such people. Mr. Rex’s problem is his class enemy within, she thinks. Trying to make it big with dirty money instead of scratching away at a decent job. Even poets have to work for a living, like Ken does.

Momentarily, Elsie is arrested by the worrying thought that Ken’s poetic block is due to his heavy teaching schedule. But he doesn’t work any harder than he did ten years ago when he was writing prolifically and publishing every year. Nonsense: he’s not an old man yet, and neither am I an old woman. So what of my own literary ambitions?

Elsie’s mind wanders to the precious little leather volume at the back of her dressing-table drawer, her jottings and scribblings of poetry, untouched for many years. Her intricately woven words, children dancing round the maypole, are smothered by an

involuntary vision of dirty linen, which she mentally puts through the gyrator and wringer and hangs out to dry. I'll never get the chance to write. But I don't complain, do I?

Elsie sighs and heads back indoors, past the laundry. She counts her blessings: eleven months now she's had the machine. However did she manage before? Elsie recalls the Saturday morning last year when the McKinnons all went to Boans to look at washing machines. The sales assistant, a talkative young man who called himself Mr. Smart, was recommending a Hoover machine called Bigmatron. Elsie was appalled.

"Young man, I'll have you know that you'll not get money out of us for anything that supports tyrants! Where is your manager?"

Mr. Gordon, Home Wares Manager, relieved him. Mr. Gordon was older than Mr. Smart, his greying hair and thick sideburns lending a look of experience. Mr. Gordon smiled: he met several Elsies a day. "Madam, I'm terribly sorry to see you upset. Please allow me to help you. I understand the Hoover is unsatisfactory —"

"Unsatisfactory! J Edgar Hoover is —"

"Quite. I'm sure you'll be thrilled with this Hotpoint machine, with gyrator and wringer, very modern…"

They bought it on the never-never. Boans was happy to combine their outstanding debt for the Kelvinator, now almost paid off, with this new purchase. The repayments only went up a little and Ken's job was secure. It meant Elsie had to make do with a little less housekeeping, but it was worth it to get that old copper out of the laundry. It lay in the back garden for a week or so then Ken put it in the garden bed next to the front verandah, which was full of hot black sand and a brave clutch of pig-face. Last spring Ken had taken a cumquat cutting from Cousin Nancy's farm in Wagin and carefully nurtured it behind the garage in a hessian bag. Elsie smiled to herself: it was supposed to be a secret, a gift to celebrate their wedding anniversary in May, but of course she knew. When it was flushed with fresh green tips, smelling of anticipation, Ken planted the cumquat in the copper in a mixture of compost and straw and sand and it flourished. "Cum quat May, I will love you", the little card had said.

It has been a while now since Peter's last nightmare. A few months since he woke in the dead of the night, sweating and stuck to the bedclothes, unable to pull himself

upright, forced to lie still in silent agony while he slowly bled to death from wounds, various gruesome wounds, sustained in the horrific Korean War. That is Peter's nightmare. Since the Ranter brought the glad news last year that the fighting is over and United Nations troops have withdrawn from Korea, the nightmare has not plagued him so often. Peter blinks it away and flits over pleasant thoughts: his favourite dinners, a blonde girl named Anna from his class who smiles at him. Peter lays back on his bed, half asleep, the low voices of the Ranter lulling him deeper.

He remembers a school day, a film-day at school. Once a month a fellow comes round to each class to show a film on the school's Bell and Howell projector. The films are not very interesting, short reports on falcons or beavers, *Encyclopædia Britannica* with an American accent. What Peter really loves to do is look at the projector. He watches the spools winding and unwinding, one slowly getting fatter as the other gets faster. When the spools spin at the same speed the movie is half over. Last time he'd whispered to Anna who was sitting behind him, "The film is *half way through*." It made a beautiful pattern, it made Peter feel happy. She'd smiled at him.

There is a knock at the bedroom door followed by Ken coming in saying, "Son," and closing the door behind him. "Son, you need to do something with yourself." He turns off the Ranter. "Next Saturday you will work with me in the garden."

Peter stirs reluctantly. "That won't help."

Ken stands a polite distance from Peter's bed and looks about the boys' room. It is large, full of interesting toys and books. "What about reading then? Do you want something new from my library?"

Peter shakes his head and won't look at Ken.

"Is there anything you will do?"

"I want to go to the pictures, but you won't allow it. I want to make my own films…"

"Peter, the picture shows are a waste of money. They are trivial stories about rich Americans."

"Not anymore!" Peter looks up at Ken, imploringly. "Not all of them, now there are __"

“My hard-earned money will *not* be spent on American rubbish!” Ken insists, and raises his pointer finger on *not*. “You will need to study harder, my boy, to be welcome to attend high school at Perth Contemporary College!”

Peter is silent, his flash of hope extinguished. Ken is suddenly embarrassed that his son can defy him so easily. He turns abruptly and leaves the room, awkwardly stepping back to open the door. Both of them are marked by this exchange: Peter will remember it for the rest of his life; Ken will forget it almost immediately.

“Well?” says Elsie, who has been standing in the kitchen with ears cocked towards the boys’ room, listening to what she can of their exchange.

Ken shakes his head sadly. “The boy has everything he could want to stimulate his mind. I don’t understand it, Elsie. *We* never had his privileges.”

Elsie stirs the pot on the stove, saying, “Poor little Peter was a war-baby, Ken. He’s a very bright boy, like his father, but perhaps he knows too much.”

“Perhaps, my love.”

“It’s not your fault, Ken. It’s just his age. He’s a growing lad, needs his food.” Elsie ladles the sweet curry into bowls — banana, pineapple and sultanas mingle with the carrots and yellow-stained potatoes — and carries them one by one to the kitchen table.

Over dinner, Bruce tells his family about being picked on by the older kid. “Why, Dad, why did he do it? What are Bloody Reds?”

“When I was a lad, my shins were kicked black and blue everyday,” says Ken, slurping up the last of the sweet and spicy curry. He chews thoughtfully for a moment and adds, “They were jealous of me, I suppose.”

Bruce looks at his mum, still hopeful of a more relevant response. Elsie gets up and begins collecting the bowls. “They don’t understand, Bruce, those people don’t understand us, and what we’re doing. You just have to grin and bear it.” Elsie takes the bowls to the sink without looking at her son while Ken retires to the lounge room with his diary.

Saturday, 14th of February.

The events of the last few days have been such that I’ve been prevented from recording them day-by-day, however, there is no Party function tonight so I can get it all down. Immediately after I was elected Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom,

Bill and Fred took me aside. Bill was quite sober. "We have credible information that Tetrameter *is being funded by the CIA but we need someone on the inside to get proof. With your background in poetry and the undercover work you've done before, no-one is better qualified than you to take a stand on this censorship issue. Your first assignment as Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom is to insinuate yourself into the employ of Stewart Enright, the editor of* Tetrameter*, in his Sydney office."*

We focused on practical concerns. Fred suggested I drive across the Great Nullarbor Plain and take Elsie and the children, serving both as a family holiday cover-story and evidence of willingness to defect. A meeting with Enright will be arranged before I leave with a letter of recommendation from a friendly source. Perhaps Bill and the other comrades think that because of the friendships I made when I worked undercover in Sydney, 1945, soon after Stewart Enright had perpetrated his spiteful hoax, that I have a greater stake in the outcome of this operation. But my memories of that time are not the pleasant distraction other men might imagine them to be. I will go to Sydney because it is my duty; neither revenge nor heroics are my motivations for accepting this assignment.

There is much to do and the days have been flying by without my even noticing. The week's events have really reawakened my passion and at last I'm beginning to remember how I felt when I first joined the Party in 1937. To think I was nearly ready to give it all away, all the Party's repetitive work without any recognition. So it appears that we will go to Sydney, I'll meet with Stewart Enright and find out where his money comes from. Elsie expects it of me, and I'll get her that Gas.

The boys are asleep and Ken and Elsie sit together in the lounge room. Elsie's eyes are closed and she pushes herself gently to and fro, to and fro, in the rocker that was a gift from Ken after Bruce's birth.

"Shall I read to you, my love?" asks Ken. "I have an Alcheringa volume out, one with something of mine in it."

"Oh, yes, Ken, that would be delightful," says Elsie. She herself had located the Alcheringa book in their library this afternoon and flipped through it to look at the old work of Mr. Rex. And later, instead of putting it back, she left it prominently on Ken's desk. She's not sure why she did it, perhaps to test Ken's sensitivity to his old friend's betrayal. It

is not usually their way to speak plainly of Party doings at home, partly out of fear of not having the place entirely to themselves.

Ken clears his throat and turns a few pages. “I’ve been thinking, Elsie, how would you like to go to Sydney in the school holidays? Ahh, here we are, ‘The Tammar’.” But he waits for Elsie’s reply.

“Go on then, darling,” Elsie says. She folds her hands in her lap, they are still red from the dishwater. Elsie feels exhausted but she will sit up with Ken for a little while. Sometimes the demands of the house distract her from the more pleasurable of her duties as a wife. A trip to Sydney is beginning to sound rather nice, she thinks. The Party will pay for our petrol and we can stay with Gillian and Maxwell.

Ken has a good reading voice, rich and expressive:

I’ve gone too far.
Breathless fear
Of never finding home.
Of stumbling under
The silver thread snares
Fairy moonlight spins.
Of shadows amongst
Wombat holes.
I’ll be forever lost.

A tammar jumps, rustles
Stops atwitch. My guide
To path and gate
And house and mother
Standing, eyes dark
Against the sun.
I follow him.
Run to comfort thighwards.

Ken waits for Elsie’s approval without looking up, but it is not forthcoming. He turns the page and prepares to continue with some throat clearing. “Another, my love?”

Too tired, too late, Elsie says, “That’s beautiful, darling,” with her eyes closed and breathing slowed.

9 — Skye

As Skye grows her competence catches up with her ambition. Daring stunts that used to end in tears, such as climbing an unsteady assemblage to reach a light switch, are now achieved without mishap. She has grown out of turning every activity into an oral experience and the range of things we can do together increases daily. Recently we were painting on butchers' paper at a large easel at the back of our small brick house. I began to paint what I saw: beyond the short paved area was a neglected garden that ran into remnant native plants. A lemon tree, its leaves curled up to preserve water, sat sturdily to the right. A monstera and several straggly spider creepers grew on the left, running down the side of our old house. The garden was well established and overgrown, a perfect refuge for a few possums and bandicoots whose ancestors hadn't had to limit themselves to these urban lots. All this I represented as well as I was able with a half-inch brush and artistic talent of similar measure. Unlike Skye, a quiet but insistent anxiety accompanied my painting, I felt I was rushed and couldn't get it right. My possums looked like footballs stranded in the branches of trees. I couldn't hope to capture a sense of the suburban atmosphere, with its shared sounds and smells despite the corrugated asbestos walls insulated with a thick growth of honeysuckle, that separated us from our neighbours.

Skye was content to mix the colours together, starting in the middle and radiating out. She was also happy to mix the paint in the plastic tubs and on her clothes. I suggested she stick to one colour at a time and keep it on the paper; we began a new sheet. So she painted one colour at a time but each on top of the other until a hole wore through the centre. She began a new patch and experimented with which colours go on top of others, soon deciding that black was the colour over all others.

Every minute with Skye was full of her sense of wonder but living with such attention to detail is as exhausting to witness as it is to experience. I needed a break. Half a glass of juice. I left her with a new sheet and strict instructions to keep it on the paper. Two minutes later (optimum supervision-free time) I called her inside to get cleaned up and she pretended not to hear me. I called again before realising that she was imitating me, her lips pouty and pursed together like mine get when I'm reading something good and won't stop no matter how much she *Mummy*s me. I gave her another couple of minutes.

* * *

Although I am home a lot with Skye I consider myself an activist. I don't attend any meetings nor belong to any clubs, but I participate in policy-making as far as "representative government" allows. I wouldn't call it "democracy", but it's about as close as you get. The internet is an invaluable tool for the at-home activist and I devote some time each week to contributing to discussions at political blog sites and signing my name to online petitions. And I like to march.

My whole family marched in protest against the invasion of Iraq and I was proud to walk with them. I was especially proud of Uncle Peter who wasn't going to come as he finds crowds disturbingly noisy. But in the end he did, with a megaphone in his hand and earmuffs (over earplugs) on his head. Ostensibly to protect his voice from strain and his eardrums from rupture, with the added benefits of making his voice louder and his ears deafer than anyone else's. I carried Skye in a sling across my chest while she carried her favourite soft toy, Winkle, a generic person-shape with arms and legs spread like a star. By mid-way my voice was hoarse with chanting, my back sore from carrying the extra weight. I also felt light and refreshed. I looked at the faces around me. Some people were smiling, singing out their wishes in straight-up rhymes. Some protesters were crying, but it was a clear kind of crying, broken up with laughter. I could hear drumming coming from the front of the mass of people, gradually getting faster. The voices accompanying the rhythm were loud and fierce. I felt safe, surrounded by this group of people who were peacefully resisting the immanent unprovoked invasion of Iraq.

Dad walked beside me. I noticed he didn't chant; I could imagine him making song lyrics in his head out of the protest couplets. A few times he offered to carry Skye but it would have been harder to change mid-stream than to keep moving. At one point I looked up at Dad and noticed he was repeatedly stealing glances at a group of marchers who were coming up alongside us. Their march chant — "South West women don't want your war! We are not America's whore!" — gave them a snappy beat to walk to and they were moving forward in the thick snake of bodies. *South West* alerted me, but Dad's face gave nothing away. I was drawn toward the tail of the group and picked up my pace. I couldn't see Skye's face as I carried her in the sling but her legs kicked happily.

I grew up thinking that *South West* was a small country town where my mum lived. Later, when I developed a better sense of place and geography, I became increasingly disillusioned as I realised I wasn't just going to bump into her on a school camp down south. Dad had always told me he didn't know precisely where Amy was but I'd never really believed him, not wanting to give up hope. Could he really know as little as me, so that a group of *South West women* are as likely to hold my mother as any? Anyway, they were too fast for me. I fell back in line with Dad.

Our family cluster managed to stay together but the people around me changed over the duration of the march. Some were clearly part of a group, dressed in clothes of the same colour or in matching T-shirts. Others marched as individuals or couples. There were lots of children. Gran wore a cardboard sign on her hat that read: "Bob's my Uncle, not Sam!" This is typically obscure Elsie. I watched people read her sign, flick their eyes to her face and back again, all day. But she was happy and marched arm in arm with Ken. Later on, Ken would say over and over, "Four generations of marchers, imagine that! Four generations!"

At the end as the marchers dispersed, I caught sight of a man, more a boy really, tall and very blonde like Nils. I milled about in such a way as to keep sight of the bright head in the crowd for as long as I was able. I knew it couldn't be Nils but my heart raced a few beats and then I saw the side of the boy's face and knew it wasn't Nils, but still I was attracted to him and was surprised at the faintly sexual feelings — warming fascination, breathless attraction — he stimulated.

The night after the march I dreamed of him. We were in Denmark at a cinema and the film was of us, in Australia, lying on the lawn at university and walking on the beach. In this film we were speaking Danish. I couldn't understand what was being said and when I looked at Nils in the dark of the cinema I could see he was laughing: his mouth was wide open and his eyes were crinkled up and his whole body was shaking, but no sound was coming out. I felt stupid for not being able to understand the film and I wanted to go to the toilet but when I stood up Nils grabbed my hand and wouldn't let me go. I didn't want to make a scene in the silent cinema so I tugged away wordlessly, tears streaming down my face and finally I wet myself.

I woke up suddenly, hot and sweaty and at first I thought I really had pissed in bed. I used to have nightmares of Nils humiliating me, not understanding me, when he first left, though it wasn't really like that at all. We were in perfect accord, if our agreeable and respectful behaviour is taken as the measure. We existed in the moment-to-moment world of university exams and parties, playing together and sating our appetites. I'd told my friends and family that I was pregnant and that Nils and I were discussing what we would do. In fact, no such discussions took place, but our tenderness, our love, gave me the illusion of information sharing. I confided my fears and Nils was silently supportive. He continued to care for my physical wellbeing during the first couple of months of my pregnancy. He cooked to suit my cravings, was careful never to smoke in front of me and massaged my shoulders and hips, which had started aching. But he never made any concrete statements of his feelings and intentions and I suppose I was too wrapped up in my own journey to notice.

He was loving and thoughtful right up until semester finished. He helped me study for my exams while I was ill with morning sickness. And then he told me he was leaving. He was so sorry, but he was leaving, the day after tomorrow. He'd left us one last day to spend together. I suppose he thought it was the proper thing to do, but inevitably, it was an anticlimax. I don't remember much of what was said.

I got hold of some sleeping pills for the nightmares but decided not to use them, for the baby's sake. Soon enough I fell in love with Skye, at first through my changing body and then in her own flesh. The nightmares stopped and I thought no more of him. His name does not appear on Skye's birth certificate.

Whenever Skye's father did steal into my thoughts, I couldn't conjure any ill feeling towards *him*, but it made me feel ill. Something heavy and hard in the pit of my stomach would lurch up my throat for a moment and then back down. My love, gone hard, hidden away. And reflected in this smooth stone of resentment I saw my mother. How could she do it? How could she leave me? I swallowed it down but up it came.

I know the exact moment Skye was conceived. I was twenty years old, I was in love with Nils Strohlm and he was in love with me, Carly McKinnon. I'm convinced that a particular feeling — call it love for want of a better word — is a necessary ingredient in the

conception recipe. I don't know what happened to him later, when he knew about the baby, but I know that when we made love, when we made Skye, I could see his soul was as naked as his body against mine and he loved me.

We had been together for perhaps three months. We were still in that first flush where all was novel and exuberant. Sometimes Nils, who lived in student accommodation, would spend the night at my house. But we also spent several chilly nights sleeping out in pockets of urban forest. During the crisp and clear nights of November, nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find a spot and lie naked, looking at the stars. Later, we'd both climb into his sleeping bag, which was huge and cosy. I always thought of it as the Danish Sleeping Bag.

We were amongst the small banksia trees on one fringe of King's Park. It was a beautiful night, so cold, but his hands where they touched me and his hips underneath me were hot. I shivered madly and Nils pulled me down to lie along him and we rolled together to our sides, facing each other. There were no clouds and half a moon, a well-lit night. I remember how the downy hair on his arms and his navel shone against his dark, Australian-sun-tanned skin. So much more beautiful, more resilient, I thought, than my fair skin, dark brown hair.

Although I'd had several lovers before, my longest relationship had petered out after three months. For each of my three one-night-stands I had provided condoms that I insisted my invariably disappointing lovers used. Nils and I had been careful and I didn't need to insist nor take sole responsibility for contraception either, which made him one of the more thoughtful men I'd known. Nils checked to make sure the condom was still in place and we continued to move together, on our sides. I could see his face quite plainly in the starlight, I could see its openness, its honesty. I thought at that moment, yes, this boy could be a man, be a father. I don't know where the thought came from. I'd never considered having children before. I held the thought, admired it, and then put it away in my heart.

We discovered afterwards that the condom had broken. I didn't recall my precognitive glimpse of this until much later. At the time I did some calculations in my head and decided that it was safe. Safe enough. Nils was happy to take my word for it.

I knew I was pregnant before I took the test. I think I even knew I would have the baby, though I didn't say any of this to Nils. I made sure he was with me; he waited in my bedroom while I stuck the stick into the stream of my piss as it plashed into the bowl. He was the one who watched and waited for the result. I looked at his face, needing to know his reaction to what I already knew to be. A minute passed. I saw his eyes widen and I could swear a smile flashed across his face, but it instantly disappeared. "Positive," he announced with a frown. I sat on the bed beside him and waited for him to say more. But he didn't.

After Nils was gone I was left to my own devices. I read a lot of books about what I could expect. I practiced squats and meditation, not at the same time, in the lounge. When I was eight months pregnant I asked Elsie to tell me her birth stories. She brushed the question away, "Oh, don't ask me, Carly, I was a disaster in that area." I persisted and she told me her labours were very long and arduous, she had uterine inertia, due to her flattened pelvis from carrying too heavy weights as a child. And that afterwards she suffered a prolapsed bladder, a prolapsed bowel and a prolapsed uterus.

"Some years after your father was born I had an extensive repair and tubal ligation and that was the end of it. My doctor actually suggested that Ken be sterilised to save me, but I wasn't going to let them anywhere near my husband. No, I was the problem." Elsie paused and looked at Ken, who was sitting silently in the armchair near the window. He made no response: he was probably asleep. She turned back to me and said, "My poor mother didn't have the benefit of surgery."

I found all this shocking and made no further enquiries, so two years elapsed before I discovered Elsie also gave birth to a dead child between Peter and Bruce.

When I considered Elsie's life, I supposed that to her, a good mother was one who survived maternity and stuck around. I realised how blithely I'd taken on the role, confident in my abilities to birth a child and be responsible for its wellbeing. I anticipated much more than mere survival: I was curious to know what kind of a mother I'd be and how this would be reflected in my life. *My* life: this distinction, acknowledgement of separation, remains important to me. Paradoxically, my new passion was aroused by the very familial bonds I wished to be free of, so that my research and writing became the means to joining up the families, through Elsie, Amy and me.

As I approached the birth my curiosity became more lion than cat, growing fiercer in its intent to see my child flourish. Perhaps more than anything else it was this feeling of yearning to know that made me determined to have Skye, despite the challenges of single-parenthood. These days the stigma associated with the single-parent household has been reduced to a minor wound, suffered with ubiquity, but I could also see far enough ahead to know that soon — in ten years or in twenty, I could not tell, but inevitably — Skye would ask me about her dad, and I would have to provide answers.

The Second

Excerpt from the notebook of a senior intelligence agent based in Perth, Western Australia, dated March 19, 1954.

OPERATION PROPHYLAXIS STAGE TWO — The chosen Communist Party Member will travel to Sydney. CPM will meet with editor of *Tetrameter*. Identify agent and situation in which to implement Stage Three.

NOTES — *Tetrameter* is run by our ally, the Australian Committee for Cultural Freedom. They are strong enough to withstand the curiosity of the CPWA. The letter of recommendation regarding McKinnon is from a university professor who, though respected in his field, is ranked as Left Wing Socialist, if not Suspected Communist, and the ACCF have been made aware of this. In return they have indicated they will string McKinnon along until Stage Three has been implemented.

By a stroke of luck (or perhaps Mother's prayers to Joseph, patron Saint of Fighters Against Communism, aren't in vain), the McKinnons' hosts in Sydney, Maxwell and Gillian Murray, are members of the Fair Go Players, communists fronting as a theatre troupe. We have agents in the theatre and files on many of the members. As is generally the case with clusters of his sort, various factions evolve and vie for superiority, revealing the psychology of the main players. Our man-on-the-ground provides on-going information updates. I need a strong character prone to discontent, ripe for turning, and one Scott Ranley will do the job. This man's role is slightly more demanding than is usually the case for a new part-time agent, but his personal circumstances prepare him nicely for the challenge. He joined the Fair Go Players about a year ago and immediately began to win the major roles. He is an ambitious young man who dreams of being a professional movie-star. He has the lead role in their current production. A meeting will be arranged.

The Organisation's sources have confirmed for me that McKinnon spent several months in Sydney after he was discharged from the Army late in 1944. McKinnon's name came up in connection with that of Rolf Million, failed poet and publisher, whose file was opened by the Commonwealth Investigation Service after his professional suicide with the publishing of those infamous modern poems in 1944. A typical lack of co-operation from the CIS is obstructing my access to further information and I can only speculate as to what McKinnon's role was and whether he has done undercover work before. I may have to re-evaluate my initial impressions of McKinnon as gullible and sentimental, easily manipulated. There is a possibility that he is a very good actor who is playing along with me. However, I have invested too much time in McKinnon to abandon him as our candidate at this stage. He is the best CPM to give his comrades a final opportunity to abandon Communism for a more moderate position on the Non-Communist Left. If he succeeds he will be the hero of the hour. But the rejection of Stage Three by the WACP will more than likely lead to the sacrifice of the CPM.

10 — Crossing the Nullarbor

March 1954

Ken rises before dawn and does a final check of the car and the luggage stowed in it. Inside, Elsie and the boys are up, eating their Weetbix, a holiday extravagance, in silence. Ken has several of the cereal biscuits with hot water and cold milk, and sips strong tea. He feels prepared and content. Their simple breakfast and ablutions complete, the McKinnons are soon gliding along the Great Eastern Highway in the direction of the rising sun. The FX Holden is well clear of the city by the time the first rays warm the bonnet and a good start has been made on the longest leg of the journey.

The boys begin in silence but brighten when the sun comes up. At first Bruce is fascinated with the scenery and he remembers the car journey to Uncle Alfred's farm last year. Unselfconsciously, he carries out a dialogue about the various rural wonders they are passing, supplying both question and answer. "Why are those cows in a field on their own? Because they have horns and they might hurt the other cows. Why does the mist go in patches? It must be clouds. We're driving in clouds." Later on, Bruce gets bored with this game and begins to question Peter. "Pe-ter, what are those birds called? Pe-ter, what are you doing?"

Peter has been permitted by Elsie to take several volumes of *Brown's Illustrated Encyclopædia of History*, from the set that was his birthday gift last month. He seems happiest when left alone to read, his great head propped with a pillow, the window down just enough to ruffle the curly brown hair on top. Bruce thinks it is terribly unfair that Peter is allowed, and able, to read. He imagines his older brother reading all day, every day, even when they finally arrive and are able to play outside. So boring! Bruce has Bev, of course, but really, she isn't much good at throwing.

Past Kambalda a group of emus gather on the road, drinking from a puddle. Ken pulls off ten yards short of them and Bruce winds down his window to get a good look. The birds disperse in an apparently leisurely fashion and yet a roll of deep drumming noises comes from the group. A single bird lingers close by and Bruce can see its blue throat tighten and release with the sound it makes. Its beady eye follows them as the car moves slowly past.

Aside from a refuelling stop in Merredin, the McKinnons push on to Coolgardie. Ken drives slowly through the wide streets, past the grand old buildings. His father still lives around here somewhere, doing a bit of prospecting. After filling the petrol tank, Ken insists on visiting the pump house of the famous CY O'Connor pipeline, whose path had braided with their own all the way from Mundaring.

"Ahh, there she is," Ken had said several times, as the pipeline emerged from the bush once again and ran along side them, or crossed underneath them. "Ahh, there she is."

Elsie does not understand Ken's fascination with the pipeline. She knows that in its day it was an engineering wonder, but in any case, the bonnet of the Holden is just as useful a kitchen table when parked at the Coolgardie pump station as anywhere else. Elsie is preoccupied: she has been learning to drive and has taken a lesson with Ken every Sunday this year, except when a Party event prevented them. In an empty street she can get the gist of it, but other drivers put her off. Ken had convinced her to take the wheel for part of the way over the dusty red Nullarbor Plain, the quietest stretch of road for many a mile. But the ladies of the Modern Women's Club and those at Party meetings have been frightening her with stories of the treacherous bulldust and hundreds of animals dead in the road. She can think of nothing else and regrets her promise. "The Nullarbor, Ken. Are you quite sure the road is very straight and flat?"

Ken sits on a boulder in the shade, looking out to the east; he doesn't notice Elsie's distress. "Yes, my love. Very straight and flat. Though we won't reach it until tomorrow. Only a couple more hours to Norseman and then we will stop for the night. We've made good time today," he says, nodding and smiling to himself.

Elsie feels her shoulders drop and cuts another slice off her pear. In a minute she will pack away the foodstuffs and stow the rubbish. She is reprieved.

In the late afternoon they refuel in the township of Norseman and just beyond, Ken pulls the car up on a rough track cutting into the side of the highway. Gratefully they clamber out, stretch and relieve themselves. Ken selects a site and begins to put up the small canvas tent, calling Bruce's attention to the salient points with his teacher's rhetorical tone. Here Elsie will sleep on a stretcher. There is room for Peter and Bruce inside the tent too, but Bruce decides to sleep outside on a swag, with Ken.

The night passes comfortably enough but the boys rise at dawn and stand around the grey embers of last night's campfire, eager to be moving. Ken gets the fire going and puts on a billy to boil, speaking softly to himself, "So! The great Nullarbor Plain…" While they drink tea, Ken tells of Grandfather McKinnon and his family crossing the Nullarbor by camel wagon sixty years earlier, when those highland Scot immigrants failed to successfully farm the arid South Australian land. The Plain's featurelessness is legendary in the McKinnon family. Bruce hears the story for the first time.

Back on the road, Ken describes their journey-so-far somewhat redundantly, ending with, "So now we are heading east along this gravel road, into the area known as the Nullarbor Plain, which is Latin for—"

"No trees," interjects Peter.

"That's right. No trees," finishes Ken.

"But there are trees," points out Bruce. "There's one. And there's a few. I saw lots back there."

"There will be fewer and fewer trees, Bruce," Ken explains. "Anyway, we want to cross the Western Nullarbor today, and tonight we will camp in South Australia!"

Bruce continues to see things that can only be described as "trees" all day and thinks that Nullarbor is a very silly name. Littlarbor would be better, as the trees are getting a lot smaller. Once, he sees something that looks like a child's forest, a small park-sized area full of those miniature trees. Just big enough to hide in and not so big he'd get lost: he imagines himself playing hide and seek with Bev. He calls out, "Stop! Stop, let's look at that!" But they just keep on going every time he sees something interesting.

Midmorning, Elsie notices a sign on the roadside that says 90–MILE STRAIGHT, AUSTRALIA'S LONGEST STRAIGHT ROAD. Here Ken pulls over and suggests it might be the place to stop for sandwiches and tea. He unfolds his map and accompanying charts of projected daily destinations and fuel stops. Pushing it towards Elsie and running his finger along the ninety miles of straight road between Balladonia and Cocklebiddy, he says, "So, my love, are you ready for your drive?"

Elsie suddenly remembers what it was she felt so anxious about this morning. She says, "I don't know, Ken, it's very isolated out here. What if something goes wrong?" quite forgetting that it was the absence of other drivers that convinced her to have a go in the first

place. But she allows herself to be coaxed into the driver's seat and struggles her way through first, second and third gears. Once she makes the transition into top gear, almost smoothly, it is simply a matter of resting her hands on the wheel and her foot on the accelerator. Elsie's initial anxiety fades but she remains stiff in her seat, alert to the possibility of hidden potholes. Once or twice she steals a glance at the dust flying up behind them in the rear-vision mirror and feels a thrill. The boys are quiet and Ken is nodding off. It seems as if she's been at the wheel for hours and Elsie is quite pleased with herself, giving Ken a good rest.

In the distance, something seems to obscure the road. The land dips a little and she loses sight of it and then there it is, just ahead. A carcass of some sort, it is enormous and appears to fill the whole road. Elsie doesn't know what to do — she aims for one side of it and then swings to the other — too late — and back again. The Holden bumps over some part of some unfortunate and Ken starts awake.

"Ken! Ken! There was something in the road, there was no way around it. I'd like you to drive now. I've done my bit. Ken! Are you awake?"

Ken is still and apparently calm, but only because he can't think what to say. The vehicle sounds alright, so he tries: "We're only a few miles from Cocklebiddy. Don't you want to finish the leg?"

This image is too much for Elsie and she forces the unwilling vehicle into a lower gear, clumsily comes to a halt and stalls in the middle of the road.

"I feel sick," moans Peter from the back.

Ken stops the car in the sheep-grazing township of Cocklebiddy, which was actually still some distance off. While he fills the fuel tank Elsie organises biscuits and tea. Ken is determined to stick to the schedule and reach South Australia this afternoon, so he eats as he drives, bearing down on the accelerator as they travel on in uncomfortable silence. Elsie stares fixedly out of the window to the north, the boys are alert to the unspoken tension in the car.

Ken keeps the Holden hovering just on fifty-five miles-an-hour and reminds himself to take in his surroundings. He has never crossed the country in a car before and thinks it is better than flying in an aeroplane. The view from a plane is all the same, but here, one has a

sense of the immensity of the atmosphere. A track bisects the hard crust of land and his eye can follow it east, off into the distance. As the landscape diminishes the sky appears augmented: the horizon is visible in every direction on this great plain, enclosed by a prodigious dome with a low cloud ceiling. Blue skies to the east, light cloud cover to the south, being pushed nor'-west. We're driving into clear skies, Ken thinks. He can see the weather in many directions: taking into account their movement through the plain and the movement of the clouds that are pushed by the wind, it's as if he can see ahead in time and predict the weather of the near future. Covering great distances in the car, the McKinnons drive through patches of rain and emerge into bright blue skies, rather than waiting for the rain clouds to come to them, as they do at home.

A little while later as they climb one of the few land features that might pass for a hill, the Holden begins to surge and then regains power down the slope. The car continues to coast along for a while and they soon pass through a blur of larger features marking a small township. A few miles out the surging returns and the car stops short.

"What's the matter Dad, why have we stopped?" Peter anxiously wrinkles his brow and cranes his neck forward.

"Shhh Peter!" says Elsie. She herself is worried. Imagine being stuck in this nowhere-land! Fortunately there is time to walk back to the last town and get help before dark, if needs be.

Ken tries to turn the engine over, it groans and dies. He is mildly annoyed with himself that he didn't think to look at the fuel gauge when the surging started, and now that the engine has stopped the gauge reads empty. "It's spark, or petrol," he announces, opening the door and hopping out.

Bruce, who has been staring out of the window at the endless horizon to the north, is snapped out of his reverie by the slamming door and gets out too. He is surprised at how hot it is outside, without his face in the open window. Flies take only moments to find him and buzz close by his ears and nose. Bruce swots them away and stands next to his dad who is peering under the bonnet.

Ken moves to the side of the car and points. "Down there, under the car, Bruce, what do you see?"

Bruce isn't sure what he's supposed to look for but he can see blood and gore and says, "There's something on it." The smell of petrol is strong.

"The jerry can will get us an extra fifty miles, not enough to reach Eucla, especially if the tank has a leak." Ken looks at Bruce as if waiting for a reply. Bruce nods. "We'll empty the spare fuel into the tank and head back to the town we just passed through."

The Holden limps back at thirty miles an hour. As they roll past the General Store, Elsie notes the township's name: Mundrabilla. It is a Monday afternoon and the street is deserted. Ken pulls up in front of the area that most resembles a workshop and goes to bang on the door. Bruce slips out behind him.

Elsie takes a handkerchief and wipes her forehead, neck and hands; she takes a comb out of the shoulder bag at her feet and runs it through her hair. She gets out of the car and walks to the edge of the highway, looking up and down the forty-or-so yards of Mundrabilla, then walks in the direction of a dwelling with a mass of flowers at the front. Finding himself alone in the car Peter follows his mum across the road, running a little way to catch up. Elsie turns into the flower garden: there are geraniums, lavender and a solitary rose bush, coddled with damp straw. Peter stands, panting, behind her, while she raps impatiently at the door.

A long time passes during which Elsie bangs and shouts "Hel-lo", several times. Peter's breathing has subsided but his face is red and sweaty. Elsie passes him her handkerchief and says with some surprise, "Maybe nobody's home —" but just at that moment the door is opened by a tired-looking woman, some years older than Elsie.

"Yes?" she says, stepping into the doorframe and nearly filling it, for all her sagging shoulders.

"My name is Mrs. McKinnon and this is my son Peter. I'm terrible sorry to impose on you but I'm afraid we're in trouble: the car. Mr. McKinnon is trying to raise someone at the garage across the street but I wonder if you can tell me where I might find a guest house in Mundabilla?"

"Mundrabilla."

"So sorry, Mundrabilla."

The woman seems unsurprised and her ruddy face remains expressionless. “You’ll stay with us. I’m Mrs. Owens. Mr. Owens will be home later on, and then he’ll help your husband with the car. Any more kids?”

“One more,” Elsie concedes.

“I’ve got one room. It’s nineteen shillings, and that includes meals. We eat at half-past five.”

Elsie feels her chest relax. “Mrs. Owens, how can I thank you enough? The hospitality of country people is a credit to this nation. You’ve no idea how relieved I am after the ordeal we’ve had this afternoon! And might I say that I think it’s marvellous what you’re doing with the garden, in this climate. You must have the green thumb.”

Mrs. Owens visibly softens and a smile begins to emerge from the corners of her eyes. “Do you think so? So few notice it, you know.” She steps out into the dry and warm afternoon heat, heat that will turn to bracing cold once the sun goes down and the wind blows in from the Great Southern Ocean. The women inspect the small front garden together and Peter lumbers off to tell the others the news.

Later on in the afternoon, Elsie, who is peeling potatoes at the kitchen table with Mrs. Owens and talking nineteen-to-the-dozen about factory conditions in the city, stops short when Mr. Owens, presumably, comes in through the back door. He is a big man, weathered and strong like an old tree, and he reminds Elsie of her father. Barely a look passes between Mr. and Mrs. Owens before the latter sends the former across the road, “to help our guests with their motorcar,” Mrs. Owens explains.

Well, it seems *Mrs*. Owens is the man about the house here! thinks Elsie to herself, put out that she wasn’t introduced. Mrs. Owens does not pick up the topic of the shirt-making factory in Osborne Park and so Elsie changes the subject. “You said your daughter married, Mrs. Owens. Where is she living now?”

When Mr. Owens steps out the front door of his house and ambles over, slightly bow-legged, to the FX Holden, Ken comes out to meet him and holds his hand up in a sort of wave-cum-salute, eyes downcast, as if he were saying, “Yes, here I am, the guilty party.” When they are a few paces apart, Ken looks at the tall blonde man, at his large red face under his felt hat, and says, “Mr. Owens? Ken McKinnon.”

“Call me Charlie,” say Mr. Owens. “What’s yer trouble?”

They turn to the car and Ken points as he speaks, like he’s teaching a lesson, “I have a minor fuel leak. I’ve got the car jacked up but a light would be useful.”

Very few words pass between them but the appropriate tools and necessary patching materials are gathered together and the job is completed in a short time. Bruce watches the two men work together wordlessly, fascinated into silence himself.

Mr. Owens wipes his hands on a rag and passes it to Ken, who says, “Thanks Charlie, how much do I owe you for that?”

Mr. Owens shakes his head and says, “Nothin. Yer our guests. This’s just how we do things round here. If we didn’t help each other out, nothin’d git done.”

At half-past five o’clock, seven sit to dinner at an old wooden table in the Owens’ small kitchen and dining area. Bruce and Peter are together at one end, perched on a stack of two wooden crates, which causes a degree of elbow jostling until a scathing look from Paul, the Owens’ grown-up son seated at the other narrow end of the table, stills them both. Charlie has his hat off, he is old and dry-looking from his years in the sun though he’s probably no more than forty-five. He clears his throat and offers a short grace. This makes the boys stare: they notice that Mr. and Mrs. Owens and their son, and their own Mum and Dad too, have their eyes closed and hands clasped in front of them.

Soon all are focused on their food, which to the McKinnons seems a feast, with lamb casserole, cold mutton and chutney, onions and mashed potatoes. Elsie offers Mrs. Owens appropriate compliments on the quality and variety of her repast, “despite feeding twice as many as usual and under these isolated conditions.”

“It’s true, we don’t get much fresh food out here, but we never go hungry, and we’re never short on meat,” Mrs. Owens says with pride. “Mundrabilla is sheep-grazing land.”

“Mundrabilla. What does it mean in the native tongue?” Ken asks Mr. Owens.

“Plenty water,” Mr. Owens says seriously, and then laughs.

“Ignore him, Mr. McKinnon. That’s Charlie’s idea of a joke. Mundrabilla was the name of the homestead of those who established the first sheep station here in 1872. My family came west in the nineteen twenties, from South Australia.”

“As did mine, in the eighteen nineties.” Ken picks up the conversation, on familiar ground. “They went in for wheat though, not sheep. You say there’s plenty of water?”

Now Paul Owens laughs, and says, “No Mr. McKinnon, no water. At least, not enough for anyone else. There’s our holding of 60,000 acres and there’s Carter’s of 45,000 acres. A few smaller holdings broken up out of the Gillings’ in East Mundrabilla. There’s the Bracks who have the store and Mrs. MacDonald whose husband works in Eucla. That’s Mundrabilla and we need every drop of rain that falls.”

“Sorry to pull yer leg, Ken. There was drillin done here all through the twenties, but no ground water was found.”

“So why do you stay?” says Elsie, perhaps too lightly. “I mean, it’s such a hard life for you. The people don’t appreciate what you go through to raise sheep.”

Mr. Owens shakes his head and saws away at a tough piece of mutton, saying, “The Owens have been feedin the nation for three generations, you city folk need us. We git the best outta the hardest land an what else is there to do with it?”

Mrs. Owens adds, “In bad years when we don’t get our six inches of rain, we’ve gone without milk and butter and kept the children out of school. But you all still expect your meat on the table.”

The McKinnons are quiet and everyone eats in silence for a while except for occasional mealtime interjections. Elsie has finished eating and has to stop herself from getting up and clearing the table to ease the discomfort she feels. She nervously clenches and unclenches her hands as she says, “I’m sure I prefer your kind of Australian people, Mr. Owens, hardworking and generous, to Mr. Menzies’ version, numbed to the state of the nation with their comfortable office jobs and household gadgets. We are more your kind of people, working hard for our country. You’ve heard of the Communist Party, I’m sure?”

Mrs. Owens opens her mouth but doesn’t speak. Mr. Owens goes a little redder in the face and speaks slowly. “It’s understood round here that we don’t talk religion an we don’t talk politics. What business is it of mine how another man worships the Lord in his own home? An as long as the government stays in the city and I stay on my land, we git along fine.”

* * *

The McKinnons sleep past dawn in Mrs. Owens' clean and sparse guest room, furnished only with four narrow beds, two of them foldout, and a chest of kerosene-tin-drawers. Ken and the boys rise to a breakfast of eggs and porridge cooked by Mrs. Owens. Charlie and Paul had already breakfasted and left by the time Ken, Peter and Bruce get to the table.

"Charlie's filled your jerry-can and one of his own to pour into your tank. We'll just ask you to pay for the petrol," is all Mrs. Owens says to Ken, other than sufficient acknowledgement of their thanks and the goodness of the morning. Ken is filled with gratitude for these people, who have helped them without question and pre-empted their every need. But he isn't effusive about what he feels with this taciturn woman who knows the value of silent understanding. When they've eaten their fill, Ken takes the boys to pour fuel into the Holden and make sure it holds. If it does, they have enough to reach Eucla to fill up.

Elsie sleeps long in Mrs. Owens' hard narrow bed, waking refreshed and quite recovered from her ordeal. The house sounds empty when she comes into the kitchen. Under a clean tea-towel there is a plate with three slices of fresh bread, a saucer with butter and one of jam and a boiled egg in a cup, gone cold. Elsie involuntarily smiles, sits at the table and eats everything. She washes up after herself, remembering the scarcity of water, and leaves a one-pound note on the table.

It is a late start to the McKinnon's third morning out of Perth and they've further to go today than Ken had planned. Elsie does not take the wheel and they don't stop for lunch, simply passing around biscuits and a flask of tea every few hours. They are now moving through the most desolate stretch of Eyre Highway over the Great Bight. The road goes on and on and they are travelling quite slowly.

We might as well be going backwards for all I know. Impossible to mark progress in a landscape like this, Elsie thinks to herself.

On and on for almost eight hours. Ken refuels every time there is the opportunity, which is twice, but the tank mend seems to be holding nicely.

It's getting dark when they get within sight of Ceduna. Just before the wide track of Eyre Highway is interrupted with the half-dozen assorted buildings, all with the ubiquitous corrugated iron roof, they camp for the night. Ken and Bruce get the tent up in half-an-

hour, the fastest yet; Elsie cooks sausages and boils pumpkin over a campfire, sitting awkwardly in front of her makeshift stove. After being coerced into collecting a little firewood, Peter retreats to the car to continue reading in the dying daylight.

"I hate camping," he says.

On the fourth morning they are off early, keen to get out of the desert, out of the car. It is the shortest day's drive and from Iron Knob the roads are sealed again and the going is easier. The next morning Elsie drives for a short stretch between Port Augusta and Orroroo. She drives so slowly (her experience of three days ago has not been discussed) that Ken is soon eager to take the wheel again and they make it to Broken Hill by evening. Elsie points out a sign for a caravan park and gratefully uses the rather squalid public ablution facilities while the boys pitch the tent. The last of the food they've brought along in the hessian-lined strawboard box is easily transformed into a vegetable stew on the campsite hotplate. Elsie is relieved to find that even Peter is helpful this evening, collecting wood for the fire and washing the tin plates under a tap after dinner. Ken pats his stomach and declares with triumph: "We'll be in Sydney for lunch tomorrow!"

It is Friday, a clear autumn day, when the red-dust-covered FX does indeed reach the outskirts of Sydney by noon, having carried the McKinnons safely across the Nullarbor Plain and through outback New South Wales. But it is nearly dark by the time they reach the Murray's place. Sydney's busy streets, the frequency of intersections and the forthright nature of the city drivers take Ken by surprise and he finds it hard to navigate to Bankstown according to the instructions given to him by Max Murray. In the back the boys are fighting over a pillow and Elsie is anxiously shrill.

"Peter and Bruce stop that at once! We are one family and I will not tolerate fighting! How can your father be expected to navigate and drive if you do not remain still and silent?"

11 — Bruce's Rhythms

March 2004

Family Dinner Friday conversation consisted of the usual: current affairs rounded up by hobbyhorses. Elsie bemoaned a series of events that, through her very momentum, were made to seem causally linked. She began with the upcoming anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq and ended with Bruce's poor scholarship and the "American cultural imperialism" that encouraged him to "go wild" in high school. This led to remonstrations against the precariousness of Dad's occupation, a topic that goes back to the days when I began school.

Dad was still working all day then and I spent the afternoons with Ken and Elsie. I don't recall much about that time but I clearly remember that I was nine when Dad cut back to part time work, against his parents' protestations, and started to play jazz on the weekends. I would sleep over at Gran and Pop's and during the week Dad would walk me to and from school. I thought this was a fantastic improvement. Sometimes we'd stop and play cubbies in the park, creeping underneath the green skirts of ancient grass trees.

"Don't worry, Mum," Dad said. "The worse things get, the more folk want to come out to drink and listen to good music." Dad's dry wit was lost on Elsie who clattered dinner plates all the louder.

Later I thought more closely about what Elsie had said, the words she used, looking less for sense and more for feeling, the fears and dark places. This is the other sense: it's a kind of fleeting terror of something too big for her to hold in her imagination, the blinding unknown. Elsie's adolescence coterminated with the Depression years and her young womanhood kept pace with world war. After that, one house, one job, one husband were such blessings. Her happiness solidified around these rocks. But Bruce didn't share her convictions nor her fears: he didn't form a nuclear family, evaded a rigid career.

The term "nuclear family" always seemed so strange to me. In the post-World-War-Two housing boom, extended-family living became less common and new houses popped up like atoms instead. Presumably the nucleus was the breadwinner, being circled by its particles, the homemaker and children. I grew up thinking that a "nuclear family" was a

grotesque family, the result of some horrific accident. No-one told me as much, that was just how I put it together with the information provided.

Dad and I were sitting at the back of the house in the late afternoon watching Skye. The big sky was preparing for a warm autumn setting, all pink oranges and soft fruits. We were having tea. Dad does this thing: he stirs the cups and finishes with a ding on the rim of each. Often he'll name the interval and sometimes this will bring forth a snatch of melody around the sounds. Some blues were wafting out from the lounge so no song this time, but for me the minor third brought to mind Elsie's panicky "went wild" from dinner last Friday. I'd made some notes about that night and I wanted a story from Dad to intersect with Elsie's. I tried, "What did Gran mean when she said you 'went wild' at high school?"

He laughed a little before answering. "In high school I discovered jazz music on the radio. This was the era of bebop, but at that age it was too hot for me, all that polytonality: whew!" He fanned his mouth as if he'd eaten something spicy. "So at first I got into boogie-woogie and Dixieland, then I hit on traditional New Orleans jazz and blues. The radio was a revelation! I listened in a lot and tried to play what I heard on the piano." He named a tune and sang a line as his hands felt it out on the wooden table. He'd be there still, but I brought him back to the point.

"That doesn't sound too wild…"

Dad laughed again. "That's Elsie's way of saying I made a few friends. When I was sixteen or thereabouts, the kids found out I could play swing tunes so we'd get together at lunchtime for a play around. I think we were pretty good, though swing had been over for fifteen or twenty years. This was the early sixties: I was discovering the music way after it was written but swing remained popular with the next generation of kids. Mum accused me of trying too hard to be 'one of the boys' to the detriment of my study."

Dad fell silent. There was more to this story and I thought I'd have to fetch him out but he was going on, more thoughtfully. "She calls it *wild*; to Elsie, jazz is wild, but it came from the poor, the blacks, the downtrodden, whom she likes to think she fights for. That's strange. I always thought it was funny: swing was the music of her generation, but because it was popular, because it came from America, it was suspect. When Mum and Dad got together with their comrades they'd end up singing around the piano, but always the popular music of their parents' generation, nothing post 1939."

The record had finished so Dad got up to select another. Although I enjoy watching all sorts of music live, at home we always listen to jazz. There has been a lot of music in my life but I have acquired no particular instrumental skills. I can hold a tune and my ear is good but it feels like a lost opportunity. Dad offered me instruction in whatever I expressed an interest in but he never enforced practice. I went from clarinet to saxophone to trumpet, taking advantage of Dad's ability to secure long-term loans of whatever instrument I took a fancy to. Sometimes I think he should have been a little firmer with me, less reactive to his own tortured childhood music practice, so that I might enjoy the benefits now. But it was my problem: I secretly wished to go to ballet like the other girls and hadn't the courage to say.

Dad has always shared his music with me and I have enjoyed handling the satisfyingly chunky discs since I was a child. Later, I invested several years' worth of pocket money into cassette tapes of great variety but the medium was no more enduring than the music. Dad's enthusiasm for jazz is infectious and I know his collection of records as if they were my own. I can bring to mind the constant oblique nod of his head, knees slightly dipping in time, in any number of settings: chopping vegetables in the kitchen, ironing his shirts, driving me to school. The way he loves Dizzy, Monk and Miles, they are like the brothers I never had.

Dad had chosen an album of "Bird" Parker tunes that preceded him out of the lounge. Skye was exploring deeper than usual into the tangled greenery behind the orange tree and now screeched out in her attention getting, rather than truly hurt, manner. I called to her and got up, fishing her out of the garden and dancing with her on my hip back to the table. I asked Dad, "So when did you get into this stuff?" meaning the bebop he favoured these days.

Skye giggled as I bounced her around and Dad completed his story. "As I got older I began to experiment with the more modern, complex bop tunes at home. So from traditional, through swing and onto bop, you can see my interests followed the evolution of jazz music itself. I've always enjoyed that."

Later as I recorded my recollections of our conversation I noticed that Dad and Peter told similar stories of the way their music appreciation developed, within their respective styles. They each observe that their tastes changed with reference to the style

itself. But what happened as they grew older? Styles faltered, underwent transformation and emerged as something new, leaving young admirers behind. Older admirers were stuck: Peter's classical music collection peters out in the early twentieth century, Bruce's jazz ends in the late sixties.

Uncle Peter attempted to wield an influence over my musical tastes when I was younger by taking me to concerts of the West Australian Symphony Orchestra. I enjoyed these events but they were strange, too, like the Museum of Young Australians: I was out of place without the words to say it. We never talked about how the music made us feel and I didn't have anything else to say. By the time I was a teenager he had given up and I thought I somehow deserved it. Peter didn't call me out of my word maze: no-one taught him how. All of us tangled with words, strangled with silence. I hope I don't forget how to read Skye's face.

The house was dark but I could see clearly. I walked to the lounge — the shaggy brown carpet was wet — and sat at the piano. I pressed a key and the piano went *Maaa!* Another, a little higher, *Meee!* I liked the feeling of the cool keys resisting, then yielding to my touch, so I played a little more: *Maaa! Maaa! Meee!* I played for a very long time and eventually lifted the lid of the piano and there was Skye inside, holding the strings and pulling on them: *Mum-my! Mum-my!* Then another age passed and the sound became louder, and I realised it was Skye, really Skye, woken from her sleep. The digital clock next to my bed displayed 2:26 with a sort of arrogance, I thought, as if it knew and didn't care how tired I'd be tomorrow. A few more moments of procrastination and I got up and went into the room next to mine.

Skye was lying on her front in that lucid space of crying and calling clearly but still quite asleep. I patted her bottom, which protruded a little because she'd pulled her knees up under her, and whispered soothing sounds. When I spoke she woke fully and clambered up to be held.

"Were you dreaming, Skye?"

She nodded. The curtains were open to allow the little breeze to move the air; moonlight showed her eyes serious and face fat with sleep.

"Can you tell me about it?"

She shook her head but I asked again and she said: “Too scary, Mummy, you be scared.” I assured her I wouldn’t be scared if we were together, so she told me she fell down the bath and tried to hold the taps but they broke and then bees stung her. “There’s other rhymes too, but I forget the words,” she added.

I knew what she meant: dream dialogue has the drive of a rhyming poem. With and without melody, this is a form Skye knows well. Sometimes I catch my dreams in the act of singing, yet with closer attention the rhythm subsides into ambient noise with a tangible source, the melody slides away into the modulations of a human voice. I laid Skye down and pulled up the sheet; it was a warm night but she liked to be covered. I located her Winkle toy and tucked it alongside her. Then I sang to her in the language of parent and child that includes meaningful silences alongside syllables, as many touches as words, and she slept.

Skye’s hadn’t been the only noise in the house. I could hear the piano from the lounge, a soft undertone of currents and waves, mournful and melodious. Dad was up, which wasn’t unusual for this hour. He loved to play at night. The playing stopped abruptly as I came in.

“Oh, Carly, was it me? I’m sorry, darling, I get a bit wrapped up in it.”

“No, Dad, it wasn’t you, she’d sleep through a brass band some of the time. I just wanted to listen.”

He was fully dressed, still in his working white shirt, crumpled and untucked. Handsome, though in a dishevelled sort of way.

“It’s nothing much, a very old tune.” Bruce’s hands strayed back to the keys and danced lightly over the melody, too polite to drown out the conversation but wanting to be immersed once more.

“I recognise it,” I said. “I haven’t heard it for years but I recognise it.”

Travelling on a string of notes, strengthened through space — the same old Ronisch piano still in front of the window — memory took me back in time and I saw a flash of green lawn and a feeling of motion. I was riding outside the back of the house, this house. I could hear Dad playing inside and through the open window I said *what’s that song called,*

Dad? He said *do you like it?* It was melancholy and slow, being alone music, not riding music. *No!* I said boldly. *Oh* Dad said sadly. *I wrote that song*. I felt bad and rode away.

Determinedly pushing aside childhood discomforts, I said to Bruce now, “I like it, it’s lovely. What do you call it?” I perched on the edge of the piano stool next to him and put my dressing-gowned arm around his waist.

“I haven’t called it anything for a long time,” Dad said quietly. “I used to call it ‘Amy’.”

Amy: my mother’s name. I suppose this is my mother’s name, unless she’s changed it to something more fitting for her current circumstances, whatever they might be.

In my childhood, Dad and I developed a ritual that was performed every Saturday morning, now less regularly but with no less sincerity. I have a sweet singing voice, not very special, but I can hold a tune like I said before. Dad has always encouraged me to join him in jazz standards and old time songs, some of his own compositions and other personal favourites. We like ballads the best, the sadder, the better: it is cathartic. He used to sing them with me but now I know them all back to front and he prefers to play the piano, listen to me sing, and improvise around my predictable rendition. In all those years — hundreds of sessions — I’d never heard that tune. “Amy” was his alone. It didn’t have any words.

“Did you stop playing it because I told you I didn’t like it?” My arm fell away from his waist, guilty and defiant.

“Ha!” Bruce said, too brightly: was he distracting me? “I was remembering that too! No, it wasn’t you, Carly. It wasn’t your fault, love.”

We hugged side-on and stared at the black and white keys. Dad and I did not discuss my mother, by tacit agreement. Each of us learned to spare the feelings of the other. Normally I might have felt a little cheated, like he had taken my thoughts and left behind uncomfortable ones of his own. I checked the feeling out like I might try on a hat, but it didn’t suit me, I didn’t feel angry. Bruce’s right hand unconsciously moved back to the piano and Amy spread over the keys again.

After that night I knew something had shifted in me. How else can it be that knowing one’s mother can mean nothing for so long and then be so consuming? Skye was born and, overnight, I was committed to caring for a child of my own; it wasn’t until later

that I recognised the gnawing curiosity I felt when I was gestating her. Perhaps it never really went away but became increasingly aroused while I was busy breastfeeding.

It's not that I didn't think about her when I was growing up, wonder whether she still looked like she did in the photo I have of her from before she had me. The process of understanding my family structure took up much of my adolescence. For a while I blamed Elsie, who hadn't a kind word to say about Amy. And then I blamed Dad: what had he done to make her go away? But this was futile, the more so because Dad had virtually nothing to say about it. Yes, he said, they had fought, but not ferociously. And yes, she was very passionate about her work, but of course she wanted me. He didn't know why she left. He did not know where she was. Gradually I saw that Dad was just as confused as I was. We were in it together.

By the time I was a young woman, not knowing my mother did not trouble me so much as intrigue me, in an idle, escapist kind of way. Her mysterious life came to hold all the possibilities I wanted for my own life: when I was too young to be out alone I imagined that she was allowed out at that age; when I was tied up with a formal education I imagined that she dropped out in third year and hitchhiked around Australia.

Suddenly, irrationally, I wanted her around. Not for practical mother-care educational reasons — I don't think she would have had much to offer me there — but more to fill a space that Bruce and Elsie and the others never could. No single event sparked my curiosity about my mother's life but more the chain of events: it was the only logical way to feel. After that night, the dream of Skye and Dad playing Amy, it was from then I knew that I would find her.

12 — Stewart Enright: Great Australian Poet

Ken feels exhausted when they finally arrive but the Murrays greet them warmly. Gillian and Maxwell are old friends of the McKinnons, from before the War. Gill and Elsie get along like a house on fire and Max loves the boys, having only girls of his own, three of them. They've never been Communist Party members but are interested in *social justice and culture for all*, as Elsie puts it. Gill has prepared them a simple tea. They enjoy hot showers and retire early.

Ken sighs audibly as his head touches the pillow in the Murray's study, turned over to the guest room for the week. I've done it! he thinks. We've made it from Perth in the west to Sydney in the east, two-and-a-half thousand miles!

He's dead-tired but can't sleep, instead bringing to mind the letter of introduction that was sent ahead to Stewart Enright, Editor of *Tetrameter*, from one of his old professors in Perth. Ken has a copy in his notebook. It's full of praise, all true enough, and it makes him feel good to remember it. The letter speaks sensitively of his published poems: "If you do not recall seeing McKinnon's name in print, it is because he is no comet, blazing brilliantly but then lost to the generation. No, McKinnon is a steadily burning star illuminating the Southern skies, whose poetic humility has graced many volumes over the years." And of his experience across the fields of ink-slinging, the letter was generous: "Mr. McKinnon has earned his living with his pen for his country, his university and private patrons, but his most steadfast effort has been his promotion of the Art of Poetry in our high schools." Finally, the letter emphasised Ken's willingness to offer his services in any way, even relocating his family to the other side of Australia, such is his enthusiasm for working under Mr. Stewart Enright.

After his comrades had revealed to Ken his mission, there had only been time for one more meeting before Ken left for Sydney. Bill, Fred and Andrew met him late one night at the coffeehouse close to the North Perth Hall. Fred Hapfield, alias Comrade Engels, Secretary of the Equality Committee and a teacher like Ken, had spoken first. "I've written up a profile of Enright, his history and political agenda, so you can familiarise yourself with his motivations."

Andrew Stone, a.k.a. Comrade Marx, was about Ken's age and Secretary of the League for Peace and Liberty. "You must act decisively. Become familiar with certain writers so you can speak in praise of them. I recommend you look closely at the work of our erstwhile comrade, Mr. Rex," Andrew had said, passing Ken the first issue of *Tetrameter*. "This is my annotated copy, you may find it useful."

"And what if I do get the job, what then?"

Bill was reassuring, "You'll find out where records are kept. You'll recruit someone on the inside. Anyway, one thing at a time. We can speak on the telephone as often as you like." Ken had looked at Bill, Fred and Andrew, and nodded gravely: they were depending on him.

Ken yawns yet his mind is racing and his eyes spring stubbornly open. An idea returns from younger days: himself, Comrade Wilde, moved by the spirit of Robin Hood. Not the English Robin Hood in his jade tunic but an Australian version, sensibly dressed, less showy but well prepared. His work is not as dramatic as that of the bushranger, he is no Kelly. It is the slow, thankless work of bringing the truth of inequality to the attention of the people. Dressed in khaki, he is walking along a perimeter fence with a mass of sheep in the background. So many sheep: it is the last thing he remembers.

First thing Monday morning Ken is on the train to Sydney's centre. He has no trouble finding the offices of *Tetrameter*. They occupy a two-story building in Elizabeth Street and the moniker ENRIGHT HOUSE appears over the heavy doors in brass capitals. Ken feels nervous and he's twenty-five minutes early so he stands still for a while under the shade of a large plane tree a little way down the street.

Inside Enright House a receptionist greets Ken as he approaches her desk and takes him to a large waiting room with comfortable chairs and a library of recent literary magazines. Many copies of the first issue of *Tetrameter* face outermost, with a range of other, less salubrious publications alongside. On the lower shelves there are multiple copies of several foreign magazines, British and American, Ken can tell just from the look of their glossy covers. He chooses one and sits down. A large portrait titled "Stewart Enright of Enright House — Editor of *Tetrameter*, Great Australian Poet", hangs on the wall opposite

and Ken finds he can't concentrate on any of the articles, so commanding are the eyes of the man depicted, until an assistant brings him a cup of tea.

Still waiting half-an-hour later with increasing nervousness, Ken wonders how many people leave Enright House without actually seeing Enright, fooled by this larger-than-life substitute. He returns to the bookshelves and magazine racks that constitute the library and a cover catches his eye. It is cheaply produced, card printed in two-tone with the headline: "Hoax of autumn, 1944: Ten years on and twenty behind".

Now that sounds interesting, Ken thinks. He is about to reach for the magazine when he stops himself: I mustn't give any hint of sympathy for a radical cause. Can't be too careful in this place, eyes everywhere, he thinks. Ken stands awkwardly for a moment, imagining eyes everywhere. Suddenly he wishes desperately to leave but wills himself to conjure the image of his Robin Hood.

A young woman's voice interrupts, saying, "Mr. McKinnon?" When he looks up, a well-rounded bottom is disappearing into the depths of Enright House. He hastens to follow and she ushers him into an antechamber where his hat and coat are taken. This all happens rather quickly and only during a brief tug-of-war over Ken's briefcase, which he pulls back at the last moment remembering the documents inside, does he look at her face. The assistant has red hair, she is young and stares back at him with bold eyes. She opens the door at the far end of the antechamber and pushes him in, quickly closing the door behind him.

Enright's office is very large and everything appears new yet the style is conservative. A large leather Chesterfield, presumably occupied although Ken cannot see from where he tentatively stands, is facing the window. The window is wide and beyond the chair he can see greenery; it gives a view down onto a large grassed area from high above. Ken can't remember climbing any stairs.

"Mr. McKinnon, is it?" says a voice emanating from the armchair.

"Ahh, yes. Yes, that's correct."

"And what is it you want, Mr. McKinnon?"

Without having to look the man in the eye it is easier to speak than Ken imagined so he goes on with some confidence: "I'd like to offer my services, to you and the magazine,

in any capacity. I am a great admirer of the work you do here." There is a pause. Ken goes on, "Perhaps you've seen a letter from Professor Ruebens recommending me?"

The cumbersome Chesterfield is equipped with a swivel mechanism that permits the armchair to slowly swing around.

"I'm a writer, of course, but such is my enthusiasm to work with you that, that —"

Enright faces Ken, silencing him. He is only a little older than Ken, his handsome face becoming craggy at the peaks. Great rolls of steely grey hair sit in glistening waves on his head. Enright scrutinises Ken intently and says, "Where is your writing published, Mr. McKinnon?"

"Well, I haven't published anything for some time, under err… this name. May I sit down?" asks Ken; he has been fidgeting since Stewart Enright turned around.

Enright nods at the chair in front of his large mahogany desk as he opens a drawer to remove his pipe and smoking tobacco. Ken sits down and says to himself, just carry on with the plan. He takes a deep breath and says, "I enjoyed immensely the article by Mr. Anderson in your first issue, on 'Why Dylan Thomas failed as a poet'. 'Where there is no technique, there is no form; where there is no form, there is no beauty.' Quite so."

Enright continues to pack his pipe, expressionless, so Ken blunders on.

"And it cheered me to see Mr. Rex has finally come to his senses and given up all that Alcheringa nonsense. The work you published is so much more *mature*, isn't it?"

Enright puffs and pants to light his pipe, speaking in short bursts. "I'm glad you think so… I think I could use a man like you, McKinnon… But…" Enright smokes into a comfortable rhythm, fixing his eyes on Ken and nothing is said for a minute.

But what? wonders Ken. Is this going well? Is he testing me? Enright doesn't speak again and the silence stretches out like an abyss in front of him. Push on, Comrade Wilde, he instructs himself. Truth! Liberty! Honour!

"If you don't think it too forward, Sir, as a prospective employee, I'd like to ask, is it possible that *political* concerns mar the great edifice to *culture* that you have erected? I've heard some unkind rumours that you receive money from the Central Intelligence Agency."

Enright is not shocked by Ken's bold assertion; in fact a smile seems to hide behind the pipe smoke, but still he remains silent. Eventually, Enright speaks: "*Tetrameter* has no

prejudices and is uncompromisingly in favour of freedom of thought and expression. I know of no such funding arrangement, nor am I influenced by such an arrangement in any way. But if that *were* the arrangement, it is hardly shameful to indirectly receive funds from the agency of a democratic government, while communist dictatorships subsidise leftist publications. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. McKinnon?"

"Yes! Oh, yes, absolutely! Fair's fair, I'd say." Ken feels light-headed and loose limbed, as if he'd had a stiff drink, though he hasn't touched a drop for weeks.

Stewart Enright takes the pipe out of his mouth and rests it in a black leather ashtray that looks for all the world like a giant furry hand. He shifts his gaze directly to Ken, and yes, he is smiling when he says, "I've a job for you if you want it McKinnon. Yes, I've got just the thing. Miss Tingle will give you your assignment and show you out. And I'll keep you working in my antechamber until we can find you an office. Ten o'clock tomorrow?" A small bank of switches sits on top of the mahogany desk and he moves one back and forth a few times: an orange light flashes.

The young assistant knocks briefly before coming in and standing behind Ken, who blushes involuntarily because he can smell her, not a perfume exactly, but *her smell*. "Ten o'clock, then," Ken says and rushes out without meeting Miss Tingle's eye. But in the antechamber he has to stop and wait for his hat and coat. There is a large desk with an orange light and a pair of cubicle work areas on the other side of the room. Ken does not wish to be rude so risks a short smile as Miss Tingle passes his things as well as a yellow envelope and wordlessly shows him out to the lobby.

The next day at a quarter past ten, Ken is ensconced in one of the cubicles in Enright's antechamber in front of a rather good typewriter, rolling in a fresh sheet. WILL STALIN'S DEATH BRING THE BIRTH OF LITERATURE TO THE SOVIETS? he types at the top in capitals. This is the name of the assignment Enright has given him and Ken winces as he types it. He'd opened the envelope last night with Max and the pair of them had sat up thinking about what it might mean. If Enright had any suspicions about Ken this might be considered a test, a particularly pointed conundrum for a Marxist poet masking as a Enright-protégé, but given the contents of *Tetrameter*'s first issue it is a typical topic. Elsie, who'd been assiduously eavesdropping from the kitchen where she and

Gillian washed the dishes after dinner, joined them at the table to offer her opinion. “It’s sheer ignorance, that’s what it is. How can a man who knows nothing of the value of socialist realism run a literary magazine?”

Of course, if Ken were really intending to fulfill this assignment to the best of his abilities he’d be in a library, not in an office, but today it is imperative that he figures out where the filing cabinets are and how they are organised and accessed. He throws out a few sentences: “With the death of Joseph Stalin in March of last year, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has an opportunity to shake off the shackles that have strangled the writers of the Eastern Bloc for several decades. Since the nineteen thirties, a Politburo order has compelled writers to ‘depict life truthfully; not scholastically’. The policy of socialist realism was forced upon Soviet writers as a way of harnessing their power. Stalin called writers ‘the engineers of human souls’. But how can the writer truly reflect life without reference to the great works that have gone before him?” This slap-dash approach to composition, straight off the top of his head with its hotchpotch of dates and quotes, is a struggle for Ken, but he has to make a start on something.

Around eleven o’clock Enright comes through the antechamber with two assistants in tow, Miss Tingle and a young man, but doesn’t acknowledge Ken. Soon after, Miss Tingle comes back out of the office and tells Ken she is instructed to give him a tour of Enright House. Ken leaves his opening paragraph in the typewriter and his briefcase under the desk, carefully emptied of Party material this time. He is shown the brightly lit, luxurious offices of Sir Sinclair Ramington, Head Manager, and Edward Kreuger, Chief Executive, neither of whom show any sign of using the office assigned them. When Ken asks Miss Tingle what their roles entail she replies without hesitation, “Sir Sinclair and Mr. Kreuger are exceedingly busy in their positions heading up the Australian Committee for Cultural Freedom, of which *Tetrameter* is the flagship.”

Upstairs, there is a journalists’ library, a tearoom and a hive of individual offices. With his questions and kind interest in her every word, Ken encourages Miss Tingle to give him the full tour of the upstairs clerks’ and filing offices and with earnest curiosity requests a “complete understanding” of the magazine’s “administrative operations”. Miss Tingle is only too happy to oblige and walks through the system with him. In the office of Finance Files Ken casually reaches out to a drawer marked INCOMING and hums approvingly as

he slides it in and out a few times. Miss Tingle pushes it firmly shut; the fourth and fifth fingers of her pale and freckled hand come to rest on Kens' hand: they are hot. She and Ken each recoil from this unintended moment of contact. Ken catches a glimpse of Miss Tingle's pink face before following helplessly in the wake of her perfectly rounded posterior. He forces himself to say over the headings he's just seen inside the INCOMING drawer: ACCF, CCF, Campbell, Charitable Donations, ummm, Fabular Foundation… No CIA, he notes.

In the afternoon Ken progresses little on his assignment. He spends a long time upstairs in the library pretending to be immersed in the collection's small Russian section. The selection on the USSR is limited to pamphlets and magazines with articles much like the one he's been instructed to write. Well, that solves one problem at least, Ken thinks. Libraries always have a soothing effect on him. Around half-past-three the room begins to empty and the tearoom fills up, but the stairs are too busy for Ken to return to the office of Finance Files. He takes a few items with him and goes downstairs.

Back in the antechamber Ken pulls the paper out of the typewriter and rolls in a fresh sheet. He can hear Enright's muffled voice from his office coming in waves: he sounds louder than usual but then his voice softens and fades away. A little while later the office door opens and Ken gets that smell again: without turning around he knows it is Miss Tingle. She is sniffing a little as she moves across the antechamber and out.

The next day, Wednesday, Ken comes in at nine, hoping to have more privacy. Miss Tingle is already stationed in the cubicle next to Ken's, not the main desk with the flashing orange light, he notes. Ken assumes Mr. Enright has not yet arrived from Miss Tingle's friendly and talkative manner. In fact she confides that she's been demoted to office assistant, that Enright no longer wants her as his principal personal secretary.

"He's a fool, you know. I know the systems here inside out, much more so than *young Master Locke*." This is how Enright refers to the man who has replaced her.

"May I ask why you were demoted, Miss Tingle?"

"He doesn't say, exactly. But recently he's been barking at me more than usual, especially when I know something about the writers or financiers or distributors that he has forgotten. Once he said I was 'getting ideas into my head' and that it was dangerous for 'someone in my position'."

“What rot!” Ken says with perhaps too much enthusiasm.

“Anyway, I ought to keep my mouth shut if I want a job here at all. What about you? Why are you here?”

“Ahh, I’m terribly interested in how things work around here, which is why I so enjoyed your tour yesterday, Miss Tingle. Mr. Enright is a fascinating man. I think I can learn a lot from him.”

Miss Tingle laughs and shakes her head slightly, turning back to her work.

Ken blushes, wondering what he said that offended her. She’s a sophisticated city girl. Why would she be concerned about what I have to say? And yet, I feel she has a certain curiosity… He turns back to the typewriter and adds several sloppy paragraphs to his now mainly plagiarised article.

Some time later Mr. Enright comes into the antechamber, accompanied by Mr. Locke who takes his hat and coat. Enright talks all the while to his new secretary, as if the other two are not there, then the pair of them go into Enright’s office. “Well, that was rather rude!” Ken makes an effort to get Miss Tingle back on side.

She whispers, “It was the same when I first arrived. Once he had me, he ignored his old secretary. He just chews us up and spits us out! When she warned me I thought she was jealous.”

Before too long the orange light flashes on and off with a buzzer accompaniment. Both Ken and Miss Tingle turn to look at the unoccupied central desk and then each other. Miss Tingle gives him a wink and turns back to her desk. Again the buzzer goes, a more staccato rhythm this time: burr-burr-burr-burr-burr. Moments later the office door is opened by Mr. Locke and Enright calls from its depths, “Miss Tingle, come here.”

She goes to him; he begins to question her, with some contempt, as soon as she appears in the doorway. “Miss Tingle, do you not hear the buzzer?”

She answers sweetly, “I hear it; but that is no longer my desk, Mr. Enright. I did not know if —” And then the room swallows her as the heavy door falls shut. The scene from yesterday afternoon replays: Enright’s voice coming in waves then Miss Tingle sniffing across the antechamber.

That’s it, thinks Ken, This is the best chance I’ll have. I’ll find her, I’ll sympathise with her, I’ll ask for help.

Ken finds Miss Tingle in the tearoom preparing tea for two, redder than ever. She's fuming and when she notices Ken approach she turns away. He wastes no time. "Miss Tingle, may I speak with you, in private?" There are others in the tearoom, young men eyeing Miss Tingle with curiosity.

She finishes setting the tea things on a tray and says, "What is it, Mr. McKinnon? I've got enough troubles for now."

Ken turns his back on the tea-drinkers and speaks in a low voice as he stands beside Miss Tingle, "I can see you're upset, Enright's treating you like a second rate servant. You're an intelligent young woman, I can see that. Just give me a moment in the library."

She rolls her eyes at him, picks up the tray and leaves the room; Ken follows her into a quiet corner of the library.

"Miss Tingle, do you want to do something really good, something worthwhile, something to tell your grandchildren about?"

"You'd better get to the point, Mr. McKinnon, this tea-tray is heavy." Her voice is haughty, but Ken thinks her eyes look a little tired and scared.

He peers around to make sure they are unobserved and speaks in a hushed voice. "Mr. Enright, this magazine, is a propaganda machine. It is funded by the CIA, the American Central Intelligence Agency. You can be assured they have a file on you by now. I'm here… I'm here to find evidence. Can you help me?"

Her sudden grin enlivens them both. "I knew there was something strange about you! So, are you a spy? Are you Australian Intelligence? Is Mr. McKinnon even your real name?"

"Yes, yes, I'm just Mr. McKinnon and we must get back to work. But please think about my request, Miss Tingle. You know the systems better than anyone. I need proof of funding, names, addresses."

At half-past twelve Ken goes to the tearoom and eats a ham and cheese sandwich thoughtfully prepared by Elsie. Ahh, Elsie, my love, my helpmate, Ken thinks. I've neglected you this week, but I know your selflessness when it comes to the cause. From Elsie, Ken's mind wanders helplessly to Miss Tingle and inevitably a comparison is set up.

Such different women, and yet, with some of the same fire. But of course, Miss Tingle is much younger, with the spark of youth… Ken stops himself and focuses on his

sandwich. After lunch he will retype his article, now of a suitable length. With Miss Tingle's help, perhaps his work is done! But what if she wants something from him? With this uncomfortable thought, Ken rushes back to his cubicle.

Some time later Enright and Mr. Locke leave the office for a late lunch. Enright stops and hovers over Ken's desk. "How's that first piece coming along, McKinnon?"

"It will be on your desk this afternoon," says Ken.

"Well, I'll have a subeditor look over it. And we'll talk about remuneration, an office, your future at *Tetrameter*."

"Wonderful!" says Ken.

Enright and Locke leave and Miss Tingle follows two minutes later. Ken worries for a little while that she is going upstairs to turn him in. He works all the faster on his final rewrite, as if this demonstrates his innocence of any wrongdoing. Thinking this way reminds him of the several source materials still scattered around his desk. He had better return them immediately, and that will give him an opportunity to look out for Miss Tingle, too. He doesn't see her on the way up to the library nor on the way down. He procrastinates with an unnecessary visit to the toilet. When he returns to the antechamber Miss Tingle is back, working with her head down and typing rapidly. Ken relaxes and goes on with his work at his own pecking pace. Then Miss Tingle's machine stops abruptly and Ken hears the page removed from it and she leaves the room.

She soon returns and sits at her desk, looking straight ahead though evidently speaking to Ken. "I'll have to keep this quick, so listen well. *Tetrameter* receives donations from all sorts, but only little bits and pieces. The big money all comes from ACCF, the Committee for Cultural Freedom, Kreuger and Ramington, remember? I went through their files. Here is a copy of the names and addresses of their financiers. By far the most generous contributor is the Fabular Foundation. I can't be sure of what they do. But a few of these names I recognise: Ralph Braden is a millionaire industrialist, he plays golf with Kreuger. Samuel Moore is a wealthy magazine publisher, an old rival of Enright's. Why he would be making donations to a competitor, I do not know, but he is regular and generous with his contributions. I don't know if this helps you. It's all I can do." She slides a folded sheet of paper across her desk and Ken takes it, his hand resting on hers. This time neither of them moves for a little while.

“Thankyou, Miss Tingle,” says Ken, taking back his hand and the precious paper. Perhaps it will be worthless to the Executive back at home but for now it seems the manifestation of a remarkable three days’ work.

Miss Tingle goes on, more excited now. “I shall probably lose my job. I won’t be able to pay my rent. I will have to go back to begging from my parents. Unless… Never mind. I can see from your ring that you’re married.”

Ken coughs, embarrassed. “Yes, Elsie, my wife is Elsie. We are very happy. We have two sons. I’m sorry, Miss Tingle, if you thought… I am just an ordinary man.” He looks around even though they are alone in the antechamber. Miss Tingle is watching him carefully. “There is no reason for you to lose your job, Miss Tingle, you were most professional. In fact I will recommend you: perhaps you have guessed I work for… Charlie Parker?” Ken speaks with halting reverence.

Miss Tingle blinks.

“Charlie Parker, CP?” Ken drops to a barely audible whisper. “Communist Party. I’m undercover.”

“Oh,” says Miss Tingle. “Oh,” she says again, looking through different piles of papers on her desk, rolling a fresh sheet into her machine. “Well, now we both have a secret.”

WILL STALIN’S DEATH BRING THE BIRTH OF LITERATURE TO THE SOVIETS? is complete, several sheets stacked on his desk next to the typewriter. Mr. Enright returned to his office a little while ago, without his secretary. Mr. Locke came in later and took his place at the antechamber’s central large desk, the one with the orange flashing light. With Mr. Locke in the middle and Miss Tingle and Ken along one side, the small room was feeling decidedly crowded. They were sardined a full half-hour before Miss Tingle went up for tea. Ken would love a cup of tea, there is nothing he’d rather have at this moment. But he has finished and wants to go home. He is waiting for Enright to call him. But then, perhaps he should just go? Enright has no hold over him now. But Miss Tingle, what would he say to Miss Tingle? Nothing, if he leaves now. That’s the easiest. He pushes his chair out and looks over his shoulder and the hat and coat corner. Yes, he can see his things. Mr. Locke catches his gaze and frowns.

The orange light-buzzer goes on: one long tone. Mr. Locke goes to Enright's door. "He will see you now," Locke mutters to no-one in particular.

Ken takes his magazine piece and gets up. He feels rather calm, relieved. It doesn't matter what happens, he just has to get out with the paper in his trouser pocket.

Enright asks him to sit down, even offers him a drink; Enright himself is having a large whisky; of course Ken refuses. Enright takes a quick look at Ken's piece. "Alright Mr. McKinnon. I can see you're capable of putting together an article. A new assignment tomorrow, a new office. What were you getting at your last post?"

Ken tells him truly, he can think of no advantage in lying.

"I'll match that and add five percent. You can have the first fortnight's pay at the end of the week: I know you have some expenses. So, say nine tomorrow?"

"Well, ahh…" Ken stammers a little, "I, I'd like some time to think, if that's alright with you, Mr. Enright. To be honest I expected a little more."

"Ha ha hah!" Enright roars. "You're all the same, aren't you? Just like everyone else after all! It all comes down to cold hard cash in the end."

Ken is puzzled. Enright goes on.

"You think I don't know who you are, Ken McKinnon, but I do. These last few days have been a sort of test: I wanted to see what you could do. 'If they're going to all this trouble,' I thought, 'they must be sending someone pretty good.' So here's what I think. You'll take my offer because you're finished over there. I've got this article, written by you, which declares your true feelings and for which you'll take my money." He puts Ken's article in a drawer, throws back the whisky and barks, "Go!"

13 — Peter

Sometimes when I'm sitting at my desk I close my eyes and feel a regular thump, thump, coming up from beneath, coming through my shoulders and back. The first time I remember it happening in recent years I felt like I was swaying and I opened my eyes to regain my balance but I hadn't actually moved. I say "recent years" because this sensation of internal rhythm must have been there all along, like a heartbeat; it is only my sense of it that changes. Perhaps there is nothing so very profound in this, an internal meditative space where one's heartbeat fills the place of consciousness, echoing into spaceless unconsciousness… But it is more than that, because this rhythm can be drawn out, or rather, drawn into waking life and its motion carries me along. Suddenly it is all around, reflected in the movement of the tree branches in the wind, the djitti-djitti hopping from branch to branch, its tail pulsing up-down, up-down. I'm riding a wave of subterranean perception.

This sense can guide my writing, on a good day. Not just the content of it, the choice of words and rhythm of phrases, but the fact of the work itself. Never mind if it remains obscure and isolated, it is my very own and seems a necessary counterweight to the studiousness with which I approach the half of me I give to the raising of my daughter. The rhythm helps me balance the tugging of Skye and the equally strong desire to make something of my own.

When I feel it, I write, and when the flow stops I go to Skye, if she and Dad aren't out. Dad has developed such a wonderful connection with her these last months that at times I feel envious and resent him for allowing me the freedom to love something else. It is all very well to intuit the flow but it makes it difficult to accommodate unplanned events. Apparently other people have their own flow. Sometimes Skye pointedly ignores me, especially if it has been a couple of days since I've spent time with them. Weekends, mornings, nights are still my time alone with Skye of course, but at two-and-a-half years old, she loves me the most and punishes me the most if I fail to live up to her expectations.

Uncle Peter had his own rhythm too and it began intersecting with mine in a frustrating manner: he was getting impatient. He phoned me a couple of weeks (he said it had been a month) after I'd visited him at home and he'd set me the task of solving the

puzzle of the two poems. I hadn't really thought about it since then. He began calling me every few days and I got tired of offering the same excuses and hadn't the spirit to invent new ones. I decided it would be more efficient to go ahead and play Peter's poetry game.

I did what I thought I'd do: went 'net hunting. Which is a better metaphor, I think, than to surf. The surfing implies a certain elevation, a perspective that, though surrounded by water, commands the water. Whereas I felt more as if I were chasing an elusive something, catching glimpses of it as it disappeared in the forest of choices and choices and choices. The right path had a certain feel to it, a smell that said, on! On! My efforts were rewarded with morsels of information, not the fine something I'd been anticipating but enough bits and pieces to keep me going. In the end I did solve the puzzle. Uncle Peter had made a small error in transcribing one of the poems, which threw me off. And the other poem now officially appears only in the 1974 edited version, which is slightly but significantly different from the original, republished several times. Peter had used the older version.

"One was written by a young man who died before it was published and both were written by a Catholic Cold Warrior. Who are the writers?" It was a nineteen forties hoax: the first poem was written by one Stewart Enright, poet, soldier, teacher, literary editor, Catholic convert, Cold Warrior. Enright's alter ego Nestor Grub wrote the second poem. Grub died tragically without knowing of his success, this was the story launched by Enright in order to make fools of the champions of modern verse. When the real identity of Nestor Grub was revealed, Enright claimed he'd constructed deliberately bad poems in the modern style.

Despite myself I was excited. Here was a story I had read about in Ken's diaries: after my fevered hunt I'd had Stewart Enright, Soldier Poet, stacked somewhere on my bookshelf all along. Perhaps Enright was Ken's missing link between 1945 and 1954. I phoned Peter straight away and without announcing who I was, launched into the full "Discipline of Poetry". Peter listened patiently throughout the four verses and at the end said with a laugh, "Yes, you've got it! Now the other one."

I recited:

If, after all, you find yourself empty of
Meaning, devoid of all dangerous belief —
Rake your fingers across the hollow
And follow the songlines into the distance.
Transformation complete,
Meaninglessness made more, and

What was nothing now resounds, for
Here abound your instruments of pleasure —
Make a note, take a measure, as
Along each string your fate does pluck, and
Within the hollow your soul is stirring
Roused from slumber, perhaps I'll follow.

"And who wrote these poems?"

I told Peter the story as I knew it, including my suspicions about Enright. He was very pleased and couldn't restrain the laughter in his voice. It made me laugh to listen to his pleasure and we shared a few moments' joy before self-consciousness crept in. "Peter, you've got to get out more," I said. Later I was ashamed that I'd disavowed the feeling. Shit! I've got to get out more, I thought, and resolved to get in touch with Peter soon and arrange some time out together.

As I'd searched for Peter's poems online I came across references to other literary hoaxes in Australia: it seems to be an increasingly common occurrence in this country. When a hoax passes undetected into the public arena, in a glow of cleverness the hoax is revealed and, so the hoaxers believe, their point proven. Publishers, critics, readers have been fooled into rewarding category over artistic merit. Or have they? Hoaxes have a way of turning back on themselves. When false identities are laid bare and the hoaxers examined, are they really pure enough to be poking the finger, especially when their tricks cause pain to others?

And yet, a good hoax is clearly appealing and broadly defended. Never do the arts make as good copy as when a hoax has been exposed, though the matter sinks just as quickly, returning to the source. It's like telling a sick joke at a dinner party. It's not wrong, but you've got to do it just right to get away with it. Many appreciate the release, the relief of hearing such thoughts out loud. But behind it there is something unsaid, something denied, something shameful. What is it? Who is it? Who am I?

In this way, my excitement was ground away by an incessant series of questions.

We McKinnons are a melancholy bunch; we enjoy our own company, especially if we're feeling low. There's something so attractive about being alone and pondering the form of one's aloneness. Who am I? Perhaps it is the same for everyone, alone together, like dolls sitting next to each other on the shelves of the Museum, staring straight ahead.

The more you're a stranger, the stranger you are. It's easy to slide into isolation with the modern world's array of electronic companions, but I'm not attracted to the aesthetic of the screen, the push-button, all the multiplying media. Who could witness my misery with so much competition? So there's the rub: the beauty of misery lies in the unclaimed territory between alone and not-alone, the strange-lands where a glimmer of hope on the horizon promises the dawning of another One, alone and hoping. Some opt for the surer bet of the on-switch. Others are lucky enough to have a family. The luckiest hang on to their family.

Peter had been in love once. Only once, as far as I know, though there may have been other, less dramatic affairs that escaped the family's (that is, Elsie's) attention. He wasn't a prime candidate for the romantic hero at the time he graduated from university with a degree in political philosophy in the early sixties. He was still rather fat and for all his intellect, an awkward conversationalist. He got a job in the public service.

Dad always had his music. Peter greatly appreciated music of course, his kind of music, but it didn't own him. Peter needed something bigger than himself; he was forever looking for his group. He was a member of various organisations including a classical music appreciation group, an ornithological association and a political lobby group against conscription which he joined after Bruce was a victim of the draft in 1966. But despite these efforts Peter grew in upon himself. He continued to live with his mother and father throughout his twenties and to be buffeted by their hopes and expectations.

Peter was a romantic and fantasised about meeting a beautiful blonde woman at a classical music recital, but it never happened. When I was a child I remember Uncle Peter introducing me to the word "romance" in its simplest sense. We were bushwalking together, something we did a lot of in the olden days. Perhaps I asked why he had no children, or something like that, I don't know, but I think he was trying to tell me that

before children there has to be a romance and he didn't have one. I don't think I understood exactly what he meant but I understood "romance" immediately: it sounds like "France" and was therefore good, though unusual, beautiful and maybe a little bit naughty. I was much older when Peter told me about Jenny, whom he met at his bird-watching group.

It was 1968; he was twenty-six years old. She was a painter making a study of birds in flight and had come to a meeting of the ornithological association seeking assistance for her renditions. It just happened that Peter was making a presentation that evening, showing some slides from his recent trip to Dwellingup. Slide photography was a poor man's substitute for movie making, but still it was Peter's only creative outlet and he felt great pride in his images. He was the youngest member of the group but the most proficient photographer.

Jenny gravitated towards him after his presentation. Peter found her surprisingly easy to talk to and they agreed to go on a bird-watching day trip together, just the two of them. They fell in love and saw a lot of each other over the next couple of years. When Jenny graduated from her university course, Peter asked her to marry him but she said no. She needed to travel, maybe after she had been to London. Jenny asked Peter to come with her; she knew he had some money saved. But he declined; that money was for their house. What's the point of travelling if you haven't a home to come back to? Peter asked.

Jenny went away and Peter didn't leave his parents' home for a week. He put on more weight and soon he was heavier than when he first met Jenny. He received a letter from her but its contents were vague and its tone ambiguous. Peter threw himself into his work, putting in long hours while other men went home to their families. At home he sat at his desk and listened to Wagner at high volume, until Elsie lost her temper and told him to toss out the record or find his own home. By his thirtieth year, Peter realised that Jenny wasn't coming back.

Skye and I were on our way to Peter's house: we were picking him up and taking him out for a movie. It was a kids' film, a cartoon, Peter had always had a soft spot for cartoons and it would be Skye's first ever movie experience. We took Winkle too, her star-shaped soft-toy. I was pretty sure Skye would fall asleep during the movie because all the way there she chatted and sang. "Winkle Winkle little star…"

Skye and I found Uncle Peter in a bad mood. His face was long and his shoulders more hunched than ever. He didn't want to go to a movie, it would be too loud. Skye would catch a cold in the chilly cinema. And there was nowhere decent to eat.

Skye was drawn to the colourful spines in Peter's record cabinet and with an irrepressible gurgle, pulled a few out. Peter yelled "No, Skye! Don't touch those!" as if she were in danger: she started to cry. I sighed as I sat down with her and suggested we have a cup of tea.

Uncle Peter doesn't know much about kids so we make a lot of the interests we do share: music and movies, literature and history. As with most things, his taste is old-fashioned. I don't know what Peter was like before Jenny, but if he's anything like Dad, and he must be at least a little like Dad, he's not good at moving on. He was well into his thirties before he moved out of home. In 1975 he went on a tour of Europe and spent a month in London haunting galleries and museums: I'd bet he was looking for Jenny.

I was born in 1980 and Peter took an interest in me. I think he knew he'd never have children of his own and saw an opportunity to be involved, especially after Amy left. I stayed with him a lot when I was a kid, with Dad working at night. I preferred staying with Uncle Peter to Gran and Pop, who were well past horseplay. Peter loved being the favoured one and having a playmate of his own. He chose all the games we played: model railways, boys' own adventure stories, slide shows, but I didn't care. As I grew older his interest became more distant and avuncular. In the nineties, Uncle Peter took it upon himself to send me to a "good school" and revelled in his own generosity, eyes bright when he asked me about my progress as if anticipating being overwhelmed with gratitude. Dad didn't push me to be eternally thankful, pointing out that Peter did it for his own pleasure. Dad tended to think that all schools were about equally oppressive anyway.

Peter's and my relationship was complex, with intertwining strands of obligation and happy memories, contrasting needs and incompatible disappointments. That morning I felt frustrated with him: I knew his objectionable social persona was a cover for his loneliness, but knowing that didn't always give me the patience I needed to relate to him. Over our pot of tea I talked Peter round to the idea that getting out would be good for him and he eventually agreed to get in the car with us. We were to go past a pharmacy to get earplugs and then out for a bite to eat at a place I knew Peter would approve of.

He ate lunch in silence and seemed not to notice Skye's attention seeking efforts: spilling her drink, once she threw a piece of bread at him but it fell short. As I negotiated Skye's antics I asked him if I could test his memory once more. My rhythm had been interrupted, I felt riled up, tired of being understanding. Or maybe I was learning a new rhythm, a stilted, syncopated one.

"Hmmmm?" Peter said.

"I've been thinking about Amy," and before he could back out, "How much do you know about my mother and about where she went?"

"Hmmmm?" he said again. "Your mother?" To my great consternation he waited for a confirmation. I nodded.

"Not much, Carly, not much at all."

"Well, what? What *do* you know?" Now I had his attention. Peter put down his bread roll and fastidiously wiped his hands with a paper serviette.

"We were told that she went down south. There was a commune, or something."

"Who told you?"

"I think the information came from a police detective. At first your dad made a missing persons' report. Then this information came back."

"What was the detective's name?"

Peter sighed and appeared weighed down. "I don't remember. Mum never believed him of course, but that hardly sets him apart. Maybe he was one of Dad's old cronies, I'm not sure. Now Carly," Peter said, pointing to my unfinished quiche, "I don't want to rush your meal, but we ought to get going. What time did you say the next session was?"

Peter turned to Skye and whistled the theme tune from a cartoon we watched together twenty years ago. He clapped his hands and whistled it again, an unashamed bid to engage Skye's attention now that it suited him. In the end I think he saw the movie with us to avoid being asked any more questions.

14 — The Fair Go Players do *The Jumbuck Jig*

"I don't suppose what I want matters," Elsie begins when she and Gill and the children sit down to breakfast. "But there is a mill in Surry Hills that a comrade at home told me I really must see, like something out of Dickens. To think that Australians are forced to work under such conditions in 1954!"

On Friday, the seventh day of the McKinnons' stay, long grey clouds gathered around the dawn. Bruce and Peter had been keen on a trip to the zoo but the morning's ominous weather has put a stop to that and privately, Elsie is relieved. She went to bed early last night but didn't sleep well and squawking animals to accompany screeching children is the last thing her nerves need.

"Oh, no, Elsie, that's not true, of course what you want is important!" Gill pops the last bit of toast-and-marmalade into her mouth and wipes away the crumbs with a serviette. In a somewhat hesitant voice she adds as an afterthought, "Although the girls have been very keen on seeing the Queen. You know the Queen is in Sydney this week?"

Elsie gives a little laugh, "Oh Gillian, you don't *really* get excited by all that nonsense do you? The *Queen*? What has the Queen got to do with Australian life?"

Gill pours herself another cup of tea. "Oh I don't know Elsie. The girls were excited."

"She's a real live Queen, Aunty Elsie," it is Linley, the eldest of Gill's children, "the Queen of Australia."

"It's like a story, but true," says nine-year-old Alison, the middle child.

"I can't think of anything more boring than standing on the street waiting for a lady to drive past in a car. I won't go," Peter weighs into the conversation. Outside, the wind is whipping up a fuss. There will be rain later.

"I love her dresses," says Irene, the youngest.

Bruce seems nonplussed; he has nothing to add to this conversation. The other children begin to speak on top of one another and Elsie says to herself, loud enough for all to hear, "It is just as I thought: what *I* want doesn't matter."

Gill makes a decision and stands. “Never mind, girls, we’ll join the Queen’s leaving party next week. We’ve never been to a mill. A visit to a mill sounds *very* interesting, doesn’t it?” She smiles at them all.

Later that afternoon the sky is still heavy and low and it hasn’t yet rained. The day has been a success and Elsie is relaxing with a cup of tea that Gillian insisted she take, sitting down alone in the dining room while the children play outside. It is kind of Gill to give Elsie a rest; she finds the five children too much to bear sometimes and the girls are so shrill and demanding. The sky isn’t the only thing weighing down: Elsie is expecting her monthly and is anxious for the flood of blood that has become the norm to be under way before they begin the journey home.

Gillian has really been a wonderful hostess, as if to make up for Max’s absences during their visit. Max works as an accountant for a large firm in the city, which is hard for him because by disposition he is a jolly man, and this probably explains his enthusiasm for acting. He is a founding member of the Fair Go Players and is in their current production, *The Jumbuck Jig*, taking the part of Mr. Gleddon, the hero’s father-in-law.

“Max only takes on a large role once or twice a year and we forgive him for being away from the family when we see the shows. Oh, Elsie, you ought to have seen Max’s Dave Bloom in *Bring the Boys Home*!” Gill had enthused on the way home from the mill, taking her eyes away from the road for a moment to smile broadly at Elsie, who didn’t manage to keep the panic out of her voice when she replied:

“Watch out, Gillian, the road! Yes, now that Ken has been elected Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom, he will be away at least three evenings a week. But that’s the role, isn’t it. We support our men in their endeavours. And they support us too, of course.” Gillian had nodded her assent.

Elsie finishes her tea and is about to take the things into the kitchen when she’s stopped short in the hall, overhearing Gill speak on the telephone to Max, urging him to come home after work and spend some time with his family and the McKinnons.

Evidently Gillian prevailed: it is the first meal they’ve been all together. Max is warming himself up for tonight’s performance and riding high on the success of the show. He appears to be able to combine eating, talking and smoking virtually at the same time. He

regales them with snippets from the saga of behind-the-scenes drama within the Fair Go Players.

"We have communist and non-communist members, just as we did when we began," Max says. "The ratio of one to the other has fluctuated over the years, depending on the popularity of theatre and communism at any particular time. The communist members take it for granted that ASIO has infiltrated our group and say we must push ahead with the workers' themes in order to weed out the traitor. But I think everyone's having too much fun to give themselves away!" Max laughs loudly and barely pauses for breath before going on. "There are fewer communist Players but they are persuasive and the local press love nothing more than to drum up *affairs*," he mouths the word, "between communist and non-communist Players. It's not nearly so shocking among we thespians, you know."

Gillian adds, "The charter clearly states that the Fair Go Players support Australian themes over English, or any other foreign themes. But what are Australian themes? That's what they argue about. It was the Party members who got hold of *The Jumbuck Jig* and we all see the success it is enjoying. What I can't understand is why would ASIO target the Fair Go Players?"

"You're ahead of your time, that's what it is. In the future, revolutionary themes will be the norm, rather than the exception to the rule." Ken speaks with the confidence of the converted. "They can't stand to see a community organisation where communists and non-communists work together, because that undermines the notion that Party members are different and dangerous."

"So, who's looking forward to going to the theatre tonight to watch uncle Max in *The Jumbuck Jig*?" says Max, raising his voice and looking down the table at the children. "You, Peter? Bruce?"

Bruce and Peter nod and the girls, in the pride of their experience, clamour to tell them what they may expect.

"Friday's a good night to go," Max adds, looking at Elsie. "The audience is ready to relax after a hard working week."

"I do hope there is nothing vulgar in it, Maxwell," Elsie says hesitantly.

"No fear, Elsie. You'll be charmed," Max assures her.

* * *

The Jumbuck Jig went up a fortnight ago and the Murrays have seen the show several times already but for Friday night's performance Gillian has arranged front row seats. The theatre is small but has good seating and the Murray girls consider each visit a treat. The Fair Go Players have not had a hit like *The Jumbuck Jig* since they made the Newtown Community Theatre their own in 1948, on the success of *Bring the Boys Home*. There is a full house most nights so they'll play on another week at least.

The curtains part on a vivid set with straw-bales on one side, a coppery horizon and azure sky. The music is live and loud: musicians dressed in workers' flannels assemble themselves on the straw-bales and play fiddles and home made percussive instruments. At the end of the opening number Ken turns to Peter who is sitting next to him and says, "Truly, this is real folk music, the people's music."

Peter has his fingers in his ears and so he doesn't hear what his father says. It is easy to tell what they're singing about without the noise and he enjoys it so much more with the softening effect of muted sound. It's silly, really, *The Jumbuck Jig*, but the characters capture him and he cannot help but be carried along with the crowd who are eagerly amused at every little gesture, the villain's limp, the heroine's faints. Peter pays close attention to the story, generously interpreting for Bruce who is sitting on his other side.

After the show, Elsie, Gillian and the children make their way out to the car, leaving Ken behind to wait for Max. "Well Peter," Gillian looks expectantly at him. "What did you think?"

"It would make a good film," says Peter, seriously. He's visualising the spectacle unfolding silently before him. "Aunty Gillian, don't you wish you could have Uncle Max on film?"

Earlier in the week, Gill had appealed on Peter's behalf during a re-run of the worn-out discussion with Elsie on why Peter can't go to the movies. "Oh Elsie, they're not that bad," Gillian chastised in a softly mocking voice. Elsie had said nothing, offended at the interference. Gillian went on: "But Peter, I'll go one better than seeing a movie show. We have a movie camera with some film around here somewhere. Max can't figure out how it works. If you can, how would you like to use it?"

Peter had nodded enthusiastically, but Elsie warned: “Don’t go spoiling him, Gillian. We wont be able to keep it up.”

“Nonsense, Elsie, they belonged to my brother. The film needs to be used,” she said, going to find it. All week, Peter has been Aunty Gillian’s most willing assistant in the kitchen, if not quite so willing in the garden, looking to her for allegiance. She enjoys Peter’s steady seriousness, so unlike her daughters.

Gillian unlocks the roomy family Chrysler and the children tumble in. Peter hangs back, waiting for a response. Gill says tentatively, “I would love to have Uncle Max on film, Peter. There’s one more performance before you go, tomorrow night, perhaps Max will take you, if it’s alright with Elsie, of course.”

There is a moment’s silence while Elsie searches for a reason to object. It’s true she hasn’t seen Peter this happy for some time, but what happens when they go home? Elsie says, “We’ll see,” and the subject is closed. “I really admire your freedom at the wheel, Gill. It must be so convenient to drive around with Max away so much. Ken’s teaching me to drive, which is just as well, I suppose. Did I tell you that he’s been elected Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom?”

“Yes, Elsie, you did.” Gillian turns over the engine and covers a sigh.

Ken is standing against the lobby wall as the large crowd mills past him and out of the Newtown Community Theatre. It has been a long week and he enjoyed a good belly laugh this evening but now he feels empty, like an egg with its insides blown out. Wednesday afternoon he left Enright House with the ACCF paper in his pocket; he should feel elated but is strangely let down. Yet, wasn’t it worth the trip to see for himself the machinations of corrupt power? Know thy enemy, or something like that. The drive over was difficult and they’ve still got to get home, and yet, wasn’t it worth meeting the Owens and sharing their Australia? For the first time in months Ken feels moved to write a poem.

Soon the performers appear and Ken greets Max and the crowd moves habitually to the nearest pub, the Green Hat. Ken would have liked to talk privately with Max but they are swept along with the others. For a moment Ken imagines he catches a glimpse of a familiar-looking head, tall with thick fair hair, then it is gone and before too long he finds himself ensconced in a booth with men all around him and a beer in front. It is only when

he feels a set of bony knees touching his, attached to long legs underneath the tabletop, that he notices Comrade Piggot from Perth sitting opposite. He grins and says: “Comrade Wilde. Fancy meeting you here.”

Ken contains his surprise in a nod and turns to Max, who is laughing at someone else’s joke. Why wouldn’t Comrade Piggot tell me he was going to be in Sydney? Ken wonders. Was that a sneer in his voice? I don’t trust him: how much does he know about what’s going on?

With Max alongside him, Ken makes conversation as best he can in the noisy, smoky atmosphere, asking about *The Jumbuck Jig*’s lyricist who is “almost as good as Lawson”, in Ken’s estimation. But all the while Ken is distracted and silently watches Comrade Piggot, wondering, what if Bill has sent him here to keep an eye on me? No, Bill wouldn’t do that. The Executive would never fund it.

Comrade Piggot is talking to the young chap next to him who took the lead role in the play. He and Comrade Piggot are laughing together and Max joins in. Moments later, introductions are taking place and Ken is required to participate.

“Forgive me, Ken, I forgot you don’t know everyone here. Ken McKinnon, Scott Ranley,” Max indicates Ken, then the young man, with his beer glass. “You already know Don Ditchards, I suppose.”

“Yes, we are well acquainted,” Comrade Piggot, or rather Don Ditchards, answers before Ken can. “In fact, we will be working on some important projects together.”

That’s not how Ken would have characterised their acquaintance, but he manages to nod in agreement as he turns to Scott Ranley.

“Call me Scott. Pleased to meet you comrade, Comrade —?” Scott Ranley speaks very quickly like Max and Ken thinks it must be something to do with them being actors.

“Wilde. Comrade Wilde.” It is not usual to use one’s Party pseudonym outside of meetings but for Ken, it is too tempting an invitation to pass up. He asks some leading questions about *The Jumbuck Jig* and Scott Ranley is happy to tell him that it took only eight weeks to produce and has made forty pounds profit so far. Ken warms to the young fellow and says to him: “Tell me comrade, how do you find audiences respond to the Australian flavour of your production, while we live in a world of American movies and English plays?”

Ranley is pleased and answers eagerly. “That’s a very good question, comrade. The director and I try to bring it out without drawing attention to it, if you know what I mean. It’s a love story, it just happens the hero’s a shearer. And the audience loves it. There’s always a group of em join in ‘The Jumbuck Jig’ Refrain in the final number. Under socialism, of course, the people will see a lot more theatre so it won’t have to be so song-and-dance-y, I do straight acting too.” Despite this claim, Ranley stretches out his arm, glass in hand, and allows his melodic voice to ring out over the Green Hat as he sings the final verse of the Jumbuck Jig once more:

> Gather round the happy couple, a shearer and his wife,
> We’ll stick by them as they stuck by us, that is the union life.
> For city ways and lazy days we could not give a fig,
> United we stand, take me by the hand as we dance the Jumbuck Jig!

There is scattered applause and Ranley looks like he might just be getting started. He runs up and down a few scales: “Mi-mi-mi-mi-mi…”

It is becoming a bit much for Don Ditchards. “Who’s got the next round?” he shouts. His loud voice goes right over Ranley’s and the young man stops short and looks at him. Ditchards says pointedly, “Ranley, are you in the money, or not?”

“Give us a minute, will ya, comrade,” says Ranley, a little red in the face. He sits and sloshes down what remains in his glass and then hunches forward in a conspiratorial way, forming one part of a private conversation. Ditchards and Max, Ken and one or two others sitting at the end of the booth follow suit. Ranley speaks clearly and quietly; Ken watches his mouth move. “Comrades, listen. A union man known to me, the Secretary of the Federated Ironworkers, has recently returned from the United States with some very important information from the leader of the Communist Party there: Earl Campbell. The kind of information the reactionaries don’t want us to have, about how to make socialism work.”

Max pulls backs from the huddle and lets go a loud snort: “I think Senator McCarthy has taught us all the Yanks have to say about socialism!” The other men lift their drinks and light their cigarettes, turning back to their conversations.

Ditchards reclines a little, spreading himself out, but his attention remains on Ranley. Ken feels disappointed in Max’s mockery and shakes his head, however it is

Ditchards he waggles his pointer finger at, saying, “It is exactly because of the extremely hostile climate in the United States that the Communist Party there has something to teach us.” Ken looks at Ranley for him to go on.

“We have, that is, myself and my trusted comrades, been meeting to discuss Campbell’s ideas. I know he’s a Yankee, but he supports a peaceful, co-operative transition to socialism. I think this will be of interest to you, Comrade Wilde.”

“Well, yes, I am interested.” Ken’s eyes are met by Ranley’s and he feels their warmth, but pulls back a little. “Leader of the Party in the United States? Does he have the sanction of Central Committee?”

“Oh, well I’m just a new recruit, I’ll have to defer to a comrade with more experience than myself to answer that.” Ranley looks to Don Ditchards, who looks back at Ranley and says, “Perhaps the Secretary of the Federated Ironworkers will enlighten us?”

“I’m not *entirely* sure…” Ken looks away and picks up his glass of beer as an afterthought. He sips it, tentatively at first; it is not quite so sharp and prickly now. He feels excited and flattered that this information has found him, in a pub in Sydney. The fragility he was feeling earlier on has dissolved; he is filled with hope and gratitude for disappointments that turn out to be opportunities. He’s both surprised and a little smug that the international brotherhood of communism has reached out to him. Ken notices Ditchard’s eyes flicking once, twice, to his near-full beer glass on the table between them, which he has again abandoned.

“Be a sport, McKinnon! Well, I’ve already given you my commitment to come to your discussion tomorrow and get a copy of Campbell’s statement,” Ditchards says. “I’ll pass it onto Comrade Wilde when I’ve finished with it.”

You’ll do no such thing! says Ken’s look, but he withholds giving Ditchards the satisfaction of speaking aloud.

Ranley ignores Ditchards and looks Ken in the eye when he says, “Meet me after the show tomorrow, comrade.” He sits back and with a final solemn nod between them, it is sealed.

Minutes later, Max drains the last of the beer from his glass, stretches and yawns. “I’m ready to quit while I have a head,” he says, getting up from the booth.

Ken shuffles out after him, nodding a brief good-bye to Ditchards and offering his hand to Ranley as he passes. Before they are even clear of the table, Ditchards takes up Ken's beer and slugs half of the warmed liquid down before breathing "Ahhh…" then grins, showing teeth and a frosted moustache.

When the McKinnons drive out of Sydney at the beginning of the third week of their holiday, to be spent, like the first, in their FX Holden, Ken feels elated at the wheel. He drives for longer stretches because the endless road seems to integrate his experiences. The bitumen rolls out before him as if new pathways are being trod in his brain. Through rural New South Wales he mulls over the implications of Campbellism, thinking about how these ideas could influence the comrades at home. Socialism tailored to Australian conditions: this could be just the thing our candidate needs in an election year, he thinks.

Only a fortnight ago the whole journey and mission seemed so formidable and now it is nearly over. When Scott Ranley learned that Ken had driven over the Eyre Highway to reach Sydney, he pleaded with him to put off his departure in order to address a group of young men about the adventure. Ken regretted that he had to tell Ranley his teaching schedule prohibited a delay. Every now and then Ken reads aloud a road sign or point of interest as they whiz past, but otherwise he is silent.

On the fourth day of steady driving Elsie thinks Ken should rest but he wants to keep moving. Just out of Wirulla he begins to weave a little and she is forced to intervene. He says, "It's just the gravel, I'm following the road's rhythm," but Elsie takes the wheel for a stretch and Ken snoozes.

Elsie begins very slowly, her progress remains unobstructed and the Holden's speed creeps up to forty miles-an-hour. A hundred miles to the next town, no-one else in sight and the sun at her back, she feels very pleased with herself and begins to find the ruminatory space hinted at before a carcass got in the way. What if the theatrical committee of the Perth branch of the Party could produce *The Jumbuck Jig*? Now that she's got the hang of the driving, she'll have the freedom to recruit a director and musicians before the next branch meeting. Off the top of her head she can think of eight or ten people who would love take it on, if she could just get to them. Enrol the Party faithful before her idea gets tangled in red tape.

On the fifth morning they get onto the 90–Mile Straight out of Cocklebiddy and the McKinnons do not stop, Ken and Elsie driving turn and turn about from sun up to sun down. They emerge from the dry interior into a drizzly Perth afternoon, with light specks of rain falling all the way home. Elsie points out a series of saucers hung out to wash in the long grass, flashing under the rain and sunset light. She looks for some sense in the circles of light, it takes her several moments to realise they are spiders' webs sprinkled with rain, all the same size to fit in the Vs of thatches of native grasses.

15 — Elsie

Amongst the evidence I have collected of my grandparents' lives as young adults is a portrait photograph of Elsie. Her face is full, shapely, fine-nosed. Her hair curls but is cropped sensibly short, held back from her face with a single pin. The photo is dated 1942, so she is a young mother, about the age I am now. Her expression is one of forbearance, or studied placidity. It is wartime, but by 1942 legality had been restored to the Communist Party and Labor was in power. Definitely a moment worth capturing.

There are only a few McKinnon photographs dating from this era and no family album. Those images that aren't framed and propped on bookshelves and desks, I found wrapped individually in tissue paper and inserted amongst the pages of certain books. Only in one photo do I see anything of myself. It is an outdoor shot of Elsie and baby Peter, between pages eighty-two and eighty-three of a first edition of *The Complete Adventures of Blinky Bill*. The resemblance resides somewhere around our cheekbones, maybe it's in the eyes, but like a star, when I look directly, the similarity disappears. Better to steal glances in passing. Perhaps it is just the classic maternal presentation of the baby that I recognise, hands clutching its torso and holding it forward: Look what I made!

Elsie's wartime dresses are like uniforms, with reinforced lapels and breast pockets. Into the nineteen fifties her dresses take on more feminine lines: bows and flounces, skirt-and-shirt combos that draw attention to the waist. But it is the dresses of the forties that flatter her best. After Skye was born I mostly wore the same clothes I'd worn before she was conceived. They were tighter on me, but in a way that made me feel feminine and curvaceous rather than trashy and grotesque.

A while ago I paid a spontaneous visit to Gran and Pop in a die-hard polyester shirt at least two decades old, in those shades of blue and green, (a summer sky and warm grass, with the edge taken off) that make me feel unreasonably happy. I loved that shirt despite its synthetic sins and wore it with my fascinating (to Skye and me at least) full breasts and frankly floppy tummy bulging the buttonholes. Elsie let me in, greeted me and offered to buy me a new outfit in one continuous sentence that began before the door was even open. "…saying to Ken that sounds like Carly and the baby, hello darling come in and you must remind me to get you a new frock, you poor dear." I let the patronising tone go, as one

could not afford to be easily offended around Elsie. The proposal was not out of character: Elsie was generous, if always measured. But I was immediately suspicious that she had an ulterior motive, and with good reason.

"We can't have you looking like that when we go to the Museum, can we?"

Shit, there it was again. I *just didn't like* the Museum. We sipped tea, Russian Caravan it was, whose smoky flavour I had acquired a taste for over time. Gran rattled on and my mind wandered. I was reminded of a previous visit: Elsie had told a story in a child's voice whilst looking wide-eyed at Skye. "When I was a little girl my granny from overseas sent me a beautiful china-headed doll but when it arrived its head was smashed. Mother cried and made me write to my granny, 'Dear Grandmamma, thankyou so much for the beautiful doll, I shall treasure her always.'" And then a bisque doll was taken down and reverently placed, for a few minutes, in the arms of carefully seated Skye, just as she'd done with me. The story was from the Elsie canon, its heavy familiarity told me so, but it was one I hadn't heard for many years. There was something I didn't like about it, plain old dishonesty turned into high artifice.

I don't think Elsie mentioned the Museum again that day in the lounge with the Russian Caravan, but she was in a provocative mood. I busied myself with Skye, bounced her from knee to knee and sang.

"Well, I suppose you're a natural mother after all. You must get that from me, Carly."

It was a cheap shot, even by Gran's standards of tactlessness. I was struck dumb and Elsie bulldozed on as if my silence licensed prying enquiries about my personal life, normally off-limits to grandmothers.

"So is there a special man in your life yet, Carly? It's really time you thought about a husband, dear. Oh, you know what I mean, whatever they call it these days, de facto."

My first response was to shut down, but then I thought, I can do this. It was a faint echo of the way I felt in the hospital when Skye was born and I was surrounded by strangers, naked and in pain. There came a point when I said to myself, fuck you all, I can't protect myself from your prying eyes and poking hands any longer, let's just do it! And soon after, it seemed, out she popped.

I looked Elsie in the face and told her, “There’s no-one in my life at the moment, Gran. But I hope to be getting out more soon.”

She broke eye contact and patted my hand. “Well, don’t put it off too long, Carly dear. Look at your Uncle Peter. Always waiting just a little longer and then suddenly he’d missed the boat. On the other hand, I wouldn’t go rushing into things again if I were you. These days, it’s so *easy* now to have the pleasures of love without the results! No wonder young people are selfish. When I was your age, I was too ashamed to talk to Ken about it and it felt wicked somehow to try and cheat nature. Before I married I plucked up the courage to ask Isabel about it and there was a… a device she got hold of for me. I tried it the first time: simply ghastly. Once I got a taste for Ken I deserved all I got! But don’t you worry love,” and here she patted the silent man whose presence I had almost forgotten, “it was worth every minute!”

It was like she was upping the ante and I felt uncomfortable, defensive, but also sad for her. In Elsie’s analysis, a “natural” wife and mother was one who both desired her husband *and* felt ashamed of it, accepting the resulting pregnancies with dignity. Could Elsie’s options really have been as limited as all that?

“But there are almost six years between Peter and Bruce; surely you used contraception throughout that time?”

Elsie started to collect up the teacups but she kept talking. “There was another one, a stillborn, in 1944, two years after your Uncle Peter. Before that, well, Ken was away so much during the War, who had time for lovemaking?” Elsie clattered the teacups into the sink and ran in some water. “After that, the doctor talked turkey with Ken and told him that I needed a rest from it all, that he had to wear two sheaths, and told him where to get hold of them. Three years later there was Bruce and then I was tidied up. Some doctor had left an awful mess down there.”

I was moved to silence. During her labours Elsie was given twilight sleep, a combination of morphine, extracted from poppies, and scopolamine from belladonna. Poppies to dull the pain and belladonna to forget you felt it. And during this timeless time, her body, the source of life, was violated by death.

Later on as I was leaving, Elsie said, “It’s decided then: I’ll buy you something you’ll love from my favourite shop.” As if we’d actually discussed it. Under these

circumstances Elsie's gift of new clothes was a charade but after her openness I felt I owed it to her to play along. A week later she bought me a "frock" of fine, light green linen. It was expensive; the cut was conservative, reminding me of the sack-like dresses Elsie and her sisters wore in a photo I'd seen, dated 1933, but I was captivated by the texture of the linen. I never wore it and Elsie didn't mention the Museum again. I enjoyed occasionally hanging the dress out for an airing in front of my open window, imagining my bedroom blessed by the light coming through the cooling film of fabric.

"I can't understand you young women!" Elsie said when I was evasive about it. "It's a perfectly good dress, Carly!"

With it, Elsie made me grotesque. The shape of the dress suggested my body ought to be disguised and I saw morality moderated her utilitarianism, while dreams corrupted mine. I continued to wear my old, too tight clothes.

The unbridgeable gap between us was not merely generational, as Gran suggested, nor was it simply a difference of character. The irreconcilable difference amounted to this: Elsie, the only other woman in my family, missed the feminism train by a good thirty years, too soon and too late. This is no small thing. The device that Elsie found so ghastly might as well be feminism; it is as natural to me as the freedom to choose contraception, abortion or single parenthood. Gran's world, most of her life, has been lived vicariously through her men: first her father, then her husband and sons. So many women were washed away with their daily lives, the chores and the children. Elsie, particularly, had no mother, no mother-in-law, no older sister nor favoured girl-cousin to share her troubles with, to measure her lot against. I, at least, have Elsie.

Elsie had her comrades in the Communist Party. Surely some of these like-minded women penetrated her haughty exterior and offered her some feminine solidarity? Perhaps she even allowed herself to be dragged along with some of the local dynamos (we know there were some) to demand recognition for domestic labour and the choice to refuse it? There are times to place your trust in another mother, someone who knows what it is to bear a child. But I don't think she turned to her women-friends or let them lead her.

* * *

I called in to see Natalie at her place south of the river with Skye recently. She lives in an apartment that belongs to her mum, a pied-à-terre that was a particular point of contention in the divorce settlement, now turned over to Nat and her sister for token rent. At her most cynical Nat claims that her parents divorcing is the best thing they could have done for their girls, as it's taken care of their housing needs. It's a lovely place to live but I know she doesn't mean it. I saw her mum and dad offer toasts side by side at Natalie's twenty-first birthday party and she beamed. I've never seen her so happy as when her parents stood next to each other and sang her praises.

For all her cant about the hopelessness of family, Natalie dotes on Skye. We were unannounced guests but Nat invited us in, cleared a play area for Skye and filled it with more sparkly and shiny stuff than she'd ever seen in one place before. Wrapping paper, tiny boxes of glitter, bottles of nail polish, strings of beads, textas… Skye examined and sorted and tried desperately to get the lids off things, with mixed success. Natalie was only too happy to demonstrate the unfamiliar items, sitting on the floor with my daughter. I took advantage of the free time and went to make cups of tea in the kitchen.

I didn't leave them alone too long, aware that even the most enthusiastic inexperienced babysitter tires quickly. Nat got up to take her tea, sat in a lounge chair and I took the one opposite. She asked me how my writing was going.

"I'm in pretty deep, Nat. It's turned into a bigger thing than I'd imagined. The story is coming together but there is something else. I'm starting to… think things. I feel like there's something they're not telling me."

"What do you mean?"

"It's something to do with Amy. There's something…" My words faded.

Natalie looked at me patiently, her big dark eyes holding mine. Nat is a remarkably attractive woman. She has Italian features and colouring and beautiful skin. She's slim without trying. Her realm of risk, against the backdrop of studious study and sober habits, is that of men. She has the power to connect with any man of her choosing and has never seen the need to limit herself. She loves the drama of the juggle and the tryst and I suppose I have vicariously enjoyed it too, I'm not immune to her beauty. In everything else, she plays it pretty safe. "You need boundaries for your work, Carly. Keep it focused. When are you coming back to uni?"

“You sound like my Pop.” I laughed, but was vaguely annoyed.

Skye got up and took a bottle of nail polish to Nat. “What’s this Natalie?”

“I told you, Skye, it’s nail polish, see on my fingernail?”

“What’s this Natalie?” Skye repeated. If she’d known how, she’d have said, “More information, please.”

Nat looked to me for permission. I said she could paint eight of Skye’s fingers: no thumbs. As she did this she took the conversation back to my work and the need to give it form. “That’s what a university course is for, Carly,” she patiently explained.

“But you’re not listening to me: I’ve been talking to the McKinnons a lot and I’m sure they’re keeping something from me.”

This time she looked fierce, with none of the longing. “Carly: can I remind you that Amy has been absent, for the most part, more than twenty years? Your family, for all their eccentricities, Elsie, Ken, Peter and Bruce, have supported you through everything. Why would they lie to you? It doesn’t make sense. Look, have you considered putting Skye in childcare? What will you do when she’s at school? Maybe you just need a break.”

I finished my tea and got ready to go; Natalie piled Skye up with trinkets. After we left I felt angry and unreasonably blamed the plastic fripperies. Once Skye was distracted I took them all away.

Why hadn’t Natalie understood me? She knew the thrill of the chase, playing with desire. My writing has become my realm of risk and this has given it a life beyond me, a life that can lead me, even as I create it. It doesn’t want boundaries and focus. It wants a companion.

In her maturing years Elsie has found it expedient to occasionally hire someone to come in and clean the house. Once I dropped in uninvited, as I did rather frequently in those days, and found Elsie in a fluster. I was on my own and was about to make my excuses and go but Elsie grabbed me and propelled me towards the kitchen and put a cloth in my hand. She was speaking nineteen to the dozen but I gathered she was worried when I rang the bell that I was the new cleaner, who was due shortly, and her house was a wreck: I must help her tidy up.

Elsie is not a good employer. It's as if she isn't comfortable in the role and can only play it like a bad stage actor. No-one she hires lasts more than a month at most: I had to let her go, Elsie claims, because she was too lazy, or disrespectful, or she was cheating me. Year after year, Elsie goes through a run of cleaners and sooner or later resorts to doing it all herself. Perversely, the older she gets, the sooner she gives up on the help and cleans her own house. The effort of relating to someone across the perceived class barrier is greater that the effort of vacuuming and scrubbing. And it's not a small house.

Elsie showed me the area she wanted wiped down. I began to do as she asked but said, "Gran, that's what you get a cleaner for, isn't it? To clean your house for you?"

"Oh no, Carly, these women judge you." Her arm worked furiously over the stovetop. "If my house isn't clean when the new cleaner arrives she'll give me all sorts of trouble."

Elsie was a model communist woman: politically radical and morally conservative. The "no-man's land" where radical and conservative meet, usually around the stove and washing machine, was sometimes referred to as the "Woman Question". Women like Elsie were expected to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of socialism. In theory, communists supported equal pay for women. In practice, they expected their wives to take care of the unpaid work at home.

I helped Gran with the kitchen and reflected on the kinds of conflict she and I endured and remembered once more that the issues themselves were relatively petty. She has never chided me for choosing to raise a child on my own, has never applied that awful euphemism "got yourself into trouble" and has never gloated about the fact that the social support I enjoy was won in fights begun by communists. These must represent some of the things she means when she talks about the choices not freely available when she was a young woman. She may not have seen herself as I could, but she saw enough to know that I wasn't her. What followed these thoughts was a feeling of great empathy, indeed, of love, and for a short period of time I saw it all, her life and its making of her, with compassion. Inevitably the old patterns returned and we resumed bickering, but since then, sometimes I can stop in the heat of judgement and bathe myself in the memory of that feeling.

16 — A Party Social at the McKinnons'

Bill and Joylove Leighton are coming up the drive of Number 92 Wattle Street and Bill stumbles over the stones bordering a garden bed. Joylove hisses, "Don't you go embarrassing me in front everyone, Bill. Go easy, y'hear?"

Neither speaks as they approach the house. Joylove stops for a moment to make final adjustments to the elaborate decorations on the surface of the cake she carries, and then nods to Bill to knock.

"Mr. and Mrs. Leighton!" announces Elsie as they enter. "What a marvellous-looking cake, Joylove. Is that banana on top?"

This question signals the beginning of an exchange prior to entering the house proper, a rite-of-passage that doesn't involve Bill, who goes off to find some refreshments. Joylove, at forty-five, is an elegant woman. Her hair is a good golden colour, just starting to silver at the sides, always pulled into a tight bun. She is plainly attired in a yellow frock. "That's right Elsie. Pureed with pineapple and mixed with passion-fruits from my own vine." Joylove smiles tightly and continues quickly, casting her eye around the lounge ahead, "So *do* tell me, Elsie, how do you manage to get your home looking beautiful so soon after returning from Sydney?"

"Oh, it's all about priorities, you know."

Having paid the ritual compliments, Elsie allows Joylove to pass into the kitchen to put down her cake. Elsie is somewhat bothered by the Secretary's wife. Was she implying that her house has not been clean and tidy on other occasions? Elsie watches Joylove look over the offerings laid out on the kitchen bench, grey soups and gravelly cakes, and smile smugly: her cake will stand out from the others. Then Elsie observes Joylove scanning the sink and stove, no doubt looking for evidence of slatternly living. Elsie is confident, however, for she is nothing if not scrupulously clean.

Later, Elsie finds some small satisfaction when she overhears Joylove asking Mrs. Longley, "Why has Elsie organised a social before there has been a chance to have an official meeting? After such an important assignment, this is a gross infringement of protocol." Adelaida Longley, helping herself to another glass of punch, chides Joylove for

her uncomradely spirit. But Joylove goes on, “I wonder, Adelaida, is the woman sharp as a tack or just plain ignorant?”

Peter can hear the occasional booming laugh and a background of viola-pitched screeches as the squeaky board in the lounge is depressed again and again. There is a large enough crowd now that he can go out unnoticed to find Bruce and tell him to get the kids together for the picture show.

“Yay, yay! Movie time!” Bruce is enlivened by the presence of kids his own age in the house, he does a little dance and runs off to find them. Because Mum and Dad never let them go to the pictures, these special bedroom shows of Peter’s are very exciting.

Peter returns to the back of the house where he’s set up the projector in Ken and Elsie’s bedroom, next to the door where he can control comings and goings. The kids will sit in front of the bed, facing a sheet hung in front of the heavily draped window. Everything is just right. There is much stomping down the passage between lounge and bedroom and Peter jerks upright and instinctively puts his shoulder to the closed door, hands gripping the knob. “Who is it?” he calls.

“It’s me, Peter,” says Bruce in his high twangy voice, like a girl, thinks Peter. “Peter, it’s me, Bruce.”

“How many customers are with you?” Peter enjoys resisting Bruce’s excitement.

There are a few moments’ silence and then a flurry of voices counting and recounting: *Twelve! No, fifteen! Fourteen, it’s fourteen!* until Peter repositions himself to open the door a crack and peer out. The noise stops and all eyes turn to Peter, the biggest and strangest kid they know.

“Welcome,” he says, swinging the door open wide and standing with open arms in front of the projector, protecting it. This leaves a rather narrow space between Peter’s stomach and the open door, a little like a tollbooth, in fact. He paddles the kids through one at a time and directs them to sit on the floor in rows.

“Julie, you go to the back row and Bruce go to the front. Robin and Margaret swap. Alright,” says Peter, turning off the light and closing the door. A few of the front rowers squeal.

“Ladies and gentlemen, tonight you will be taken to Sydney, from whence I have recently returned with these visual records of that place and her peoples. First, Manly Beach and her lifesavers squadron. The main feature is a surprise.”

“Why is he talking like that?”

“Shhh… let him keep going.”

“Start the film!”

Peter turns on the light of the hand-cranked projector and begins to wind the handle, nice and steady. He is good, the picture moves at an even pace. Manly beach, lifeguards in their matching shorts and caps. Standing in a row to pull in the rope, hand over hand, above their heads. Crashing waves. Surfers. About five minutes of it and the kids are riveted.

At the film’s end Peter exchanges the roll of sixteen-millimetre film for another. He’s practiced all afternoon and can do it in a minute, but the kids start talking and break his concentration. “Quiet, all of you!” Peter orders, beginning to feel nervous. “Very soon we will see the main feature.” Peter draws out this phrase, “Straight from a full house in Sydney to you, I present excerpts from the new musical, *The Jumbuck Jig*!”

“Yay!” Bruce alone cries out while the other kids fidget and jostle each other.

Then Elsie comes in, leading a throng of ladies. “Yes, Peter is turning out to be a real genius with the moving picture cameras. But the expense, you know. It is prohibitive.”

The room floods with bodies, woollen and cotton-print bottoms line up along the bed and stand everywhere else. Peter sees at once that they are nearly all women; the few men drift to the back of the room and out the door and away. Elsie stands in front of the suspended sheet and holds the floor.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she smiles exuberantly at her comrades, “I have recently witnessed a *spectacular* event celebrating Australia’s rich culture and our Party’s role in that culture, put on by our comrades in Sydney.”

Elsie stands with her hands clasped in front of her, elbows bent, as if she were a child reciting. She has practiced her address and nods slightly on the words she wishes to emphasise. “Imagine our own New Theatre producing an *Australian* story with real bush songs. What you are about to see is but a *fraction* of what we could do ourselves in Perth, in the name of our Party. Please enjoy these excerpts from the *best* show in Australia, *The Jumbuck Jig*.” Elsie’s voice clearly conveys her enthusiasm and a spontaneous smatter of

applause follows as she moves to the back of the room, next to Peter, who wastes no time in getting the film rolling.

Showing pieces of a musical on silent film is not really going to match the excitement of the real thing, Elsie realises, but she hopes the novelty of the medium will trump that. And if that's not enough, she has prepared a song, as best she can remember it, to accompany part of the film. She's still in correspondence with the producers in Sydney to secure her copy of the script and score.

Again the sheet fills with life and reveals a square room with men to one side, perched and draped against straw-bales. The focus is steady and clear, Peter is pleased to note, as he was able to set up a tripod in the centre of the theatre and get all of the stage. A few heads belonging to taller members of the audience are visible but they don't distract from the lit image. A man comes into the frame and speaks some words, lost to this audience, moving his arms in wide arcs to indicate the area around him, as if it were a vast and open plain. Then the straw-bale men bounce into action, elbows bent to fiddle and knees to stomp. A minute or so into this silent spectacle the company dance a jig, swinging each other around with skirts swirling and hats flying. Peter notices some of the women perched on his parents' bed are smiling, even nodding in time to the rhythm they cannot hear.

"Uncle Max!" Bruce calls when the next scene comes on. Aside from the lack of a chorus and dancing, this image looks much the same as the first one. Some of the younger children have located their mothers and joined them, distracting them. Eventually Peter stops winding the projector and the screen fades to black.

This is Elsie's cue. She explains, "The first was the talented young comrade Scott Ranley and the Fair Go Players doing 'The Jumbuck Jig'. Then Maxwell Murray, founding member of the Fair Go Players singing 'What's a Father to Do?'" Elsie pauses to gauge her audience's response, smiles and goes on. "This one, 'The Drover's Dilemma', Peter and I have learned for you, to provide a fuller sense of what it will be like."

Peter begins to wind the projector handle and the set comes into view once more, this time with a young couple centre stage. Elsie lurches into a song whose melody approximates that of "The Wild Colonial Boy" and Peter reluctantly joins her.

I am a young Unionist, Mark Denver is my name,
I move about the countryside ’cause shearing is my game.

And so on, for several verses, until:

I wish we all were Unionists, by all the stars above.
I swear it breaks my heart to be a Unionist in love.

The flickering image of the boxed man and woman have completed their number and left the stage when Elsie and Peter get to the final verse. Elsie’s voice is limited and she attempts to compensate with her hand, held aloft and gesticulating to convey where she wishes her voice to go. At the end, she concedes:

“Of course, *I* can’t sing…”

“No, no,” the women agree.

“But *I* can,” claims Eileen Mahon.

“I have an exquisite singing voice,” says Isabel Matthews.

Joylove, with some reluctance, says, “Perhaps the women of the Singing Vanguard could be persuaded to join in? I, for one, wouldn’t mind.”

Elsie is winning the women’s interest in her project, albeit with the inadequacy of her rendition of the song rather than her earnest oration on the importance of participating in truly Australian culture. “And you Cassandra, what do you think?” Elsie asks the older woman sitting on the end of the bed. She tries to sound calm, detached, but desperately wants Cassandra’s approval.

“Very amusing,” Cassandra allows. She is wearing her red evening dress and a little lipstick and to Elsie she looks rather severe. Cassandra uncrosses and re-crosses her legs. “I shall come to your opening night but I shan’t be in it.”

Meanwhile in the lounge, men stand and sit around Ken who is facing them from the top of the room in front of the empty hearth. Nearly all of them are smoking and most of the men hold glasses. Ken smothers a cough. Peter had drawn and taped up several NO SMOKING signs in the lounge and kitchen but Elsie had made him take them down before the guests arrived. Ken doesn’t interfere with Elsie’s arrangements.

This is when he is supposed to make his pitch to the men regarding *The Jumbuck Jig*, according to Elsie’s schedule of events. He also needs to make some sort of statement

regarding the *Tetrameter* incident, and there is the very exciting news regarding the movement known as Campbellism. Ken wants to provide enough information but not too much and not give away his prize idea just yet, the pinnacle of his trip to Sydney, not to the whole group. How shall he get their attention? He will just begin, that is all. He neither drinks nor smokes, but talks earnestly, and begins quietly.

"I have been thinking about the statement I am to make since I returned from Sydney some days ago, although school responsibilities have weighed heavily on my time too. Comrades, you will understand, I am a working man." Ken chuckles and Fred Hapfield who is sitting close by, deep in an argument he is losing to Bill, looks up to watch him. Others follow and quiet descends upon the front of the room. Fred nods encouragingly and Ken goes on a little louder.

"So I'd like to start with the good that came out of the trip and first has to be our discovery of the musical production, *The Jumbuck Jig*. It has been an enormous success for our Sydney comrades, drawing people together to celebrate *real Australian culture*. It is a sort of outback Romeo and Juliet, but with a happy ending. Juliet leaves her family of swells and joins the Shearers Union."

Ken pauses while the remaining conversations drop away and then he goes on. "Comrades, nothing like this has been seen in Perth before: home grown Australian theatre. None of your tired old English upper-crust rot, none of your new-fangled American nonsense! A couple of months to rehearse provided we all pull together, and we could have the New Theatre version of *The Jumbuck Jig* up before the election!"

A few men oblige with a laugh, which upsets Ken's pace for a moment because he wasn't making a joke. Someone else says, "Australian theatre? I've never heard of it."

"That's exactly the point!" says Ken, recovering nicely. "If we can pull the community together with something new and exciting, they'll look to us for inspiration in other matters! Everyone can be involved: there's a call for actors, musicians, singers, carpenters, painters, managers. And the musical instruments are homemade! Picture this: a sturdy broomstick with nails knocked-in all over, each nail holding in place two or three beer bottle caps. One thumps the stick onto the ground and the caps jangle. What's it called? A lagerphone! So start saving those bottle tops, mates!"

Someone calls, "Will it be an earner?"

Ken looks a little put out. “As a matter of fact, in Sydney it is making a handsome profit, but that is hardly the point of the people’s play.” Talking breaks out: some are enthusiastic about the idea, others not; it seems for a while that Ken has lost his audience. From the next room, his bedroom, Ken can hear Elsie’s thin voice attempting to sing “The Drover’s Dilemma”. He hadn’t the heart to tell her it wasn’t a good idea.

When Ken catches his eye, Andrew Stone, Secretary of the League for Peace and Liberty, calls evenly but quite loudly, “And what of your assignment, Ken?”

He is amongst friends, so he will be frank. Ken holds up his hands and counts off the following: “I got a job at *Tetrameter*. I questioned Stewart Enright. I investigated the filing system. I made a connection. My contact knew the systems there inside out and made me a list of names and addresses of some of the biggest funders of *Tetrameter*’s biggest financier: the Australian Committee for Cultural Freedom, which must be affiliated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom that we know to be funded by the CIA.”

He takes the document from his jacket pocket but before he hands it over, Ken feels he needs to offer some explanation regarding the threat Stewart Enright made, to present him as a defector. He hopes the ACCF paper will seal his allegiance. “If you hear anything about me that suggests I’m anything but a loyal Party member, I trust you all know to disregard it.”

Ken now waves it about and several men rush forward to grasp the rumpled document. Bill Leighton lifts himself with some difficulty out of the sagging lounge. Once upright, with a wipe of his hand he moves the others aside and takes charge of it. An excited buzz fills the room and the men soon fall into smaller groups. Fred takes Ken aside with a glass of whisky in each hand.

“No thanks,” Ken says, refusing the glass.

“Suit yourself,” says Fred, plonking both glasses on the shelf above the fireplace. Fred knows Ken rarely drinks but it is a useful way to approach a man nonetheless. They stand together in silence for a while with the comfort of old comrades who have never bothered to know each other very well.

Fred’s lower jaw juts out a little and he thoughtfully nibbles his ginger moustache. “I will need your records of expenditure for the Equality Committee,” he says lightly.

“Yes, of course, of course.”

“So, you consider the assignment a success, on the whole?”

Ken has been waiting all night for the right moment to share his secret, his Sydney discovery. Can Fred be the one to hear his important news first? Bill has other things to think about, best not tell him yet. Andrew might envy him, or worse, sabotage his idea. Yes, Fred is the one; he’s trustworthy and honest. And now that the right moment has presented itself, Ken can hardly get his mouth to make the shape for it.

“Campbell,” he manages deliberately.

“What?” says Fred.

“Earl Campbell,” says Ken and once he’s captured Fred’s attention, he begins. “It was my second-to-last night in Sydney and we were sitting in a bar called The Green Hat. Maxwell Murray introduced me to Scott Ranley, star of the Sydney show and a budding poet as well, he assures me. Oh, and Don Ditchards, Comrade Piggot, was there too. We got talking about the show and the Australian theme, when Ranley told me the most remarkable thing…”

With his head ever so slightly tipped to one side, Fred is already looking a little sceptical, biding his time ahead of the inevitable interjection to stop Ken before he gets carried away. “What’s so good about this Scott Ranley?”

“Well,” Ken pauses in his monologue to think, “He’s an energetic young comrade, talented and full of ideas, he’s what they call ‘well connected’.” Then Ken remembers the expression Max used when he’d asked his opinion of Ranley, adding, “He’s fig jam. Real fig jam.”

Fred’s head tips ever so slightly to the other side.

“But Ranley’s not really the point, it’s more *who he* knows, if you know what I mean.” Ken indicates the emphasis with his pointer finger. He looks around but nobody is taking any notice of them. He goes on cautiously. “Ranley introduced me to the work of Earl Campbell, who is General Secretary of the Communist Party in the United States. A union man known to Ranley brought back the Campbell documents from America and I’ve got a copy! Ranley convened a meeting to discuss the paper, just a few of us mind you. A marvellous man, Fred, a true philosopher. Campbellism, they’re calling his ideas. I have a feeling that this will be of great importance for our branch.”

Fred takes one of the liquor glasses down from the mantelpiece and swirls the contents thoughtfully. “What’s Campbellism all about then, Ken?”

“It’s about…” Ken holds his hands in front of him, clasping them about the presence, as it were, of Campbellism, massaging it into a form he can articulate. “It’s about adjusting the way we express our ideas to suit the Australian people. The Australian people didn’t always see eye to eye with Uncle Joe, but that need not stop the spread of the philosophy of the Party, simply adjusted —”

Now it’s Fred’s turn to swivel his head to make sure their conversation is not being overheard. “Ah, I don’t think you should be doing any *adjusting*, Ken, Democratic Centralism doesn’t allow for any deviation from Stalinist socialism, surely you’re aware of that?” Fred is speaking under his breath now, leaning towards Ken, who can smell onions in his moustache.

“What if Australia doesn’t have a socialist future, Fred? What if the revolution doesn’t come?” Ken is whispering now, flustered, exasperated. What is wrong with everyone? he thinks. He goes on more slowly. “We know the Party philosophy perfectly well and if we can interpret it in a truly Australian way, well…”

Fred sips his whisky but doesn’t look convinced.

“Take this musical for example, *The Jumbuck Jig*. Australian songs, Australian workers, Australian culture… Imagine how many recruits we can attract if that is the introduction they get to Party life!”

“But Campbell, he’s not Australian, is he? How do you know this will really work for us?” Fred cuts short his questioning when Bill joins them in front of the empty fireplace. Fred hands Bill the remaining liquor glass, a peace offering following their argument earlier, which is accepted with a nod.

Ken brightens and thinks of a new direction he can take. “I haven’t seen the Secretary of the Council for Culture and Justice here this evening. Perhaps he’s away?” Ken’s leading question is directed towards Bill.

“Don Ditchards?” Bill Leighton raises the hand without the drink in it and waves dismissively. “No, no, he’s been having some personal troubles at home, apparently. His wife doesn’t approve of his commitment. Bring her along! I say, but no, she won’t come. He’s missed quite a few meetings recently.”

Ken is surprised that Bill doesn't mention Ditchards' trip to Sydney. He is no longer holding the list of names and addresses, Ken notices. Suddenly Fred throws back the remainder of his drink and bangs the glass down, throwing an accusing finger towards Ken.

"Fig jam. F–I–G–J–A–M. I knew I'd heard that before! Do you know what that means, Ken? Fuck I'm Good, Just Ask Me."

17 — Bruce

The morning means tea. For me, the sun rises with the steam from the kettle and there is no light until tea touches my lips. Sometimes I catch myself sighing over a hot cup of Darjeeling and can hardly believe that before Skye was born, I scorned it as the drink of the aged. It has become my spice, my panacea. Many a morning has a strong black Orange Pekoe saved me from stomach upset, or a cooling green eased a head cold. Who would have thought that a nurturing cup of tea could move armies? That a tea party would trigger a revolution? Now I know tea as the drink of the ancients, with a five thousand year history involving invasions and bloodshed, which I blame on that most masculine of its constituents, caffeine. And yet, this is a co-dependent relationship I have no wish to terminate.

One ordinary morning just before eleven, I sat with my third cup of tea for the day. With Skye up around six I had my first upon rising. The second to keep the first company. And the third as a way of marking the transition into my time, after I handed Skye over to Dad when he stirred from sleep.

The day before I'd put aside some light reading, pamphlets and scrapbooks taken from the collection in Gran and Pop's library, that served to ease me into my work while I reset myself, out of mother mode into that other. I sipped my tea and flipped a few pages and reflected upon what it was I was actually engaged in. What came to me was this: as notions make their way into language and often, into print, they acquire a presence, a shape, a line. Reading these lines together adds, in a synergistic leap, another dimension to the notions and they evolve into stories, seemingly of their own accord, as if motivated from within. I read haphazardly but the stories that came to me were well formed, replete with justice or irony as the situation demanded. The stories suggested themselves to me; my role as researcher amounted to that of receptionist, who greeted the stories that arose through my reading.

On the book-strewn trail of my family's involvement in communism in the forties and fifties to their more conventional peace activism of later decades, one name came up again and again when things went wrong: Don Ditchards. Although I had trained as a critical historian, my cynicism was gradually wearing down into belief as I succumbed to

the repeated refrain. He drank with this man, he gave evidence against that man, he slept with this woman and left her for that. But none of the threads joined together. Some writers pointed to Ditchards' several aliases, the Black Snake and Comrade Piggot among them. When I read reports surrounding these identities, Ditchards' shadow darkened, his scent thickened. Several local historians noticed the presence of Ditchards around tensions and obstacles in various groups and accounted for it with one word: ASIO. It was pursuit of his name that led me to the Vietnam protests of the sixties and seventies where Ditchards had allegedly been responsible for the convictions of no fewer than thirty-nine draft-dodgers. The trail petered out after that. Did he move to the Eastern States? I wondered. Did he retire?

I sipped my tea and opened a scrapbook titled "Bruce's Trial", in Elsie's hand. It consisted of a collection of articles from a variety of newspapers over a period of several months. Immediately it triggered memories; Gran had shown me this when I was younger, much younger, so in the back of my mind somewhere I knew that Dad had been conscripted to fight in Vietnam but stood trial instead, winning his case for conscientious objection. Elsie had been proud of him, "Bruce as a Hero", she called that story.

I'd taken the Trial scrapbook home with a number of other items that, with greater anticipation, I'd already investigated. Dad never mentioned his conscription case and to be honest, I didn't think about it before I went hunting for the Black Snake. I finished my tea and was considering having another (to keep symmetry with this morning's pair), when turning through the scrapbook a newsprint photograph caught my eye. It was the caption, actually. "Smiling investigator Ditchards leaves court room ahead of angry mob after McLeary (19), Sanderton (18), and Devareau (19) lose their cases for conscientious objection."

Devareau, Amy Devareau, my mother's name before she married. She had a brother who died, her only brother, two years older. He died before I was born. The paper was dated November 26, 1967. I did the sums and decided that this caption, that photograph, referred to my dead uncle Geoffrey and that he had known Don Ditchards. I scanned the body of the article for "McKinnon" and found it in the second to last paragraph: "Also tried as conscientious objectors, free men after winning their cases this week, are Matthew Smith

of Subiaco, William Murchison of South Perth, Bruce McKinnon of Mt. Hawthorn and Fernando Domopola of Hamilton Hill."

At first I was excited simply because this newspaper article seemed to join a pair of the threads amongst the strands of story I'd uncovered. After that I wondered why no-one had told me: but told me what, exactly? What was it I was seeing here? I'd followed Ditchards to "Bruce's Trial" and there found my mother's brother. But was I following Ditchards or was he following me? This didn't fit with the story I'd been given of when Bruce and Amy met. And maybe Ken was on to something when he noticed how Don Ditchards seemed to have it in for us. I needed more information. The house's silence told me Skye was still having her morning sleep so I went to find Dad.

The funny thing about fighting with someone you love, someone in your family, is that behind all the anger, all the cruel words and ill-conceived accusations, there is a glimmer of belief that the conflict will eventually be resolved, that in the end, you're stuck with each other. For some this seems to give licence to especial viciousness, as if to hurt the one you love is the most forgivable, and at the same time, in the case of the one with whom you fight, the most unforgivable, of sins. For others it seems to speed capitulation, an urge to move quickly to the point of forgiveness, to get it over with. Sometimes I lash out and then instantly regret it, but not so much that I can't see that these lapses in self-control are often productive.

Dad and I so rarely fight that when we do, it can be brutal. I ran away from home for a day when I was fourteen because Dad was too quick to judge my first love from his admittedly limited taste in music. I spent the day shivering between the shield-like roots of an enormous fig tree, nibbling at the packet of biscuits I'd thought to take. When I'd formulated my most heartfelt and tortured accusation and the biscuits were all gone, I went home and said something like: "You can't understand how I feel because you're doubly distant from me. You've never understood what it's like to be a girl and you've never understood half the genes in my body!"

Dad was suitably apologetic and proceeded to show me the understanding I needed, assuaging my loneliness, praising my independence, all the while agreeing that, of course, he couldn't really understand. I remember that Peter arrived while we were talking, wearing

galoshes and a hard hat with a torch attached. I guess they were pretty worried about me. There were a few other incidents in my young adulthood, but since Skye's conception, Dad has been my closest ally.

It didn't start off as an argument and for my part, perhaps I was a little tactless. I didn't realise I was probing sensitive areas; I felt they were mine to examine. These events of years ago, years before my birth even, helped to shape me and the way my life has been. For the first time since I was a child, I felt like there was something else to discover about myself, something I had decided Bruce knew, and I did not.

First I asked Dad what he remembered about his conscientious objector case, and he said, very little, and continued diddling on the piano. I asked him whether he knew Geoffrey Devareau. No, he did not know him, though that was Amy's brother's name. I asked about Don Ditchards, and Dad said:

"Who?"

"More like conscientious obstructor. Why aren't you more forthcoming?" I bit out.

"Carly, it was a long time ago." He was patient with me.

"You've told me you met Amy in 1970, but now I find you and my mum's brother together in the same place in Elsie's 1967 scrapbook, and you expect me to believe you didn't know her until 1970? Why should I believe you don't know where she is now, then?" I wanted to sound reasonable, explain it carefully to him, but I heard my voice tipping up at the edges.

"Jesus, Carly, I've always answered your questions. I've told you everything I know!" He was losing his cool and then his face went slack and he dropped his eyes. "There is something, one thing. Not a significant thing, but if you want more information about your mum…"

"It's not about her, not only about her," I corrected myself.

"Amy and Elsie fought, once, but bitterly. I've sometimes thought that was why she stopped coming to see us."

"What about? When? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know, I'm not sure, I wasn't there. You were there, you must have been about five or six, I can't remember. It was in the old house in Mt. Hawthorn. Elsie said they began arguing about the Communist Party and its methods of campaigning. Amy was still a

member but wanted to be more active in nuclear disarmament than the Party would allow. Mum could never keep her opinions to herself —"

"Amy was a communist? Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded, feeling really angry now.

"It didn't seem important, or perhaps I thought you assumed," Bruce said. He spoke softly and didn't seem at all sure of himself.

I was relentless. "Not important? All the times I've asked you about her, you've lied!"

"It didn't mean anything to be a communist in those days, it was just an embarrassment." Bruce had become calm and firm. "I didn't witness this argument. This is Elsie's report, and who knows how reliable that is? Telling you something untrue is worse than nothing, isn't it?"

"No! Knowing this might have helped me to find her!"

I knew Dad had a point but couldn't concede it; that would mean backing away from the mass of resentment I'd accumulated which was all I had holding me up. My voice had not yet cracked open but tears were running down my cheeks. And then Skye woke and start to cry, painfully, like she was an infant again. Dad looked grief-stricken and said quietly: "She doesn't want to be found."

He left the room and walked down the passage that joins the lounge and Skye's room and I followed, throwing: "How do you know?" I was going to go on even though I could sense the debate was winding down. "You never tried to find her. You believed what you were told. Maybe she was compelled to go."

I stopped when he opened Skye's door and stood and watched, sniffling quietly, while Dad took Skye for a wee, changed her clothes, plopped the sweet smelling girl into my arms and went to make a pot of tea.

Later, while Skye played on her rug in the lounge, Dad told me a story about his conscription and trial. He just volunteered it, like a peace offering. A story I couldn't have found in the scrapbook or any book. It answered questions about my mother I hadn't even known how to ask. I sipped my tea, puffy-eyed, but my heart was open to Dad's story.

Everything of significance was put away inside me, to examine and play with and try on at my leisure.

"You probably know there was a lottery and my number came up. We watched it on television and I must have somehow prepared myself for what was going to happen, because I wasn't shocked. When the little brown draft card arrived in the post I had difficulty deciphering what I was to do, seeing I had no intention of reporting for duty on the given day, so I began to worry. I was eighteen; I'd only been out of school a year. Mum and Dad got me a lawyer, because *I* had to serve notice to the Department of Defence, can you imagine it? It was my responsibility to prove them wrong for drafting me. There were a lot of boys who burnt their cards and went into hiding, but most were arrested in the end and fined or sent to prison. I went to school with a kid who reported for duty and when he saw what basic training was all about, he objected. He was a religious kid, his folks had been missionaries in Thailand, and now he was supposed to practice killing dummies with Asian faces. He ended up in military prison for being 'psychologically unfit'. Had a terrible time."

Bruce was quiet for a while and I made us sandwiches, cheese and tomato. The bread was fresh; Skye and I had walked to the corner store early that morning, a treat for a small family who take a week to eat a loaf. Skye was kept very amused with her squishy triangle of white and red layers and Dad went on.

"This all happened a few years before I knew Amy and I never met her brother, but his death was one of the first things we talked about. Like me, he was conscripted and wanted to object. Amy's parents were French, as you know; her father fought and was wounded in the Second World War, her mother's family was killed during the occupation. They wanted a fresh start with a new family in Australia. Amy always thought that it was because her parents didn't speak good English and had nowhere to go for help that Geoffrey had died. He was drafted but didn't know what the proper procedure for objectors was and eventually he was arrested. The magistrate asked him why he had not reported for duty. Geoffrey stated under oath that he was opposed to the Vietnam War on political grounds, that it was not a just war to stop immoral acts from taking place, as in the case of the Nazis. But the law stated that this reason was not permitted as a defence against service. 'If Mr. Devareau does not have a sincere belief in the wrongness of all war, he must fight in

this war,' the magistrate said. 'He does not get to pick and choose; that is the government's job.' So Geoffrey had to serve his time and was killed in Vietnam."

Bruce paused to eat his sandwich, now soggy on top where the tomato lay.

"Not knowing how to fight for your rights, that was what made Amy investigate communism," he said between mouthfuls. "We met a couple of years after this happened. I thought she was wild and beautiful and to show off, or prove my worthiness, I told her I was raised a communist, though we hadn't discussed Marx at home for years."

I remember he said that: wild and beautiful.

"When it was time to talk about my conscription case, I told Amy the story I'd told under oath in court. About my sincere and abiding belief in the wrongness of war, about my family's history of pacifism. And she married me and you were born. But slowly, we came undone. I was not the man I made myself out to be. I was not at all brave and principled. I caved in at the slightest resistance. I'd been manipulated by Mum for years. I was unwilling to join Amy in her communist activities and felt embarrassed that she was a member. She was a fighter and I was not. The truth, Carly, is that I didn't want to go to Vietnam because I was scared to death of being killed. There was nothing noble about it. How could I be in the army? I couldn't shoot rabbits on Uncle Alfred's farm, how could I shoot people?"

"But…" I didn't know what to say. I didn't expect this revisionist version of Bruce's trial, with toppled heroes and muddied principles. But still, to refuse to fight, for whatever reason, requires bravery, taking a stand. How many hundreds of young men reported for duty because they feared the subtle violence of saying no — the wrath of patriots, military prison — more than the open horror of war?

The Third

Excerpt from the notebook of a senior intelligence agent based in Perth, Western Australia, dated April 15, 1954.

OPERATION PROPHYLAXIS STAGE THREE — Expose CPM to ideas of Mr. Earl Campbell (friendly) in setting congenial to CPM. Encourage CPM to take on moderated notions, carry them back to Western Australia to spread the antidote.

NOTES — The isolation of Perth is built into the design of Operation Prophylaxis to provide a secure testing ground for Campbellism's appeal. At the same time, the isolation means I have been the only agent assigned to save the CPWA by drawing it back to the Non-Communist Left. However, the outcome of the Operation will ultimately stand or fall on the Organisation's psychological analysis of the NCL as an attractive opportunity to abandon Communist Party Membership. I think my Organisation has miscalculated in this regard; the NCL man, Campbell, is a Yankee, and CPM's don't trust the Yanks.

I've received some further information on McKinnon's activities in Sydney, 1945. He arrived in early January and went straight to Yukanstae House, apparently by prior arrangement. The house in Darlinghurst belongs to David and Martha Harley, both Left Wing Socialists, but at that time it was home to any number of disreputable and dubious persons, and their children too. CIS did not succeed in getting an agent inside the house but was able to identify various figures present over the summer months. Notable characters included Mr. Rex and companions Flex and Moody, members of the Alcheringa Group, a boy-scout school of poetry concerned with humpies and billabongs etc., and the aforementioned Rolf Million. McKinnon left in late February and no contact ensued.

It has long been my belief that characters of this ilk on the NCL are not to be trusted. After all, they are only one step from LWS and then it's a slippery slope all the way down to CPM. This does not bode well for Stage Three of the Operation: McKinnon has had experience with these people before but no long-term relationship was established in that case.

Excerpt from the notebook of a senior intelligence agent based in Perth, Western Australia, dated April 21, 1954.

NOTES — Despite the obvious success of Stages One and Two of the Operation (for which I can legitimately take sole credit), the Organisation has seen fit to take on a Junior Agent. Since the Petrov activities it would seem our work is being taken more seriously. But the added responsibility of a greenhorn for whose training I am responsible is not going to assure the success of Stage Three. I mentioned my concerns to my immediate superior and he said it was important we look ahead to the next threat. I reminded him that even as we spoke, the Viet Minh were overrunning the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu: communism is a present and spreading danger. The boss said that soon the Junior Officer would take on the routine surveillance of the local CP cell and that I ought to keep my eyes on nuclear disarmament nuts. Jesus, Joseph, where are you now? If someone is to take my place in the CPWA, *years* of work will be lost. But that bastard Harry is serious. "Work together with the Junior Agent to make Stage Three stick, or you're for it!" He doesn't know the CPWA like I do. It will never work.

18 — Ken on the Party Stump

April 1954

Ken is headed for Perth's traditional Sunday morning soapbox venue, the grassy Esplanade alongside the river. During the ten days since the party at the McKinnons' place, Ken has experienced a surge of creative energy. His statement on Earl Campbell is complete and he's written two poems, with a third on the way. The day is crisp and fine, the boys are at home with Elsie and he should be in his element. But he doesn't feel at all right, there is something silently gnawing away at him. Perhaps it is just the news, Ken thinks.

Menzies had announced Vladimir Petrov's defection on Tuesday. Ken had been sitting at the dinner table working on his speech for Sunday with the Ranter on, just softly, to catch the news.

Prime Minister Menzies has informed Parliament this evening that Russian diplomat Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov, formerly third secretary to the Soviet Embassy, has requested and has been granted political asylum. Mr. Menzies claims that Mr. Petrov is in fact the head of Soviet intelligence in Australia and brings with him documents revealing evidence of attempted subversion and systematic espionage. The Prime Minister also announced Cabinet's decision to institute a Royal Commission into Soviet Espionage in Australia —

Ken had put down his pen, flabbergasted.

Elsie didn't look up from her work but emitted a high-pitched groan of frustration. "What could the Soviets *possibly* want to steal from the Australian Government, when the Socialist Republic is more scientifically and socially advanced than we are?"

Ken had shaken his head sadly, easily brought down from his lofty optimism. "A Russian spy, six weeks before the Federal Election! Just the kind of softheaded rubbish the people are fooled by. How very convenient for Mr. Menzies."

Elsie was more resilient. "The people won't be fooled by this!" she'd said in a voice that showed *she* was no fool. Whether or not the people will be fooled is debatable, which is exactly Ken's trouble. Who wants to listen to "An Australian Approach to the Communist Revolution" when there's a spy-plot to discuss?

He is early and can see no-one in the park save a couple of young men who have evidently transported and positioned the Party's "stump", a timber A-frame with a step half way up. Ken wanders past them, gazing out to the river. One of the young men calls, "Nice day for it, comrade." Ken doesn't recognise him but offers a little salute to the air, keeping his eyes downcast.

Ken's faith in the grain of truth at the heart of Earl Campbell's concept ensures he will not be dissuaded from his chosen course of action. He's had to explain this many times over the last few days. After Fred's unenthusiastic response at the social, Ken had avoided all casual mention of Campbellism. Regardless, word got around and Ken's comrades insisted on bringing their questions and worries to him.

On Monday evening while he was working on a poem that would become the one named "Perishing in Golden Lands", Bill came round to talk about Ken's report for Head Office on the *Tetrameter* mission, but Ken hadn't considered writing the report by that time. Then Bill asked Ken about the "dangerous ideas" he'd come across in Sydney and when he planned to submit a report on those.

"Well, now that you mention it, it's my intention to clarify those misconceptions regarding Campbellism and address all the comrades at once from the stump this Sunday. I'd appreciate your approval, Bill."

"Well of course you may speak, but we'll need something in writing." Bill appeared supportive and Ken was pleased and allowed his attention to wander back to his poem and Bill must have let himself out.

On Wednesday, Fred Hapfield had called past Number 92 on his way to an executive meeting, ostensibly to talk about the findings of the Equality Committee regarding Ken's expenses, but really to whisper a warning, a word of caution: "I've heard the General Secretary is on the warpath. They're cracking down on liquidationism. I tell you this as an old friend: best keep that non-Party-line stuff to yourself for now, eh, Ken?"

He'd laughed a little and said, "But Fred, surely there's no harm in *talking* about it?" And then yesterday, Adam Scrabble arrived at the McKinnon's place first thing in the morning. Saturdays are Elsie's one morning to lie in a little while Ken gets up. Adam had banged on the door and Ken called out for Bruce to open it; Bruce was nearly knocked over

by his grandfather whose booming voice sent him scurrying to his parents' room: "Where's your mother, child?"

The intrusion had brought Ken from the kitchen where he was kindling the fire, suddenly feeling sorry he'd sent Bruce to answer the banging door. He'd thrown one of Elsie's aprons over his dressing gown and was wiping his hands on it. He wasn't pleased to see his father-in-law but he didn't neglect his manners. "Adam! We didn't expect you. You're joining us for a cup of tea?"

Adam followed Ken to the kitchen and sat himself at the table. He was a large man and his arms seemed to cover the table's whole breadth. "I've heard some talk of your decadent evening last week. I don't know what you have in mind, son, but more likely than not, you're about to get yourself into a muddle again and drag Elsie down with you!"

Ken sat down and this time his sigh was audible. "I suppose you're talking about my interest in Campbellism?"

"Ha!" piped Adam, "He admits it!"

So Ken had attempted to explain to his father-in-law what Campbellism is about, but as soon as he got through the definitions Adam interrupted him to say, "I've never heard such codswallop! It's a rightist deviation and you'll never get away with it!"

Ken skipped straight to the heart of the matter. "Last year the Soviets were hanging Party members in Czechoslovakia and shooting them in East Germany. Violence will never win the people over. We must work slowly and co-operatively, alongside even the capitalists, perhaps aim for socialism in fifty years, instead of five…"

A moment later Elsie had come breezing down the hall in her dressing gown, saying, "Ken, why didn't you wake me? Hello Dad, lovely to see you. How have you been?"

Bruce came in behind her and there were four at the table.

"It's false pride, Elsie! False pride, that's your husband's problem!"

Elsie fidgeted. "Oh, dear, have you two not been getting along?" She stood up and sat down again. Ken was wearing her apron: he did the tea on a Saturday. What was she to do?

“It’s a false pride that resents the duty of the communist clerk. Orders come from above. We are all workers, Ken!” Adam Scrabble’s booming voice roused even Peter who joined them at the table and then there were five.

Elsie had tempered her father with condolences and pragmatisms and Adam garumphed his disapproval. There was no place for Ken in the conversation so he’d gone off to make the tea with Bruce trailing behind, whining for breakfast.

Though Elsie has not expressed a direct opinion on Campbellism, she has said nothing to make Ken think she doesn’t support him. It is true, she has not declared herself to be overwhelmingly in favour of the ideas: she is distracted by her preparations for the musical. Just as Ken has not yet volunteered for a task in *The Jumbuck Jig*, but he trusts Elsie knows she has his unqualified support. The two projects, the musical and Campbellism, have existed side by side for them.

And yet, yesterday she was siding with her father. It takes Ken back to the days when they were all living together in that tiny house in North Perth after the War. “It is my house and what I say, goes!” How many times did he hear those words from his father-in-law’s lips? What a relief, when rationing ended and they could finally build a home of their own. Many times, Ken has questioned Elsie about Adam’s disapproval of him, his feeling of being sneered at because he works with his mind and not his hands, but she always insists her father values book-learning over all else.

It is still early but soon people are thronging into the park. The crowd thickens around him and Ken’s stomach begins to feel queer again. Campbellism’s concepts are challenging and complex, perhaps it will be beyond them, maybe the comrades won’t understand. Although he has given stump speeches several times over the years, Ken has not felt so nervous since his very first public speech in 1946. On that occasion, his father-in-law had persuaded him to speak out against the Dutch Government’s attempts to resume imperial rule in Indonesia. Ken’s objections went against Australia’s official position but in the victorious atmosphere of post-war Perth, it was a topic popular among the people and Ken had been well received in his first public appearance as a communist. A young police officer, notebook in hand, pushed through the crowd to reach the pair and asked Ken for his name and the title of his speech. Adam answered for him: “Ken McKinnon. ‘Hands Off

Indonesia'" and then said to Ken: "Let them keep your name. They can't do anything with it." It was a good moment for Ken and his father-in-law.

Ken holds his position at the foot of the stump as room is made for Bill Leighton to approach the front of the crowd. He gives Ken a nod, Ken nods back and Bill repeats his action with eyes that indicate Ken is to mount the block and get the speeches underway. He is pleased. A couple of feet elevated, Ken can see Fred towards the back of the crowd. Fred had promised to come and support him, but more as a favour to his comrade than out of enthusiasm for the idea, Ken suspects.

He makes some improvised introductory statements: "Good morning, comrades. You may or may not have noticed that I've been absent from meetings for a few weeks. Well, I have not been idle…" Ken takes a few moments to polish his glasses on a large handkerchief before putting them away again and does not notice some new information ripple through the crowd to reach Bill.

"Let them try. Just let them try!" Bill says with a shake of his fist. The comrades gather more closely than usual. A feeling of apprehension steals across the group. Some turn away from Ken to gaze towards the city. Bill urges him on: "Speak up, McKinnon!"

Ken speaks freely his opening lines, barely glancing at his papers. A couple of minutes in, it is apparent that everyone's faces are changing and turning away and between sentences Ken can hear the approach of a noisy crowd. Without getting out his glasses Ken does not know who, or what, approaches.

He speaks with increasing volume and tempo and hears himself emphasise the words, "Campbell's model demonstrates a peaceful, co-operative transition to socialism…" The familiar phrases keep coming but Ken feels dizzy, his voice ringing in his ears. He glues his eyes to the page before him and pushes on as the crowd swims around him. As his hearing returns to normal he finds himself reading rather loudly, "Campbellism embraces the Soviet Union as the first workers state, but recognises that our path to socialism must also embrace the society that sustains us…"

The comrades at the outermost edge of the crowd link arms to form a cordon. Now Ken can make out that the intruders are yelling, "Commie dogs! Traitors! You'll be deported!" He falters, then goes on, but more slowly. How many are there? Fifty? One

hundred? Twenty-five years on and nothing has changed since the playground where bullies routinely tormented me, he thinks. Just as well I didn't bring Elsie and the boys.

"It's the Black Gang! Santamaria's cronies!"

With relief and resignation, Ken stops reading. When the group of men making the racket come close enough, Ken can see they number only two dozen or so, though they make a devil of a noise. They are dressed head to toe in black. The comrades, who outnumber the Black Gang three to one, begin to respond to their jeers so that Ken has no choice but to step down.

"You communist dogs! You Soviet slaves! You all ought to be exiled to Russia!" The Black Gang is the young and foolish public face of the secret Catholic Action Group.

"It's the McCarthyites of Australia! You idiots don't know what you're talking about. Is your *holy father* going to get your candidate elected?" the comrades yell back.

"You watch your mouth, Red!"

A few scuffles break out on the edge of the crowd but mostly the Black Gang hang back, taunting, not wanting to set off the larger group. They are young men with nothing better to do than stir up trouble. Last year, several prominent Communist Party members were beaten by groups of youth dressed all in black.

A loud and distinctive voice pulls out of the circle and takes Ken's place on the stump and simultaneously Ken is subsumed into the circle surrounding it. It is Don Ditchards. He speaks a sustained monologue in the capacity of Secretary of the Council for Culture and Justice. He refers to the week's allegations: "Faced with extinction on May twenty-ninth, the government falls back on one of the oldest and corniest stunts in election history, the 'spy plot'." He thrives on the jibes, throwing them back with ever greater volume and spittle. "Shouldn't you boys be in church with your mothers?"

For all that, though, Ditchards doesn't really say anything, Ken thinks. Nothing that isn't said every Sunday on the Esplanade and at every branch meeting. Certainly nothing about Campbellism and his trip to Sydney. The fights quiet down and Ditchards makes a conventional close, with this variation: "I would like to offer Comrade Wilde the opportunity to conclude his speech, which was so rudely interrupted…"

Ken is taken unaware and for a moment he is truly flattered, stammering, "Well, if the people want me to, I'm happy, but —"

A few cheers go up but they are soon drowned out with cries of “No! No!” and “Move on!” Ditchards catches Ken’s eye and raises his shoulders before he steps down, as if to say, “I tried, but this is the will of the people.”

So far from the source of power, local rules apply beneath a veneer of discipline, which itself exists beneath a veneer of benign democracy. The khaki Robin Hood isn’t equal to the task of cutting through so many layers of petty conflict and he begins to drift away.

There is a surging for the stump as others rush to speak, flowing through to a rippling on the edge of the group that is exploited by the more reckless members of the Black Gang. Soon the whole mass is jostling one way or another and it is all Ken can do to drop below elbow level and find his way to the edge. He is out, and off moments later.

19 — Ditchards

April 2004

I guess I hadn't been out in a while. When Dad gave me a fifty-dollar note to get some winter shoes for Skye, my initial response was rather rude. He countered me with his most paternal voice and phrases such as "terribly important" and "sick child". He almost sounded like Elsie, and I was chastened.

The department store was a monstrosity of perspex and fluorescence but Skye and I braved it. Whenever I stood still to get my bearings she kept one arm firmly tucked around my leg and when I made a dash Skye kept up a pretty good pace behind: in this manner we made it to the children's department on the third floor. The lady at the counter directed me to the plethora of shoes on the shelves and within moments Skye was targeted by a sales assistant. She was drawn to contrasts: sparkles and lights breaking up surfaces, strong colours together. The assistant offered no discriminating guidance so I intervened. Skye and I negotiated: "What about these?"

"Don't like brown. I like these."

"They won't do, Skye, I don't want you to wear batteries in your feet."

We compromised on a pair of blue leather boots with a white flower velcro fastener. She exerted a surprising amount of influence for someone unschooled in these matters and it was an exhausting process. The idea of Skye being older and able to play a more active role in the dialogue both relieved and terrified me.

I felt quite panicky as I handed over Dad's money and hoiked Skye onto my hip for a quick getaway. There were now several customers requiring attention waiting impatiently behind us.

Half-an-hour later we were in the park near home eating sandwiches from the deli across the street. Skye was breaking in her boots on piles of liquidambar leaves scattered thick in places. A tricksy wind picked the leaves up and threw them away while Skye tried to catch them. My hair flicked in my face and I realised how long it had grown while I had been busy. Busy doing what?

I thought of the brightly lit department store, bustlers shop-shopping, the crush on the train, and shuddered. Then I remembered my work, the papers at home spread over my

desk and I longed for the enclosure of that space with its crystal words growing into phrase fronds. I hadn't thought about it for several hours. It should have been refreshing but I just felt tired, drained. I sighed with resignation, then forced myself into the present, diving into Skye's world, tumbling into the leaves. She shrieked hysterically as if to say, "Look! Mummy's such a clown!"

When we got home Dad said he hadn't any work that night and asked if he could spend the afternoon with Skye. I was happy to leave them be but couldn't face my desk and its papers. I ran a deep bath and threw in a handful of loose-leaf jasmine green tea from my not inconsiderable supplies. I soaked for what felt like hours but was actually a mere twenty-minute brew.

The next day I was back at my desk before Skye woke up but I'll be damned if I could remember what I was doing when last there. A yellow Post-it note with DITCHARDS underlined three times was attached to the space bar on my keyboard. But how I'd got there and what I'd do now was lost. I'd reached a sticking point: miles had been travelled, screeds had been written but I couldn't pull it together. I began a frenzy of recapitulation, retracing my steps to find the shape of my work so far. Dad and Skye went out to the park; she'd told him about "dancing leaves".

"Don't you want to come and enjoy the last of the fine weather with us?" Dad called.

"No!" I yelled angrily, "I'm buried in books."

I was resisting. Resisting what I knew to be the key to my story, or rather, *whom* I knew to be the key.

I had to do something, something proactive that demanded a response, a new stimulus. One afternoon a few days later (perhaps I'd had too much green tea: it had a strong, savoury flavour that gave me a moment's pause when I took my first taste) I looked up "Ditchards" in the White Pages. There were only three listings. I rang the first one and it went to an answering service for "Kerry and Steve". The second one rang out. I dialed the third number and a man answered almost immediately.

I spoke, "Hello, I'm looking for Mr. Ditchards."

"Speaking."

“Mr. Don Ditchards? He knew my grandfather, he’d be quite old now…”

“Oh, you mean my father. What is this regarding?”

“I’m trying to put my grandfather in touch with old friends so they can talk. He’s losing his memory and I thought it might help him.” I could feel the heat coming off my face as it flushed red with the lie, but my voice was steady, convincing, sincere.

“And your name is…” I told him and he said it back slowly, “Car–ly Mc–Kin–non,” he must have been writing it down, then he said, “Well, Dad loves to talk. I’ll give you his phone number…”

It was that easy. He wasn’t suspicious at all. I wondered if it would have been so easy if I were a man. Of course, it wasn’t *that* easy. I still had no definitive proof that this number would lead me to *my* Don Ditchards, but how many could there be? I still had no way of knowing whether Ditchards would remember Ken and Elsie, and if he did, whether he’d tell me he did, and even if he did tell me he remembered them, whether he’d confirm or deny what I’d surmised of his misdemeanours in the nineteen fifties. But I didn’t think about these questions until later on.

I phoned the number straight away, carried along with the wave of adrenaline and to get in before the younger Mr. Ditchards, in case he decided to call his father. The phone rang for a long time and I realised it was the same number I’d called before, the second listing. My pulse sank but then rose again when I remembered old people rarely had answering machines. It’s because they are home so much, I thought, and because they have had a lifetime to assimilate the concept of living in the present moment.

“Hello?” The voice was breathy, a little gruff and caught me by surprise. My heart raced a few beats and I felt the heat on my face again as I spoke.

“Hello, Mr. Ditchards. My name is Carly McKinnon. I think you knew my grandparents, Ken and Elsie McKinnon?”

“What? McKinnon? Yes, I remember. Who are you?”

“Carly. I was hoping I could talk to you about the times in which you knew my grandparents, because Ken is losing his memory now, and I thought you and he might be able to talk, or maybe —”

“What makes you think my memory is any better, eh?” He laughed a little, slow and wheezy.

“Well, you remember my grandparents… Anyway, I thought I could meet with you and then I’d know.”

This made him laugh really hard and the wheeze turned into a cough, which hacked on and on and on.

His breathing steadied suddenly and Don Ditchards said, “You want to know if I’m crazy? What makes you think you could tell, eh? I think I’d like to meet you, Carly. I’ve got some stories. Have you got a car? You want to come round now?”

I laughed now, a nervous giggle that I quickly suppressed and said, “No, not now, Mr. Ditchards, I have a little girl to look after. Maybe we could arrange to meet next week?” He agreed to a time and gave me the address.

It was a quiet street in Claremont, mostly units and duplexes. Tidy magnolias shaded the verge and NO PARKING signs kept the grass neat, but eventually I found a place to park around the corner where no sign forbade it. Don Ditchard’s unit was easy to find, with a well-ordered system of numbering the houses. No chance of calling upon the wrong place and accidentally speaking to the neighbours. There was a school somewhere nearby and I heard the siren calling kids in from playtime. I was about fifteen minutes late: the traffic was thick along the highway.

Don Ditchards answered the door in his dressing gown — royal blue with quilted lapels — and I nearly turned and ran then and there. He was a big man, tall and fat-bellied and he even sported the moustache he’d worn in the 1967 newsprint photo I’d seen, though now it was rather ill kempt. He surveyed me and said, “Carly, come in. I’ve got the kettle on. You drink coffee? I have mine with a nip.”

I had my notebook and pencil case with me in my handbag, but suddenly I wasn’t sure what I was doing there. At least, I knew what I wanted to do: get some truthful information out of the old bastard, but as for what I was pretending to be doing there, I was no longer sure.

The unit was neat, with contemporary furniture and bare white walls. A few framed photos stood on top of the large television. Ditchards pointed me towards a wooden chair next to the outer-side of the built-in kitchen counter while he spooned instant coffee into a pair of enormous mugs. I didn’t actually like coffee but hadn’t the courage to say.

“Thanks, Mr. Ditchards,” I managed.

“Call me Don,” he instructed and poured a generous plash of brandy from a large bottle into each mug. Mine was pushed across the counter towards me and he carried his own to the small table next to the only armchair, into which he sank.

“So, you want to talk about Ken McKinnon, eh?” he said, grinning at me. In that grin I saw that Ditchards was no fool: he remembered *exactly* who Ken McKinnon was. I also saw his confidence, his brazen self-assurance.

I went on with the script, but with less conviction this time. “Well, Pop is losing his memory now and I thought it might be nice for him to chat with old friends again.” Ditchards fixed me with his eyes while he took a large gulp of coffee and I knew he didn’t believe me. I blushed.

“My granddaughters couldn’t give a damn about me. I only see them on their birthdays. They don’t come round for mine. How much do you know about my connection to McKinnon?”

I spoke carefully. “Not much. Well, I’ve read his journals, but I suppose they’re one-sided…” Suddenly, my recent firm conviction that this pompous old playboy made a fool of my Pop seemed flimsy and unfair. Then again there was “Bruce’s Trial”, which connected Ditchards to the next generation, but how, exactly? I tried to bring to mind the list I’d made of allegations and their sources that I’d been studying so assiduously the previous evening, but I couldn’t see it.

Ditchards looked away and said, “It’s all true, probably.” He went on in a distracted fashion, with generous slurps between words, “We weren’t very subtle back then. We had to manipulate and lie, for a good cause, of course, but the techniques were regrettable.”

I could hardly believe it: from the horses’ mouth! Ditchards was silent for a moment and then drank again. He looked at me sharply and said, “I’m allowed to talk about this now, it’s declassified.” I remember thinking it was strange that Ditchards wasn’t at all perturbed that I knew what he did to Ken, but he was worried lest I think he was breaking ASIO’s confidences. I was itching to get out my notebook, but resisted. If the fish sees the net it might get scared away. I realised I was staring stupidly so I bent forward and cradled my cup close to my face.

He went on, “I was a provocateur. Part of my job was to guide the Communist Party into certain acts, to keep tabs on them, frustrate their efforts. Ken McKinnon was Communist Party. He was one of my more… frustrated rivals. You are his granddaughter. It’s only natural you’d be frustrated too, until you understand what happened. So I dug these out.”

Ditchards put down his coffee and turned his royal blue back to me while he bent to fetch something from the other side of his armchair. He sat up and held a scruffy stack of small notebooks bundled together with an elastic band. He offered and I reached for them, but then he snatched them away suddenly and clasped my hand, shooting at me, “You’re not a communist, are you?”

“No!” I replied, with a conviction that surprised even me, shaking off his hand.

I left soon after, without his notebooks. When I refused a second cup of coffee Ditchards became difficult to manage. Forgoing the coffee, he went straight for the brandy and took it back to his armchair. It was for his cough, he insisted, and gave me a demonstration of the harsh hack I remembered from that last week’s phone call. Despite my attempts to encourage nineteen fifties reminiscence, he passed over volatile politics for voluble jokes of the sexist and sick varieties. I got up to make my getaway and he bounced up beside me with surprising strength and clasped one of my hands with both of his.

“You must come back, Carly. I’ll get the notebooks organised for you and you can borrow them. There are… there are things you should know. Give me a few days.”

Reluctantly I agreed.

Later that week I repeated the journey to Claremont, only with more trepidation this time. I had the same bother finding somewhere to park, but at least Ditchards was partly dressed, in a white shirt and a suit jacket that was too tight, with black tracksuit pants. I was armed with excuses to make my escape but I said nothing when I saw a neat stack of notebooks on the kitchen counter. I took the chair nearby and accepted my coffee and listened while he told me about his career after the nineteen fifties. He mentioned the names of lots of operations and characters, “anti-nuclear nuts” he called them. I didn’t recognise any of the names he mentioned. I was surprised by the warmth with which he spoke of his

various adversaries; he was trying quite hard to be charming, I realised, reminiscing like I'd asked him to the other day.

Still, he was a nasty piece of work who made a career out of harassing those who dared to question the authority imposed on them. Australian communists? Anti-nuclear nuts? Ditchards was more dangerous than these people. I finished the drink and got up, taking the notebooks. I held out my hand to shake his, saying, "Thankyou".

"Well, I've enjoyed these chats of ours, Carly." His hands were hot and cloying and I tried to pull away, but he held on. "Promise me you'll come again to talk. I'll need my notebooks back, you know."

I used my excuses and got out. My elation upon escaping with high hopes for my prize was deflated when I reached the car. A parking ticket was pinned under my windscreen wiper, nonchalantly flapping in the breeze. I walked fully around my car and discovered a PRIVATE — KEEP OFF THE LAWN sign hidden behind a bin.

20 — PJ Pound Pays Perth a Visit

It is Monday and the women have gathered to organise the May Day March. There is a federal election due at the end of next month and in all the flurry of getting *The Jumbuck Jig* together and finding some energy for the election campaign as well, (But really, they tell themselves, Elsie and the other women, but really, the show itself is our contribution to the campaign) they had quite forgotten that May Day is now less than a week away.

First of May is International Labour Day, a significant day for communists, indeed for workers all over the world. The Party members *must* march despite their hectic rehearsal schedule, and these things take time and planning. What will their slogan be? Do they need to organise a banner-painting day? The hard legwork of recruiting helpers to get an event such as the May Day March together is *always* left to the women.

"We have so little time," Isabel complains, but she has the part of the heroine in the show and is forgiven her reluctance.

"Why don't we use the banners from our last federal election campaign, I still have them stored in my attic," Doreen says, and adds, "Well, the issues are always the same, aren't they." She doesn't intend this to be a question but a statement of the obvious, and several women nod in agreement with her.

Elsie opens her mouth in disbelief: "Nonsense!" she says; it comes out as a squeal and Doreen gasps. Elsie tries to go on more slowly, more gently: "In 1951 we were fighting for our very right to exist. The referendum to change the constitution to allow the outlawing of the CP, remember?"

"Oh yes, of course," they murmur and begin sharing stories in twos and threes about their campaigning adventures. Elsie feels frustrated; there was something unspoken in the room when she first came in, she could see it in their eyes.

"What about using our sets for *The Jumbuck Jig* in the march? The scenes of the outback, the red earth and blue sky, are striking." Joylove speaks over the others and brings everyone's attention to the matter at hand. "After all, this is the Australia we are fighting for, isn't it?"

Conjuring Australia in this way, as theirs to fight for, an incantation replete with primal colour, blood earth, blue sky, warms the women and brings them together. Fairly and efficiently the tasks are delegated. Doreen will assess the appropriateness of her banners, Isabel will negotiate the loan of the sets, Elsie will recruit the children to assemble at the front for a singalong, and so on.

On her way out, Elsie meets Cassandra coming in. Elsie greets her old friend and enquires after her health as she moves by, more out of politeness than interest. Cassandra, however, will not be so easily put off and gets her long fingers wrapped tight around Elsie's arm as she talks her into a corner of the office.

"Ahh, Elsie, I've been meaning to ask you and now here you are, if you don't mind coming with me for a moment, did Adelaida Longley tell you that she was playing hostess to the General Secretary?" Cassandra speaks this last part sotto voce and looks Elsie in the face.

Elsie's jaw drops. She tries to recover: "Yes, we were too busy to have him this time…" but fails miserably to convince Comrade Cassandra.

"You know what it is, don't you Elsie? It's Ken: his new interests. You must speak with him Elsie. It is a matter of the utmost urgency. I can help you. There are ways one can manage one's interests."

"What do you know of his interests?" Elsie cannot help raising her voice, ruining the layer of discretion Cassandra has been at pains to protect them with. "My husband has only the Party's interests in mind. He is the least self-interested man in the world! Everything he does, he does for the Party and yet they throw it back in his face." She breaks off suddenly and pulls away from Cassandra.

The older woman is unflustered. "Please yourself Elsie. But do tell Ken I offered."

The next day, Elsie's investigations reveal that PJ Pound, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Australia, came to Perth on Sunday and went straight to the Longleys'. Elsie is surprised that her network of Party connections had failed to notify her of this in advance. In fact, she *had* received several forewarnings of her leader's arrival but was too preoccupied with her organising to notice.

There is nothing unusual in the General Secretary's visit, in and of itself. He undertakes the long journey from Sydney to address the grateful West Australian branch

every year or two, and even though PJ Pound had spoken at the State Conference just last spring, there *is* an election campaign on. What is unusual is that he didn't come knocking at the McKinnons' door, suitcase in hand, as he had done for the last three visits. Why didn't he come to us? Elsie agonises, and studiously avoids thinking further on what Cassandra said.

Though certainly not among the wealthiest of Perth's Party members, the McKinnons are better placed than most to play host to PJ Pound, whose modest stature belies his prodigious appetite. Although Elsie prides herself on being an economical and efficient housekeeper, she likes to think that her leader chose to stay with them less for her provisioning and more for the quality of debate that followed dinner and ran late into the night. Last time, Elsie sat rapt as PJ dominated the dinner table with his discussion of the Woman Question.

"If it is to be effective, the Committee for Work Among Women must necessarily include a number of women. But one or more of the men leaders of the State Committee, Ken or Fred, for example, should also be a member of the Committee for Women."

"Quite so," Ken had nodded and Elsie nodded too.

PJ Pound continued. "It is not because men are inherently superior to women, but because historical development has been such that greater numbers of men take an interest in economic and political questions, the result being that greater numbers of men occupy responsible positions in the Party than women."

And then Elsie cleared the table and put the kids to bed and did the dishes while the men drank coffee in the lounge room.

The last time the General Secretary came to stay, Bruce's babyish sensations that this was not a nice man were confirmed in new six-year-old impressions. Bruce was scared by the Old Man's loud, burring voice, which made him seem bigger than his body. He was bad enough while awake, but asleep, the Old Man's choking snore was worse. Elsie had made her leader a comfortable foldout bed in the lounge room but by the second day he'd outgrown the lounge and expanded into the kitchen. And on the third day Bruce made a disturbing discovery in his bedroom: he came home from school to find the strange Old Man asleep in his own bed at half-past-three in the afternoon. Bruce had been frightened

and ran to tell his mum, who transformed her embarrassment at her leader's subversion into anger at Bruce, ordering him to move the foldout into her bedroom all by himself.

In the morning he got up early and desired a certain toy that he knew was on top of the bookshelf in his and Peter's room. It meant going past the Old Man who was probably asleep, and Bruce decided to risk it. The toy was retrieved but Peter woke up.

"What are you doing with my telegraph cans, Bruce?" he challenged.

"Do you want to play with me Peter?"

"Give them to me!" Peter said, making a swipe at them. Bruce had squealed, the cans clanged and the Old Man had woken. Bruce stood stock still with fear. The Old Man blinked with his whole face, screwing it up small and then letting it go, very quickly. He leaned over and felt around underneath the bed, located his glasses and put them on. He didn't look at Peter but turned his wrinkled face to Bruce. He growled, "You've got green in your eyes, son." And with that adult judgement, PJ Pound got out of Bruce's bed.

He didn't have enough words to call it, but Bruce *knew* that a gross injustice had just been done him. Bruce could hear the Old Man's piss ringing against the side of the toilet, the door was open, another example of his monstrousness. Couldn't anyone else see it?

"Alright, we can play, but it's *my* toy and *I'm* in charge." Peter had said, passing one of the cans to Bruce. The toy was useless without two players. But Peter had misjudged his younger brother: Bruce dropped the can and ran out of the room.

The monthly branch meeting is scheduled for the last Thursday in April. Elsie has not informed Ken of PJ Pound's arrival because of a vague feeling of shame. Perhaps it reflects badly upon her housekeeping. As mortifying as this notion is, it is preferable to the more likely reason for Elsie's reluctance: her growing suspicion that Ken's actions are going to be denounced.

Elsie and Ken are seated towards the front of the hall and Adam Scrabble is nowhere to be found. Ken is feeling invigorated with his creative successes and enjoying his new high profile: people are definitely starting to look at him differently. He has prepared a statement called "The Significance of *The Jumbuck Jig* for Australian Culture", his first as Secretary of the Movement for Arts and Freedom, based on a couple of

Campbellism's key concepts. He has also made a start on the *Tetrameter* report. But Ken forgets all about his statement (he'll have no need of it anyway) when he spots the General Secretary from Sydney sitting next to Bill at the top of the room. Ken looks around him and realises what everyone else already knows: something is wrong. He feels he ought to have been informed, not least of all because he is the secretary of a section committee.

Comrade Joynes begins by clearing his throat, for rather too long. "Come to order, comrades. The modern age brings prosperity to some and ruin to others. The threat of nuclear war is forever lurking close, triggered by the atom-maniacs in power, but Menzies would have our countrymen believe that we, comrades, *we* are the threat! During the next few weeks it is vital that we make our strongest efforts to date to topple the reactionary regime that has hold of our nation. PJ Pound, our tireless leader, has made time in his busy schedule for a short visit to Western Australia to encourage and inspire us."

PJ Pound must be close to sixty. His hair has receded to a short formation at the base of his skull and his belly's gone to pot. He is a short man but surveys the room from the elevated stage, allowing his heavy stare to fall on various members of the audience, who visibly shrink. Then he begins.

"Comrades. I wish that it were only encouragement I needed to offer, but alas, it has come to my attention that some pernicious ideas are poisoning the unity of our Party. Let not the geographic isolation of your city allow a weakening of Democratic Centralism! Surely I don't need to remind you that our first and foremost commitment is to international solidarity with the working class? And as the first worker's state and bastion of socialism, the Soviet Union deserves our respect, and above all, our discipline and obedience."

The General Secretary goes on to talk of "certain persons", who have been fooled by "certain notions" and who dare to try and convince others to take up this deviant practice. These individuals are liquidators! Very cleverly, without ever being quite specific enough to name names, PJ Pound systematically rebukes every point Ken made in favour of Campbellism in his stump speech down by the river.

Ken's face feels hot and he tries to rationalise the situation: his leader spoke of *persons*. Surely there are other Party members here tonight who have more cause than I to blush at our leader's words? Ken thinks. The General Secretary does not stare at him but Ken knows that his eyes aren't very good. He cannot quite believe that all this anger, all

these jargon-clad insults are meant for Campbellism, even as his face burns with shame. He surreptitiously steals a sidelong glance at Elsie, who is flushed but stares stonily ahead. Her hands grip the bag in her lap and the knuckles are white. It is true, then. The General Secretary's dressing down is meant for him, Ken McKinnon, for opening discussion on the ideas of Earl Campbell. It is a cool autumn evening but circles of sweat are creeping out from under his arms.

After the General Secretary sits down Comrade Joynes makes an announcement of adjournment and the members disperse quietly. Ken and Elsie stick close together, she clings to his arm, her eyes darting about. No-one makes eye contact and she clings tighter. Ken sees Comrade Piggot, Don Ditchards, not far ahead of him in the hall and he pulls away from Elsie to catch up to him.

"A bit rough, wouldn't you say comrade? You were there; you know how persuasive Campbell was. At least," Ken corrects himself hurriedly, "how persuasive Ranley was." Ditchards keeps moving with the crowd and doesn't look at Ken. "So where to from here, eh? Party line or else, is it?" Ken is attempting to be jocular, making the kind of foolhardy comments he guesses forge mateship.

Ditchards stops and turns to Ken when they reach the door to the lobby. He speaks loudly so those around them will hear. "Comrade, I don't know what you're talking about."

Ken chuckles and looks around. Elsie is a little further back. "Sydney. The show. The Green Hat. Comrade Scott Ranley: we were introduced."

Now Ditchards laughs and places a heavy hand on Ken's shoulder. "Comrade, I haven't been to Sydney since 1946. Best you get yourself home to bed, eh? Mrs. Mac." Elsie has caught up with them and Ditchards smiles at her with his head cocked to one side. He speaks more softly now. "Mrs. Mac, your husband needs you."

21 — Contact

I hadn't heard from Natalie for some weeks and then she phoned one evening recently to tell me how bored she was at university. She envied me having Skye, giving my life such direction and purpose.

"Don't be ridiculous," I warned her. "You know if you were me you'd want something else." Nat gets like that when she's feeling unlovely, imagines the most unsuitable things would be better for her. She moaned about being lonely and complained I never phone and insisted I make some time to spend with her the next Sunday. I suggested eleven; she said she'd pick me up at ten.

When Natalie arrived I met her at the door dressed in Sunday best. She looked me up and down and took me back to my room to change my clothes. "What's going on?" I demanded to know. She muttered idle intentions regarding taking me in hand, sorting out my wardrobe and so on, while rifling through my things. Eventually she threw some pink velour pants at me; they were pre-Skye. "They're my pyjamas, Nat!" My protestations went unheeded and soon I stood awkwardly next to her petite, tastefully black-clad figure, in day-glo green and pink velour, a mismatched anachronistic tracksuit. I was starting to grasp Natalie's plans for me and feared it involved physical exertions.

She took me to a room in the city with wooden floorboards and a handful of people, some of them less carefully dressed than me. They were dancers, contact improvisers to be exact. This was their jam, their open get-together; Nat had heard about it through a man who was interested in her and he greeted us enthusiastically as we walked in. I was a buffer, I realised, though on the way there she'd given me a line about being concerned I wasn't getting sufficient cardio exercise to stimulate brain activity.

Natalie was absorbed immediately and at first I just sat at the side and watched. What is it exactly, this contact improvisation? Those who risk an immediate answer use cryptic quips like "an exploration of gravity" or "an enquiry into momentum" and although I can see that this is true, it doesn't explain much. Many try to describe how it feels, sensations of skin on skin, muscle on bone, the resistance and flow, the breath. Some offer a psychological answer and describe the dance as a physical manifestation of interpersonal relationships. What does it look like? Bodies in combinations of rolling, reaching, sliding,

falling and flying. Bodies paired and piled, moving with speed and then slowly rolled and then still.

But it might also be something else entirely. It is, after all, an improvisation. Its category evasion makes it tempting to analogise contact improvisation as the bebop of the dance world. Yet to me, “contact”, as it is affectionately known, is far more accessible than that complex and dissonant style of jazz, requiring only a willingness to listen, a call-and-response between dancers.

Sunlight and street noise streamed through the tall windows on one side of the room. A sickly-sweet smell, ripe bodies, was beginning to fill the air when someone put the ceiling fans on a lazy spin. I’d been watching for perhaps half-an-hour when a woman came and crouched next to where I sat. She introduced herself in a whisper and then softly pushed me with her shoulder, asking polite questions that I answered monosyllabically. “You a dancer? … First time?” So slowly did she increase the pressure of her push that I became stuck to her, and when she pulled back, I followed. I’m not sure when the sitting stopped and the dancing began but it seemed hours before Caroline let me rest and I lay in my quickly cooling sweat, panting. What had we done? Sometimes I’d felt awkward and sometimes, exquisite. I had an overwhelming sense of relief, no, more than that: fulfillment.

Our bodies are another kind of notebook, another way of recording our lives. A walk might tell the story of an old injury, our moods leave their marks in the lines on our faces, anxieties reveal themselves in mannerisms. Although I’d taken care in not allowing myself to be swallowed up by my baby when she came, cultivated a challenging project that was separate from her, in truth my pursuit took me no further from home than Gran and Pop’s place. In that wooden-floored room in the city, few words were spoken but all around me a language unfolded that I wanted to learn to understand.

How far inwards had I turned, crouched over my desk at home day after day? I love the story that begins there, but as I was tumbled, squashed flat and turned upside down, I remembered there was something else. That first jam ended with bruises on my shoulders and knees and one, a mysterious pear-shape, on my right thigh. The next morning long-forgotten muscles deep inside me made their painful presence felt and I moaned every time I had to walk up or down steps or pick up Skye. The day after, I felt a little better and the

one after that I was high as a kite. I couldn't believe there were four days to wait before I could do it all again.

This new language of feeling was pushed aside by my familiar one: I had the notebooks. The ones I got from Don Ditchards. I read every word in every one he gave me.

Chronologically speaking, the first two consecutive volumes were thin cloth-bound books dating from October 1953 to July 1954. Although they were written as a series of short entries with much abbreviation, a story nevertheless emerged. A lot of it was about Ken, portrayed as the necessary subject of Ditchards' assignment but possibly worth saving. Ditchards seems unperturbed by the hypocrisy of selecting a subject for his gullibility (twice fooled, by communism and by Ditchards himself) *and* expecting this subject to have the charisma to proclaim a new way forward for the Party.

I stopped reading for a couple of days after I'd finished with the first two notebooks. My head was full and I had to wait for the teeming thoughts to subside before I could consider putting anything new in there. When is enough text enough? Words appear to be a self-perpetuating medium, each requiring the next in order to make sense of what came before. Any ending, then, is necessarily arbitrary, or at least temporary. This thought helped me to be at peace with the story I was close to concluding. If an earthquake had swallowed my house and every scrap of the last six months' work, I'd be OK about it: that's what I told myself.

I left my desk for an afternoon and went walking with Skye. The days were warm; we walked by the river. Water birds pecked a living between the boats and jetties and Skye chased them happily. When I insisted she keep her shoes on and not paddle in the water, her face broke into a dozen puffy pieces, like cookie dough. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry, it's dirty. You can't go in there." I sang all the water songs I knew, they were like charms, and she was happy again.

Soon the notebooks drew me back. There were random volumes of different shapes and sizes: a pocket-sized, hard and black little thing from 1967, similar in red for late 1969 and so on through the seventies. A lot of the notes were not relevant to my search, except as a rounded picture of Ditchards and his prejudices. There were innumerable suspicious characters, many encountered incidentally but every so often Ditchards' notes zoomed in

on one or two key players for a period, presumably when he was undercover, then zoomed out to broader ideological polemic. But without fail, every volume revealed at least a passing reference to a McKinnon.

After 1976 the McKinnon in question changed gender and generation, a detail noted by Ditchards. “Amy Devareau, F 27 y.o. sister of Geoffrey Devareau, draft defaulter, ’67. Marries Bruce McKinnon, M 29 y.o. son of Ken and Elsie McKinnon, former CPM’s.”

That was all.

The last three notebooks were consecutive again, but this time their protagonist was Amy. There had been a protest gathering and her name was among several collected under a list titled Women’s Action for Nuclear Disarmament. (Here Ditchards noted a loud guffaw over what he thinks they ought to do with their acronym.) Then Amy’s name came up again a month later in “an aggressive lobby group whingeing about black land rights.” Ditchards wrote, “The appearance of McKinnon in agitations on two separate issues suggests a pattern that leads to professional subversion and lawlessness. Watch this woman.”

Without apparent self-awareness, Ditchards filled the next exercise book with Amy’s comings and goings and every public event was held up as further evidence of her dangerous nature. Those who go looking for suspicious behaviour are likely to find it. Though apparently still a member of the Communist Party, this held less interest for Ditchards than Amy’s vocal opposition to militarisation, especially of the nuclear variety. He attended a public meeting she was addressing and took notes of “the bitch’s rant”. He recorded fragments: “Soldiers are coerced into war … Boys are sick, self-loathing, they have a death wish … Military complex is corrupt and profits in death and destruction …” Whatever it was Amy said, it pushed Ditchards’ buttons.

Soon, Ditchards was noting details of Amy’s private life, too. He recorded when, in 1982, Amy and her family — “McKinnon F and M, 1 child 1 y.o.” — moved house (I was two, actually). And Ditchards seemed almost gleeful when later that year Amy moved out of the house, taking her vehicle (orange 1974 Falcon). Did Ditchards ever imagine, I found myself wondering, what chaos was left in the wake of his surveillance and interference? Did he ever imagine that the events he observed were influenced, even precipitated, by his

observations? I figured my exact age when Amy moved out, in years, months and days: two, four, eight. I wrote the numbers down then took the paper outside and burned it.

In the third volume, Ditchards recruited a woman named Maggie Carlton. She implicated Amy in secret preparations to travel to Nurrungar, the US communications base built near the remains of the Woomera Rocket Range. Ditchards quoted Maggie Carlton over several weeks and entries; she claimed that Amy, now living in "an infamous doss-house in Northbridge", was leading efforts to infiltrate Nurrungar. On this ridiculously flimsy pretext, Ditchards advised his superiors of the danger Amy McKinnon may be in given her intention to break the law outside of the Australian jurisdiction. He made contact with her through an agent with a long-term union-leader profile. "Led McKinnon to believe the US base at Nurrungar has been made aware of her plans. Strongly recommended she curtail all public appearances and consider moving away, for the safety of her family."

Is this one of those "regrettable" methods he referred to the other day?

The last entry on Amy was in December 1983. She had taken Ditchards' advice and vanished. At the end of the year she'd returned to Perth and "visited private residences including the home of her husband and child." When she left, she was on a bus to Kalgoorlie. The ticket officer stated the woman had made enquiries about buses travelling out of Kalgoorlie, but hadn't purchased a follow-on ticket.

I copied out the last sentence in full, word for word, as it was my guiding clue: "Connection with Force in Kal reports: Woman, around 30, fair, slight, made enquiries at several hotels about Aboriginal settlements in the Eastern Goldfields; left when laughed at."

Kalgoorlie is not known for its neighbourliness; that sentence could have heralded the beginning of a horror story. But I know she came back because she visited me once a year for the next four years. And when she didn't come Dad wasn't so surprised, she sort of faded away, he said, sharing less and less about her life on the commune down south. I'd never had more reason to think that this was because she was living somewhere else, doing something else entirely. And my anger at Ditchards was mollified by the preciousness of this new information. But it was too much. I put the notebooks away in a little used drawer.

* * *

I went back to contact improvisation the next Sunday. I was welcomed and included by many of the same faces as last week, a few were new to me, there were no more than a dozen of us. Natalie wasn't there but she arrived later, with her new man. They joined the dance and some little time later, Nat found her way to me, standing tentatively on the sidelines.

"Hi," her hips said as they nudged me, a little friendly, a little coy. She hadn't phoned me all week.

I gave her some weight but turned my back, I wasn't going to roll over that easily. Natalie kept the pressure against me and slowly bent her knees, lowering to the ground, so that I had no choice but to follow, short of pulling away sharply. "Won't you play with me?" said her shoulder dancing down my ribs.

It tickled, or hurt, I broke contact and rocked onto my hands and knees, steady, self-contained. Quick as a flash Natalie followed me and took advantage of the platform to roll up my arm and leg with her own and onto my back, so that she rested, open hearted, arms and legs splayed over my steady table-back. I could see her lover close by us, dancing with Caroline and another body with an obscured face. Natalie sighed, I could feel it through my back: she was in love again. I dropped one hip and bent the same-side elbow, letting Nat roll off the way she'd come. To help slow her dismount I'd quickly learned to push into her, and if that movement is followed through it means I roll up onto Nat's back.

I held back a little fearing I'd squash her. I'm a good bit bigger than Natalie, but she resisted my reluctance and then I was there, sprawled open and supported from underneath. My head fell into the hollow of her shoulder. I could breathe. I sighed, just like Nat did, but instead of that signalling dipping me off, she held tight and my arms and legs dropped a little longer. "The others come and go but between us there is a constancy," her back said to me. I sighed again.

The second jam didn't hurt so much, fewer bruises, no muscles shocked stiff. And the afterglow came sooner and lasted longer. There was a mid-week evening jam that I wanted to go to, which was trickier as far as time without Skye was concerned. But I felt drawn to the dance, it was easing the pressure in my head, it was good for me.

I called Uncle Peter and asked if he'd come over on Wednesday evening and put Skye to bed and sit for an hour or two. He was happy to oblige, pleased to be asked to step

in, I think. He came armed with *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear* and looked revved for a good night. Skye always enjoyed his silliness, intentioned and otherwise.

The dance was different this time, a partly different group of people. And there was music where usually we danced in silence. I learned a new shape by copying a man about my size and when I found I could do it I laughed out loud and didn't feel embarrassed until later. What happened in that space? It's hard to get words to stick to it. A shift of some sort, a speeding up, an *enlivening*, and these are all inadequate. It was like an opening, a window through which to view a new possibility, a new way of being. It went away of course, but the residue remained for several hours after every dance.

On the way home on the train I met a woman named Carmel Batel. We were in the same carriage along with a few other late-night commuters. We were all, except for Carmel, white skinned. Perhaps this was unusual, for Carmel spoke nervously to herself, "Where're my people? Where're my brothers an sisters?"

The other travellers ignored her. Quite a feat, given the layout of the carriage with seats all along each side of the train and nothing to face but each other. A quick glance and back to the paper. Carmel repeated her plea a few times, growing louder and more determined, trying to engage us, and then cursing us when we remained stonily silent. "What have ya done wiv em, ya fuckers?" Her voice approached aggressive, but when I looked at her I could tell she wasn't well. She was pinned to the seat, as if to move were a great weight, a great pain. Carmel spoke quietly in her own language and consoled in English, "At least I still got my language. At least I got that."

I wanted to speak with her. Keep company with my countrywoman while we travelled together. Be the one who was prepared to, if not answer the question "What have you done with my people?" at least enter into dialogue. Was I arrogant? I feared so. I didn't move. But if she would only speak to *me*, I would respond.

I too lowered my gaze but when Carmel called "Hey! Hey, you girl!" I looked up and we made eye contact. I went to sit by her. We shared our names and looked each other over. An easy rapport was established. Carmel Batel. Carly McKinnon. Her appearance was different from the local Noongar people, her skin a little darker; I guessed she was from further east. She said she was in Perth to receive dialysis. She was only a few years older

than me but her sickness and the scars covering her forehead made the difference seem greater. I was about to ask Carmel about her country, the country of her language.

The train had stopped at a station but no-one moved and the carriage doors remained shut. Instead of moving us on quickly, the driver opened his door at the front of the train and strode down the carriage aisle to where Carmel and I sat.

“We won’t have that language in here, ya hear me? I can hear ya all the way down there,” he pointed at the control room, “and we don’t tolerate that kind of language on the trains. Unnastand?”

We’d been talking quietly for some time but Carmel hung her head and murmured acquiescence. I looked him in the eye, too aware of the loaded nature of the power dynamic to intervene, only able to bear witness.

If I’d had the height, the wit, the wealth, I might have questioned the driver: “What language are you talking about: her native tongue or ‘you fuckers’?” But I didn’t. Never had I seen a driver come out of the control room to chastise a passenger, though foul and offensive things occur with some frequency in public trains late at night. Such a cheap trick. Twenty years ago the driver might have said to me, “Is this woman bothering you miss?” and I would have had a way in, but his insidious assumptions, his slick discrimination went unchallenged, to my shame.

The driver went away and the train moved on and Carmel and I resumed our conversation; we didn’t speak of the incident. Carmel told me her place was Yanana, a settlement east of Kalgoorlie. I asked her about children, assuming this was something we would share. But Carmel hid her face and said “No. I don’t want to talk about it.” I felt ashamed and said nothing. Carmel spoke quietly. “My husband beat me an burned me for hurtin em, but I didn’t. See?” She pointed to her scarred forehead.

I looked away. Were the other passengers staring at us? Had they heard what Carmel said or was I the only one? I didn’t want to talk about it. Silently I searched for something else to talk about and finding it, rushed on too quickly. “Carmel, I’m looking for my Mum. I’ve heard that maybe she lives with a community in the Eastern Goldfields. Are there many communities east of Kalgoorlie? Maybe she’s at your community.”

Carmel looked at me seriously. “Not many, Yanana, Warunta, more up north. People are leavin missions an stations an goin to homelands. Lots of people always movin, movin. You don’t know. Who’s your mum?”

“Amy McKinnon.” I said it quickly, like ripping off a bandaid.

“Don’t know Amy McKinnon,” said Carmel.

It was foolish, but my heart sank into my stomach with disappointment and I was hollowed out. I couldn’t look at Carmel.

“You got two dollars?” she said. I did have two dollars — I’d seen it when I put in some money for space hire at the contact jam — and absently I scrabbled about in my bag for my wallet. As I took the coin out and passed it to Carmel, I saw my photo, one of the three photos I have of my mum. She holds me in her arms, I’m a few days old, she smiles. I took it out too and passed this most precious image to Carmel.

“She’s good-lookin lady! That you?” She pointed to the infant.

I nodded and reached for the photo but Carmel pulled away and looked closer at it.

“Nah, don’t know this lady.”

We were nearly at my stop. I reached again for my photo and Carmel held it tight, studying it. “Carmel, please give me my photo.”

“White lady live wiv us *years* ago. She left Yanana wiv Bob Wakadkutja. He’s a good man!” She looked at me with serious eyes and her scarred brown forehead. “I don’t know this lady, Carly-girl, but my aunty, she knows *all* the relations. You let me keep this photo to show er.”

“No! No, I don’t want to —”

Carmel flicked my forearm with the back of her hand and clicked her tongue. “You don’t know your own mother! My husband beat me, like this, on my head.” Carmel mimed the action with the hand that held the photo and then folded it in half, slipping it down the front of her shirt, which fell loosely against her body. “If this lady live wiv us, my aunty will know. You meet me tomorrow morning Midland station an I bring my aunty.”

The train pulled into Bassendean and the doors hissed open. I stood, torn. Carmel smiled, “You go way now, Carly-girl.”

I ran from the train carriage and kept running, up the overpass and down into the car park across from the station. Tears ran down my face but as long as I kept running too, the wind wiped them away.

What could I do but get on a train with Skye the next morning and go to Midland? The end of the line, before the Prospector heads out east. Ignoring the spray-painted instruction, NO LOITERING, we sat on the steps fronting the bleak complex where I had a good view of comings and goings. It was just after nine o'clock. "One hour, we'll wait for an hour," I said to Skye. She ate her sultanas and seeds.

They arrived soon after, Carmel Batel, her aunty and some kids, materialising out of the commercial jungle across the highway. Carmel greeted me like an old friend and sat down on the steps. She introduced her aunty Sheila who sat too, with some difficulty. Her grandkids, two boys and a girl, ran around us, occasionally stopping near Skye to stare. "She's eatin bugs!" said one. They laughed, daring closer and closer until Skye caught their energy and climbed down the stairs to join them.

"You Amy's girl," Sheila said. She was a big woman, long curly hair streaked with white, tied back with a rubber band. I nodded, held her eye for a moment and looked away. She said, "Let me look at the photo, Carmel."

Carmel shrugged and looked at the kids, murmuring something I couldn't understand.

"Never mind," Sheila went on. "I haven't seen Amy Wakadkutja for five, maybe six, seven years. They was headed for homelands north of Yanana. Carmel showed me that photo last night and it was like a ghost! Amy's *old* woman now, like me!" Sheila laughed, revealing red gums between her teeth.

I blinked. Skye was happy with the kids. I looked at Sheila.

"You want to give her a message?" she said.

"But you just said you haven't seen her." My voice came out more softly than I intended.

"What's that?" Sheila looked incredulous. "Look, girlie, we ask around, *somebody* seen her or Bob or the kids."

"Like I told you, Carly-girl, my aunty knows *all* the relations," Carmel said with a smile.

“Then give her the photo, OK Carmel? Give my photo to Amy.” I stood, suddenly conscious of people staring at us, disapproving looks at our kids tearing up and down the steps. “I’ve got to go.”

22 — May Day, Menzies and the Musical

May 1954

May Day is a Saturday and it begins with a bright morning. Another gathering of folk might consider this a blessing but for these workers on International Labour Day, it is no more than they deserve. The march looks to be a great success with hundreds of people turning out, more than the organisers had hoped for. Groups of various sizes merge together as the slow walk begins north of the city on Stirling Street, heading south towards the river along Beaufort Street and increasing in density, volume and tempo as they go. There are lots of Communist Party members and their families, crossing over with non-Anglo ethnic communities and church groups. A real feeling of solidarity pervades the gathering. There are colourful set-pieces painted on lengths of calico and banners reading SAY NO TO MENZIES, with the words FASCIST BILL still visible beneath a layer of paint.

Despite its political accessories, the May Day March is above all a social occasion, with special emphasis on supporting those less fortunate. Members of the Eureka Youth League lead the way with chanting and songs, the more experienced and enthusiastic marchers shepherding the smaller ones. A picnic will conclude the morning's journey, set up by those too young or old to walk.

Elsie hovers close to the front with half an eye on her boys, next to Deirdre. Deirdre is younger than Elsie: her six-year-old is making his first march while her youngest awaits her at the other end. Deirdre wasn't at the branch meeting two days ago and hasn't tutted at Elsie with that mixture of sympathy and reproach that Joylove specialises in.

"It would seem that the members of the Roman Catholic Church are missing this morning," Deirdre says, a little timidly.

"I hadn't noticed," Elsie says.

"It's this Petrov affair that's pushed things over the top. Did you know, Elsie, that in some churches the priests are telling the flocks that to vote Labor is a mortal sin?"

Deirdre is shocked but Elsie sighs. "Boys will be boys," she says. In previous years, Catholics have marched on May Day for the sake of International Labour, although separated from the Communist Party by a group of Baptists and the Friends of Yugoslavia.

Deirdre goes on: “My Malcolm is ready to hit the roof at the mere mention of prayers; he never used to mind. As for taking the children to mass with my mother, that’s over.”

Elsie presses her lips together tightly. Her red flag is small and light, with WORKERS UNITE! stencilled on it. She holds it delicately, right arm in the air with her pinkie extended. Elsie lets the flag sway gently as she walks, gripping it with her thumb and forefingers, leaving the littlest free to signal her femininity. She takes the conversation back to more victorious ground on this day of celebrating the worker.

“Here’s a win for you, Deirdre. You know my friend Judy? For a bit of extra money she’s been cleaning ladies’ houses. Recently she visited a woman in Claremont for the first time. Mrs. Harper was plump and dogged jawed, the real exploitative sort. She began to give instructions to Judy in a very authoritative manner, ‘You’ll do this, don’t forget the corners, you’ll do that.’ But Judy wasn’t having any of it. She took her forefinger and ran it along the top of a shelf, bringing up such a load of dust, which clung to her finger and fell to the floor. Slowly, Judy rubbed her fingers together and looked that woman in the face and said to her, ‘I think I can see what needs to be done.’” Elsie laughs in triumph at her friend’s clever comeback. “Now Mrs. Harper never tells Judy what to do, just greets her at the door and hands her the money after!”

By mid-May *The Jumbuck Jig* is coming together nicely. The band and the cast have started to work together and they’ll run through the show every night, three times every night if necessary, until it goes up. The usual Party activities of meetings and study groups have been conducted in the small front room of the North Perth Hall. The children have spent many afternoons and evenings of the last few weeks as the “audience”; there are always older children or a spare mother on hand to watch the little ones. They are fed together out of a large stew-pot that everyone contributes something to, prepared in Mrs. Dudley’s kitchen because it is just around the corner.

Elsie has thrown herself into the work of producing the show. Every obstacle has been anticipated and resolved. With her newly found freedom behind the wheel and her unwaining enthusiasm, as well as her uncanny ability to convince (or coerce) insufficiently involved Party members to be part of the crew or front-of-house staff or publicity

committee, Elsie has pulled the production together. The only one not doing his bit is Ken, much to Elsie's dismay. He promised to write a press release last week and still has not begun. It'll have to be given to someone else. But I won't complain, will I? Elsie thinks.

Aside from this uncomradely spirit, new life has come to the West Australian branch of the Communist Party. Spontaneous group outbursts of song have become commonplace and whole melodic dialogues take place beyond the boundaries of the stage. A general gaiety pervades. After rehearsals on Monday evening, nine days to opening night, Bill Leighton steps out of his minor role as one of the townsfolk into his loud-voiced role as Party Secretary.

"There'll be no rehearsal tomorrow night." Several voices groan, but Bill continues undaunted. "Amidst all this merrymaking, let us not forget our political duty, comrades. Prime Minister Menzies will be addressing the people of Perth tomorrow evening, and some of us should be there to ensure he's asked the difficult questions."

There are those who are for the enforced break and some against and everyone goes home muttering. Everyone except Mr. Gleddon, Mark Denver, Jenny Gleddon and a pair of Wandering Drovers. They share a few bottles of beer and discuss how best to execute their political duty in the light of Mr. Menzies' visit.

On Tuesday evening, the Returned Services League hall in South Perth is thronging with black-suited men and fancy-hatted ladies. Reporters jostle for seats towards the front and soon it is standing room only. When Menzies and his minders appear they are greeted with rapturous applause, which dies down as he mounts the podium and begins to speak. "My all-too-brief look at life in Perth for the everyday man shows me that here dwell a hard-working and rightly-proud people. I hope I am not too forward in claiming, on behalf of my government, some of the credit for supporting the everyday man in his endeavours." No sooner does the fished-for shoal of cheers arise but Menzies cuts it off. "However, after two terms in office, we are still dogged by that alien pest, *the communist*."

The heavy statesman gets no further than this when, as if on cue, a pair of men on either side of the centre aisle stand up together and produce placards reading BAN THE BOMB! from under their jackets and attempt to call out "Mr. Menzies —" Within seconds, the pair are forcibly removed from their seats and thrown unceremoniously into the street.

Robert Menzies picks up where he left off, enlivened by the interruption, confident of his control. “That destructive and alien pest, *the communist*, organised not for social purposes but for *high treason*! This nation’s recent brush with disaster in the form of a spy ring in the *very corridors* of Parliament House is a timely reminder that we must remain vigilant. Were it not for the decision of that brave man, Mr. Petrov, *even at this moment* the security of our homes, the safely of our families, would be at risk.”

Very soon, (at the next mention of *the communist*, in fact) another, familiar looking pair of men stand in the row behind the first, pull out their placards and chant together, “Mr. Menzies, why is Australia the mule —”

Menzies, not to be outdone, uses his microphone to drown out the hecklers, “We see before us the pests at their mindless and destructive work!” A few of the audience members laugh, a few boo, and the protesters are thrown out.

He goes on: “One of the best instincts in us is that which induces us to have a little piece of earth with a house and a garden which is ours, to which we can withdraw, in which we can be among friends, into which no stranger may come against our will.” And on: “The Royal Commission into Soviet Espionage that opened in Canberra yesterday will unearth evidence of *systematic espionage* and at least attempted subversion. Ladies and gentlemen, let me make it abundantly clear that it concerns something *far superior* to party.”

“Mr. Menzies, why is Australia the mule in America’s nuclear arms race?” Twice more Menzies is interrupted by aisle-hugging men who finally get their question out before they’re thrown out. Menzies takes it all in his stride, knowing there’s nothing like a bit of drama to spark up a campaign speech, and rolls ever onward.

A silent restlessness settles over the room. Soon a woman stands and taking up a pause in Menzies’ oration, begins to speak eloquently of the need, not to take sides in the Cold War, but to end it, as the only realistic path to stable peace. It is Isabel Matthews, the heroine from *The Jumbuck Jig*. She is standing in the middle of a block of closely seated people and although she draws all the eyes in the room, she is inaccessible to the security guards. “There are today powerful men of the Western world preparing for a probable third world war…”

Menzies makes several appeals to her, “Please, Madam, as a sensible member of the fair sex, I ask you to sit down,” but she keeps on. He gives directions to have her removed.

The security guards have ordered the women (for they all are) on either side of Isabel out of their seats. They dutifully stand and begin to file out but an elderly lady sits heavily before she clears the aisle and begins to gasp for air. Then a young woman sighs and falls into her sister's arms and within ten seconds a dozen women have fainted. The fainting brigade counts on the fact that etiquette compels the security guards to offer cursory aid to the women and when they look up, the actress is nowhere to be seen.

One week later, North Perth Hall has been transformed from the dull flat space of branch meetings to an outback barn stacked with straw-bales, overlooking a red horizon. During intermission on the opening night of *The Jumbuck Jig*, Elsie goes over the prop list while the rest of the cast smoke cigarettes out the back of the hall. She is waiting for Ken.

They have a full house tonight and are fully booked for the first week with the second week filling up fast. Elsie thinks, if the election result comes through we may even have to run to a third week. She does some mental calculations on the money raised for the Party in that circumstance. Elsie has been at the hall all day working on last minute things and left Ken a note arranging to meet him at the backstage door, end of intermission. All through the six-week production period Elsie has saved him a cameo role — the Handsome Stranger — appearing early in the second half. Even though Ken has not once turned up to a rehearsal, Elsie insisted he'd be there on the night to deliver his line. In the mean time she's always stood in for him.

Behind the drawn curtain the band members begin to arrange themselves and their instruments on and around the stack of straw-bales, downstage left, for the second half of the show. Elsie can hear the bell ringing at the front of the house and then people begin to come back to their seats, the cast and crew come in from outside. Is Ken among them? He must be, caught up in conversation with some comrade or other. The Singing Vanguard (the communist women's singing group requisitioned as chorus for *The Jumbuck Jig*) congregates behind Elsie. A brief silence hangs in the darkened air, then the curtains are drawn, the lights come up, a drum and a fiddle begin their introduction.

Elsie jumps off her stool and goes to the back stage door: Ken is nowhere to be seen. She comes back in and peers along the dark corridor that connects the two entries onto the stage, quietly calling "Ken!" a few times. There is no response.

Meanwhile, it is time for the heroine's test. Jenny Gleddon is on the brink of deciding to run away with Mark Denver, but there is a glimmer of doubt. "Is he really the one for me? It will be a life of hard work and struggle…"

This is the moment when the Handsome Stranger should appear up stage left, but nothing happens. Elsie is locked in panic. The dramatic pause has fallen well into the territory of the botched line, when Don Ditchards saunters in, upstage right, beyond Elsie's sphere of influence, to deliver Ken's line: "Miss, if you could tell me where I might find Mark Denver the shearer, I would be grateful. I've come to repay him, now that I'm a rich man, for he helped me when no-one else would."

When Elsie hears Ditchards saying these words, she rushes back to her post to see if it is really true. Yes! Oh, damn and blast it! Elsie curses. To look at that smirk one would think that Jenny Gleddon's going to abandon the script and choose him after all. It is *just not right* to have Ditchards saying the line of the Handsome Stranger. Where is Ken? He's supposed to be here with me!

Elsie grasps her clipboard and perches rigidly on her stool for the rest of the show.

After the performance Elsie busies herself with setting props for the next night as the hall gradually empties. Adam Scrabble remains, speaking with, or rather talking at, a comrade. He is criticising *The Jumbuck Jig* and the woman-comrade is young enough to be his daughter, Elsie notes with some surprise. He is using his too loud, showing off voice.

"Well, the lead couldn't act, you can see that. He might be a top-notch recruiter but that doesn't mean he can hold a tune, does it? And the banjo was out, did you notice that? I noted that, I've got quite an ear you know. For all the time she's spent on it these last months I expected more. Oh, my eldest put this thing together. Yes, she's been obsessed, she's thought of nothing else. And that's starting to show in the home," Adam Scrabble says, knowingly.

Surprise turns to shock. On trembling legs, Elsie moves across the stage. Can her father not see her? If he could see her, he wouldn't say those terrible things.

"It wasn't perfect, but *The Jumbuck Jig* was good, Dad, you heard how the people cheered at the end. They loved it! Why would you say such unkind things?" Elsie stands on the stage, looking down on her dad seated at the front.

Adam's interlocutor makes her escape and he stands to respond to his daughter. "Why do you waste your time on this stuff Elsie? You should be organising the federal campaign! With my help I know you could do that. This stuff is just fairy-floss for the mind. Rubbish for the people. Is that your message?" He gesticulates with his walking stick — an unnecessary accessory — as he climbs the steps to the stage.

"The federal campaign? And how would I manage that, Dad? Who would look after my children, my husband? It's been years since you took an interest in my life." Elsie's voice sinks to a whisper: "Things haven't been the same since Beverly died."

"What? Speak up, girl!" Adam Scrabble leans towards Elsie.

"Since the birth of my second child, my stillborn child, you haven't been interested in me. My first was born as Singapore fell in 1942. I lost my second along with Labor in the Election Campaign in 1944. I noticed that's when it changed." Elsie looks down at her hands, which are gently squeezing each other. "And the third? Ha! I nearly died every time!"

"Not interested?" Adam roars, "I was the one who got you up out of bed, got you on your feet and doing something useful rather than lying around misery-gutsing!"

"'Just be thankful it wasn't you', that's what you said."

"*Your poor mother* —" With these three words Adam Scrabble winds up a device he often uses, but Elsie will not play this time.

"My poor mother is dead, and has been dead for more than twenty years. But *I* am *alive* and I will not be *ignored*!" Elsie hands snatch into fists but her foot escapes control and stamps for emphasis.

23 — Museum of Young Australians

May 2004

In that uncanny granny way she has, Elsie sensed my restlessness before I did and insisted we pin down a date to visit the Museum of Young Australians. For just a moment I prevaricated and then I gave in: perhaps it had been presumptuous rather than kind to think I could save my toddling daughter from the initiation into family heritage. I put aside my reservations regarding exposing Skye to the rigid confines of the cabinet world, the day arrived and I gave it my all. I even wore that green linen dress.

So rarely did I see Elsie out of her house that I'd forgotten how fit for her age she was. At eighty-five years old, besides a slight stoop, she had an efficient frame with no waist. Her dark blue slacks strode ahead but she grew nervous as we approached the building. Her voice was a fraction higher, her instructions a trifle more insistent. "Haven't you got a ribbon for Skye's hair, Carly?" she asked for the third time, as if through incantation the desired ribbon might appear. There was barely enough fair hair on the kid's head to warrant the sparkly clip there for the occasion, but I found myself running my fingers through Skye's fluff anyway, tidying up.

Danica Pinkervich, curator of the Museum of Young Australians, greeted us in the foyer-cum-gift-shop with familiar-yet-awkward hand clasping between herself, Elsie and Ken. Elsie said, "You remember Carly," and Danica offered me her hand.

"This is my daughter, Skye," I added, but she turned her head into my legs, anchoring an arm around each shin, as she sometimes did when meeting people for the first time. I smiled broadly to compensate and Danica winked at me, as if to say, I understand.

"I'll leave you all alone then. You know your way around, Elsie." Danica said.

Elsie was already in the next room, clicking her tongue at this and that. I followed and saw her bending over a child in a chair, fussily pulling at its lace collar. "Now this isn't right!" she said. "Where's Mavis' hat?" I felt sorry for Mavis, having to sit there while Elsie tightened and tugged and fiddled. Elsie was clearly in her element, all trace of nervousness gone and when she said *this isn't right* I believed her.

"Miriam, where's Mavis' hat?" Elsie called loudly. Miriam was a young Doctor of Museum Studies but Elsie believed her to be personal assistant to Danica, and therefore

Elsie herself, when she was there. However, Miriam came willingly and set to searching for Mavis' hat. They moved into the next room but Ken, Skye and I loitered around Mavis, who smiled benignly on.

"Ahhh," said Ken, "They've got her an old highchair, very good, very good. The new one wasn't heavy enough." I left Pop to his own thoughts and followed Skye as she made her way to a cabinet of brightly coloured tea sets.

"Tea!" she announced, clearly pleased with herself, or perhaps she thought I'd be pleased. I remember being confused as a child with my family's love of tea, their frequent and regular consumption of this steamy stuff that was neither as cooling as lime juice nor as sweet as cordial. It was not until I had a child of my own that I took up the habit, when I discovered that I needed some mild stimulant to match Skye's preference for sleepless nights *and* early starts. At close to three-years-old, she'd watched my devotion to hundreds of early morning cups of tea. She liked to copy me, daringly flinging back one arm from her two-handled sipper cup in imitation of my one-handed — the other writing, or stirring, or folding — tea-drinking style. And now here were dozens of grown-up teacups, in just her size! And not just teacups, but all of those breakables that live up high: plates and bowls, jugs and roasting dishes, entire services in a variety of styles. An adult collection of children's collections of imitation adult items.

"Yes, Skye, tea. Well, sort of: toy teacups." She looked up at me with an open face and I wondered if I'd find the right answers.

Ken had taken Skye to see some important item so I made my way back to the foyer. Danica was poring over a large exercise book with ruled feint margins in red, foolscap size, of a style that dated back twenty years. I recognised my grandmother's handwriting and assumed the book to be some records from her era as Museum curator, a period which officially ended sixteen years ago, though she still wielded significant influence as long as she was present. Aside from my own I don't see handwriting very much and the book felt a very personal object despite its professional nature. I was peering from a polite distance away to determine the nature of the record, when Danica looked up. She pushed the book towards me and sighed: "Miriam has been employed to sort out the doll collection, which I haven't the patience for. Elsie had a *special* interest in dolls,

collected a great number of them and every one is named, but some of the records are unclear."

I looked at the book and tried to glean some meaning from the entries. Each was short and ended with an epithet in inverted commas: "Nancy", "Dorothy", "Mabel".

Danica pushed her glasses firmly onto the bridge of her nose and went on: "You know that large bisque in our first room? Mavis, Elsie calls her. Now, for some reason there are two Mavises. We don't know why, and there is nothing to definitively link that doll to a particular entry. Now-a-days, the story is the most important part of a collection, the story of the object, who it belonged to, how they felt about it, used it."

I read the entry Danica pointed to: *D.14.75 Simon & Halbig, c. 1890, bisque head, jointed body, 28cm, labelled, "Mavis"*, and said: "It says the doll is labelled."

"They are all labelled with the McKinnon Collection stamp. It tells us only that Elsie collected it."

I remembered this stamp, the name in uppercase around a pair of May Gibbs' gum-nut babies poking out of honky nuts in silhouette. The distinctive wide eyes and open mouths of the babies were in relief, giving the figures a vacant look. As a child in the Museum, surrounded by babies who wouldn't play, dolls I couldn't touch, I had invented a sort of treasure-hunting game, where the object was to find this stamp as often as I could. It turned up all over the place — on the underside of a pram, on a baby doll's fat ankle — and as strange as it sounds, it made me feel less lonely. I never thought, then, that it might be disrespectful to mark all these objects as one's own. Now, too, it seemed odd to mark them with creatures whose wide staring eyes look as if they are seeing the world exactly as it is for the very first time.

"So you hid Mavis' hat deliberately?" I ventured.

"It was Miriam's idea, she'll see if she can get Elsie talking about particular dolls. She might learn something that gives certain dolls greater significance. It would never do for me to ask directly. Elsie did a wonderful job all those years, was well ahead of her time in terms of record keeping, but I doubt she ever heard of the term 'provenance'. Of course, Elsie was convinced the powers-that-be were making desperate efforts to marginalise her work because of her affiliation with the Communist Party."

“Do you think that’s true?” I said. I was shocked to hear a reference to the Party outside my workspace.

“I think her work *was* marginalised, but more because she *wasn’t* affiliated with any group. Elsie was a self-promoter par excellence, but whom did she represent? She and Ken left the communists, she wasn’t a trained teacher and not a member of a union. She wasn’t a man, but not a feminist…”

Elsie’s voice came rapidly towards us and Danica trailed off. Elsie was talking to Skye about a precious book, how important it was that she handle it gently and listen to Elsie’s instructions.

“Ah, there you are, Carly. Come and sit with Skye so I can show her this book, this wonderful children’s book from my time. Not my childhood, mind you, *I* was never lucky enough to have such a beautiful book.”

Dutifully I sat with Skye on my lap at a small table in the foyer. Elsie sat next to us with a mortician’s eye and cotton gloves. Ken stood behind her, nodding sagely. The book was well preserved and seemed to be hand-made of thick card. The illustrations were in black, red and blue ink, and a flush of faded red ribbons hung limp at the upper edge of the pages. It was a magic picture book: when the ribbon is pulled the picture changes, as segments of card change places like a fan dance. Elsie opened it and on the first page, a girl stands with her hands clasped behind her, looking up at Mother. They are in the kitchen, which is clean and spacious. The verse reads:

> “Now Lucy, dear, I’m going out,”
> Said Mrs. Mack one day.
> “Don’t make a mess, don’t run or shout,
> You’re in charge while I’m away.”

“Now Skye, I’ll pull the ribbon to show you,” Elsie said as the kitchen folded in on itself and turned into the same kitchen, but different: full of children, on the table, under the table, in the sink, at Mother’s feet, tugging her skirts. The next page showed three young children sitting on the kitchen table, licking at spoons of treacle, which drips and drops onto the floor. Lucy is on the other side of the kitchen plopping a baby onto the lap of another, which is next to another, in a large drawer. Elsie read the verses and pulled the ribbon, allowing Skye to place her little hand upon Elsie’s gloved one.

So did Lucy do what her mother asked of her? Of course she didn't! She left her brothers and sisters to themselves and went out dancing! Skye pulled the second-to-last ribbon, which trips Lucy into the road with a terrified look on her face. Mud splashes her beautiful dress and a vehicle is heading her way. In the background, children spill out of the house with their scuffles, filthy and furious.

> Lucy had not gone too far
> When the screaming made her turn,
> Then she was smashed by a motorcar.
> From this story, what can we learn?

The final page returns to the kitchen and Mother is home. The kitchen is again spotless and seven children look up attentively.

> When Mother has to go away
> Not ev'ryone's allowed to play.

Skye held onto the ribbon and looked up at Elsie, waiting for the rest of the verse. Elsie said "Go on," and helped her pull it down. The final picture shows the eldest girl scrubbing the floor while next to her the other children play with blocks and dolls. Elsie read, falling into the accented rhythm of familiar lines:

> Baby is Baby, Brother is Brother,
> But the biggest girl is Little Mother.

I found all this rather appalling — Elsie's life turned into a cautionary tale — and she was reading it without recognition, without an ounce of irony! While I was trying to work out a way of expressing my concern that Skye was too little to understand the potential humour of such a farcical episode, Elsie conclusively closed the book and she and her important gloves went off to find Miriam and return the book to its archive.

Skye started to howl so I held her tightly. She pushed free and hopped off my knee, following Elsie with arms outstretched crying, "Book! Book!" I was relieved: the magic of the moving pictures must have obscured the intended lesson on this occasion. I caught up Skye's hand and took her into another room.

* * *

So many things! There were examples of dolls and teddies, all sorts of vehicles, puppets and costumes, a case of moneyboxes, puzzles. Everything, and several of each. Like Russian dolls in a variety of formations: sets and subsets and sub-subsets. And then there were houses of homunculi with all of *their* things, a place for everything and everything in its place. They even had their own Russian dolls. Containing the world in increasingly smaller proportions, these grand homes were richly furnished but not a sign of life! No chamber pots, no dirty dishes, no linen to be washed, and not a hint of a cook, maid, or butler.

"Something for everyone!" the Museum brochure boasts. I'm not sure: what has a miniature nineteenth-century house-and-contents got to do with me? I can't see myself in a cabinet of tin toy soldiers, nor in these prodigiously white christening gowns. Elsie would say, "The Museum of Young Australians brings history alive for young people, Carly. We need to instil in our children a sense of heritage, a sense of belonging to the past." And it did feel strangely alive, abuzz with stories and memories. And I did find its arrangements attractive, the beauty of pattern and the hilarity of excess. But it also had the half-life of the institution — school, hospital, cemetery — with its repetition and homogenisation, an intrinsic morbidity.

I was fascinated by the place and more than a little disturbed. I dimly became aware that Skye was pulling on my hand and saying, "I need a wee, Mummy." I had a sudden vision of a giant coming along and peeling away the walls of our house so that he might peer in, finding every room a jumbled work-in-progress. I took Skye to the toilet.

"Now this reminds me of something. Very strange." Ken appeared; I had quite forgotten he was there, blending in, as he does, growing greyer and more attached to the earth with each step.

"What is it, Pop?"

"Very strange. I remember going to church in this building as a lad and now here it is! Magnificent structure."

He was staring and shaking his head at a photograph of a stone building on the wall. I read the caption: “Church at Arthur River, c. 1925. Between 1922 and 1926 the church was used as the town schoolroom.” That doesn’t sound so strange, I thought. I knew the name from stories about Ken and Elsie being born in the same town, but Elsie’s family moved away and they didn’t meet until they were grown up. Then they all lived happily ever after, which is a part of the story I’d heard many times. As if “true love” were not just a pleasure but also a virtue. “What’s so strange, Pop?” I said.

Ken held out his hand as if pushing me back and recited:

> The man in the church asked of me,
> How many sinners in the world have we?
> I answered him as I thought well,
> As many Christian soldiers are going to hell!

“Did I tell you about the time Johnny Birch, who was considerably older than me, taught me this rhyme outside school one day? I must have been but eight years old, but something inside me understood, and that is when I *began to doubt*. Must be a better way. Magnificent structure,” Ken mused, looking back to the photograph.

I’d heard the rhyme in my childhood, gleefully repeated by Ken when Elsie wasn’t within earshot, because she thought it vulgar. But the story of its collection, its provenance, seemed new. “I don’t remember hearing that before, Pop. Thankyou for remembering it.”

Skye, to whom the story was not so significant, pulled my hand in the direction of a case of dolls of all shapes and sizes. I let her go and turned to look at Ken directly, something I didn’t do much anymore. Here was his past, pasted on the wall. There was a certain security for Ken and Elsie in having their lives displayed and fixed, but what if they forgot the story, or thought of a new story? He looked over his shoulder, slyly, before turning to me. He had more to say.

But before he could go on Elsie came back, calling out “Ken!” at such a pitch that it made several other quiet visitors look around as she strode past. Her walk accused them: don’t you know who I am? She joined us in front of the old photograph and said, “Ahh, you’ve found our church, Ken,” and looked significantly at her husband.

“Yes, my love.”

Elsie was still talking too loudly and I could see Ken had quite forgotten our conversation. Skye was tired and walked towards me clumsily, banging her foot and crying out of all proportion to the injury sustained. The world seemed to be closing in on itself. I began to lead our party back to the foyer, hoping to carry on out the door.

On the way out Elsie stopped and pointed, “Now, Skye, look what this poor woman has done: made a toy Old Woman in the Shoe for her daughter to play with.” Skye’s crying stuttered and stopped. “See here, Skye, it’s got sink strainers for the wheels, a teapot spout for the chimney with a wisp of unscoured-wool-smoke coming out. A triumph of maternal instinct over poverty!”

Skye turned her head towards me with a puzzled look on her face and I came to translate: “Skye doesn’t know that rhyme, Gran, I’ve not taught it to her.”

“Such a shame, such a shame. So much lost. Perhaps you don’t know it, Carly?”

Elsie was well aware that I knew it. I don’t know why I took this challenge so personally; perhaps I saw it as Elsie exploiting my mother’s absence-by-choice. Whatever it was, I bobbed down to Skye’s level and quickly recited:

> There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,
> She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do.
> She gave them some broth, without any bread,
> Whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed.

“What’s whipped?” asked Skye.

“Like banged, whacked,” I explained.

“Why?” said she, and “Why what?” I replied immediately, this being the necessary preliminary to any conversation of some length between us.

“Why the children banged?” Skye clarified.

“Well, there were just so many of them, and the Old Woman didn’t know what to do…” I trailed off, my uncertainty revealed. This was why I’d never read her the rhyme.

“Why so many children?” asked the only child.

“I don’t know, Skye, she just had.”

I felt the topic had exhausted itself but suspected Skye would think this inadequate. However, she seemed satisfied. A moment later, she looked at me seriously and said: “She should give some to their dad.”

24 — After Election Day

May – June 1954

It is around dawn on Sunday the thirtieth of May, and Menzies' government has been returned to office once again. Elsie is in bed and Ken lies beside her, snoring gently. She hears the news and switches the Ranter off with a sigh, which turns to a gasp of pain, quickly suppressed, as she settles her weight back down.

Yesterday, no, the day before yesterday, Elsie came out of hospital, where she had spent two days after collapsing late on the opening night of *The Jumbuck Jig*. She doesn't remember exactly what happened, but there was a lot of pain accompanying the heavy bleeding she has come to expect. The show has had to go ahead without her. Elsie will need surgery, "a complete tidy-up", the doctor said, which will be scheduled as soon as possible. In the mean time, "complete bed rest".

Early on Saturday Elsie insisted Ken help her out of bed to dress and into the car so that she might cast her vote at the local school. She could see Ken was exhausted. For her own part, Elsie was stoic. On the way home she did not once mention the gripping pain in her middle but she slept the rest of the day and through the night and so missed the count. It is barely light outside and already Elsie is bored and melancholy. How can she possibly survive *weeks* of this? The thought makes her giddy and she falls back into a fitful sleep.

Later Elsie wakes with a start from fierce dreams. She struggles to sit up, suddenly alert. I must bear up, she thinks, gulping down some water and rubbing her eyes. I'll have Ken bring me books. Novels! Perhaps he can get in touch with Comrade Cassandra. Elsie calls out, "Ken! Ken!" Not in a panic, she doesn't want to frighten him, but loudly enough for him to hear from any part of the house, or garden. He is there in a few moments and receives Elsie's instructions attentively.

"Of course my love. Elsie, the boys, Peter and Bruce, can I send them in? They want to know you're alright."

"Yes! Yes! Send them in! Why do you shilly-shally? I'm not a gorgon, am I?"

Elsie's sons come in, Bruce ahead of Peter. With some coaxing Bruce climbs up onto the bed next to Elsie and Peter sits on the bed's end. "So, you see I'm alright," Elsie

says brightly. “Your mum needs a little rest, that’s all. And you two will have to help your father, he will need lots of help.”

A memory comes to Elsie of her own mother lying in bed like this, shortly before she died. Elsie and a younger brother had been to visit her, Amelia’s other children left at home. Eight children and younger than Elsie is now! They’d had only a few minutes together: Elsie and the younger brother each held one of Amelia’s hands. Later, Elsie overheard one family friend telling another that the nurse had reported Amelia’s last words were, “Who will look after my children?” Elsie takes a deep breath to calm herself.

“What happened, Mum? What’s wrong with you?” Bruce says.

“Nothing, Bruce, I just need a little operation to fix my insides up. Then I’ll be back to normal!” Elsie’s tone is light as she reassures Bruce and pats him on the head.

He appears encouraged, but there is something else. Bruce starts to wriggle a little closer and looks up at his mother. “Mum…” He draws the word out, refining his thoughts, then pauses.

“Yes Bruce?”

“Bev’s gone. You know my friend Bev? I haven’t seen her for a while. Why’d she go, Mum?”

Elsie feels a moment’s alarm at the name, her own child’s name. Could Bruce have overheard her the other night? No, no-one but her father heard. Elsie smiles at her son and shakes her head. “She’s a school friend? Maybe her family has moved away. You’ll find other friends, Bruce, keep your chin up.” Elsie pats him again, saying, “Off you go.” Bruce hops down from Elsie’s tall bed and runs off.

“Ahh, Peter my darling,” she says, sighing. He doesn’t look at her but sits glumly: back curved, hands clasped. “What will we do with you?” Elsie tips her head thoughtfully to one side and stares past her son’s round shape.

“I’m alright,” Peter says quietly.

“You’ll help with the wood for the stove, you’re big enough for that. And you’ll have to purchase the groceries, Peter. I’ll write the list and you can fetch it. Peter?”

He pushes himself from the bed and shuffles out without looking at her.

Throughout the afternoon, Elsie plans how to manage the household from her sickbed. Perhaps one of the Party-women’s daughters will come and do for us; Emily

Hapfield is about the right age. Or Eileen Mahon's daughter, I forget her name. But Elsie worries that none of the Party women will be willing to lend her a hand.

"The gas!" She is so relieved she says it out loud. It is the right time to get the gas on: she must speak to Ken about it. Elsie reflects on their financial situation and allows herself a snort of ironic comprehension, immediately suppressed because of the pain in her middle, that Ken's ousting from the Party almost certainly improves his job security.

A week or so has gone by. A delegation of Elsie's siblings had come with a stew large enough to feed them for days, thanks to the wonderful refrigerator. But not one of the Party women has been to visit. At first Elsie clung to the thought that they were distracted by the election result, but as time goes on and things remain much the same she can't help but conclude that, despite her status as Party stalwart with unswerving commitment, she has been cut dead. So much for comradeship, she thinks. More like a sinking ship, the rats!

There is a brief knock at the bedroom door then Ken opens it wide to usher in Comrade Cassandra, holding a tray of tea and biscuits. Elsie sits up and tries to get out of bed to help but Cassandra has anticipated this and tells her quite sharply to stay where she is. After she has deposited the tea tray on Elsie's dressing table and poured Elsie a cup, Cassandra leaves the room and comes back with a large bagful of books.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to get here sooner, Elsie dear. But I've brought you enough books to last several bouts of sickness and recovery. And here is something for you to keep." Cassandra reverently passes Elsie a copy of her little red-bound book of poems. "First edition. I signed it for you."

"Thankyou Cassandra!" These words punctuate Elsie's speechlessness.

"Well Elsie, your absence has certainly created ripples." Cassandra settles herself on the end of the bed, teacup delicately balanced on her long hand. "The Party was already divided over Campbellism but now that *The Jumbuck Jig* is over they're bickering amongst themselves while Bill feebly tries to maintain discipline by calling their attention to the rule of Democratic Centralism."

The directness of Cassandra's conversation takes Elsie by surprise, even though she should expect this by now. But how should one respond? While she tries to work this out, Cassandra goes on.

“Ken’s ACCF paper came to nothing, I’m afraid: all the addresses trace back to private fronts. It’s called a *triple pass*, apparently: the CIA has one hundred *private patriots* who act as quiet channels to direct money to philanthropic institutions such as the Fabular Foundation, who fund ACCF. Three transfers before the money even reaches *Tetrameter*, impossible to trace! So, I’ve decided to write another book. Take more of a background role in the Party for a while. They still have my undying support, but I need a break from it all, from all of them. I’ve told Bill: he didn’t take it very well.”

Elsie has always tried to remain willfully naïve regarding the love affairs of her women friends. She’s managed to ignore both the delicate and rude hints that emerge in conversation with the Party women, but she has such a damnably good memory. She will come up with a dozen alternative interpretations of the told tale to avoid the unpleasant suggestion that communists are breaking marriage bonds. Elsie is struck by the older woman, who sips her tea and stares intently at Elsie, stuck between admiration and fear. Cassandra is single and free to do as she likes, but what about the families? Yet it is true that she has produced wonderful works of poetry…

Elsie slurps her tea noisily and says, “And what will you write, Cassandra?”

“A romance. I’ve done sufficient research for now, I think. Perhaps it will be a novel in verse, heroic couplets, or something like that. What do you think, Elsie?”

“Only you could manage such a thing, Cassandra!”

“Adam is in quite a state. I think he ought to take a short sabbatical too, quite frankly. But don’t you worry Elsie,” Cassandra pats Elsie’s legs under the bedclothes, “he’ll come round in time. You’ve been his most faithful companion, after all.”

Elsie’s face burns at the mention of her father but she says nothing. The women finish their tea and Elsie excuses herself, saying she must lie down. “Thankyou for coming Cassandra and thankyou for the books.”

When Elsie wakes later on it is dusk. The first thought that comes is that which haunted her as she sought escape in sleep: her father. Cassandra and Adam have been friends for years, but surely nothing more? No, her father would never allow it. It is Cassandra herself: she is a bundle of contradictions. No-one believes in the future of Soviet rule more strongly than Cassandra, but she’ll come and go as the mood takes her.

Elsie picks up a long-forgotten ornament from her bedside table, a gift from Cassandra: a Russian doll from her trip to the USSR. Elsie unpacks it gently to reveal its inner dolls and despite her attempts to suppress them, tears spring to her eyes. On the pale wood inside each doll's rim, Elsie had printed in tiny lettering the names of her women ancestors: GERALDINE inside the largest one, AMELIA inside the next, ELSIE inside the medium doll and inside her, BEVERLY. Beverly opens but there's nothing inside her but the solid, smallest doll. "Dear little things," Elsie sobs as she packs the nesting dolls away again. She rubs the dust off Geraldine with her nightdress. "Dear little thing!" Her sobs come all the harder and Elsie thinks of her Dad alone with eight children after her mother died. How she wished to help him!

Ken is in the garden, thinking. He'd come outside to collect something, or do some little job, but then he started thinking and now he can't remember what it was he intended to do. The creative spurt that Ken had been enjoying dried up rapidly after PJ Pound's humiliating dressing-down. He'd spent several days furiously writing rebuttals to his leader's arguments before realising he'd have no forum to present them. Fred Hapfield, dear old Fred had come around and advised him, man to man, to submit his resignation.

Ken agonised over the decision. He tried to see Bill but was told by Joylove, sweetly but firmly, that Bill was unavailable and won't-he-come-again-soon. Ken even attempted to contact Don Ditchards but the telephone number he'd talked out of Comrade Cassandra was not connected to any Mr. Ditchards. Finally he accepted his fate and sent his resignation to the Executive Committee, outlining his regret over the "Campellism misunderstanding" and claiming his "ongoing belief" in the compatibility of his views with those of international communism. In return Ken received a notification that he had been expelled from the Communist Party, his "membership revoked for jeopardising Party security by promulgating ideas of a deviant nature." The unnamed executive member was "especially disappointed given that Comrade Wilde had been entrusted with an undercover mission of an entirely different nature."

Ken can understand why Bill and his other friends would turn on him, he'd seen it done to other fellows before him and the comrades never enjoyed it. They considered it a measure of their commitment, however, to enforce the expulsions despite personal feelings

of loss. Ken can also understand why Ditchards would lie about his interest in Campbellism, once he'd seen what happened to Ken. But why did he lie about the whole trip? Why did he claim never to have been in Sydney, claim to coddling a neglected wife in Welshpool instead? It is this that troubles Ken the most, to be left alone with a traitor's shame, when it was the encouragement he got from Ditchards and Ranley that spurred him on. Campbell's ideas make sense to him, he's not fooling himself about that, but if it hadn't been for the kindling of mateship — a warm recklessness with an edge of competitiveness thrown in — Ken doubts he ever would have been so bold as to declare a new path for the Party. Discipline is the first rule for the CPA, it is this that gives them a reputation around the globe as a formidable force on the left, and now he's sacrificed sixteen years of dedicated commitment.

Taking advantage of Elsie's absence from the house proper, Ken has been watching Peter's film of the Sydney production of *The Jumbuck Jig* incessantly. He's not sure why, but the ritual has just about run its course. Ken sighs and goes back inside. Once more, I'll run the film just once more, he thinks. This was the promise that had sent him into the garden to clear his head before. Taped onto the projector he finds a small note in Peter's even writing. "Warning! To guard against accident, projector should be packed into box when not in use."

This time his hand relaxes, finally comfortable with the motion of winding the film. He focuses on the screen and it's as if he's sitting in the Newtown Community Theatre. Under the stage is a range of heads, large boulders in semi-shadow. There! There it is: Don Ditchards' large head in the bottom of the frame. As it rolls about it catches the light in different ways, revealing Ditchards' fair, curly fleece.

Yes, it's him alright, Ken nods to himself as he winds the film on and on, Ditchards' head always there, lolling this way and that. Evidence that Ditchards is lying when he says he wasn't in Sydney two months ago. And if he's lying about this, then what else? Ken thinks of Stewart Enright and his threat to expose him as a traitor to the communists. Well, there's nothing in that now, but how did he know about me? Might it have been Ditchards? Ken stops winding the film and turns the projector off.

* * *

Peter looks up at the sky as a patch of shrieking black cockatoos pass overhead. The sky is cloudy and unpropitious. A heavy vehicle without a muffler passes behind him and his hands fly to protect his ears. As a boy in the old house, Peter was afraid of the dunny-cart that did the rounds once a week to empty the pans. He was petrified that, as it trundled down the narrow and rutted lane, a large pot-hole would cause the truck to tip and spill its contents, which would ooze and flow their way downhill, flooding Peter's house.

This house has septics, Peter thinks approvingly.

He takes another of the fancy biscuits left from Comrade Cassandra's visit, smuggled in a serviette outside to the garden at the bottom of the back steps. He bites the buttery shortbread in half, wanting to appreciate it for longer than the first few biscuits gobbled down in haste. Crumbs scatter onto the open book in his lap and he curses: "Darn it!" Fastidiously he swallows and blows the crumbs from the book, bending it back to get right in the crease. Peter wrinkles his nose as he examines the pages for remains and then focuses on the text before him. *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*, by Hillaire Belloc. Introduction:

> I call you bad, my little child,
> Upon the title page,
> Because a manner rude and wild
> Is common at your age…

The back door slams and Peter knows it will be Bruce. He thinks of taking another shortbread — maybe one with raisons — and remembers his enjoyment of the last one was ruined because of the spilt crumbs. And the next will be ruined too, if it has to be observed by Bruce. Peter doesn't look up from his book but scans down to the end of the poem:

> … so control your actions that
> Your friends may all repeat.
> "This child is dainty as the Cat,
> And as the Owl discreet."

Bruce comes racing down the steps and Peter makes no effort to hide the forbidden food, but allows himself to be interrupted. "What are you eating, Peter? Can I have some?"

He will enjoy every biscuit less than the one before it, Peter realises. "Here, have the rest." He holds out the serviette with several biscuits remaining inside. It is not usual for

Peter to be so generous, especially when it comes to food, so Bruce hesitates. Peter opens the serviette to display the genuine article and says, “I’ve had enough. You can have them all to yourself, Bruce.”

Bruce smiles broadly and takes the white bundle but his prize is tainted when Peter can’t help but add, “And lucky you: you won’t even have to share them with Beverly!”

Bruce runs down to the river and eats half of the sweet shortbread biscuits, crumbling the others and tossing them to the ducks. In the weeks following he will come often to this place and wistfully stare at the fat ducks to whom he sacrificed the rare treat.

Elsie is feeling much better and decides to get herself up. The Ranter tells her it is Sunday but the house feels empty and lonely. The boys must be outside. She moves slowly and carefully from room to room, fearful of the disorder she might find. However, everything seems much as she left it, except the kitchen, where the breakfast dishes have not been done. Had not a racket been emanating from the laundry at the back of the house, Elsie might have started cleaning. Instead, she follows the noise and finds Ken standing over the washing machine with a spanner in his hand. The gyrator is beating out a regular clang, clang, and a small stream of water runs from under it, across the floor and out the back door.

Ken looks up when Elsie comes in. “It leaks,” he says, shrugging his shoulders apologetically.

“Like me,” says sardonic Elsie. “Oh, Ken, you shouldn’t have to do this! Give it to me.” She takes the spanner from him and gives the machine several heavy blows on the side. The clang, clang, skips and stops and Ken notices a pattern of small indentations on the machine’s side attesting to Elsie’s technique.

“You’re a marvel, Elsie. Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“I feel much better. What are you washing, Ken? I’ll run these things through the wringer. What I’d really like is a hot bath.”

Ken hesitates as Elsie looks around the laundry at the evidence of his industry. “I’m washing your linen, my love. I — I’m not sure if I’m doing it the right way…”

“What? Oh, Ken! You shouldn’t trouble yourself with all this, this women’s business!” Elsie bustles around, lifting various items of underwear, streaming and shapeless, from buckets, kicking at soiled items on the ground.

Ken smiles and drops his head, happy to leave the room. “I’ll just stoke up the chip heater then, Elsie, my love.”

25 — Follow

June 2004

Last week I finished my family's story. I had the manuscript bound and presented it to Elsie a few days ago. She has been much easier to get along with since the Museum visit and generally warmer. I hope she reads my version of her story in the same light. To be honest I'm glad there will be a stretch of reflective distance between us before I receive my grandmother's response. I'd like to hear what she has to say, but not just yet.

After I left my photo with Carmel Batel, I found another (of the precious few) to replace it with. In this one I am a toddler. Amy is holding me on her hip with her torso angled away from me, as a counter weight. I am yelling with some force, maybe trying to get away, my torso straining away from hers. Amy's face isn't clear in this picture and I can cover it with my little fingernail. She appears to be grimacing. It has never been my favourite and when I put it in my wallet, I put it behind the one of Skye and me.

I shut my eyes to bring into my mind the lost photo that was the best one of Amy's face. In my mind's eye it took on a luminous quality: from it came some sense of her that I hadn't felt before. Nervously I played with my lips, eyes closed and forehead creased with worry, just like Uncle Peter. I saw myself, my face floating there next to Amy's and it struck me: my mother has my lips. I must have spoken aloud because Skye looked up momentarily, wide eyed, before returning to her game on the floor in front of me. How strange it was, I thought, to imagine myself saying, oh, you have my lips, to my mother. Oughtn't *she* have long ago said that to me? Perhaps she did. Whose lips were they, anyway? Hers and mine, someone else's before that, and so on, for who knows how long. These lips, so familiar to me, I am just borrowing for a while.

I studied Skye where she sat with a puzzle that was too easy for her now. It was hard to tell whether she had inherited our generous mouth as she was round all over. I have a tendency, in the absence of her father and my mother, to see Skye as just like me. For her to see my mother would somehow fix a line between our likenesses, a third point of light for keeping my eye true. I thought of the lost photo again and saw it making its way ahead of me against the chest of Carmel Batel. It will precede me like a calling card.

Skye tired of her game and was sitting, sucking her thumb with her wide-eyed stare that often comes before a good cry and a deep sleep. Aside from the Danish eyes, cold and clear like china, I saw nothing of Nils Strohm in Skye's changing face. I stood and dug out my photos of him and sat down again to compare carefully. Skye's eyes looked back at me looking at her, mesmerising. My attention to her duplicated features broke her daydream and Skye focused on me, removing her thumb to say, "Mumma". She'd taken to sucking her right-hand thumb to the exclusion of the left, losing the ambidexterity of babyhood and developing preferences. "Do you want to see your Daddy?" I asked, I don't know why, I don't know what I expected her to say. Skye was silent. I put away the photos and picked her up, understanding that regardless of me, she will see in her own way.

A week before we got on the train for Kalgoorlie I had an afternoon alone with Natalie. We'd shopped for a few items I needed (shopping was easier with a friend) then rested with coffee and tea. I'd managed to keep the conversation on very practical ground while we searched for various items, with questions such as, "Which colour is the most robust for Skye's overalls?" "How many extra tools will I need on my penknife?" But when we sat down, Natalie started to think and to question me about my plan.

"So you met a woman who introduced you to another woman who says she knows your mother, who used to live with her at a community called Yunana. You don't know where this community is —"

"East of Kalgoorlie," I put in.

"You don't know where this community is with any greater precision than *east of Kalgoorlie*, which is no small area, but you're going there anyway? With your two-year-old daughter?"

"She's almost three!"

"I still think you're mad," Natalie said. "Aren't you scared of …" she trailed off.

"What do you think's going to get us, Nat? Terrorists? Dingos? Clever-men?"

"What?"

"Never mind. I feel safe. Skye's a good traveller. A mother knows these things."

Natalie returned to her coffee again and looked thoughtfully at the milky froth. I thought about trying to turn the conversation onto her not-so-new love affair but she'd

already given me her I'm-not-kidding look several times during our brief conversation. I attempted to pour myself a second cup of tea from the meagre pot-for-one in this trendy café of Nat's choosing: only dregs and not enough milk. I wrinkled my nose and might have posited some criticism if Natalie had not persisted in that kindly-but-firm nursey manner she has, "So you'll stay in Kalgoorlie. Just say you *do* find out where this place is, *and* find out how to get there, and *somehow* manage to arrive, what then?" She looked at me triumphantly.

"Well, I don't know. It depends on what happens on the way, how I get there… I just have to go, Nat, I can't do anything else until I go. It's hard to explain."

"It's hard to believe you're taking this risk for her, Amy McKinnon, I mean."

"Amy Wakadkutja," I corrected.

Natalie distinctly rolled her eyes. "Well, maybe, maybe not. What have you told your Dad? What did he say?"

"He's organising a pair of mobile phones for us to use. I told him they probably won't be any use where I'm going, but I'll take one. He understands I have to go."

"And what about you taking Skye, what does he think of that?"

I lost my balance, remembering the horrified look Dad had given me when I first described my plan to him, and yelled at Natalie, "That's the whole point, Nat!" I exhaled noisily, demonstrating my exasperation and she backed off.

"OK, OK, I just want you to be safe, that's all. I worry about you. I'll miss you."

"We *are* safe. Miss me, think of me often, send me your blessings, but please don't worry. It doesn't help."

I packaged up the notebooks borrowed from Don Ditchards and sent them back to him with a courteous note of thanks. I had no desire to visit him again and had photocopied the pages of the notebooks I thought especially valuable. I extracted a small portion of pleasure from denying him a third visit and was careful to leave no return address, no contact phone number, on the package and its note.

Yesterday I collected together all of the books and things borrowed from Ken and Elsie and took them round to their place. I was joining them for lunch, Skye was with me and Peter was there too. I'd announced my travel intentions to them last Family Dinner

Friday, having got Dad on board to help me corroborate a vague yet assured journey. Elsie and Ken were unsurprised, apparently, but Uncle Peter showed some interest. When his enquiries began to get emphatic I promptly changed the subject and Dad followed me up.

Lunch yesterday was my goodbye visit. When I arrived Skye ran in to Uncle Peter and I carried the boxful of books upstairs while Elsie followed me, directing. When I'd put the box down, Elsie sought out the small red volume of Cassandra's poetry. "I'd like you to keep this." She passed her signed first edition back to me, retracting her hand when I moved to receive it. "Let me just read my favourite one last time."

She flipped the thick pages of the well-worn volume to the piece called "Earthchild" and read it aloud.

Earthchild plays in rain
Dust mingles, makes mud —
Tidal rivulets round ankles.
What clings there, bristling?
Each feather is treasure
Holding the secret of flight.

Earthchild rolls in leaves
Grass to twist, ash to bind
Emerge from forest floor
Daring to stand proud?
A mottled prince
Robes splendid and divine.

Earthchild stares in wonder
Blinking, mouth agape
Dusty hands clutch —
A dirty stone?
But tale-inscribed
A crystal ball, the world!

"Dear Cassandra," Elsie said, passing me the book. It was one of my favourites too.

"Thankyou Gran," was all I could manage. I kissed her on the cheek and she smiled.

Elsie and I prepared lunch together while Peter played with Skye and Ken looked on, smiling and nodding. Elsie had had news. "Not two weeks after our visit, Carly, I got a letter from the Museum of Young Australians. They're packing the collection away. The university doesn't want it any more. And that Danica Pinkervich, I'll bet she knew and

didn’t want to tell me, the coward.” Elsie jabbed her knife in my direction to make her point.

“Surely not, Gran! I spoke with Danica that day, she wasn’t preoccupied with the job of moving the collection.”

“You don’t know these people, Carly. They would have got to Miss Pinkervich somehow, made it impossible for her to tell us the truth.”

Six months ago I would have deflected a comment such as this entirely, but now I saw a sort of meaning in it and could respond in kind. “Maybe, Gran, but Danica Pinkervich isn’t one of *them*; *they* must have been keeping it from her too.” Elsie conceded that this was possible.

After lunch we exchanged brief goodbyes. I went to Pop where he was sitting in his customary chair and took his hand with a smile. He said, “It was good of you to come. Won’t you come again soon.” I bent to give him a kiss before realising he probably didn’t know who I was. “Cheeky miss!” he said, pulling away, but chuckling. I laughed too, and so did Skye, each laugh a shallow echo of the one preceding it.

Tomorrow we leave on a train bound for Kalgoorlie. I’ve booked a room at the backpackers’ close to the centre of town and I have enough savings to keep us comfortable for a while. I’ve packed: one change of clothes for me, two for Skye and several sets of underwear each; warm jackets; a good sized woollen blanket; hats for the sun and hats for the cold; some emergency rations; a small bag of personal items; Winkle for Skye and a new notebook for me. Everything fits in a middle-sized backpack and I have a sling on my front for Skye, though fortunately she prefers to walk. All of these things, this practical planning, seemed remarkably easy after the emotional preparations of the last year. It’s as if there is nothing to do *but* get on a bus with my daughter and a backpack and head for the desert. Yet, *head for the desert* doesn’t sound right. More like heart for the desert. Heading for the heart.

I’m not looking for an escape. There is no escape: a way out is a way into something else.

Later, after I put Skye to bed, I sat watching her sleep for a few minutes. Would she be lonely? I wondered. Then a notion from nowhere dropped in: siblings! *I might have siblings.*

I'm not sure what it means, or what I think. I toss it up and down, from hand to hand: it is an orange ball in the cold sky, warm and promising.

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