

**Out of the shadows:
Representations of the reading and writing
process in fiction.**

A novel and exegesis

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

The categories of reader and writer have often been conceived as binary opposites representing the poles of passivity and production. The idea of this dichotomy between reading and writing has dissolved as the recognition of the indeterminacy of the text is mirrored by postmodern conceptions of the contingent nature of subjectivity. However, the novel form as we know it emerged during the post-enlightenment age when the subject was conceived as singular and original and the individual life as narrative. The issue of who gets to speak and how that speech is received continues to be a major thematic concern in the novel to the present time.

This exegesis examines the locus of narrative authority as played out between representations of the author and reader, and reading and writing, in *Foe* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The same two novels also show how 'writing starts with reading' as Cixous says. Reading and writing share an impetus to override the existing text to rewrite what has been unsaid. These two novels explicitly address a shared reading history, through the recuperation and overwriting of canonical texts and their authors, and therefore illuminate the spectre of the actual author and the actual reader haunting the margins of the text.

The creative component of the thesis, the manuscript 'Tex Surfacing', is a complementary exploration of the notions of narrative truth, narrative authority and the relationship between reading, writing and subjectivity. The characters of 'Tex Surfacing' play out the argumentative positions of author versus reader, and reading versus writing in order to establish who gets to tell the story and what, indeed, the story is.

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Tex Surfacing: a novel

Chapter 1.

Perth 2005

Monday 12th August 2005

Dear Reader,

Apologies for my absence over the last month! In my last post in June I promised I'd try to post a substantial chunk of my Work-In-Progress within the month. Alas, my characters misbehaved, especially Andra. Just when I decided she could wreak her revenge on all the people who had ruined her life right from the time she was just a cute little ball of uncontrolled bio-electrical energy, a character emerged from the Verboten Lands – a very handsome head-strong male – and things got complicated. . .

I've attached the relevant section of this second draft and no doubt the story will continue to grow and develop and the characters, as they become more alive, will deviate from my sketchy plans for them. So here it is. As always, dear Reader, your comments and responses are very welcome.

Tex had read the excerpt posted on the internet and at first reading it was the same story that Sarah had always told, though it was a different world, more space-age and less medieval, and Andra hadn't been the heroine's name in those childhood stories that Sarah had made up for her entertainment. It was two months since Tex had discovered this blog, this writer's journal, and it was a shameful addiction, taking her away from her work and, more dangerously, leading her back to Sarah.

The computer monitor was angled into the corner of the room, allowing a split view of the garden and rain-heavy bushes; the tiny birds dipping their beaks back and forth in the defeated blooms and the open file of her proofreading job - *C:\My Documents\editingMarcel2.doc* - a confusing mass of ugly words on the screen with all the green additions and red deletions. And there was Richard lurking in the background. Tex was alive to the movement of his shadow so when she felt him, or saw his shadow slide across the screen, she toggled between her work and the blog, *Wordmonkey's Progress*. He was suspicious, ducking his head around the side of the door, creeping on his soft feet, but he didn't catch her out.

Excerpt Ch 3 – Eden fall

It was only in times of planetary stress that her underlying nature, her true force, escaped from her much rehearsed control and she became dangerous. The deep groaning of the land as it unfurled and the great moon Hoi'a on the horizon as icy Mul sped around the firmament alerted Brun to the potential risks of the day and the possibility that Andra might be caught off guard.

He knew the triggers. It had been his apprenticeship to observe and experience the normality of his world - the twin moons and their powerful pull, the restless ground – as alien and treacherous. All those years, the lonely days perched high on a stool, his little legs dangling, poring over the ancient manuscripts, his immature tongue rolling the strange words around until the voice trapped in the fine etchings and scratched lines might emerge: 'There is one who will come, invisible in form, to awaken the mystery that slumbers at the heart of all life'. He had learnt well, too well perhaps. As a man now, he could not trust a single element in the entire world – he was eminently suitable as emissary and guard to Andra, and she, of course, he trusted least of all.

Tex had risen early, made a cup of coffee and rolled and lit her first cigarette of the day as the sun crested the eastern horizon. She had bought this house when no one wanted or dared to live in this suburb, but she had recognized the land's shape falling away to both the west and the east, perched on this ridge as they were. What was left of woodland and wetland sat behind, and to the west the unending sea sat flat against the horizon. When he came back to her, ten years ago now, moved his meagre boxes into her spare room, he had complained of the 'great Australian ugliness'. She lived in one of the mean houses of 1950's social engineering, but she loved the marginal and he had come to accept the hollow sounding walls and crumbling foundations of their home. The mornings were hers; they had agreed on her need and his compatible need for the moist and heavy hours of deep night and, right now, with the echoes of the weekend still disturbing their careful calm, she fervently wished he would go to work.

"I've got a pot brewing and then I'll be off."

She spun her chair around to face him and his pale face was too naked, cleanly shaved and gleaming.

"Good."

A familiar rebuff but today it was cruel and, surely, he deserved more.

"Just give me five minutes, a couple of paragraphs, that's all."

She stretched out her hand and he took a couple of paces into the room as if she might rescue him. His eyes skated over her shoulder to the screen and she half rose to block his view.

"Five minutes."

As he approached her chamber, a flash of green light shot out from under her closed door, momentarily illuminating the woven bark hangings in the corridor. He rapped sharply and, at a small noise,

entered. She was a flickering pillar of swirling colour that subsided to reveal pale skin, staring dark eyes, a slim yet rounded elegance of form; all of this a mask that occasionally slipped to reveal who, or what, she really was.

“What have you done?!”

She evaded his furious gaze and waved at the open window where the soft sunlight and warm breeze was tainted by sudden cries and shouts and the sound of running feet. Brun crossed to the window and looked out. From this height he could see the two small figures lying side by side, deathly still, in the middle of a circle of other children, adults now quickly converging on the scene from the surrounding stables, sheds and fields.

When Richard got home on Friday night, she was buried on the couch her finger twitching on the remote, the half bottle of red wine conveniently on the floor at the drop of her hand. He, as usual, at the end of his purgatorial week of teaching, was half drunk but she handed Sarah's letter to him anyway. After a good hour, when the overgrown back yard and the house had sunk into a glowing darkness, he came back to her.

“She's back?”

“She's never been away Richard, she's just been elsewhere.”

All weekend her face turning away from him in the kitchen and the bedroom, told him all he had to know about how the past could appear out of the blue, in a sudden rush, blowing away the flimsy construction of what they, he and Tex, had made together.

On Sunday night Fay, Tess's mother, had called for the third time since Friday and despite Richard insisting to Fay that she was out walking - the walking that took hours and left him wondering and bereft - she wouldn't be put off again.

“I know she’s there and I want to talk to her now. No excuses, Richard. I know her better than she knows herself and tell her I got one too – a letter from Sarah – and I’ve been beside myself all weekend.”

Finally, at Richard’s behest Tex had called.

“She’s my sister after all Tessa, your aunt, and now there’s her son, my nephew returned to me after all these years. It’s time we put away the things of the past and think about being a family again”.

Fay’s pronouncements were a hodge-podge of sentimentality, but Tex found some small comfort. The problem of Sarah was compounded; the hope that she could keep Sarah safely stowed in her head, or at least as a photo and this set of words, an author’s blog intended for hundreds, maybe thousands, was futile. As she responded to Fay, with murmured agreements and evasions, it wasn’t her problem alone anymore and it was a relief to speculate, and remember, and go over the old ground.

“I bought one of her books. I could’ve borrowed it from the library, but I wanted to own it, to look at her photo. I didn’t recognize her, but it’s been a long time . . .”

Tex laughed. The photo of Sarah on the blog and the back cover of her novel was a cliché of a fantasy writer, with its wild hair and misty eyes; the whole thing a vaseline-lens vision as if she was channelling magical happenings from a mythic place and time.

“Mum it’s up to you what you choose to do about Sarah and her son; whether you want to see her or not. I was only a child when all that happened.”

“But you weren’t a child when you last saw her Tess. You and Richard, Sarah and that bloke that had the accident; you were all together.”

15th June 2005

Dear Reader,

'Cranky' has commented on my POV and, yes, it might be more 'natural' for me to write from Andra's POV but the whole point is that I am exploring the becoming of a female subjectivity and so, therefore, someone – in the story – needs to be my eyes and ears. Andra doesn't see herself clearly – do any of us?

I write in allegories, but that doesn't mean that it's not emotionally real to me. To my mind all writing is autobiographical, and I use it to find a way to rewrite my own history, to imagine myself in a different place from where I ended up. Many of my readers know some details of my personal history – what I have chosen to share with you in this journal – the struggle to come to terms with my sexual abuse and estrangement from my family, and the little baby boy I gave up for adoption and the great gift of our recent reunion and our budding relationship as mother and son. I know from your correspondence that many of you understand that my life and experiences penetrate my books – how could it not! - and perhaps this makes your reading experience richer as well. There are also many readers out there who don't know my personal situation. Is the book they read different from the one you read? In the end a book stands alone; these words aren't mine once you open the first page, the story is yours.

There's a fine mist of rain, softening the walls and tatty square of grass outside the window here and I have only two more hours before I go to my part-time job at the library. Today, I am hoping for word from my dear niece in reply to a letter I sent by snail mail last week. There is something about pen on paper; it is the intimate form I think, the movement of the hand demands that I communicate a sense of myself that is right here in this moment and this place.

They had a ritual and she logged off her work and her own private secrets and followed the trail of their early morning. Richard was in the kitchen,

sweating over a slowly roiling pot of poached eggs, keeping an eye on the toast in the griller and her reluctant progress to the kitchen table. She noted the teapot, snuggled in its cosy, and the extra effort of the retro 40's tea cups and jug he had laid out. She sighed and poured a strong cup of tea.

"You read the letter. Sarah's sending her emissary."

"Her son, her long lost son. Will you see him? Don't you owe her that and, for that matter, him?"

Of this at least he was innocent; that chapter had been written long before he had appeared in the scene.

"Mum's seen him. Simon called, did I tell you? He took her to lunch at the Palace Hotel, quite the gentleman. He must have got those fancy ideas from his adopted family or perhaps his mysterious father. Fay says he looks nothing like Sarah."

She watched his hand gripping the spoon, tracing spirals through the bubbling pot, as if he could refigure the story Sarah told so that he and Tex disappeared.

"I never thought to hear of Sky again or have to go over . . . "

He sighed and rose from the table and his weakness made her strong again.

"Come here."

He knelt at her feet and she let the strap of her nightgown fall and pulled his head to her breast. At once his breath came fast and his hands rode up her thighs, so she laughed into the receding part of his springy hair.

"This is the same, but only this."

She made herself another cup of tea as the house settled furtively around Richard's absence. She allowed herself another five minutes, her finger guiding the cursor to the hidden window.

Andra retreated to the day-bed, pulling the curtains to hide her shame and distress. He strode over and pulled the covers aside, his breath

coming in short, angry gasps. Even so, he was careful not to touch her, get too close or let his eyes meet her own for more than a second.

“You are a danger to all that is living and warm, always and forever. Your lack of control has once again exacted a price that others pay.” She didn’t need to be reminded. Her mind’s eye replayed the scene over and over; the chubby children, a boy and a girl, twirling hand in hand, riding the restless undulation of the ground beneath their feet. Their soft bodies, their shining eyes, the music of their laughter and, most of all, their total absorption one in the other. The merging of their breath, minds and spirit exerted a desire so strong, so sudden, that her energy unfurled like a coiling snake – she couldn’t hold it. She felt the rush course gloriously through her body, saw and felt the clean powerful surge as it struck the two children, surrounded and penetrated them in a spear of cold green light and just as quickly returned to Andra replenished, stronger and more deadly than ever.

On her second reading, Tex realized that this heroine, this Andra, was more potent than the frail figure of Sarah’s early stories. Tex wondered if Sarah recognized herself in the dangerous powers of this young woman, or was she just a weary amanuensis copying down all the voices and confessions of everyone she had ever known? Tex had recently ploughed through *Possession* by A.S. Byatt. She had been annoyed at the pretension of the writer to take up every position, recreating the swooning Victorian poetess, the beautiful and brilliant academic, every fairytale and piece of arcane research lovingly recreated from the scrap bag of her own mind. Sarah, like all writers perhaps, had recreated herself again and again. Tex, as a child, had taken every one of Sarah’s postures as the real thing. Sarah had been there when she was born, had told her stories as a small child, had

collaborated with her and Richard in one momentous story that, on reflection, might very well be a lie.

Sarah and Sky. Sarah and Richard. Tex and Richard and Sky and Sarah. A couple, a triangle, a four-pointed star; different patterns, configurations, gathering and re-forming and falling apart again. At the start there was Sarah, always Sarah with her stories and Tex's fascination with not only those mythic tales but the storyteller herself. And then there was Richard and his poems, then Sky and his pied-piper seduction of all of them. Up until that time that they had shared, all four of them, almost twenty years ago, Tex had believed herself to be the hero of her own story. And it was this, more than anything, that hardened Tex's heart against Sarah and her stories that made a lie of everything Tex thought she had witnessed all those years ago.

Chapter 2.

Melbourne 1984

The cold was delightful, like nothing she'd ever known. It gave Tex leave to stay cocooned in her nest of rugs, a little hidey-hole from which one finger emerged to prop open the pages of the book, her breath warming the small space into which the words, like honey, poured over her.

She was reading *In Watermelon Sugar* though there was a stack of other books by the bed, accumulating one by one from the bookcase that loomed in the hallway neglected by everyone else in the house. They belonged to Randall, or had come into his possession because he stayed in this narrow terrace on busy Rathdowne Street when others had moved on, abandoning these paperbacks.

"Have you read them all?"

She props her hip on the wooden bench while he hammers and cuts and punches holes in the stiff leather, fashioning it into durable sandals he sells at the Victoria Markets.

"I've given up reading."

As one would give up alcohol or heroin.

"But I've read most of them. I was going through a bad time a year or so back and lay in bed for six months – did a lot of reading."

"So, what's good?"

"Good? Fun, will-change-your-life, or fritter away the time?"

He pulled out *The Words*.

"I thought this would help. Existentialism might give a meaning to my misery?"

“And did it?”

“I didn’t believe him. Sartre was famous, could sleep with any woman he wanted, hang out at French cafés with other intellectuals smoking Gauloises and drinking Pernod. What did he know of suffering, life in the raw? His life and mine? I was an ugly, drunken bastard and his voice didn’t speak to, or for, me.”

Tex preferred books by women for that very reason; that the voice might speak for her.

“I didn’t like Simone de Beauvoir’s book about her and Sartre. He invites the young blonde woman to stay, flirts with her, sleeps with her, and she just puts up with it, like a victim.”

“Why do you think those characters are de Beauvoir and Sartre, Tess? The book isn’t the author, the story isn’t even his own. The characters are combinations of everyone they’ve loved or hated – they might even just be strangers, inconsequential. But it’s still only bits and pieces, we make up the rest. That’s why they hang out at cafes – to eavesdrop, to catch fragments.” He was smiling slightly, perhaps making a joke.

“Did anything you read make a difference?”

“I stopped reading novels; they were messing with my mind. It was bad enough being so deep inside my own head, but it was worse being in the writer’s head – claustrophobic, like being locked in a cell with a deeply unpleasant stranger for weeks.”

She grabbed *The Getting of Wisdom* and *Jane Eyre*, wanting the familiarity of rereading and the distance of nostalgia, but they lay open at page four and chapter two, ruined castles on the box that made-do as a bedside table. They were stalled by inertia just like Tess, the door half-open.

The potential of Friday night drifted though her window, the heavy bass of a local band tuning up at the Prince Hotel and, if she hurried, she could be propping up the bar when Nicholas walked in. He was patrician even in his

carpenter's work clothes. Way back in hot, sticky February he was long and smooth like a cool glass of water.

"You're a golden girl."

She was too tall and brown, like a tree, but it was good that this pretty slim boy ran his finger down her arm imagining she was something else.

"You're a Gauguin girl; all you need is a hibiscus in your hair."

On the way home he plucked one from a bush overhanging the sidewalk and tucked it behind her ear. The next week he pulled a crumpled postcard from his pocket.

"For you, golden girl."

The women were flat squares of primary colour, like blocks of wood.

The phone rang; a distant peal that she could ignore such was the narrow staircase that wound up and away from the activity of the ground floor.

"It's your sexy aunty."

A little joke amongst her housemates for they had met Sarah and circled around her pale drooping shoulders and languid eyes, her dark head wrapped in a scarf.

"Come tonight Tess. There's food, music, poetry – new people to meet and explore."

Sarah herself was a new person to explore, like everybody else in this city, no matter how she tried to draw Tess close, gave her scarves and tatty exquisite nightdresses and 1940s bathing suits all shirred and spotted, and wanted her to meet, or witness, all the strange types and budding geniuses or faded icons that she gathered around her.

"I'm rostered on at the restaurant from five until ten."

"Come after. You can bed down with me. Remember Tessa, just how we used to, and I'll tell you stories."

The Duke of Kent Hotel edged the pavement of Little Collins Street, as did the other grand turn of the century buildings, banks or barristers on the

ground, ratbag unions and pokey small publisher offices clustering on the upper floors. She had made herself a plain black A-line skirt out of shiny gabardine, a remnant; sewed it up like a bag on one of Randall's machines, the rusty brown thread appearing in bunches on the seams and at the hem. "Wipe the table, quick, many people eating soon."

By the time the businessmen, sweaty in their all day suits, and the wives with reluctant teenage children, sat down to the artificial lilies and napkins folded like swans, she had her pad and her pencil, her hair escaping in greasy tendrils and wrapping around her neck.

'Call-me-Chas' was kind, with his choppy vowels and yellow smile. At the end of her shift, after the restaurant closed and she had wrapped the red stained little clouds of rice into bundles and thrown the stiff tablecloths into the vestibule that opened onto the stinking alleyway, he presented her with a plastic container in a paper bag – fried rice, honey prawns with a plastic fork wrapped in a paper napkin. Sometimes, when she was running late, the Chinese staff, who had been concealed all evening behind the steaming grills and high benches of the kitchen, sat at the long tables in the restaurant, bowls held close to their chins, shoveling rice and strange vegetables, the long noodles and rice never falling – and the noise – did no one listen? In their foreign tongue they shouted stories she couldn't understand.

The trams still clattered slowly up and down the street – almost pedestrian – and it was easy to jump aboard, the long-haired conductor in a uniform of dusty green, casual with the bag lady spread out in her corner, and the junkie nodding off in the aisle seat on a constant teeter, hooking the reluctant attention of all the other late night passengers trying to get home without misadventure.

Sarah's house hid behind drooping hibiscus bushes, their canes unpruned and hanging and catching casual passersby who all seemed to end up here.

The front windows were dimly lit and all of the activity was happening at the back of the house, movement and music and muffled shouts at the end of the long hallway. Silhouetted against the window, on the caved-in couch on the front verandah, was a lump of dark person, a cloud of smoke enveloping his head.

“I’m here to see Sarah.”

There may have been a shrug, a slight grunt, and she continued on past the open doors of bedrooms, mattresses on the floor beside venerable marble fireplaces, paper-moon light shades hanging from the elaborate ceiling roses. The final door gave onto an open kitchen added onto the mean scullery and pantry that had been the domain of the women who lived and served in this house a hundred years ago. Two women in tubular black skirts with short spiked hair were watching the contents of a stockpot on the stove that gave off clouds of fragrant steam. On the bench beside them was a cutting board covered in cubes of tofu and tiny delicate pink mushrooms. She shouted above the music which might have been the ‘Go-Betweens’ or ‘Blondie’.

“Is Sarah here?”

Someone snapped off the noise. The movement was illusion for there were only three people in this vast room.

“She’s gone on a mission for the secret ingredient.”

He was an elf, with his cloud of red hair and discreet moustache and goatee.

“And you are . . . ?

“Tex.”

She didn’t know why she used that old name that she had thrown off along with her history, which didn’t amount to much, just the end of school and stupid part-time jobs and Friday night at the local pub and her mother reading, watching TV, going to the movies.

“That’s a big name for a little girl, but I bet there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

She wasn't small, not literally, but perhaps he had divined the smallness of her existence. He stood to pull out a chair for her, an extravagant whirl of hands and arms, and she noted his dusty black dinner suit and ruffled white shirt and the sidelong glances from the kohl-rimmed eyes of the two women.

"Tex, this is Macy and . . .?"

"Lou."

Her wounded eyes filled up with his forgetfulness.

"And you can call me Sky."

Though he was darker than that, or weightier, despite the spun gold hair.

"What brings you to this cold city Tex?"

A thin, singing line that connected her to Sarah? A taut telegraph line that stretched between that place and this.

"Because it was the most different place I could come to in Australia. I knew it would be cold and wet and noisy and that's why I came, because I couldn't afford London or New York."

"There's plenty of different places in Australia Tex; the rainforests of Cape York or the spirit places of the Northern Territory? Those places are more different than you could imagine. They're uncharted – no great writer has put them to pen, no one's described that great emptiness yet."

"Maybe we haven't got the language to write those places."

He bounced up from his chair. "I'm going to enjoy you Tex. I hope you don't run away too soon."

He pulled the two women to him, encircling them with his ginger-haired monkey arms, and dipped his head into the steam rising from the pot. He wasn't tall, the two women or maybe only girls after all, rose above him like pillars.

"My Tessa , there you are."

In her time in Melbourne, nearly eight years, Sarah had developed a faintly exotic accent, as if her pale skin and long enclosing clothes had finally found a country.

“Did you introduce yourself? Here is Sky and . . . the girls – I’m sure you’ve met.”

Sky detached himself from the scene at the stove and stood like a cavalier with his hands on hips and head thrown back as if he was sniffing the moist air that Sarah brought with her.

“Your ‘erbs, M’sieur.”

Held out like a bouquet to him. She faintly ruffled the leaves that emerged from the top of the dampened newspaper, releasing their fragrance.

“Tarragon, dill, chives.”

“Let the feast begin.”

He was all movement and flash, flinging implements and chopping and stirring. He called for the mortar and pestle and ground salt and lemon rind and peppercorns and the chopped herbs - Lou was given that task - that he mixed into a paste with olive oil. Macy was instructed to coat each of the tofu cubes, gently, while Sarah laughed and casually rinsed and drained the noodles. The other members of the household emerged, blinking, from behind the doors of the long hallway.

“Sally and Red, Merlin – I think you met last week, Michel, and here comes Richard.”

He appeared silhouetted in the front door, shapeless and shambling down the corridor as if it was the light that led him, like a moth, into the room.

“Sit beside me Richard.”

Sarah was delicate but precise in who merited her attention. And Sky, himself, dropped a hand on Richard’s shoulder as if anchoring him; Sky might just as well have been called Earth.

“This is my niece, Tessa.”

“Tess or Tex.”

She held out her hand and he emerged from under the table, surprisingly lean and strong despite his mushroom like silence.

“I’ll call you Tess, the beautiful Tess, lost, abandoned, but full of spirit – do you get what I mean? Full of capital S – spirit.”

He was drunk, or just rambling along a groove that this city, or at least this group of people, followed.

“I like Tex.” Although she hadn’t known this until now. “I don’t feel like a romantic heroine. I’m as strong as a horse, I can work for hours, even at things I hate. I’m not some weak pale girl in a fancy long dress.”

“Nor was Tess.”

They were whispering without even realising. Sarah, Sky, Macy, Lou and all the rest were on the outside and Tess looked around for rescue, as if this stranger might steal her away.

His hair was black and spiked like the girls’, and his black tatty denim jacket and ripped t-shirt complemented theirs so seamlessly that she asked: “Are you all going somewhere special tonight?”

Macy draped herself over the table, the black swathe of cloth falling away to expose a tiny hard-nippled breast.

“Princes Hotel, but later, much later. Richard’s doing a reading at the open mike night. You should come.”

It wasn’t really an invitation, more a list of what Tess didn’t know and should know. Sarah sat down – it wasn’t her job to do the serving or the cooking – and waved away the Friday night schedule.

“I know Richard’s poems – brilliant – and Tessa has plenty of time to get to know the poems and the man and the muse that moves him. Tonight, we are being greedy and once you are all fed and gone we will have the night just for one another.”

“I got a letter from Mum.”

Sarah minus her household was more normal. Tess lay with her head on the thin pillow, eyes tracking Sarah around the room.

“She sends her love. She wants us to send photos so she can see us here together. Do you want to read it?”

Tex flapped the pages at her but the pull of blood and pricks of consciences were too weak to catch Sarah, so Tex continued on.

“She’s working at the barber’s in Hay Street, though she says the owner calls it a men’s salon. He’s the only man, the owner, and the rest of the cutters are women about her age she said – a good bunch.”

A thin laugh from Sarah but her back was still turned as she poured silky scarves and fine slippers into the narrow top drawers of the dresser.

“She’s humming and hawing about dating one of the clients, a retired farmer who comes in once a week and the tips of his ears blush as soon as she tucks the smock into his collar. He’s ‘old money’ she says.”

The dim light from the hallway glanced off Sarah’s hair and the peacock brooch that caught the folds of her blouse and tucked it neatly under her breasts.

“Photos might be fun, Tessa. Michel has a camera, and tomorrow everyone will be here and we can show Fay the kind of life you have now – so different from what she knows or might even imagine.”

Tex had imagined a conventional photo, heads leaning in towards each other and the faint family resemblance caught in the smiles and eyes gazing at the viewer. They could go to the photo booth at the train station, pull the too short curtain across and make silly endearing faces.

Sarah sat on the bed and stroked Tessa’s cheek brushing her hair back off her face.

“And what’s been happening in your heart and soul this week, angel? Have you seen Nicholas?”

“I don’t feel real with him Aunty Sass. He treats me like a princess and then I look in the mirror and find I’m not the beautiful one he thought.”

She turned on her back and gazed at the spotted remote ceiling.

“The other morning I woke up before him and - you’ve seen him, he’s gorgeous isn’t he? Everyone wants him and I’ve got him. I woke up and looked at him – his long eyelashes and mouth and hair - and he looked like a plastic doll. When I look at him that’s all I can see now and when he wants to . . . do it, you know, have sex, I’m just not there; I’m flying away at a million miles an hour.”

“Love, or even sex Tessa, is not about hair or white teeth or brown arms. It’s about beauty, soul beauty. There’s recognition between true lovers of their soul’s purpose. Give up Nicholas, he doesn’t want you and you don’t want him.”

“But I want someone.”

Sarah laughed and threw herself on the bed alongside Tess.

“There are many someones Tess. They come and they go and that’s the brilliant mystery of life – finding them.”

“Sky’s attractive. Is he a ‘someone’ for you?”

“He’s been coming to the house just this week. We’re circling. Is he an enemy, a lover or a friend? Does he want to disturb my life, take it over, or has he got something to give? I don’t know as yet. Time will tell.”

They lay stretched out on the wide white bed a small gap between them, but their hair fanned out and mingling on the pillow and their feet just touching at the end of the bed where the doona lay bunched up creating a cloud of softness and warmth. The house ticked in the silence, a distant clank of pipes and the faint rush of rain through the gutters, or perhaps another person watchful or listening in the sheltering darkness. It reminded Tess of

other nights from many years ago, and other beds, the soft coil of Sarah's plait on the pillow, and her voice.

"Time for the next installment?"

"Yes."

Chapter 3.

“Where were we?”

Sarah doesn't read, she recites, though the words might be the same as those that Tess had glimpsed; the stack of paper in the hatbox pushed under the high iron bed.

“She is grown now you said. Well, almost grown, and she's awakening to her destiny – the one they haven't told her about or they keep her protected from, a kind of prisoner in this beautiful place.”

“Oh yes.”

Maybe Sarah changed the story for each listener and the true story was the one hidden away under the bed.

The light flows like ruby so it must be eleven o'clock when the twin sun of Hoi'a rises and together with Zios almost setting on the eastern horizon, the land hushes under the bloody light, but after all it only lasts for a short time, twenty minutes, and then the green pure light of Hoi'a has ascendancy. A good time for a break, a cup of tea and other refreshments that call you inside, away from the sight of birds tucking their small heads under their wings and the flowers drawing in their petals.

“I'm bored.”

The Graces are probably bored too, but they have become so used to this rhythm of yellow light, ruby light, green and then pale – nothing – light that feels the most usual for them, although they don't tell her any of this, for the world must be constant for Janra – that is their task – until the time has come.

“There was a Man today, I saw him – I smelt him first – he was trying to hide under the Booya hedge. He tried to speak to me – he opened

his mouth and sounds came out and he stretched out his hand and dipped his head and raised his eyebrows but there were no words to make proper meaning.”

Berte glances over her head at Mara who has been busy with chiming the glasses so they ring with the correct tone for their refreshment, and she straightens her already ramrod back to observe the flickering insubstantial shadow of Janra. Is she deceived? Does her faint longing, subsumed under duty, make her imagine there is a thickening of the light that courses like a web, circulating around the potential of Janra for, after all, at this early age that is all she is. There is a faint flush or blush, but perhaps that is just the quality of light invading the chinks of the shutters.

“I feel weak.”

But even Frio stumbling through the door with a tray sees that she is not weak at all and, alarmed, rattles the jug of sweet white milch and the pot of The’. She, at last, places the tray on the small table and then applies her hands, plump and warm, to Janra’s extremities, teasing the loose ends and wrapping them back so the electric energy that had started to snake in abandoned tendrils is tamed.

“That feels better.”

And she hums like a bee, if she knew what one was.

“Doesn’t Janra have a proper body?”

“It’s becoming, be patient.”

A little yellow cake and a glass of warm vin and she slumbers, leaning into Frio’s ample shoulder, her colours growing then receding just as it should be..

“Is she growing do you think?”

“Of course she’s growing Frio. Even here life follows rules, cells divide and find organisation, differentiate, become . . . what ever it is they were destined to be.”

“And what was Janra destined to be?”

“A woman becoming, I’d like to see that.”

He has crept in, the dim light and gigantic shadows of the oversize wardrobe disguising his presence. Only the halo of Sky’s hair and his words permeate the room like a faint aroma.

Tex is stung by his interference, his jumping of the gun.

“What makes you think Janra will be human, or even female? She might become an animal.”

“She is shaped by the hands of the women who love her.” He’s challenging, teasing them. “Perhaps she’ll turn into something else, surprise those interfering women – a tiger, how will you deal with her claws? Or even a pig and you will have to rinse her off, endure the smell with her always wanting . . . mud, and dirt.”

He is upon them; Sarah is shrieking and Tess wonders if she should save her, but they are laughing and snorting as if animal nature is a game. This Sarah is just a woman, a girl, and Sky is just a man, and there is only laughter and clothes, always in the way, another reason to laugh, to act as if nothing mattered but to rip open whatever obscures skin and touch.

‘No, no.’

“I’m sorry. What was your story, what were you trying to say?”

He is still and Sarah also subsides, sinking under the weight of ‘what she tries to say’.

“Make me a wonderful chai, one of your special ones, put everything in it – let me have just a little time . . .”

“Yes.”

And he is gone, springing up from the pillow but leaving his imprint and Tess can hear him whistling the start of some classical tune, flushing the toilet and calling out to someone in the hallway.

Sarah has gone soft, she’s always changing. When she wraps a woollen scarf around her head and strides down the street in her grey man’s overcoat she looks like a refugee, her dark eyes searching out faces for signs of conscience. But when she is like this – dishevelled in her satin slip, a tendril of hair coiling around her neck – she is film star alluring.

“You look alluring.”

Sarah laughs.

“Alluring is a mirror in which I can see myself being not myself. Where were we?”

“You were describing Janra like a web of light or energy that the Graces are – well, I don’t know whether they’re stopping her from growing or helping it to happen.”

On the pillow, Sarah’s face sharpens and she is like a statue – Nefertiti.

The Graces have been carefully selected to endure the deprivation and loneliness of this place, to be faithful and loyal to the great plan but have the wit to amend any procedure as the situation demanded, to have the necessary skills to nurture into bloom the bud of Janra’s specificity. Most of all they must work as the complex units of a singular function and this demanded a compatibility that endured through the complement of their differences.

Frio is young and plump, bursting with feelings that escape in her touches and caresses and her wild singing voice and fingers that plait and weave the coarse grasses that grow inside the field into intricate tiny baskets. Sometimes when Mara watches Frio rub and tickle

Janra, she finds her breath caught sharp in her chest and then turns quickly away

“Hmmm, women alone. Might lead to shenanigans.”

“Don’t be vulgar Sky.”

It might have been for Richard’s benefit who was swaying beside him at the door.

“Sorry Ma’am but the whole princess thing turns me on, especially a sleeping one that I might creep up on, her alabaster skin glowing through the darkness like a torch – so pure and ripe to the point of bursting.”

“A peach.”

Tex thought he was calling her a bitch. The force of the word pulled him into the room, teetering across the floor. Richard’s eyes locked on Tex until Sky steered him into the cane chair at the foot of the bed. He sank into a nest of silk blouses and satin skirts.

“Richard’s had a bit of a big night so the girls tell me. His poetry went down like a bomb and he threw a jug of beer over the organiser. A misunderstood genius aren’t you mate?”

“Give him tea Sky.” Sarah is tender like a mother. “What did you recite?” She coaxes and he slumps further into the satin, though his green eyes slide over her caressing hand and flick over to Tex who is thumbing through a musty linen copy of *Don Quixote* from Sarah’s bedside table. ‘Tilting at windmills’ that’s all she remembers.

“Tell me.”

“*My Straw Boy* – I read that first.”

“And . . .”

“I was nervous, but I’d thought about that, thought it would work with the ‘subject matter’.”

Sarah and Richard are united. Sky with his tray of steaming fragrant cups is serving, quietly placing a cup each, conveniently at arms length. The room is respectful, even Tex who has no respect for authors or poets.

Sarah perches on the bed as well, so there are the three of them in a row all facing Richard who is sipping on the tea as if it were an elixir.

“All right.”

He pushes himself to his feet and he is so close to them in the small room that they are gazing at his chest and his rumpled shirt emits a slight tang of sweat and yeasty beer.

*I made a tiny boy.
I made him for me
with my own hands
from rough Hessian
into shape (that shape).*

*I sewed,
my clumsy fingers,
lines of speech,
holes of sight.*

*He is ragged,
poorly made,
rough black stitches
like wounds.*

*He might come apart, break open,
if I touch too much,
too close
too hard.*

He looks like he might come apart himself, spilling beer and sorrow onto their laps. Sky is jammed in between Sarah and Tex.

“Men need to make babies too; it’s just a question of what those babies will be.”

Sarah murmurs on the other side of him.

“The depth of love that recognises the flaws and dirt of another can only be felt by an artist – or a mother.”

Sarah’s mouth is slightly parted and Sky raises a finger to her lips and lightly defines the sweep, circling and circling, until her mouth drops fully open.

“What do you think?”

She and Richard might as well be alone; his words have drifted over and enclosed Sky and Sarah.

“I don’t know if I understand. Poetry is . . . strange, like music, not like books. It takes over, I don’t have control. What I meant was, it worked I suppose. I could imagine a Geppetto making a perfect child, except they never are my mother tells me.”

She lets out her breath and he is suddenly whole again as if she had breathed him back to himself.

“Do you want a coffee, something real, not this chai hippy weak shit?”

Chapter 4.

The drizzle had thickened, but you still couldn't call it rain, not proper rain.

"I wish it would rain properly, heavy and dramatic and then go. It just goes on and on here, like it will never stop and there's no escape."

"You're from Western Australia. I didn't think it rained there at all. Talking to Sarah, you'd believe it was just desert – limitless space, drying out everything that's soft."

"Where are you from?"

"Tasmania."

That explained his pale, moist body. Her body was still brown, though it felt like the Melbourne drizzle invaded it like a disease.

"It rains, it pours in Western Australia, like a tap coming on just when you thought everything would burn away. And then it's too much and you want the long days back – and it's the same every year, but you never remember."

He's listening, like he has all the time in the world, as if these grey cold city blocks, the pavement, were just a matter of patience. She was in a rush to be there, out of the lowering sky and into the warmth, the raw brew slipping down her throat restoring her.

"In Tasmania the sun is always a surprise, the warmth a gift. Do you know what I mean? No, probably not. Rain in Tasmania is just the way it is; it's not even weather, it's just the way it is."

A flickering of neon light ahead; Lygon Street with its cafés and takeaways, the people sitting, leaning, walking and waiting were deviant or different from what she'd ever known.

"This one's good."

One of the bored, dangerously thin staff raised his eyebrow as he flicked a wet cloth at the table in the booth.

“You’re out late Tex. It’s gotta be good to keep you away from your cup of milo and your book.”

It was a standing joke amongst Nicholas and his mates, who were somehow aligned with members of her household through various affairs, that she was a farmer’s daughter from out west, rising with the sun and fading minute by minute after the sun had set. Tex had never lived on a farm and lay in bed in the morning for as long as she was able, waiting for stray beams of light to warm the wooden floor so she could dash to the toilet then into the shower trying to catch warmth.

“Bry, this is Richard, a friend of Sarah’s.”

He raised a different eyebrow this time.

“What’s Nicholas up to tonight then?”

“I’m not sure. I went straight from work to Sarah’s and she only has herbal teas at her place and we needed . . .”

She shrugged and turned away to the booth almost hoping that Richard would slide out the door, or sit at a different table, so she could stir her coffee and prop a magazine up on the sugar bowl, flick through pages of languid girls, misty interiors, sweating whisky bottles, until she found some words thick on the page that she could throw herself into; even a recipe, especially if it had phrases like ‘crush gently’ or words like ‘roulade’ or ‘compote’.

But he followed and instead of sitting on the opposite side with the table and all its implements between them, he sat on the same bench, perched on the end while she huddled in the corner.

“Latte.”

“Make that two.”

He arranged the table; pulling the salt and pepper shakers apart, laying a border of sugar packets around them, placing the sugar bowl in the middle, taking the toothpicks out of the small cup and creating a fan that swung between the two of them.

The coffee arrived, finally.

“Is Nicholas your boyfriend?”

“He’s someone I’ve been seeing, he’s helped me meet people, learn about Melbourne, or at least this part of it.”

“Didn’t Sarah do that?”

Sarah created her own worlds. Tex knew that, had always known that, but they were not worlds where Tex was free to make herself and roam around freely. He turned to look at her; out of the corner of her eye she could see his face glowing like a moon.

“I want to be with you Tess.”

“The world has got too small. Look at this urban concrete world with people like ants scurrying to and fro. Time to get away, my children.”

Sarah was clipping his hair like a hedge. The morning was watery but fine, the ground soaked and leaves dripping but overhead the sky, clear and remote. Sky sat like a pasha, gold filaments off his halo falling in a fine rain all around him.

The previous night Tess had gone back to Richard’s flat where they murmured in low voices, wrapped together like lost children on the couch. She had fallen asleep, Richard holding her hand while the TV flickered with old b&w movies and finally faded out to a dull grey static that soothed as much as his hand. She’d murmured when he finally drew away, though only to make tea and toast. “It’s morning.”

“How about it Tex? Ready to meet the big unknown?”

Everything was unknown and Sarah was turning on a pivot that had Sky as its centre.

“North?”

A bit north, more west. We’ll be riding on the sheep’s back Tex.”

“How far? How will we get there?”

“I’ve got the van.”

Daylight didn’t suit Richard, with his spiky dark hair and grease spotted jacket.

“I’ve got reading and teaching jobs in a few different towns. It’ll be ok.”

“Had you all planned this already; that Sky and Sarah would go with you I mean?”

“There’d been some talk, and then the letter came for Sky about his father and . . . “

Sarah whipped off the sheet and tendrils of Sky’s hair flew around the garden landing on the hibiscus and on the path through the overgrown lawn to the back door.

“I’m a new man.”

He leapt up and then crouched down beside Tex and there she sat, precariously, in the deck chair that listed to the left, and Sarah stood alongside rubbing her neck, and pulling her hair up and off her head, so Tex felt naked, all her face on show, and Richard watched.

“Just a few weeks, maybe a month – a holiday, Tessa. The men will be busy – that’s what they want – and we will have all the time to explore a new place together.”

Sarah would be there with all the familiarity of her evolving stories, and Richard? Even after a day she knew his silent watching and his way of speaking that was not eloquent but offered something from deep inside – his strange poems, his broken babies.

“I’ve been booked by the Victoria Education Department to do regional school workshops, reading poetry and writing classes, in Carey, Ivanhoe and Swan Hill, and some of the private schools will probably book me as well.”

With his spiky hair and smoky pallor, she couldn’t imagine him amongst cruel ten year olds.

“Swan Hill . . . I’ve heard of that, something to do with the pioneers? What’s it like, do any of you know it? Have you been there before?”

Sky laughed and sang deep and low into her ear:

“ I have been a rover

I have traveled far . . .

I’ve traveled far from there Tex in a great big circle and now I’m going back to the dusty heart of my beginnings.”

“Is your family still there?”

“Dear old Dad shot himself in the shed, and now I’ve got a property to inherit. We could burn it down, or start a commune and fuck all the locals, or just sit on the verandah and watch the clouds drift over the paddocks.”

Sky looked familiar now. She remembered the farm boys who sat unwillingly in her classroom; boys with freckles and wild hair cut severely across the crown and ears, who didn’t care about words and sums but cared about the sun rising every morning, and the rain that never came, and the sheep clustering stupid and smelly around the grain truck.

“Did you live there for long?”

“I escaped.”

Sarah flung off her shawl, catching a ray of light that at last penetrated the enclosing walls of the inner city courtyard, and turned like a priestess letting it catch her upraised arms and pour down over her shoulders and back.

“The wide sky, the sun pouring down like honey, the soft breath of the land . . .”

Sarah never seemed to have a history, either then or now. Tex remembered her as a soft, pale creature arriving into the cruel sun of the mid-west, all her

stories, her magical creatures springing from a land and a time only familiar from those dusty out-of-date books she brought with her to Geraldton – those childhood treasures.

Chapter 5.

Geraldton 1974

All the way down the street there wasn't a soul, just the three-legged black dog panting on its side in the deep shadow between the chemist and the butcher. The open window of the pub let out warmly yeasted gusts from the red cheeks of the men, their elbows on the windowsill, immobile except for a mutter from the corner of their mouths. They ignored the plate glass window across the road. There through a faint fog, bodies flitted brightly.

The familiar scent up her nose; sickly floral notes and ammonia. An old shriveled woman had her whole head done in pin curlers so all you could see was pink scalp. Fay lavishly applied purple paste to each wrapped roller. In the mirror the old lady's lips moved but over the rush of the hair dryers, the clatter of combs and scissors, she was mute.

"Get the old dear a cuppa will you Sally."

Tex would have liked to offer tea and a biscuit, fuss around, but that was a privilege reserved for the apprentices along with sweeping up all the different coloured hair from the floor into a neat pile, like the pelt of an exotic creature.

"You can clear up in the back room Tex."

George discouraged gawking kids. The salon was a women's retreat and he was the honorary male; the object of their head tossing and fluttering eyelids, the girlish expressions that emerged from wrinkled faces like ghost smiles from their younger selves.

Sally –that great lump of a girl Fay called her – was pining in the back room that made do as a kitchen and storeroom, her stringy brown hair a disgrace. Although she was endlessly pliant in every other way, on this she was firm – no fringe, no perm, no hairspray, no bows or even a clip; she wore it raked back off her moonish face into a thin plait that tapered down to end in a

possum's tail in the small of her back. If she had stories, she didn't tell them to Tex. Maybe she saved them for the six little brothers and sisters who crowded together in the fibro house on the outskirts of town. Tex had wandered up there one afternoon when Fay was still at the salon, though she knew, without Fay needing to spell it out, that the Comley's were a ragtag bunch best left to their own devices. To Tex it was like a miniature school yard, a mass of energetic bodies whirling in motion to arcane rules of their own devising. Three of the little kids were being dragged around the sandy front yard on flattened out cardboard boxes, two on one box and a slightly larger child on another. The two larger boys doing the dragging were racing towards some goal – to miss all the obstacles of the tyres, broken prams, and 44-gallon drums? Or to hit them, she wasn't sure. Sally sat in the deep shade of the overhang of the house, comfortable on a wooden stump, her hands busy with unpicking the small stitches of some discarded garment. "What are you making?"

"A precious silk robe for a Chinese emperor."

Sally smoothed the rich blue brocade shot through with red dragons. It was a men's tie, but now she had unpicked the stitches and unwrapped the fabric she said it would make a variety of costumes.

"George gave it to me. He comes up sometimes with treats for the kiddies."

Tex looked surprised, and Sally glared at her mulishly.

"Didie's his favourite; he even takes her for a ride in his fancy car."

The week after her visit, George had taken them out for a Sunday drive, Tex sticking to the vinyl on the back seat while Fay played with the radio dials and George clicked in the lighter and switched radio stations, his elbow out the window steering the car up the windy road that led through the flat topped hills that circled the town and gave it a bit of drama: You might be a pioneer in a covered wagon heading for the frontier. Fay peered at the rough pink fibro house as they sped up the incline.

“There’s Sally Comley. It’s a long way from town isn’t it? I see her trudging past my house all sweaty at seven in the morning.”

They slowed, George waving his arm in an expansive gesture. Sally rose on the step as if she might be invited and at the sound of the car little Didie came bursting out the door, her fat little legs propelling her down the steep wooden stairs as if all her Christmases had come at once. She was just a speck standing in the middle of the empty road as Tex looked back and then they accelerated up over the rise and the town disappeared behind them.

“The salon’s a way out for her; you’ve given her a chance to get away from that family of hers. You’re a good man George.”

“Mum wants you to make that old lady a cup of tea.”

“Do you know how she takes it? Sugar, milk?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to go out and ask.”

Sally scraped her toe against the floor.

“I’ll go.”

George frowned but Tex hurried over and whispered to Fay.

“How it comes. Milk and a sugar will do.”

Sally poured the milk and tapped the teaspoon with smooth grace. In this small room she looked almost womanly, in charge of the white cup and the boiling kettle.

“Mum’s taking me to Coles after work, to get new bathers because I’ve grown out of my old ones. I had them since I was eight and I’m ten now. When we went to Chapman Pool the other day George said I looked obscene.”

Sally nodded without interest. Usually all it took with women, girls, was a little story of your own and then they would give you one of theirs.

“Do you ever go to Coles? What’s your favourite section? Mum likes the cosmetics and costume jewelry, and I like the knick-knacks.”

“I get the baby dolls every week – the tiny ones, three for five cents.”

“You must have lots. They look like baby pink mice.”

“I dress them up, make clothes, for my brothers and sisters.”

“What sort of clothes do you make? Baby clothes?”

“Only for Renie because she still likes playing with babies. She’s got ten all done up in bits of old towels and flannels I made into bibs and diapers.”

“What about the others?”

Sally screwed up her face and counted them off one by one on her fingers.

“Pete likes the cowboys, so I make little hats out of Dad’s old trousers and vests; Didie likes the movie stars and that’s hard to get shiny, glittery things but I got Mum’s petticoats with bits of lace that I wrap around and Stevie only likes monsters cos he’s little and that’s just tatters and rags so it’s easy for me . . .”

“What do you like? What do you make your dolls into?”

“I just like the making, so I don’t keep any for myself. Sometimes though the kids put them all together – the cowboy, the babies, the movie stars and the monsters and we have a great old game, like its all one family.”

Tex pushed the rollers down into the sterilizing solution. Bits of hair – grey, blonde, frizzy – clung and then came loose. She skimmed these off the top and they congealed into a slimy mass that she flicked into the bin.

“I’m finished. I’m going.”

Sally stomped out and Tex followed behind. The shop was empty except for Mrs Barrett making her appointment for a trim, avoiding her reflection in the mirrors which lined the walls and made it seem like there was a crowd in there, when there was only George and the ‘girls’, wilting now and shucking off their work clothes.

George was mysteriously single. He had arrived in town four years ago unencumbered with a wife, children, or lawnmowers, blow up paddle pools and life insurance. He didn't have a proper house like everyone else, but a room in the Royal Hotel; more of a suite, Fay said, with his own little sitting room and the bedroom separate. The bathroom was on the ground floor at the back near the garden, and he had to leave his room, lock it, and wander modestly in his bathrobe, naked underneath, with his shower-bag. What guests the hotel had, occasional guests, were clustered on the second storey with views from the narrow windows that ranged over the port and the wild sea that was held back by massive jagged grey rocks.

He was a good escort Fay said, respectable and undemanding, except that she be made-up, girdled and accessorized, if she was to be on his arm. They went to dinner dances, cabarets and, occasionally, a drive out to the country as if there might be picturesque scenery, little pubs or parks, when in reality there was nothing but paddocks and stands of scrubby bush here and there. They dressed as if someone might see them; George in a crisp white shirt, Fay in dense black sunglasses, a scarf tied jauntily around her neck like Bardot, and a pair of pedal pushers and strappy sandals.

"Aunty Sass is coming to stay. She'll arrive on the bus on Tuesday."

Tex let out a small scream, imagining Sarah tucking her into bed, whispering those stories that took her to another place.

"She's coming to have a holiday with us?"

"To help Grandma out, get Sass out from under her feet for once."

Fay and her younger sister weren't close; too many years and experiences not shared because, Fay used to say, she was gone, had escaped, by the time her mother groaned out this change of life baby. There was nothing wrong with the girl's brain in terms of maths, or geography and history, just the feeling that she wasn't quite all there, with her stories – her lying, deceiving stories.

“It might be a holiday for her but it won’t be one for me. You know how it bothers me having people in the house.”

And it was true. It dropped from her like a stale shift when she got home; then she was quiet, sighed, as if the pert conversations of the salon drained life from her. Tex wasn’t ‘people’; she was a diminished copy of Fay, a helper and sometimes company, slipping under her mother’s arm as they curled up on the sofa in the evening with their books.

Tex saw Sarah every year at Christmas in her grandparents’ hushed house, the heat and smells from the kitchen lingering the whole afternoon around the closed curtains. The flickering TV was turned down to a murmur that might keep Granddad Jim company, except he was already snoring ten minutes after he’d scraped the custard and crumbs of pudding from his bowl, a cup of tea cooling precariously on the arm of the chair. Every since Harry, Tex’s father, had been gone, this one day of the year, Fay would spoil her sister her mother and father with gifts, smiles, kisses, her energetic help, leaping from table to kitchen brandishing cloths and filling sinks – exhausting everyone in the process, Grandma Watson said. The family photo of Tess in her pink baby frock, flanked on either side by Fay and Harry squinting into the sun, had been shoved to the back of the cabinet almost obscured now by more recent photos – Fay and Tess in matching polka-dot blouses, waving hectically at the camera, or a family group – Grandma, Grandpa, Tess on Fay’s knee, Sarah looming darkly in the background.

“Why don’t you go and have a rest Sassy, you look like a wrung out dishrag. Tell Tex a story or have a lie down while I help Mum with the clearing up and have a bit of a chat.”

Even after all these years Fay thought that a bottle of ‘Paris Mist’, a sink full of dishes or a quick mop of the floors, might win favour or a smile from her mother. More like a grimace.

Sarah took Tex by the hand and led her out to her secret place at the side of the house; a small space she'd constructed as a cave for her dreams, she said.

"There's magical people that dwell on the many branches and in the hollows of a sheltering tree that grows in a secluded clearing at the exact centre of the Forbidden Forest."

"I know this one - *The Folk of the Faraway Tree*."

"It's my own, Tessa, it doesn't come from anywhere else."

Sarah should have been a grownup, she was twenty years old and an aunty, but she looked like a faded portrait of a little girl with her blue ribbons and plain cotton dress.

"Go on then, but I'm too old for icky fairy stories."

"Magical folk are all different. Fairies are born of the breezes that blow amongst the blossom and the grasses, the leaves and seeds of the tallest tree. They're shifty, changeable creatures, likely to be your friend one day and on the next, on pure whim, will pinch your cheeks, pull your hair or even worse."

Tex relaxed. So long as there was cruelty it was a real story.

"What about the others?"

Sarah retrieved a sketchbook from a fruit box laid on its side to make a storage area in which she kept her notebooks and other precious things. She flicked through pages and Tex got the impression of stormy clouds and shafts of rainbow light and billowing robes, until she stopped and held the book up.

"Undine of water."

A fluid figure, probably female, was entangled in long ribbons of seaweed that climbed toward a ball of swirly orange. She flicked to the next page; a conventional gnarled creature peered out from the great entwining roots of a massive tree. He was bulbous and gritty like the tubers he held in his hand.

"Gnomes protect the earth, the secret anchor of all that flourishes above."

"What else is there?"

“Sub-species of mutants; monstrous marriages between the elements – like us.”

Sarah didn't look like a mutant with her tendrils of dark brown hair, but she didn't look like them either. Granddad Jim called her his 'changeling child' although on his side there was a retarded boy, his brother's daughter's child, who had the same winged eyebrows as Sarah and tapering fingers that constantly plucked and fluttered around his face.

“So, what's the story?”

“It's about a girl, a human girl so she thinks, who becomes involved in a war between the elementals . . .”

“What are the elementals?”

“Don't you listen? The fairies, undines, gnomes and the last of all, the salamanders of fire.”

“Where do they live? I mean how did she find them?”

“Down the bottom of a huge sheltered garden.”

Tex didn't believe in fairies at the bottom of the garden. If Sarah had seen their yard at home, the furious wind that rode down off the ranges distorting and tearing clothes from the line and flinging them into the powdery red dust, she wouldn't draw watery delicate creatures but spiky little troll people like the Aboriginal kids from over the road described when they warned Tex away from the honeycombed cliff face that circled the town tip.

Fay called out the back door for Tex to put the dishes away, Grandma fussing away at potential breakages the 'little one' might cause and Tex and her mother were united again with rolling eyes against the stiff and sticky days they must endure until they could get away to their own little house, shabby and furnished with odds and ends that took their fancy or that someone else didn't want.

Fay was eyeing the boxes of old clothes, lamps that required repair, the sewing desk piled high with mending that had sat for a good few months in the sleep-out, an enclosed section of the back verandah with a wall of louvres that opened onto a shady sliver of creeper-choked ground between the outdoor laundry and the fence. On hot evenings when the clouds stacked over the ranges – small flashes of illumination announced seconds later by rumbles – great black-bodied moths clustered on the fly screens behind the louvers, arranging themselves in a mosaic that moved fitfully in a wave then was still. In the morning the moths were gone, having forecast the rain that pounded and poured through the down pipes carving small canyons in which spiders and leaves drowned.

“Should I put you out here and let Sarah have your bedroom?”

Tex didn’t answer. Her mother was only musing; she knew that Tex needed the safety of her small room with no opening to the outside, just a small window giving onto the safe dimness of the verandah. Late in the evening from that small window with her bed below she listened to her mother rustling and sighing in the bathroom, the bell-like clinks of jars and bottles as her mother rubbed and creamed her flesh.

“Dorothy Packer has a bed I can use. It’s good quality and all but it was Brent’s bed and she says she can’t stand going to the door of his bedroom and seeing it, all tidy and unused, waiting for him. It’s been a year now and she says it’s taken that long for her to really understand that he’s not coming back – he won’t creep in one night while they’re sleeping.”

“I wouldn’t sleep in the bed of a dead person.”

“He didn’t die in bed Tex.”

And Tex wondered if Fay was talking about Dorothy Packer's son or her own Harry. He didn't die in bed but in his car, his pride and joy, and the shape of him in the bed, rumbling like a bear was only the flicker of a memory.

"But you might catch his dreams if you slept there."

With hands on hips and head cocked to one side Fay imagined this room with the boxes gone and curtains on the window.

"Sass likes things plain, luckily."

"How long will she stay?"

"Granddad Jim's sick and Mum said she has as much to deal with as she can handle looking after him. Well, Sarah'll have a shock staying with us won't she Tex? Everyone in this house pulls their weight."

Tex and her mother had enough weight, they didn't drift. She couldn't imagine Sarah in this room, or this house or even the town with its searing light, the sun that bounced from wall to wall in the main street and crept under bushes where cats were hiding, forcing them to lurk under the houses. There was another world under the high wooden houses; furious battles erupting beneath your feet between dog and snake or goanna, cats and rats and mice. The neat green squares of the city suburbs didn't conceal anything; lizards lived on walls, cats sat on the windowsill and dogs were contained behind fences. But Sarah wasn't part of that world either, with her fairies and drawings and her white skin that glowed at night. Maybe Sarah, the real Sarah, would be exposed in this light, in this house that was stripped back, where the outside was always about to come in through doors and windows, even up through the floorboards.

"Aunty Sass might find a husband here. Someone might get besotted with her".

"She's not the type that attracts men."

Fay turned to the scrap of mirror hanging from a nail, fluffing her curls and dabbing at a spot of lipstick that had escaped.

“It’s too late for Sarah. She’s been shut away for too long with her books and her drawing. She only knows about her stories, and they’re not even stories about the real world of men, romance, life.”

But Tex recalled the girl who was not quite human, a mixture of fairy and something else magical. That was romance as well, not the romance that Fay liked but the sort that needed just one kiss to banish your fate; the fate that was like walking on knives.

She arrived on the bus, her face pushed up against the window as if she might miss her stop or take one look and keep on going far away to the north and then disappear off the edge of the known world into mermaid territory. She had two brown suitcases lashed with leather belts and wore a squashy white straw hat and a loose cotton coat, looking for all the world as if she’d just arrived off a migrant boat, Fay said.

“I didn’t know if there’d be anyone here, or even if there’d be buildings or roads.”

She screwed her eyes up against the glare and rubbed her forehead as if it ached. Her eyes avoided the dusty windows of the municipal buildings and the jagged grey rocks that lined the harbour like enormous fangs.

“It’s not what I expected.”

From her appearance she may have been expecting an English village, like in an Agatha Christie or Enid Blyton book.

Frank Richichi, from next door, had offered to pick her up from the bus stop in his old truck, but Fay said not to bother, that Sass would have to get used to getting around by herself. Even though Tex and Fay took a suitcase each and Sass only had to manage with her handbag, she slid and stumbled on the gravel track that was a short cut from the main street up to the oval where they dodged the mudlarks that swooped and screamed at their heads, and stamped their feet at the red dog that bounced around them with short snappy barks.

“I’ll have a rest and a wash before I join you.”

So they were dismissed. Tex mooched around in the hallway while Fay clashed pots and pans in the kitchen.

Dinner was boiled beef and cabbage and glasses of water that were not even chilled, just poured in a rush out of the tap streaming and splashing over the bench and onto the floor. Tex had wanted to set the table with the lace tablecloth and pick a bunch of the trumpet flowers that hung over the fence from the Richichi’s yard but Fay said not to bother, that they would start as they meant to continue. Dinner, for Tex and Fay, was usually a casual affair – a piece of bread and a hunk of meat, a few sliced tomatoes and some cucumber and maybe a potato all floury and dripping with butter eaten at the low table in the lounge room where each wedged their books open precariously under the plate. Fay was halfway through *Penmarric* and was lost, she said, in the great houses and sweeping grounds with servants at your beck and call even if they did scheme and gossip behind your back.

“How’s Dad? Is he worse?”

Sarah looked as if she had just woken, dreams still clinging to her pale shoulders.

“He’s fading. Sometimes it’s like the light shines right through him, but he smiles at me and he looks through his books and . . . he sits in the garden in

the morning, then he feeds the birds and checks the mail and, sometimes, has a chat with Mrs Carmody from across the road.”

Fay snorted.

“What does the doctor say? Mum must be beside herself.”

Sarah’s fingers fluttered at the edge of her plate trying to conjure the right words, or even understand how Muriel, her mother who moved solidly from kitchen to laundry and then back again, might stand beside herself.

“I don’t know. She doesn’t tell me what the doctor says. There’s the pills and they go to the hospital once a week for ‘clinic’ . . . and that’s all I know.”

Tex drops her head, sawing away at the slab of beef, squishing cabbage onto her fork to soften the passage down her throat. Doesn’t Fay understand? Sarah can’t answer those questions, she’s like Tex – kept in the dark, struggling with the meaning of shrugs and pouts and backs turned, or the furtive tears at night, the fumbling in the bathroom with packages and the bottles of pills or lotions applied god-knows-where.

“You should pay more attention Sass. You don’t understand what it’s like for women, mothers . . .”

Fay pushes, clumsily, away from the table. Was her voice breaking? Tex panics, stares at Aunty Sarah who ripples the surface of the night.

“I should go to bed. I’m tired, getting a headache.”

Her eyes turn, like the orbit of distant stars, on the plates and baking pans, the congealed grease and splatters on the bench and splashback.

“Shall I . . .?”

Fay looks decrepit; her blonded hair and drawn on eyebrows, the vestiges of iridescent pearly pink lipstick and Californian bronze blusher standing starkly on her face.

“Leave it. If you could just deal with Tex, get her ready for bed.”

Tex realizes that the dishes, the slicing and cutting, the folding and gathering, all the little tasks that a woman must do, are a means of escape.

“Do you like your room?”

Rosa from next door had run up some billowy curtains in yellow sateen, remnants from the yards of yards of fabric left over from her niece’s bridesmaid frocks. She had even made a ruffle-edged cloth that disguised the fruit box that must-do as a bedside table.

“Ssh, let me listen.”

Sarah cocked her head.

“I can hear the breeze blowing through the trees and – there! – the hoot of the ships coming into port. We’re near the railway line aren’t we? Maybe in the night I’ll wake to the sound of a train rocking along the tracks and imagine where it might take me.”

“Where would you like it to take you? Can I come too?”

“Help me unpack, Tessa, then we’ll tell stories.”

The black suitcase zipped right open so the layers of Sarah’s underwear, blouses, nighties, jumpers, skirts, could be carefully excavated and laid in the waiting drawers of the dresser that loomed near the door.

“I’ll do those.”

Sarah took the white bras and white underpants from Tex.

“Mum has beige bras for everyday and then she has all sorts of colours for the weekend. She’s got some emerald green ones with red lace flowers and matching undies. I’ve got white and navy-blue undies, but I wear the navy ones to school because we’re practicing handstands at playtime and lunchtime, and they look better, not so much like undies.”

Sarah’s blouses were pale coloured cotton, with little buttons all the way up the front. Her skirts were muted, even the floral ones, and hung below the knee.

From the inside pocket of the suitcase Tex pulled out ribbons that had been curled up like snails – red, palest blue almost silver, a deep plum. She draped them over the small mirror on top of the dresser so the room was reflected as if between exotic curtains.

“Are you going to keep your hair long or cut it?”

Tex had been given a pixie cut after-hours at the salon – gingery snakes of hair surrounding the chair where she sat draped in black cloth like a monk. It made her look like a boy – now she had to wear dresses so people wouldn't be mistaken. An Audrey Hepburn sort of look, Fay had said, but she was mistaken.

“It's easier like this, because I can just tie it up Tessa. It's what I'm used to – the weight at the back of my neck. I'm ready for stories now.”

Chapter 6.

Despite what Fay thought of her abilities, Sarah did the laundry, the shopping, swept the floors and stacked the dishes away before she went to bed. She repaired small items, screwed handles back onto drawers, tacked the fly-wire back into the frames, laboured with love over Tex's clothes – embroidering a flower around a tatty buttonhole, sewing thin ribbons of fabric around a skirt that had become too short. She rearranged the contents of cupboards and made a little nook on the back verandah with a couple of old steamer chairs dragged from the back shed, some ferns from the Richichi's garden potted in Sunshine milk tins painted blue. There she was every afternoon with her book and her pens and pencils.

But Sarah didn't cook; she even sliced the bread too thick. Tex had to dislocate her jaw to get her mouth around the sandwiches. Biscuits were hard tack or spread in the oven so the result was a toffee-like torture. Vegetables were over-boiled, meat tough, and she looked like a demented fairy running from oven to hissing saucepan to burning sauce congealing in a pan. She was better with her basket – where did she find it? – walking in the morning to the market, peeling off at Fitzgerald Street and Tex was free to catch up with her mates and practise cartwheels and plot against the unfortunates of that particular day. After Sarah had done her shopping she returned home, her ribbons blowing in the breeze that started at ten and increased until it was a full gale by noon, blowing around the town, rearranging it.

Fay left early, returned home late with everything changed, stubbing her toe on the paving stones Sarah had re-laid to form a winding pathway, meandering through the herbs and frangipani cuttings – looking like dead sticks – to the front door, where there were no potatoes boiling on the stove

or any signs of dinner on-the-go. Wandering through the half-dark house, she was as likely to find them there curled up in the steamer chairs whispering their stories, or still grubbing in the garden. Well, that was Sarah rooting around in a hole with chook manure and asparagus crowns while Tex roamed over and through the palings. In the late afternoon you might find Sarah and Frank Richichi wandering down the rows of glowing tomatoes in the hidden world of Frank's allotment behind the palings, their probing fingers delicately testing the ripeness of the fruit but, more importantly for both of them, paying homage to the spicy scent of all things that grow and seed and die, and then start over again.

When Fay was home and the house hummed with discarded clothes Tex could retreat. She mooched around near the scanty jasmine that held up the sagging crossbeams and intertwined through the faded palings that separated their dusty square of dirt from the Richici's lush haven. Green light flowed across the paltry boundary and in that thick light, furry black eyes peered.

"Little Nina, have you been put out to get some fresh air, oh you poor, poor thing."

Tex could hardly stand to look at her, or that's what her mother said: "I can hardly stand to look at the poor misshapen thing". Nina was as she had always been, first in the little pram with her lace bonnets disguising but not obscuring her egg head and mouth frozen in an O as if she always longed for the tit, but as she got older her stretched out feet that never touched the ground, or got dirty, were propped on the board across the wheels of the push chair Frank had made.

Tex pushed aside the palings that operated as a gate between the two yards and stroked Nina's fingers that arched in a bow as if wanting to grab something that sat high above the trees and the vegetables and all the sheds and equipment of the Richici yard.

“Do you want to play?”

Nina’s moth eyebrows shot up her forehead and her mouth puckered out as if wanting to suck even stronger.

“You are the princess and I am the prince – but you don’t know that, because he has had a spell cast on him and cannot even remember who he really is. I have hashed and hacked my way through the forest of thorns . . .” She hashed and hacked first with her hands then with the handle of the axe that Frank had broken the day before on the stringy blackbutt saplings. Throwing herself around, she landed under the heart-shaped leaves of the Rose of Sharon.

“In the dark, misty valleys I encountered sorceresses who tried to trap me with their enchantments, but always your vision stayed in my mind, although I have only met you in my dreams . . .”

Nina started to rock with the cadence of the moment, her little feet lifting then stamping on the board as Tex wormed her way through an impenetrable thicket of thorns, in fact, the whippy branches of an overgrown hibiscus.

“The first glimpse he catches of the beautiful princess, she is brushing her hair by the open window of her turret room”.

Tex dragged the pushchair across the uneven ground and tried to push it up the bank that Frank had built to protect the laundry and outhouses from storm run-off, but the wheels sank in the powdery soil and the chair slowly subsided tipping Nina out, to land in a tangle of limbs on the concrete slabs.

“Keep away from her you pagan ruffian, or I’ll run you through with my mighty sword.”

Tex spun around her eyes glittering.

“Go away Robert, this is my game and you’re not allowed to change the story.”

“Take up your weapon, you cowardly cur.”

He grabbed the broken axe handle and poked it at Tex’s tummy, dancing around on his feet. He was dark and slight like Nina, but while she was in a

dream, Robert was fully awake. Tex dropped her head to one side, put her hands on her hips and slit her eyes. He darted forward and made a quick dig into the soft flesh above her bellybutton and just as quickly gave her a whack across the back of her knees. She grabbed a branch from the hibiscus, twisting and turning until it snapped off. He was slightly crouched and breathing hard, his arms outstretched waiting for her parry. But Tex didn't fight with the rhythm of a boy, she went in flailing, whipping him across the shoulders and head and arms in frenzy until he ran screaming into the house. Nina let out a little hoot. She was as light as sticks as Tex quickly gathered her, righted the chair and tried to stuff her back into position before anyone came.

Nina's mum emerged in the shadows of the deep verandah, Robert trailing her like a phosphorescent ghost.

"Bad girl, bad girl."

Mrs Richichi didn't speak much English, just enough. Fay's head appeared in the peeling green frame of their kitchen window, her hair screwed into fat sausages on plastic rollers.

"She giving you trouble Rosa? Send her inside."

"You help your father now."

Robert was dispatched, but Nina was useless and once she had been checked for bruises, grazes and dirt, was left, the dappled sunshine playing across her downy cheek, her lily white skin and unruined pink lips.

"You're so lucky, you never have to do anything - just be."

Frank Richici was loyal to Fay despite the younger, fresher woman who borrowed tools and shared his love of tomatoes. Often when Tex got home

from school the house was silent and dark, but as she pushed open the back screen door she could hear the tuneless whistling from over the fence and the steady pound of the pick as Frank turned over the rough clay soil with Sarah following behind dribbling some precious drops of water from the watering can so that the seed could be scattered on fertile ground. Frank's powerful shoulders rose and fell in the late afternoon sun and Sarah's hair clustered moistly around her neck. For Frank, Sarah was similar to the women he had grown up with, the lush goddesses and wan statues, but he stood in awe of Fay's carefully applied blondness.

"Your mother, she has a way with words."

At the back door he gave Tex the eggs, softly knocking one against the other in the newspaper package, hoping to catch a glimpse of Fay in her rayon dressing gown with the golden dragon clawing over her shoulder, or the worn nylon slips she wore under her uniforms that she shed once she got home. By the end of the evening the bra was also gone, unclipped then arms released and pulled out through the neckline with a sigh. She was a courtesan then, plump and overflowing on the couch, book in hand and glasses perched on her nose.

Tex sat in her scratchy baby-doll nightie reading *Little Women* and watching the two of them over the top of her book. Their appearance and demeanor mocked each other; Fay with her red-painted toenails, feet curled up on the couch and Sarah resting her cheek on a folded hand, her ribbons folded away and her hair falling over the plain white cotton nightie buttoned up to her neck and falling to just above her ankle.

Fay had finished *Penmarric* the night before and had picked up *Cashelmara* from the library that morning. She had ordered it from the library when she was two chapters from the end of *Penmarric* and she could see already that so much was still left undone – she wasn't to be satisfied, because after all

she said, books were like life and things went on, children were born, old loves and feuds were resurrected through the generations. But *Cashelmara* was a new story, new people, and she was disappointed. It was going to take a while for her to get used to the new people, but she was resolute – she trusted Susan Howatch. Sarah was reading *Wuthering Heights* for the third time but she also had the *Earthsea* series in a neat stack by her bed. She had different books for different times of the day; sometimes in the morning she propped open a big book of poetry, one she had kept from school, and she would linger over a phrase or a paragraph while she sipped her tea.

“Do you want a story Tessie?”

Fay could have complained, said that Tess had plenty to read in bed – good books, ones that would teach her something, but she was engrossed in the love life of the servants below stairs and besides, it was Friday night and she would allow herself hours to get lost, dozing off on the couch and forcing her eyes open so she could take in some more.

“My bed or yours?”

“Yours first, and then I’ll go to mine.”

Although Tess had tried to fall asleep in Sarah’s bed so deeply she couldn’t be woken and Sarah would just let her be, it hadn’t worked. Sarah shook her off, said that Tess was bigger – all knees and elbows - that it wasn’t how it used to be when she was small.

She needed to go, although she had dreaded the day when she must say goodbye to all that was familiar and dear to her. Even as a little girl she had known she was different. No matter how they tried to keep this from her, when she gazed into the sky-blue eyes of her mother or the faded silver orbs of her Grandfather as he dandled her on his knee, she saw reflected a face without the strong brows and thin mouths of her tribe. Although there were no mirrors in any house

in the village and she was forbidden to touch the shiny shield her uncle had carried into his last battle – it must stay wrapped in the cloak resting in a corner of the room – the small pool that lay further downstream away from the rush and scurry revealed her cheekbones like knives and her slanted eyes as dark as the surrounding forest and her skin bleached white like bones. She was not one of them.

Although there was love and kindness there was also a distance. She wanted to climb the mountain that lay shrouded in clouds above their heads, and it was she who floated sticks and pieces of bark chasing them down the stream and around the bend until the village was long out of sight; none of the other children followed, they lingered where the huge fallen tree spanned the stream and would go no further.

There was no need, they said, to know what was on the other side or where the stream might lead or where the wild creatures went at night – the world was good and small and enough.

And these differences would have been no more than a spice to the sameness of the days and her cloud of dark fly-away hair would have been only a plaything to the women and children whose own plaits of gold hung straight and heavy, except now that her first blood had come a change was unfurling in her, a tendril that crept through her veins and tingled at her fingertips.

“Is she getting boobies?”

“She’s just got her first period. Do you know what that is?”

Tex squirmed. The girls had all been marched off to a separate classroom only the week before, where a nurse with stiff brown curls had held up charts of a half-woman cut up through the middle of her legs showed a hollow balloon insides her tummy. This is where the eggs come from, the woman

said tapping with her pointer and Janey Simmons laughed about laying an egg, did a fart, and was sent from the room by Miss Tyler.

“You bleed and then once it stops you can get a baby.”

“No, you can’t go to the river. From now you will stay with the women – just like Tanja and Nori do.”

These girls, once her playmates, were now quiet and restrained, in the shadows of the women, and were used to all the places they couldn’t go and things they couldn’t say. But what was the world of women to her? Unlike the other girls she didn’t want babies, or her own hearth to dress up with rocks and pots and herbs. She wanted time and freedom to explore the trails that wound away, the routes of the birds that flew over the river and past the mountain.

“You can’t make me stay. I’ll find Gandi; I’ll go tomorrow. All I have to do is follow the river and sooner or later there they’ll be. I’ll be able to see their tents from the distance and they will hear me anyway – they’ll hear my thoughts, or Gandi will, and come and find me.”

Her mother sighed and dropped her head to one side – always a sign that she wouldn’t try to deny the will of her changeling daughter.

It had been two festivals ago, the one time in the tribe’s cycle of seasons when they gladly packed up and traveled for days to the confluence of the two great rivers, that she had met her father’s people and Gandi, her father’s mother. Although no one spoke of him, she knew that it was from him that she got her gift of far-hearing and her small pale features and her head of unruly hair.

“Yes, it is time. Pao and Tith must travel next week for the wood of the Beob tree and they will take you. You will not fit here daughter and

what is the point of training you to women's ways when no man will ever want you."

Chapter 7.

“You’re invited of course Sarah. Once upon a time we might have sacrificed a vestal virgin straight after the formalities and before we put the chops on the barbecue, but you’ll be safe with me I can assure you.

Tex was skipping around, Sally was mooning over the broom jabbing at the piles of multi-coloured hair, and Sarah was trapped by George’s attention. Fay was watching and giving the finishing touches to Esme Walter’s ‘do’ – stabbing the thin end of the comb in and drawing out sausage curls which she trained onto the round-backed brush, setting it with a blast from the gun-shaped hairdryer.

‘Nothing too fancy, bring your bathers – Noondemarra Pool should be full at this time of the year – and something warm for the evening. Fay will look after the necessaries – sausages, salad etcetera.’

The day of the picnic Tex put her bathers on as soon as she got out of bed, with shorts and shirt on top, rolled up her towel, emptied her school bag of pencils, parent-notes and shriveled apples and then filled it with things that might come in handy – a knife, a coil of wire, some string, some plastic bottle tops.

Fay was trying on hats now that she had finally decided on the red scarf instead of the gauzy blue one. The wide straw hat made her look like one of those garden statues – a Mexican in a sombrero. The white straw was a little prissy for the occasion she said, so it was the black after all, sophisticated but not too much.

“What about bathers Sass? Do you have bathers?”

Sarah’s door opened a crack.

“I won’t swim.”

“Oh Sass, you’ll just get bored and moon around if you have to sit and listen to us all afternoon. Besides you can keep an eye on the kids, especially the littlies.”

Fay dug around in her drawers and handed Tex a pair of faded navy blue bathers.

“Tell her to take them or tuck them in your bag, just in case.”

A joyous beeping from the driveway and they were off.

Tex was sandwiched between Sarah and the young man from the accounting office across the road from the Salon. They both stared out their windows. Over the high dashboard all Tex could see was the horizon bouncing up and down as they careered down the gravel road. The procession of cars was strung out to avoid traveling in each others’ bull dust, and the morning outside disappeared into a red haze.

The men had already set up the barbecues, 44-gallon drums cut in half with steel mesh for the grill, below a branching river gum. They stood back from the roaring flames, the first can of beer for the day held loosely in their hands. Other men were unfolding card tables and setting up trestles, using rocks and bits of newspaper to stop them toppling while the women unloaded serviettes, paper tablecloths, bottles of tomato sauce, utensils, paper cups, Tupperware containers full of onion already sliced and lettuce left whole in case it browned. Ice was poured into eskis – three for the kids full of Fanta and Coke and Passiona, and seven for the beer.

It was Tess’s fourth year at the picnic and already it was a tradition. For weeks now she had reminisced with Debbie Henderson, Tommy and Ralph Criddle, Celine Warr and Paddy Brennan. Plans made were a continuation and improvement on last year’s events.

“So ya ready? Let’s go.”

Ralph had a small tomahawk threaded through the belt of his trousers and Tommy opened his bag to show balls of twine, a chisel, some fencing wire and pliers.

“We’ve found a tree already – we’ve been here for hours – and we’ve started to get the bark off.”

“Where are the others?”

“Down at the river.”

Their little sister whined around them, but Ralph gave her a shove in the back and she went bawling back to the women.

A thick piece of bark was hanging jaggedly revealing the pale trunk of the tree.

“He’s skinned it.”

“He’s split it in the middle. It won’t float with a great big hole in the middle of it.”

“We can patch it up with feathers or grass or maybe use the sap – melt it up over the fire and use it like a glue. That’s probably what the natives did.”

Celine had her head on the side, standing back so her dress didn’t get dirty and directing or criticizing Brian’s efforts.

“Debbie you collect the dried sap from all the trees and go back up to the barbecues with Tex – get something to melt it in – ask the men. Say we need it for our boat.”

“I’ve only just got here. Debbie can do it by herself anyway.”

Tex started working her fingers between the bark and the trunk, trying to ease it away in one smooth long piece.

“Give me the tomahawk, would you.”

“I was using it first Tex.”

“Well, you’re not using it now, so hand it over.”

She inserted the head and started to gently work it back and fro to ease the bark away. The bark split under her hand right down to the ground and the piece fell showering her in borers and insects and dust.

“Ahhh, you’ve wrecked it.”

Paddy gave her a shove and grabbed the axe from her hand, his muscles tensed like he might attack her. Tommy looked like he might cry, his eyes wide and blinking. Celine just shrugged her shoulders.

“It was always going to split like that. Tex just made it happen sooner because she’s always got to be in charge.”

Debbie came back down the riverbank still holding the lumps of sap like solidified jam in her hand.

“They wouldn’t let me. The men would’ve but I had to go to the ladies to get a pot to put it in and they said they weren’t going to ruin a pot for a game and it was dangerous because if it got hot it could stick to you like toffee.”

She dropped the sap and stared at the plank of bark now lying on the ground.

“It’s only big enough for one person.”

There was a moment’s silence while they all looked at the bark imagining surfboards and small yachts, or magic carpets.

“Me first.”

Ralph stripped off his shirt and dragged the bark down the riverbank gouging a damp red line. At the edge he pushed it away and with a yell launched himself after it, landing on his chest and propelling away into the deeper water in the middle of the river.

“I’m going to the other side.”

He kicked his legs sending up great urine coloured waves, but his water-logged craft tipped under him and slowly subsided into the water until it was hanging vertically in the water only a few inches standing above the surface.

Celine and Tex watched from the bank while Tommy threw bits of stick into the water: “Here, grab this”, and then held the leafy end of a long branch out over the water, “I’ll pull you in.”

“I can swim you dick.”

He was trying to drag the waterlogged bark after him but it sank with a sigh leaving a small circle of bubbles and he swam over-arm back to the bank.

“It’s bloody freezing in there as soon as you get out a few feet, like ice under the surface down a few inches.”

Debbie shuddered.

“I’m not going in. What if there’s a bunyip or a boa constrictor down the bottom of the pool. They reckon it’s bottomless – he might be down there just watching your legs splashing away.”

Ralph feigned sick, his face screwed up in disbelief.

“Stupid girl stuff, Debbie. I hope Celine and Tex aren’t going to go dumb and soft on us.”

Though it was Tommy who looked soft, stripping the bark off twigs and throwing it into the water, watching the faint swirls and eddies that came out of nowhere on this windless day.

Paddy was kicking around the undergrowth still massively furious about Tex’s slaughter of his canoe – he had got here early, begged his parents who were delivering the barbecues anyway so didn’t mind too much; had scouted and inspected and finally picked his tree and seen the shape of the canoe emerging from the formless mass. For the others, it might have been just a small part of the day’s plan but for him it was everything. He had imagined the five of them, disappearing like black dots around the long bend of the river, sailing into an unknown world where there might be leopards and scorpions, or at least ravenous dingoes.

Paddy knew his responsibilities, there were so many; he should challenge Ralph to a fight for calling his girlfriend of ten days soft, but it was all true – girls were soft, well, not Tex and Celine but they were still sailing in some

warm primal sea that didn't include women, or babies. Tex was a warrior if she wanted to be and Celine was the fastest runner in the whole school. "We'll make individual canoes – we'll be like a platoon or Mongol hordes or something."

"This is mine."

Tex had already claimed her piece of territory, though it didn't look like much, an outcrop of saplings springing from the base of a long-felled tree.

"I'm going to make a raft."

Debbie relied on Paddy, but the rest of them sprang to – hacking at bark, or pulling over young trees, stitching together sticks and branches.

Sarah appeared in her long dusty skirt, a book in one hand. She didn't care what they were doing and settled on a patch of green under a tree at the top of the rise, not close enough to be of any use or any bother. She didn't read and she didn't watch; her pen hung over the page as if waiting and her gaze was elsewhere, far away from the small pool and the busy activity of ten-year olds determined to make their mark on the world, even if that world was of their own creation.

"We'd better stick together, Tex, otherwise we're goners."

Celine was better at doing than planning, and she couldn't handstand or sprint or high-jump across the river. All she had was a miserable pile of bark and sticks and leaves and a bit of string she had begged off Tommy. Tex looked at Ralph who was shaving long lines of pale bark off his bit of bark with his razor sharp tomahawk and Paddy who was laying out a grid-work of branches into the shape of some grand barque – Tommy was fussing around but he was Ralph's responsibility and would no doubt be promoted to first mate on his ship. Tex ignored her and proceeded with snapping the thin saplings over her knee – she would have a huge bruise tomorrow – and weaving the sisal twine in and out between the branches over and over until

they knitted together and she had some idea of what to place next and where.

“I’m ready.”

Ralph was the first to launch off. He’d made a paddle out of a forked branch lashing a small piece of bark onto the forks with brown string wrapped over and over then around and around. His craft wobbled at every stroke turning back in towards the bank but still he was making progress towards the bend in the river.

“Jump on the other bit Tommy – like a surfboard. Come on, quick.”

Tommy’s skinny legs were blue already from standing thigh deep on the edge; one more step and the muddy bottom of the riverbed slipped away. Tex had her drink bottle filled with green cordial and a plastic lunch box packed with two cream biscuits, and apple and a piece of fruit cake.

“I’m going to swim. I’ll use the raft to keep my things dry and then I’ll have provisions for when we get there.”

Paddy watched as Tex took off her shorts and t-shirt and dumped them on the raft. She plunged in disappearing beneath the oily surface then shot out spouting a stream of water from her mouth. She pushed her craft ahead of her and it glided smoothly, only taking an occasional shove to keep it in the middle of the river away from the slippery snake-headed branches sticking out of the water here and there. The black water hid the great bulk of the fallen trees and their jangled mass of branches below.

Paddy took a deep breath.

“You hop on Dianne. I’m going to make a harness and pull you along like a wagon.”

“Or a coach. You be the slave and I’ll be the queen.”

Celine dived and in a few powerful strokes had caught up to Tex.

“I’ll have some of your cordial when we get there. Hey Tommy, put some muscle into it.”

They had just reached the bend where the slow current was forced between a mass of boulders and branches and debris that had foundered. The water rushed a little faster as Celine gave Tommy's foot a push to propel him ahead. They all knew Tommy was a bit weak and scared, they might have picked on him had Ralph not been his brother. Tommy gave a thin squeal. "Don't Celine, I'll fall in."

One leg came up high as his body tipped, stiff as a board. Tex and Celine laughed – he looked so funny and at this point on the river they were only a couple of metres away from the bank. They'd haul him out if he fell in, tell him to run along the bank and meet them further down. He scrabbled for a moment as if he could back away from the water but then with a sigh he went head first into the water like an arrow, his greeny white toe twitching for a moment just above the surface until that too disappeared.

They waited for him to come up but the water had closed over him, not a ripple or even a faint glow from his white skin. Celine started pawing at the water as if it were something solid she could push away, dig like a hole until she could find him.

"Where is he? Was it here, am I in the right spot?"

Tex took a great gulp of air and duck dived down through the silky layers of water. She may as well have had her eyes shut; there was only a thin refraction of yellow-green light penetrating through the gloom. She came up for air and then with another breath tried to go down feet first so she could feel him, floating like a spider suspended from the bottom. Celine was letting out screams as she splashed around. Ralph came roaring around the corner running along the bank, dodging low hanging branches and calling out:

"Tommy? It's Tommy isn't it? Jesus, he can't bloody swim."

Tex's eyes were blurred as if someone had rubbed Vaseline in them and everything started to sound far away, the water darker and colder with every

dive. A hand pulled on her shoulder and Sarah was floating beside her, her white blouse glowing in the murky water.

“Go back Tex, run up and get George.”

Paddy and Debbie came around the bend, Paddy’s head poking out of the water, Debbie balanced on the web of branches that were easing apart. She seemed to know what had happened by their eyes, or the way their mouths hung open and she started a keening that ended on a strangled scream. Tex was out of the water, Celine hot on her heels. They dragged themselves up the slippery bank grabbing onto the exposed roots of the trees. Celine broke out onto level ground and sped away – she was the fastest runner in the school – and was already calling out.

“Tommy’s in the river. Tommy’s lost in the river.”

By the time Tex got over the rise, the women were already surrounding Tommy’s mum in a circle holding her back, though she looked frozen like the photo of a runner gasping towards the finish line. The men were stripping off their shirts and shouting instructions, but George was already away, his hat – a fancy man’s white boater – flying off his head and sailing past Tex. She followed the hat and George’s shiny black shoes that slid and leapt over the rocks and small bushes. George was ahead, followed by Tex, then the men with bits of rope, the women following in a pack, Celine jumping at their edges with her sharp little story.

The river wasn’t rushing any more or sending up diamonds of shattered light – it was oily and opaque. Debbie and Paddy stood chest deep, Ralph squatted on the bank with his head between his knees and his chest heaving. Sarah’s hair, loosened from her ribbons, floated like a cape as she took another gulp of air and descended. A few bubbles broke the surface – six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

A small blue hand emerged, its finger pointing at the women on the bank, then an arm and then Sarah was there, Tommy over her shoulder, water

streaming from his mouth all down her back. George flung off his jacket – the only man not in a sports shirt and shorts – and waded into the water his eyes fixed on Sarah. They met and the boy was between them. Their arms entwined like a cradle and for a moment their heads bent one towards the other as they gazed deeply at Tommy, who was like a statue in his pale marbled sleep.

After that, it became the four of them: Fay, George, Sarah and, reluctantly, Tess. ‘My four lovely ladies’, he called them, though his eyes drifted away from Tex – ‘she’s springing out all over, isn’t she? Plump in all the wrong places at that age’, and he would look vexed and rub his thumb over Fay’s hands as if to erase the rough pinkness from the hair products that marred her hands. It was for Sarah, now, that he saved his compliments, his stiff gallantries as if she was a regency lass. He loved his Georgette Heyer, though Fay had found *Regency Buck* a little frigid for her liking.

It became a regular weekly event, the dinners in the dining room at the Royal Hotel, the four of them around the stiff white tablecloth, Mrs Barnes, the hotel owner’s wife, donning a starched French apron for the occasion and carefully licking the tip of her pencil as she waited to take their order – chicken parmigiana and chips; steak, salad and chips; roast beef with gravy and vegetables. George would invariably choose the fish of the day or ‘fruits de mer’ as he liked to say, and order a round of shrimp cocktails as entrées. Tex liked the narrow stemmed glasses balanced on the plate and the delicate fork with which to stab the shrimp. She didn’t like the scratchy dress she was forced to wear, and she didn’t like the way Sam watched Sarah or the way Sarah turned under his gaze as if she was a porcelain shepherdess you might keep on a mantelpiece.

Tex liked the hot afternoons; the long walk home from school and then the delicious moistness of Frank's garden where she would invariably find Sarah, her long skirt tucked up, her strong legs and bare feet flexing in the rich earth as she swung the hoe or dug a furrow alongside Frank, the two of them looking like the painting of peasants her teacher had showed them, a masterpiece she said, though Tex couldn't see what was special about ordinary people doing ordinary things like digging and not even looking at the viewer. It was like the artist had stolen that moment from the peasants and she felt that as well, lingering at the edge of the rows of broad beans, Sarah not needing her and all her smiles and her sideways looks for Frank.

Christmas had come and gone. It didn't feel like home even after a week back, Fay's plans to cook a turkey with all the trimmings gone to wrack and ruin. The great bird had taken up all the space in the freezer for weeks and then it was ruined, seething through the house like a slimy breath when they'd unlocked the door after a month away. Grandpa Jim was gone, finally, the stroke that had felled him and left him lying crooked in his bed had waited in his brain and then one night when they were all exhausted from the emotion of it all, the worry and the waiting, it had seized him in a massive embrace. Fay had stayed on, because what was she to do – there was no sign of Sarah even though they'd rung the police station of the small town to where she'd gone and sent a letter to the post office, there'd been nothing, just a silence that was a sonorous absence, under all the arrangements for the funeral and sandwiches and small cakes for after, the cupboards that needed to be cleared and the shed with all his 'projects', a mystery even when he was still alive.

Christmas had been only a pale weak thing in the half-light days of Grandpa's decline and now it was a new year. Sarah had been gone for eight months now; and eventually, even for Tex, it had been a relief when she had slipped away, her bed made up, the mirror naked of the snaking ribbons, the books – their favourite books – waiting on Tex's bed when she arrived home to the house, ticking with its own emptiness.

Tex mooched around the back yard, but there was nothing to do, nothing that caught her fancy – all of the games she'd played before they went to Perth were just broken pieces of a bigger game. School started in two weeks, high school; she needed a uniform, the grey skirt and white shirt and little clip-on navy tie that in her previous life, her younger self, had been a barometer for the days she needed to wait until her story would arrive, be bestowed upon her, with breasts and literature and science laboratories and timetables and great walls of people, strangers, who rushed from class to class, free at last from the one teacher who presided over them with her eagle eye every day year in and year out.

"Tex, I'm over here."

"So what."

"Be like that then. I've got something for you – a letter – it's from your aunty." Tex and Robert didn't play anymore, now he'd got bigger and stronger. He'd taken to tying her up, grabbing her flailing arms, pinning them behind her and wrapping them around and around with the clothesline rope Frank kept in the shed. She couldn't run away because he would be sitting on her legs after having chased her, run her down as he said, like she was cattle. Nina didn't get bigger though; her eyes took up all her dragonfly face as Tex squeezed through the palings.

“Ma said we should give it to your mother, they had a big argument about it, but Pa said it was the least we could do for her and all her troubles.”

Rosa, however, stood at the back door watching and once Robert passed over the letter, she flapped her hands pushing Tex or the letter away.

Tex slid the small white enveloped down her shirt and locked herself in the toilet while Fay clip-clopped back and forth from the bathroom, getting ready for a big date with some widowed farm machinery salesman.

January 7th

Dearest Tessa,

It's been eight months since I last saw your face and I wonder how you are and what your dreams and stories are made of. For the last two months I've been here at Wilson Downs, a huge sheep farm in western N.S.W. I am a Governess to two children – Alice who is eight and Steven who is six. The house is a rambling homestead with wide creeper covered verandahs that keep the house cool and dark. Have you read 'My Brilliant Career' yet? It's in the box of books I left for you. This house is a bit like that of Sybylla's grandmother with a piano in the parlour and landscapes and portraits lining the walls of the hallway. Though no one uses the front of the house or those rooms Mrs McCaffrey keeps it all gleaming. Life here happens in the kitchen and dining room and what used to be the library where we have our lessons and do crafts and Jane, the children's mother, has a desk in there where she does the accounts and ordering and corresponds with her old school friends.

My life is easy here, just what I need; days that follow on one after the other, meals like clockwork, the silence and space. I teach from ten

until twelve and again from two to four. Alice and Stevie are outdoorsy and resent every minute at their lessons, though they are good natured and obedient enough. They are not bookish and don't enjoy my stories so, without you my Tess, I am alone in my own imagination.

But. . . I am writing a book at last! In my next letter I will enclose some of my finished chapters and you can tell me what you think. All of this space and aloneness is good for something at least. Tessa, I would LOVE to get a letter from you, as all else is lost to me.

I received the letter about Dad and his passing away – it was sent on from the Home. Of course I had a few tears and sent a letter to Mum out of mere duty. But, for me, that life and those people – mother, father, sister – are cardboard cutouts and I cut them from my life and my memories when they shut me out of their house and hearts.

Tessa, I had a dear baby boy, did you know? I had him for two hours before he was taken from me. I expected a changeling, a fairy child, but he was a solid little golden prince. He was a surprise only in that first moment because in the next it was like he had always been waiting.

*We will meet again and I enclose a story for you as ever,
Your Loving Aunt Sarah. xxx*

p.s. I have addressed this to Frank and Rosa's house and trust that, if he does nothing else, he will get it to you.

Chapter 8.

Melbourne 1984

Richard was not the lost soul he appeared to be. Though he had only been in Melbourne two months, in that time he had sent his resume to various government departments and applied for grants and done a few readings in local libraries – where he met Sarah. He was doing relief teaching at a tough school in Fitzroy.

Some nights Tess stayed with him in his tiny bed-sit, the futon on the floor strewn with pages and empty bottles that rolled away into corners behind the cardboard boxes from which shirts and jumpers and folders full of classroom assignments spilled. It was a den that suited him, a cave in which he transformed himself from shambling drunken poet to pale shaved teacher in grey suit trousers and white button up shirt.

“Come with me everywhere, Tess, to all the places we can reach in a single lifetime.”

He raked his wet fingers through thick dark hair. It obeyed and sat back over his forehead in a neat wave. The toast popped just as he finished slotting the papers and wallet and car keys into their individual pockets in his briefcase.

“The rest of our life can wait a little while, Tess, but I want you with me on the road, in the van, just you and I.”

Tex, disordered in the sheets, liked to watch his meaningful movements and to balance the careful gravity of his every word and look and caress. She realized that Richard had a steady purpose which even the sodden nights and painful mornings were a part of.

“Sarah wants time with me. It’s been so long and she’s not how I remember her and I was just a kid then.”

This obligation Sarah had put on her: Tex was family and Sarah needed someone to help stitch together the torn pieces of her younger self, as she put it.

“You’ve got time; she’s not going to run away again and you’re an adult, you can choose to do and be whatever you want.”

“I promised, and besides, now’s the time for her to hear my stories as well, Richard, do you understand?”

But being with Richard was necessary, twined around him and breathing into his moist neck. He still panicked at every goodbye. Even a week ago she would have found that creepy, but Tex knew already that he would always be like that and she was calm, as if his fears were so huge and occupied every possible disaster or tragedy that her own darkness was lifted or at least lightened in comparison.

“How much stuff do you need to take Sky? Are you going to take provisions for the house?”

Behind the cab and the front seat the van was an empty drum. Richard’s futon, made up with sheets and a wool blanket, could be rolled up directly behind the seat, his boxes of clothes and books, with the addition of a box with his portable stove and cooking implements, the kerosene lamp and small hatchet, would stack in a row down one wall. Only three could ride in front, so one of them - they’d take it in turns - would need a perch in the back as well as their entire luggage.

“I travel light man, myself, my pack and the gi-i-tar. Though I might get some seeds, plenty of planting to be done, and perhaps some organic flour for baking bread. What do you think, my green-fingered goddess?”

Richard was measuring the vacant space with his eyes.

“Tess and Sarah can bring a bag each – essentials only.”

Sarah was frowning and Richard avoided her gaze. This side of Richard caused a wrinkle in her high pale forehead.

“What sort of place will we find Sky? Will we feel at home, comfortable?”

“He was a man alone. I don’t know, I can’t remember – an armchair I think, a bed, a table, a couple of chairs – there won’t be anything soft or ‘pretty’ if that’s what you mean. Plenty of tools in his old shed though, and plenty of hard work – then you might ‘feel at home’”.

Tex would leave the Duke of York hotel, she hadn’t told them yet and there were plenty of other jobs; she would do the rounds of the cafes when she got back. Sarah had accumulated leave from the library; she was the one always available for evening shifts when others were ill or away. On those long quiet evenings she would rework pages, adding a word or a comma, or scratching out whole paragraphs with notes to herself – ‘No, that’s wrong, she wouldn’t do that’. Sky had no obligations in Melbourne, or perhaps anywhere. Tex had no idea where he’d been before or what he had been doing. He had stories, but they were parables of a sort, not information. Tex had asked him about family, brothers and sisters. He’d replied:

“I’ve got brothers and sisters scattered from here to Katmandu. One lives in a hut on top of a mountain in Queensland, my sister lives with her people in Arnhem Land and I’ve got a brother living rough on the streets in Chicago.”

“Do you stay in contact with them?”

“When I open my eyes in the morning, Tex, I take a deep breath and blow out my consciousness to them, then I breathe in and I taste their life on the air. We’re brothers and sisters because we live with ‘attention’ and ‘intention’. Do you get it? No? You will.”

Peter and Jen, a couple that shared a room at Tex's house, had split up, though neither of them was prepared to give up the cheap rent and proximity to the nightlife and food of Carlton. Peter would move into Tex's room while she was away and pay half of her rent.

"Does that suit you Randall?"

Randall was always cutting leather or hammering it together in the front room, the old shop-front, the door open to the footpath where Italian men on their morning stroll would stop and watch for a time, rocking on their heels, their hands clasped behind their back.

"I'm the rock that you all flow around. You might wear me down just a little but you can't budge me."

"Can I borrow some books?"

"Sure, take a boxful, two, and don't bring them back. Release them into the wilds of outback Australia."

"What would be good for a road trip?"

Randall stopped his hammering and caressed his beard.

"Ah well, but what sort of road trip are we contemplating here young Texie?"

He began to list options on his fingers: "A drug fuelled journey – *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a meditative, mindful trip – *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, another one would be *In Patagonia*."

"They're all a bit boys-own-adventure."

"You want the female experience? Try *Women who run with the Wolves* to uncover your inner dingo or better still *Surfacing*, that book might be an omen of your forthcoming trip with piggish Sky and gloomy Richard."

Randall and Sky had met the night before at Prince's Bar and faced off each other with Sarah fluttering like a candle between them. Richard by that stage

had been literally weeping into his beer and Tex had left him to it, finding Nicholas in the concert room and said a prolonged goodbye to him.

Randall was hammering again.

"I'm going to take that camping stuff to Sarah's so we can sort out what's going to fit in the van."

With a sigh Randall put down his tools and flicked on the kettle on the bench.

"You watch yourself, because I can't see any of that bunch watching out for you Tex. They're all so deep into their own stories you're going to end up being a bit player in their dramas."

Sarah's front door was closed, locked, and the blinds drawn over the windows. Tex made her way down the narrow path that ran between the house and fence. There was no music, though she could hear faint movement, bumpings and low voices, coming through the open kitchen window. She called through a narrow gap in the front window.

"Hello, it's Tex. The front door's locked so I'm coming around the back way."

The gate was blocked by two bins wedged behind and she had to push again and again until they had slid away enough for her to slip through.

Sarah was standing at the back door in a blue cotton slip stretching her arms above her head.

"Sorry, did I wake you?"

A pale shape slipped behind her and into the bathroom, the sound of the shower rushing again the cool silence.

"I'm relaxing Tess, making my day off long and slow."

She pulled Tex into an embrace that smelled of tea and flesh and roses.

"I've left a box of things on the verandah. Some German guy who lived at Randall's left all this camping stuff when he went home."

"A pot of tea and then we'll be practical and make lists. Can you cut some lemongrass Tessa? The secatuers are on the bench."

Michel came out of the bathroom and blinked at Tex. Sarah blew a kiss at his retreating back as he went into his room and closed the door.

“I’ve got Richard’s map. He’s drawn the route we’ll take up to Sky’s town in yellow, and marked the towns he has to go to for workshops and the routes he’ll take are marked in green.”

Tex held up the map but Sarah just shrugged and poured boiling water into the Japanese teapot.

“He’s become ‘masterful’ now that he’s found his muse. Who would have believed that Dicky would prove to be such a man.”

“He wants me to go with him.”

Sarah didn’t turn around but her voice was low.

“And what do you want?”

“I’ll leave with him when he goes to Carey, we’ll have four days and then I’ll catch the bus back up to you and we’ll have the rest of the time.”

“There’s always time, we’ll make the time. You have your romantic holiday and then come back to me with your stories – a woman’s story.”

In the end it was only a small bag of clothes each and between Sarah and Tex they filled a box with crayons, watercolours, paper, beads and string, bits of lace and cotton and embroidery thread – amusements Sarah said. Then there was food; Richard said he could survive on roadside hamburgers then eggs and baked beans once they got there, but Sarah wanted her teas and spices. Sky had been absent for days leading up to their departure, then suddenly he was there in the backyard with an aged blue heeler who grinned at each of them, chased the cat up a tree and then settled to attention at Sky’s feet. Sky was dressed in dun colours with a bushman’s hat pulled over his sprouting hair, as if the bush and the dust had been lying in wait all the time he’d been wearing those pastels and silks that made him look like he might belong with Sarah. Now he looked like an Oliver Mellors to Sarah’s Connie.

They had – Richard had – planned to take three days to get to Willambi; he'd looked at guidebooks and selected two likely places they could pull over and camp. Tex, like a kid, was allowed to sit up front, the big windscreen of the van hanging over the road. With Sky and Sarah together in the back of the van, dozing and whispering, she had two views – the road in front, falling away under the wheels and, in the distance, the road disappearing behind bends or over steep tree-lined hills. The side window was more human – there was an occasional farmer rumbling down rows in his tractor, or a solitary child waiting for the school bus, and great mounds of kangaroo flesh and fur, at least one every kilometre. Although there was space in front for three, in reality the dog, Blue, sat in the middle his attention firmly on the horizon until he would slump heavily onto Tex's shoulder and doze for a hundred kilometers or so.

Richard drove for five hours before he gave up the wheel to Sky. He and Tex climbed into the back and he poured a thin stream of wine from the cask into a tin cup.

"That's Dicky finished for the day", Sarah called from the front.

"Have I done something to piss her off?"

He fell against Tex as the van lurched back onto the road, red wine sloshing down the neck of her shirt.

"Sorry. You're so beautiful and fine and here you are locked up with a bumbling fool."

But in the half darkness his hands weren't desperate or wrong, they knew exactly where to go and it was easy and funny with their tangled clothes and the thrum of the wheels to make a sort of love that didn't need to be finished.

The camping spot was beautiful, a grassy flat beside a small pond lined with thick rushes and paperbarks that hung long tendrils into the black water.

Sarah had marinated tofu in ginger and honey and coriander, sealed it in a

plastic container. Richard would have been happy with a baked bean jaffle cooked on the portable campers stove, then maybe a couple of apples and a chocolate bar. He was tired and just wanted to crawl back into the van, unroll the mattress and watch the sky with Tex from the open door, but Sarah was trailing her long skirts in the dust and picking up small twigs and handfuls of dried grass to start a fire.

“The first night out we must have a fire and stories and good food.”

Richard dragged the heavy canvas tarp out – a regular boy scout Sky said – and slung it over a branch so it formed a crude shelter and with rope and pegs started pinning it down, the loose end tucked in so it formed a floor for Sky and Sarah’s mattress.

“Come on Tex, let’s haul wood.”

Sky still had on his heavy boots and pushed through the long grass that grew in a wide circle around the pool.

“Watch out for snakes there Tex.”

But Blue was patrolling, his nose to the ground and his tail like a banner twitching through the rushes. Sky started hauling on a thick dead branch of a spotted gum, swinging it back and forth so it creaked and bugs rushed out of the cracks and poured onto the ground, pale grubs squirming in on themselves as gum-nuts and debris rained down on his head.

“Give us a hand Tex. Put your weight into it.”

They swung together panting and pushing until with a shriek from the tearing wood and a shout from Sky the branch gave way crashing to the ground, Tex falling into the mess of leaves and ants. Sky was laughing and pulled her until she fell into his arms. He patted and stroked the ants and dust away, managing to give her breast a rub and her nipple a quick pinch before she batted his hand away.

Between them they dragged the branch back to the camp, Blue leaping and biting at the trailing end. Richard was sitting on a log his shirt off, a row of small amber bottles beside him that Sarah picked up one by one shaking a

couple of drops each into her palm. She trailed her hands along his shoulders and then in one strong swoop pushed the heels of her hands from his shoulders down to the top of his jeans. He sighed and drooped forward, “Thanks Sarah, that’s what I needed.”

“No time for soft things yet boyo, get that hatchet out of the back and let’s get to work on this son-of-a-bitch.”

Richard drank wine all through dinner, Sky and Sarah sipped from a bottle of Benedictine.

“Did your father drink a lot?”

Tex wanted to shame him by invoking his father; he’d told her just last week that his father would sip cup after cup of black tea at his desk of an evening, the tea so scaldingly hot he would fan out his top lip to direct a stream of breath and suck at the same time. The adolescent Richard would watch from his spot on the couch, headphones on, with horror and disgust – cup after cup, blow, slurp.

“No, did yours? Did he do anything more than once? Deliver his pack of seed into the belly of your fecund mother, and then die like the spent worm he was?”

He threw his cup in a great spilling arc into the dark and pursued it, stumbling in the undergrowth and reeling around the unlit edge of the camp before falling onto the mattress in the back of the van.

Sky laughed.

“So did you have a father, or did you spring from Mummy’s loins as a little copy?”

“He’s dead, he died.”

“We’re all orphans, fatherless children, except for Richard and he’s an orphan from himself isn’t he Tex, crying out in the night with his bad dreams and holding on too hard to whatever stray affection comes his way.”

Sarah was wrong; Richard was solid, more solid than the rest of them though he escaped himself through poetry and boozing. It was the rest of them that drifted in and out of each other.

“How did dear old Dad die?”

“In a car accident, I was six.”

“Were you in the car?”

“Sarah was. She’s got a scar on her forehead.”

Sky twisted his face into Sarah’s and tried to push her hair back off her face, but she slipped out from under his hand and starting clearing away, swishing the tea-leaves in the pot in great circular motions before dumping the contents on the fire. Thick steam exploded around Sky and Tex’s faces.

“No memories tonight Sky, no stories either Tex. The road is in front of us, yesterday is past, and this place is an arrow to the future.”

She stretched out her hand to Sky.

“Good night Tessa.”

Her father’s voice had been a rumbling deep in his chest. In the evening, in her rumpled pajamas, she liked to curl up in his lap as he sat, in all his resplendent home-from-work glory watching Fay straighten up, in and out of the room, pert and efficient under his gaze. He would have a glass of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, enclosing Tex in the smoky, yeasty smell of him. Fay called questions and gossip over her shoulder and sometimes he would answer, his voice like a bear, or a cave or a volcano. Tex wished Richard drank beer, but it was the sour smell of wine that crept over her as she crawled into the van. He was flung out over the mattress fully dressed and she had to shove and poke him, fling his arm over his chest to make room, a tiny edge of the mattress, for herself.

The night was full of creaks and rustles. She heard one cry from Sarah and two minutes later the flow of Sky’s urine on the front wheel of the van.

Chapter 9.

Tex had imagined something different – a cottage perched on the side of a hill with tumbling wooden sheds and fences enclosing and sheltering; a long view down a valley and up to a high tree-covered hill. The fibro box was just off the highway where semi-trailers roared gaining speed coming out of the small town, though it was barely that; just a service station with dine-in/take-away and harshly lit restrooms, a crumbling colonial era pub entirely clad with Victoria Bitter signs, a tiny Country Women's Association hall, a grain silo which ran the entire length of the settlement and a couple of impermanent looking houses surrounded by car bodies, caravans, superfluous farm machinery and 44-gallon drums.

The house where Sky's father had lived, and died, was apart; sneaking around the bend where the speed limit reverted to 100kmh and travelers might blink off the drab image of the town and its inhabitants.

'Here we are, my father's palace.'

He had driven the last two hours and pulled up to the concrete block that formed a step to the peeling door. The house was plonked down as if dropped off the back of a truck. The windows and door stared blankly out onto the highway, the barbed wire fence a boundary of sorts.

'Have you got a key?'

He didn't look at them, just got out of the car and reached behind the concrete block pulling out a rusty ring with two keys. He put his shoulder against the door, perhaps leaning against his own reluctance, and disappeared inside. They sat and waited. Finally Richard said he would get the kettle on, find a place to nap, as he would need to leave in two hours to make it to Cobram. Tess and Sarah sat in the car, buffeted once by the

rumble of another semi trailer that had picked up speed, straining towards the straight highway ahead. Richard poked his head out the door.

'Kettle's on, grab the tea things would you.'

The walls were bare, apart from a calendar; a red rose in full bloom with a bee at its musky centre, the sheet below showing *November 1982*. A huge wood-grained TV crouched on a milk crate that was half-concealed under a seersucker cloth. One armchair sat directly in front lurching slowly to one side, its back turned on its twin that was pushed to the wall, its seat neatly stacked with newspapers in a column as tall as a seated man. This room, the lounge-room, opened into a dark bedroom with just one window high in the wall, and also directly onto a large kitchen with a row of windows to the enclosed back verandah. The light was filtered and soft and the room was clean and showed signs of life with its battered teapot and jars of tea, coffee, sugar, the fridge humming along.

Richard and Tex bumped against each other; an elbow grazing a head, a cup passed, then nearly dropped. They hadn't learnt how to have conversation or even be in the same room when Sky or Sarah were there. When they were alone, faces so close they each blurred for the other, then they could whisper and feel the breath of their words on the other. There was no double bed in the house; why would an old, fat alco need one, Sky said? Sarah took the single bed in the one bedroom, scented in despair she said, and Sky laid out his foam camping mattress under the rose calendar so he was at the centre of the house's comings and goings. Tex said she would find a spot on the back verandah, a corner where she could look out at the sky but for the moment the van was pulled up adjacent to the front step, the open doors a funnel that pulled Tex and Richard into its dark hollow warmth.

"I'll leave straight after lunch, or by two at the latest."

But he was already gone, flicking through poetry books that he pulled from a box, making sure of his marked excerpts, paragraphs, and the biographical information of famous or forgotten poets. This was the longest they'd spent together and now there were silences, not like the wordlessness in the moment or hour after making love, or even the hidden smiles at Sky's bullshit or Sarah's extravagances. Tex moulded herself against his back as he hunched over his exercise book, slipped a hand into his shirt rubbing the white softness of his belly.

"Don't let any of those bookish girls touch you. I'll mark you with my teeth."
But Richard shrugged her weight off.

"Come on Tex, you're not the clinging vine type. I'll be back in two days."
He was right; it wasn't her style, but love made a fool of her and she wanted to cling, wrap her limbs around him, suck him like an anemone.

There was nowhere in this flimsy box to sit down all together so they stood in the kitchen while Richard stirred a pot of baked beans on the stove. Sarah went back and forth to the truck passing boxes to Tex with instructions – 'bathroom' or 'put on the shelves in the kitchen'. From out of a wooden box she brought jars of herbs and spices and with a sigh of satisfaction she sprinkled some tarragon into the open pot and a generous shake of cumin although Richard grimaced and hunched protectively around the stove. Tex found some bowls with a design of wheat ears around their chipped rims and Richard poured a pool of beans into each. Sarah ignored hers steaming on the bench and continued her zigzagging movements around and through the rooms of the house. She found an old school desk in a dark corner of the lean-to verandah and pulled it around so she could write, she said, in front of the louvred window and look out across stubbled paddocks to the round hills like breasts nestled on the other side.

“Janra is in transition. Her body is moving from pure energy and becoming flesh. First she was all energy and ultimately she will be both – a powerful combination. But what is she in those stages of transition between?”

Richard sat on the back step shoveling the beans into his mouth as if it was fuel. “Blood has to come first, or maybe the brain. Everything we are or can be comes from the grey matter.”

Sky was idling around the tin shed, almost as big as the house, which hunched just behind the two splintered steps and the treacherously uneven slabs at the rear of the house. He was kicking at the mounds of grass that grew fatly between the sheets of tin and the dry earth as if there was some life-giving force just behind the rusty walls.

“You would think that Richard. What about stomach and guts – intestines?”

“Is it possible to have a shower, or even a bath before I go.”

Sky sneered and even Tex smiled to herself at Richard’s transition from punky drunken poet to the respectable vowels and his expectation of clean towels, proper cutlery and manners, above all.

“I suppose you girls want one too? I’ll fire up the old chip heater then.”

This is where the pile of newspapers came in handy and careful piles of kindling – sticks, small chips and wedges of wood.

“You need to watch, because I’m not going to be fidgeting around with this every time you want to perfume your sweet bodies.”

Richard disappeared in a cloud of steam behind the slimy shower curtain as Tex sat on the small stool feeling the air condense around her.

“Can I come in?”

“Almost done, then it’s all yours.”

“No, I meant can I come in with you?”

She saw his white body turn towards her, a white moon on a foggy night.

“I’m not going to see you for two days. I’d almost forgotten. It’s like you travel with me all the time in my head.”

She pulled the shift over her head and laughed at his dripping face, the water running in a small stream off his nose, his serious eyes.

The afternoon ticked hotly away as Tex tried to rest on her make-shift bed constantly getting up to pour yet another glass of water or boil the kettle then forget about it and then boil it again. Time was dripping like thick honey all over them catching them in a stunned waiting. She could glimpse Sky and Sarah through the open door of the bedroom every time she went into the kitchen. Sky lay on his back staring at the ceiling as if it was a starry night while Sarah sat beside him on the bed writing in her notebook, her back to him, his arm slung loosely around her waist as if pinning her there. There was not a sound, not even the scratch of Sarah's pen or the usual whistle of Sky's breath as if it was a storm trying to escape his nose and mouth. Tex felt marooned and although this was a country town like many of the shabby little towns between Perth and Geraldton, she felt a long way from home. She thought about writing a letter to Fay, had just last week got a reply to her previous letter, but didn't know what she could honestly tell her and she didn't have the energy this afternoon to lie. Fay had responded that a poet sounded like a good catch – wine and roses on tap – as if poetry was just a pretty seduction. In fact, the only poem Richard had written for her, or shown her, compared her to the skull and slight bones of a broken bird he had found after a winter storm. Tex had not mentioned Sarah's liaison with Sky. How to explain Sky or make him sound in any way acceptable and, besides, both Sarah and Fay maintained the lie of Sarah as mild-mannered librarian plotting her way between the towers of books then back to her solitary room.

A shadow flickered across the slab of light at the back door and the broad back of a freckled woman stood balanced in the line between the light and the deep shadow of the verandah.

“Hey, Stewie are you there?”

She rubbed one bare foot up the back of her calf, the sole as leathery and grey as a buffalo.

“Hi, is it Sky you’re looking for? I’ll go and get him.”

The woman turned towards where Tex reclined in the half dark.

“Is that what he’s calling himself now.” She gave a snort. “And you’re one of his mates I suppose?”

“It’s you is it sis?”

He was leaning on the doorframe his shirt off, slim and golden, but the resemblance was clear. They cocked their heads to the side, a half-smile, sly or calculating.

“The sprog asleep is it?”

Tex had thought the mound on the woman’s chest was a bag, maybe full of potatoes or turnips because she had the look of a peasant, a woman who could toil from dawn to dusk. A thin pink arm emerged from the folds, the tiny fingers clenching and unclenching as though the baby might be suffocating in the folds of this woman’s flesh.

“I’ll bring the truck around and we can unload the lamb and then you can make me a cup of tea and introduce me to your mates.”

She reached behind and undid a buckle so the baby came tumbling out into her waiting arms, limbs all akimbo and startled.

“Here hold onto him for a bit – his name’s Raphael and mine’s Cass.”

He was dropped into Tex’s lap though he didn’t seem to mind, just gazed at her with pale crossed eyes his lips pursing as though sucking on something bitter.

Tex managed to keep hold of the baby and struggle to her feet against the unaccustomed weight. Sarah was still sitting on the bed but gazing out of the high window at a slab of sky as if something had caught her eye, her pen poised above the page. She turned at Tex's grunt and raised her eyebrow at the thin baby who was nuzzling against Tex's chest and making grizzling noises.

"Sky's nephew it seems - Raphael. Did you know his real name is Stuart?"

Sarah shook her head and smiled.

"Not his real name, his old name Tex. I hope his history here doesn't drag him back to earth."

"So this is where Sky was when he disappeared last week. Did you know he had been here, did you know he had a sister?"

Sarah shrugged and ran a cool finger across the baby's cheek who turned blindly and fastened his strong gums, sucking then whining at the lack of nourishment.

"High hopes calling a baby Raphael, don't you think Tex?"

There was a series of short alert barks and some shouted curses from Sky. The sun was starting to lower behind the hills and Cass was casual seated on the tray of the truck. Sky stood frozen like a patriarchal tribesman, his commanding finger holding Blue frozen in a crouch. As soon as they had arrived that morning Blue had burst from the van and headed out across the paddocks as if there true life awaited him. Maybe the scent of the lamb, some instinct for work, had brought him home again.

"Your charge Blue; you do the job, you watch him properly and you might get a lamb chop in the end."

Sky and Blue's eyes were locked on each other, and even Tex and Sarah could see, or sense, the ripple of muscle up the dog's back as if he might spring and rip the throat out of the little woolly lamb who was tethered and straining at the rope. But that moment passed – Sky knew and Cass knew

because she grunted in satisfaction – and Blue dropped his ears and allowed his tongue to wag from his mouth in friendly defeat.

“Good boy, good old dog.”

Cass was surprisingly agile leaping from the tray to give the dog a rough caress around his thick neck.

“He’ll do you good Stew. He’ll be your good boy now, you wait and see.”

Sarah had hung behind though Tex was already crouched beside the lamb with his funny little furry tail, his little nubs of horns butting into her shoulder.

“I’ll make a pot of chai and then we can all meet properly.”

She had already disappeared but Cass put on a toffy voice and called after her: “And you, obviously, are Sarah, of whom we have heard quite a bit.”

Chapter 10.

“I suppose he told you he was an orphan.”

Sky was out the back constructing a kind of pen for the lamb. Cass laid the baby in the centre of the kitchen table, his head moving like a daisy toward her voice. She took control of the tea things, swirled boiling water in the teapot and flung it out the opened window, clattered teacups, knew exactly where the sugar, teaspoons and strainer were kept. Sarah stood, silent and arms crossed, at the far door.

Tex shrugged.

“He hasn’t told us, or at least me, much at all.”

They both turned to Sarah.

“Family is not such a simple thing for us – Sky, me, people like us – as it is for you Cass. Is it short for Cassandra?”

Cass wiped the question aside as she wiped the stray drops from the kitchen counter.

“Family’s never simple, but it’s still a fact and the fact is:” She counted the facts off on her fingers. “I’m the oldest, then Stuart, Tammy’s been in New Zealand for over ten years, then there was little Robin but he died five years ago. Mum’s remarried and they’ve got a place on the coast at Orbost.”

She took another breath but the kettle started to bubble and scream. Tex settled herself, hip propped on the table, her finger held tightly in Raphael’s little fist.

“What about your Dad, Sky’s Dad?”

“Stewey stayed with him when Mum left. Well, no he didn’t at first, but he didn’t like town, didn’t get on at the new school, so he ran away – back here.”

“How old was he?”

“About eleven. He used to go in the truck with the old man, that’s why he never got much education.”

Tex tried to imagine that little boy; curled up in the cab of a semi watching the horizon unroll, but that little Stuart and this man didn’t seem like the same person.

Sky called in through the window.

“There’s three padlocks”

“But you know where the keys are; where he always kept them.”

Cass went out to the laundry, Tex and Sarah following. The tobacco tin was nailed by its base to a shelf; she gave the lid a couple of turns and the keys fell into her hand. The locks were well oiled as were the bolts so the door swung easily into the half-dark space with shrouded shapes in the middle and, under the window, long benches.

Cass flicked the light switch inside the door.

“Everything’s in good nick. Jason’s been using the saw and the router to finish off the cradle Pop had been making for the baby, but I told him to act respectful like he was watching over his shoulder.”

Sky pulled the heavy tarp off a bench saw.

“The old boy upgraded his stuff since I was last here.”

Cass pointed to a far corner, the darkest.

“That’s where we found him Sky – well, I told you last week – but this is the spot.”

It was a bare bit of concrete floor and Tex imagined him – the old man – splayed out face-first or a chalk outline, one arm and one leg slightly bent as if running away.

“He was in his chair, like he’d just dozed off. We cleaned up after, got rid of the chair of course, and the bottles and stuff.”

Sky walked over and threw his head back as if something might emerge from these dark shadows. He stood like that for a couple of minutes and finally, with a roll of his shoulders, turned to the cardboard boxes on the bench behind. He rifled through quickly as if he knew what he was looking for and emerged with a battered ukulele. He turned and it looked for a minute like he might wield the small instrument like a weapon.

“How about you women do something useful, rustle up some viddles for the man.”

His mouth was ugly and he turned his back on Cass and Tex, but especially Sarah who stood half in and half out the door so that stray bits of her hair flew like banners in the breeze and light from the outside. He brushed past, flicking Sarah hard with his shoulder, heading off to the unknown.

Cass wandered here and there, in and out of the shadows of the shed, picked up a copy of *Siddhartha* pushed away haphazardly onto a shelf. “I remember this phase he went through . . .”, she said with a sigh. “He took it everywhere for a while, but I don’t know if he actually read it. Funny all his talk about India; when he was a kid the Red Indians were the enemy. He was a cowboy deep and true, no questions, no hesitation – quick draw!” Her broad foot stretched out and rubbed the patch of concrete where the absent chair had so recently sat.

“He had the chaps, the vest with silver badges and long tassels. He had his belt and the six-shooter. I took him to the store of a Saturday morning when we got our pocket money – only when Dad was home from a run – and I’d buy glittery rings or penny sticks and spearmint leaves, but Stuart hoarded his money for caps, those red plastic rings of gunpowder. Dad used to sing cowboy songs and play that old ukulele, taught Stuart a few Johnny Cash songs.”

Sarah stepped into the shed. She plucked the copy of *Siddhartha* from Cass’s hand and flicked through the pages at random.

“The hero-figure’s early life is a mass of contradictions.”

It was a treasure-trove for Tex; she hoped that Cass didn't mind or didn't notice as she squirreled herself away with a cardboard box from which the ends of magazines and sheets of paper tantalizingly protruded. She pulled the cuttings out one by one trying to be careful, but eager to uncover the history and secrets of this family, the clues that would allow her to read Sky – the young Stuart that had disappeared down those lonely highways crouched low in the cab, perhaps silent, or perhaps sharing everything, all his stories, with the solid figure of his father, a giant behind the wheel. Tex pulled out a yellow manila envelope with a childish depiction of a bolt of lightning and what, she realized after tipping her head back and forth, was the scrawl of an Indian Chief's head-dress looking more like a turkey. Inside were a few small clippings and a copy of a certified birth certificate: Stuart McMutrie, born at Echuca Regional Hospital on 7th April 1954; Father Robert McMutrie, Truck Driver; Mother Ann McMutrie, nee Watson, Housewife. A clipping all faded and speckled showed a toothy over-excited boy, the close-cropped face probably cut from a wider shot of extended family. The headline with an exclamation mark was simple: Missing! Another clipping, dated after the first, showed a wiry boy his arm grasped around the waist of a casual man, his eyes averted and his hand raised as if he might push the boy away, but perhaps just shy of the camera; the headline in a smaller font announced: 'Boy found.'

Sarah was finished with *Siddhartha* and dropped it on the bench: "It is passion that counts."

Cass was genuinely confused: "Counts for what?"

Sky came back and stayed in the shed for the rest of the day – asked for his dinner to be brought to him – and only emerged to slide under the covers with Sarah who had fallen asleep, *The Four-Chambered Heart* open on her chest. Tex had pattered around the house then settled in the groaning arm-

chair pulling a stack of newspapers onto her lap, flicking quickly through them, pausing to drink in murders, rapes, children drowning, disappearing, falling. She reached to near the bottom of the teetering pile and saw that these yellowing newspapers were over ten years old some of them, the old man obviously replenishing the pile on a weekly basis after he'd finished his reading – catching up on events out there in the big bad world – and always taking the papers from the top to light and fuel the chip heater. And there it was on page twenty six in June 1984, a small report regarding the volunteer efforts; 73 men and mostly-grown boys, fanning out across the rim of hills circling Geraldton to find the small girl lost from her home the past five days.

“Hey sleepyhead, I’ve made tea and toast and fruit.”

Sarah was simple in her cotton nightshirt although her breasts swung and the dark mass of her bush was visible. Sky sat like a lord pushed back from the table a sarong draped across his hips. He pulled Sarah onto his lap and ran his hand up her thigh and under the hem of her nightdress, his lips moist in the golden fuzz of his beard.

“Still a few days before your lord and master returns Tex. How will we keep you occupied?”

“I could explore?”

“Not much to see around Willambi, not within walking distance and we’re stranded without the van.”

“I’ll be with Sarah. That was the whole point of me staying wasn’t it? Only if you can spare her of course.”

He reached for his cup and raised his eyebrow. Sarah roused as if waking from a dream.

“There’s time for everything Tessa. This morning we’ll walk and we’ll chat, go to the shops for flour and eggs, bake cakes and pies; this afternoon though I need to work, to write.”

Sky shrugged Sarah off his lap.

“You can help me set the traps then Tex. They’ll be ready when your old man gets back.”

But the day turned out differently and Tex didn’t need to explore after all.

“Look who’s here with his pen thrust in front of him.”

Richard stood in the block of light at the door. Sky was between them, sitting in the armchair inspecting the newspapers, fingering the torn edges, the absence of stories that Tex had safely stowed, folded into individual squares, at the base of her laundry bag.

“I came back”, he murmured into her hair, “too long, too long”, as he pulled her tighter. Her hand slid on his rumpled shirt as she delved for the muscle and skin under her fingers.

The light had moved, the room was changed when Tex awoke and happily inspected the slight bruising on her arms. Richard and Sarah were sitting on an upturned horse trough facing the hills; a pouch of tobacco and two glasses of the iced tea Sarah had made that morning between them.

“In every group there’s one. You walk in and you think you can pick them – the boy with the black eyebrows or the geeky girl with glasses, but you can’t tell by appearances and the teachers don’t know – the kids themselves don’t know.”

“It’s not the head, the heart or even the soul.”

“It’s something else – you’ve got it, I’ve got it. What would be the same, what could be the thing we share?”

She saw Sarah place her hand on the back of Richard's neck under the heavy fall of his hair.

"Knowing there's something momentous hidden behind words, events, moments – the small details that divide truth from lies; these are the secrets that are the real fabric of every life and the very best writing."

But Tex knew that too. Just last night she had read about the woman who wrapped her dead baby in blankets, tenderly laid it in the pram and spent the afternoon pushing her secret up and down the main street, in and out of the chemist, the supermarket; held on to that story that, for those few hours, lifted her like a balloon above and beyond.

"Ah, my love has arisen."

Tex sat on the grass between his knees while his hand brushed her hair as if she was a cat.

"Like a crushed sunflower." Sarah referred to Tex's yellow gauzy dress that draped to the ground in great billows.

"Or a runny egg-yolk."

Sky carried a metal contraption in each hand, their weight causing his bare arms to pop with muscle all along their length.

"These are for the foxes, but we've got some lighter ones for the frisky little bunnies. Are you coming Richard?"

Sky distributed the traps between two duffel bags while Blue crouched in the long grass waiting for the command.

It was Tex's turn to make dinner although there was still half a pot of macaroni cheese on the stove. Sky had literally dragged Sarah from her desk the previous evening.

"Time for this, time for that – you're full of bulldust Sassy. Didn't your mother teach you anything useful?"

It had been gluggy and tasteless and Sky had disappeared without a word into the night.

Tex sliced onion, celery and diced carrots and potato, tossed chunks of beef in flour.

“Do you want Tarragon or rice vinegar?”

Sarah’s hand fluttered amongst the bottles and jars lined up on the shelf.

“No, I’m doing a traditional stew for our traditional men on this traditional night.”

“You shouldn’t go with him Tessa, even though he thinks it’s what he wants. He’s coming into his manhood now he’s out here alone on the road with his vision and his poems.”

“I won’t interfere Sarah. He likes me near him”. She hesitated, “And I like it too.”

“You unman him.”

She had her back to Tex staring through the window at the darkening paddocks. In the reflection their eyes met, Sarah’s gaze a dark challenge.

“Does Sky ‘unwoman’ you, or ‘unwriter’ you?”

“There’s a part of me – many parts – Sky will never touch. He doesn’t even know they’re there.”

Chapter 11.

“We try and give them a sense of where they are, and where they’ve come from. Someone - I can’t remember who - says literature is a kind of evidence.”

What she must have thought, seeing them straggling from the car park to where she waited inside the main doors, the nine o’clock bell having already gone and her class, twenty children or more, already mutinous about having to sit and listen, politely, to a poet.

Richard bowed. “Richard Connor, and you must be Mrs Temperley.”

He had pulled himself together although the whispered stories of last night still clung to Tex. She saw him: the only child of an accountant father and the mother, romantic and other-worldly, a part-time librarian and always buried in a book. She was happy to leave the preparation of simple dinners, all the petty tasks of running a house, to them. His father called her his faerie queene and Tex guessed that the father loved the mother at the expense of the son. Richard was well brought up and polite as only an unloved child of middle-class parents can be. This story, and others, he wove on the mattress in the back of his van while they traced each other’s contours. ‘What was your mother like?’ and ‘What did you think you might be when you grew up?’

He was tamely led in through the school doors with the right words and responses while Tex trailed behind with a folder full of handouts – quotes from the great – though it was his own poem that he started off with.

The river flows.

Its alien blood

*feeds the crops and cows
that are not kin or kind.
It creeps darkly
Through the secret groves
and cuts mountains to loam.*

*I measure my worth
Against its force
The hidden current
The snags of history
And my pale bravery.*

*I am less
And I dam the river.
It does the work of my kin and kind,
Who spread like a slow flood,
Darkly constant.*

“Where I come from, Tasmania, is very different from here, even though we call it Australia. I wonder what you think about this river I’m describing. How would you describe the river here, the one that feeds your orange trees and crops and gives you the water for your gardens?”

Their faces, those freckled foreheads and ginger eyebrows or the dark eyes and luxuriant hair of the children of the market gardeners, are blank. The Murray River is a slow sweep resting between the banks in this flat land. It appears and disappears in pools and occasionally spreads – a great reflecting plain – surrounding and covering the fences and tracks and sheds. It is never grand or mysterious – it belongs to the parched plains and sky. But this was Tex’s interpretation and the children’s stories of the river were as individual as they were varied.

“We found a roo when the river was dry, what we call dry. It was sticking out of a pool and bits of skin were blowing off its bones like they were wrapped in torn up plastic bags. We went down before sunrise my dad and me and there was a fox. Usually they run away, they’re gone before our headlights hit them, slipping away into the bushes and waiting and then run to their dens when you’re not looking. But it was a hungry season my dad said and she was a bitch . . .”

“A vixen.” Mrs Temperley whispered and her interjection barely interrupted the story.

“A vixen! – and she needed to feed her young. She kept an eye on us, seeing if we were carrying guns maybe, but she kept on ripping at those bits of flesh, gnawing on the backbone until it came away and the skull plopped down into the water and she dived for it and came up with it between her jaws and just trotted away so easy, her tail high.”

“And it sounds like that made you feel happy – what’s your name?”

“Branton.”

“Could you write a poem about that?”

“I told you about it already.” He felt cornered, sitting there in the back row with all the boys. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Then why was he telling the story? He felt the weight of his classmates attention, and his teacher and this poet and the lady sitting in the chair like she was one of the kids.

“Sometimes foxes act like they should and sometimes they don’t. That’s what’s interesting. Like that night when we should have shot her, we had the rifles in the back and all, but we didn’t?”

He crossed his arms across his chest and that-was-that.

“Rivers are life givers or takers, but sometimes, especially when we’re young, they’re just for fun. I’ll read you a little of this poem by Judith Wright, how she loves and observes exactly where she is, and then you can tell me what you think:

*South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite-
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek's leaf-silenced,
willow choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crabapple
branching over and under, blotched with a green lichen;
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter.*

They were stunned; how were you supposed to react to that, poetry had a place and it had nothing to do with day-to-day or even the stories that you had from your dad or your mum or your grandparents though sometimes some of their words would make you realize that things, even the river, were not the same as they'd always been.

They did three schools in that town and spent the night parked by the river. Richard had a hotel room booked in his name but the van was a dark confessional after the fluorescent-lit takeaway in which they had burgers and chips to fuel another night of talk and touch. Cars pulled in and they would freeze at the hiss of tyres on gravel, the sound of breaking bottles and girls screaming as the boys broke out slamming doors and yelling, the pounding of their feet and ragged breath penetrating the shell of the van.

"Why do you think you and Sarah are the same?"

He knew what she meant.

"Words are lies, but beautiful lies, and it's beauty in the end that contains truth, any semblance of evidence of what we really are."

She knew it would never be enough for her.

"What else is the same about you and Sarah?"

"We both love you."

He hadn't said it before.

“Why?”

“Because you complete me. I didn’t think it could be eased, the loneliness of being me.”

“Was it just the right time to find someone? Could it have been anyone?”

“Tess, no.”

There was only one more town and one more school. They were heading back and up; the flatness imperceptibly curving and running away into long slopes. Carey was a wide-street town in the middle of nowhere so it seemed, although from the look of the solid Victorian buildings housing banks and butchers it seemed to know where it had been even if it didn’t know where it was going to. There was a hotel on all four corners of the main street and they liked the look of The Freemasons that had been booked for Richard. It had a shabby, opulent charm in its hushed velvet foyer with the grand staircase leading away and up to a peeling ceiling embossed with plaster curlicues. They were led, however, through swinging glass doors past freezers and laundries, mops and buckets upended, to a sort of courtyard or service area from which two rows of brick and concrete rooms faced each other, a truck and an insulation service vehicle parked in between.

“You’ll be more comfortable here. It’s got the facilities.”

She had the bleached look of the women out here, her wrinkled cleavage pouring out of her singlet top, the sort of woman who could comfortably spend the night in this motel room with its flickering late night TV shows and sachets of coffee whitener, the mysterious burns and grazes on the counter top a testimony to carelessness or passion.

“But what about those rooms upstairs, do you rent them?”

She liked the look of him, Tex could tell, even though he wasn’t muscled or hard.

“Some of the regulars stay up there, they prefer it, but it’s pretty run down – haunted some say.”

“What do you say?”

"I wouldn't go up there by myself, no fear."

"I'd like to have a look. Would you go up there with me?"

Tex stayed in the room, had a shower, unpacked her book and her toothbrush and then stared at the great blank sky outside with its flocks of wheeling galahs. When he returned from his sojourn with the past, or a seductive present and how was Tex to know, he was tired with his thoughts and the associations with the past, and how it might translate or even transform his writing in these foreign lands. Tex had nothing; no newspaper or magazine even. She had brought a Tom Robbins book with her; it didn't matter which one because they were all the same; also *Madame Bovary* to serve a pose that might accustom her to being a muse or, if Richard took notice, might alert him that she knew her potential fate.

"Were there ghosts up there?"

"It was sad. What you'd expect from a single cheap room in some backwater place – the stink of despair and loneliness."

"Sky's dad, and maybe even Sky, would've stayed in places like this when they were out on a run. Can you imagine Sky, the little boy, in one of those rooms?"

Richard laughed.

"I can't imagine Sky anywhere other than where he is right at the moment.

He takes up all the air, burns it up."

"They have a lot of sex."

"He's got to keep on throwing himself into something – everything if he had his way."

The dinner was plain, nutritious at a pinch, and the room didn't allow secrets or poetry, only the mindless hacking of the game show voices on the TV followed by a police drama with dismembered bodies and screaming, crying women and blue jawed men who talked out of the corner of their mouths and

peered out of the corner of their eyes. A beige sort of night Richard said. In the morning he was already awake gazing not at Tex but at the ceiling with its textured whorls and patches of damp. Tex was bleeding, had felt the trickle during the night and clenched her buttocks so she wouldn't stain the sheets, ran to the bathroom where she folded wads of toilet paper as a temporary sort of pad until she could get to the shops. Richard had to be at the school for first class, so she would wander around she said, maybe visit the library, though she knew she would take this opportunity, when he wasn't watching, to buy a cream bun from the bakery she'd spied on the main street and buy a trashy magazine and find somewhere hidden, where she could sink just for half an hour into something simple, something like what she had and Fay had together at the best of times – and how long ago was that?

"I think I'll walk, may as well. Beth, the barmaid, pointed out the school to me when we were upstairs. That's it there."

It was a grand three-storey building with wide verandahs on top of a hill, the only hill, with grassy slopes and gardens holding it in splendid isolation. And he seemed to fit here with his scarf and pale skin, these quiet streets with roses and shade trees, everything waiting in the cool morning. Tex was cold, her brown legs looking dry and flaky under her cotton skirt, her canvas shoes ripped on the side; always impermanent and breaking down or flying apart, that's how she felt today.

"I'll see you back at the room in about two hours."

He squeezed her shoulder but was looking away and up.

Two women were behind the counter of the bakery, mother and daughter she guessed. Despite the comforting yeasty smells wafting and clouding the air, they were coolly unwelcoming of her bare limbs and inadequate shoes. Tex envied their sameness, their brown curly hair curling in the same spot at each temple, their pudgy hands with delicately pointed fingers like tweezers that held the edge of the bun and slid it into the white paper bag.

“Is there a public phone near here?”

“Are you in trouble?”

The younger woman would have liked to hear every single last detail, if nothing else, to confirm her prejudices. But the mother wasn't curious, had seen it all before.

“At the post office. It's got private booths.”

As if any conversation Tex made would invariably involve abandoned children, or drugs.

If she rang now, with the two hour time difference, Fay would be up, flicking on the kettle and gazing out the kitchen window, tapping her lip as if already there were judgments to be made, things to be discarded and found wanting even in the early light of morning.

“Are you reading anything?”

“Colleen McCullough's Roman book, slowly. It doesn't grab me, not like her others. Too much history; she loves the facts, too many of them, and they get in the way of the story. What about you?”

“I need a good murder, but Richard would be shocked. It's not how he sees me or wants to see me. I was reading old newspapers the other day, some of them were really old, and I don't know why he saved those ones – Sky's dad I mean. I found an article about that little girl Didie who disappeared. You remember the little sister of the girl from George's salon?”

There was a silence, a crowded silence. She could imagine Fay's tightened mouth and blinking eyes, but she didn't want to rush in and cover it up. She wanted to know.

“Everything was happening at once then, Tess, and that seemed like the least of my troubles. That sounds awful, but what I mean is, with a family like that it seemed like . . . they might have just mislaid her! Then George took off, and not long after Pop died. I can't remember clearly, Tess, and why do you want to know anyway?”

“Because I don’t have a murder mystery to read, didn’t bring one, and being here with a man I wonder about all those secrets, the ones that lurked at the edge of my lovely, ignorant childhood.”

“Oh Tex! Such bad memories, so many things that went wrong – Pop, and then that little girl Didie disappearing and that poor family never ever knowing.”

“And Sarah. Sarah disappeared too and before that, my Dad disappeared as well.”

The space between them, thousands of kilometers, was vacant. Fay cleared her throat of something, perhaps tears.

“He tried to look after me, and you were his little fluffy angel. It wasn’t his fault Tex. He didn’t mean to leave us. It was an accident.”

Tex was breathing down the phone as if she was a hunter in sight of her quarry. Perhaps Fay could hear her; emotion misinterpreted as always.

“Does he look after you Tex? Hold him close, won’t you, and don’t let him leave you alone out there all by yourself.”

This was the language they shared; the romance books, the happily every after, the *Jane Eyre*, the belief that someone would find and recognize your own paltry uniqueness.

“Sometimes he needs to be alone and then other times he acts as if I’ll slip away when he’s not watching. Then he’s beside me all the time and I feel watched, suffocated, and then all of a sudden something happens and he’s gone again.”

“All men are like that Tex; women are too much for them. Ted, the farmer, is taking me out dancing tonight. He’ll treat me – wine, dine, the whole lot – but then I won’t hear from him until next week; suits me fine. Has to suit me, doesn’t it?”

She didn't want to wait in the room for Richard or even in the dining room with Beth the barmaid going in and out and watching, perhaps sympathetically or more likely gleefully that she had been left alone as well. It was after eleven almost twelve even though he'd said it would only be two hours. Were they giving him tea and scones in the staff room, fawning over him, over his fertile words? She sat in the small garden beside the council chambers, sheltered from the chill breeze by a stone wall that radiated warmth onto her back and arms. She'd bought a *People* magazine, had already read the best articles – 'I Married my Son-in-Law' and 'Amazon Nightmare: Lucky to be Alive' – and was onto the funny things kids said and men said when she saw him standing on the pavement in front of the hotel. He couldn't see her behind the raised garden bed so she watched him looking up and down the street, one hand on his hip as if impatient and then dropping his head as if defeated.

"I'm here." She called out and waved her arm. "I've been waiting here for you."

There was only one other person in the dining room for lunch, a middle-aged man in navy-blue work trousers and work-shirt with an insignia of a major oil company on the pocket.

"It was like being in a room full of young Sarahs; sixteen years old solemn and watchful with their intense green eyes, hoping that maybe here was someone, a man, who'll rescue them from the empty echoing hallways and weave a web of stories around their beauty, their aching un-attainability." Richard wasn't hungry and was merely fooling with a bowl of tomato soup, folding torn pieces of white bread and dunking the ends then leaving the remains on the edge of the plate like bloodied little wads of cotton wool. Tex was hungry, or had thought she was, despite the bottle of ginger beer and gooey cream cake but didn't want the fish and chips anymore, the chips crowding the edges of the huge plate, the grey fish sliding out of its mottled skin of batter.

“Do you think you could pack up, put the stuff in the van – here are the keys – I just want to try and get down some ideas, a new poem.”

She shoved some chips into her mouth, that’s all she wanted really, the salty tang and then the bite of the vinegar; was glad to get back to the room and see her bag and her hairbrush and her towel. In the toilet she saw the small circle of blood on her pants, hadn’t noticed the slow leak of blood, and decided to have a shower knowing that Richard might be an hour or more lost in his words. She left the shower curtain open though splashes and spray swept over the floor soaking the bath mat and watched her long brown arms folding and unfolding over her breasts and belly like a lover, her long straight hair darkening and flattening over her head and shoulders, twin streams of water running into a vee over her mound and between her thighs. She soaped in between her thighs the suds becoming pink, felt the moist warmth and imagined Richard or Sky or any man soaping and squeezing her breasts holding her against the wall sliding into her roughly, her fingers white-hard on his shoulders.

The boom of the water muffled his call but at last she heard the hollow thump of the door and left the shower running to scamper through the room, wet footprints on the carpet, to let him in. He caught her as she turned away and pulled her back against him so she could feel his erection while his fingers rubbed and pulled her nipples. He bent her over and fumbled for a few moments with his zip before forcing her face into the pillow. She could hardly breathe, his hand on her head holding her down, but arched her back so he could go deeper. It was over in a few short thrusts but she didn’t mind, didn’t care that it was the delicate body of a young girl he imagined or that, at that moment, she thought only of Trevor, that boy-man, and the drunken one night stand she’d worked so hard for when she was sixteen.

They had decided after all that it was silly, not necessary, for Richard to drive her all the way back to Willambi eighty or more kilometers out of his way

when the bus went right to the general store and she didn't have much, just a bag, and could walk the short distance to the house arriving unannounced. "Four days, and I'll be there and then we can decide – you stay with Sarah and do your duty, or we can go and be out there Tex and who knows what will happen."

But she knew there would be more silence and the creeping sense of being extra to what he wanted which was, she guessed, the road and his notebook and time most of all.

The only other person at the bus stop was a nondescript woman older than Tex, though not old, neither pretty or un-pretty and dressed for comfort in loose trousers and a zip up windcheater jacket, though the leather boots and discreet silk scarf revealed that on other occasions with her hair loose and bouncy not raked back as it was now, a man – a certain sort of man – would find her attractive. She was married Tex noted, the ring on her finger the only jewelry bar the pearl studs in her ear. Tex wondered if she had children. Where were they? Was she traveling towards them or away? The woman kept her face averted, gazing down the road where the bus must appear soon.

The bus breathed a mindless comfort, the driver polite and formal. Tex had a row of seats to herself, a view calmed by the green tint of the window with the air warmly hissing around the short stiff curtains that she could pull across if she wished and sleep, or pretend to sleep. The high-backed seats protected her from the view of others and them from hers, except for the tightly stockinged knees of a plump old woman who had heaved herself down with a sigh of relief and proceeded to unpack a carry bag onto the vacant seat beside her – a thermos, a book, a *Woman's Day*, a couple of mandarins and a plastic bag through which a square of knitting could be seen rolled around a pair of needles.

Tex's head knocked painfully once against the window and she stared out at flashing mile-posts and green-furred paddocks before drifting into a child's sleep cradled by the piped music and murmur of conversation.

"Willambi coming up Miss."

Chapter 12.

On the verandah of the general store were shadowy figures – a black and white western - but when the bus door hissed open it was Sky slouching against the post flanked by a nervy looking man.

“Howdy.”

He scrunched his eyes like he wanted something, kinship, so she hugged him.

“Did the poet give you days and nights to remember?”

His voice rumbled against her chest like a bear’s, like her father’s.

“We were both in strange country, and we talked a lot at first, told our silly little stories; the ones you tell people to pull them into your history. He might’ve been someone I met a long time ago”.

His arms slackened and he gave her head a little rap.

“Enough about your teenage heart, Tex. What about your head, what strangeness did you let in?”

His arms wheeled as if the strange world should obscure all those familiar stories.

“A couple of towns felt familiar as we drove in but then they weren’t – different brands of biscuits or face creams in the shop windows – different from the west.”

“You from the wild west?”

The gangly stranger’s eyes were a blinded blue, though they raked her up and down as if he could pin something on her if he inspected closely enough.

“This is Jason, Cass’s amour.”

He pulled his hand from pocket; it was fine-boned and turned in hers like a fish, but she wanted Sky with all his airy solidity.

“Where’s Sarah?”

“Visiting her muse or maybe just lying around on her lazy arse.”

“Is everything okay?”

She didn't want to lose this, this sense of Sky as earth, but he had already caught Jason's eye, winked, and noted her long brown legs and confused mouth.

“Go and take a gander at her, you might know. It's all bloody Greek to us, isn't it mate?”

She could feel their eyes on her back and the eyes of the whole town though there was only one sunburned farmer loading bales into his ute. The road curved away at last and she was relieved to be out of sight, with her heavy pack, and the cyclone fences which formed the transient borders of the box houses surrounded by their empty yards. A snarling dog rushed at her, sending up clouds of yellow dust, then stopped short as if pulled up by a chain, freezing into a crouch one paw lifted as if awaiting a command from her or someone who might lurk behind the closed blinds of the house. She tried to see Sky's house as her temporary home, though it held up a blank face all the way along the potholed driveway. But out the back were signs of Sarah - the little lamb bleating and tugging at her rope and two enamel cups rimmed with strong tea stains on a stump pulled up to the half 44-gallon drum. And there was Blue, hopelessly glad to see her, running to her then running away.

Sarah was in the bath; the sun streaming in through the open window found the glinting hairs on her arm and the dark aureoles of her breasts. She watched Tex, a small smile twitching her lips until Tex asked:

“Do you remember that little girl who disappeared – Didie Comley?”

Sarah swung her great rope of hair sending an arc of water across Tex's chest.

“How could I remember Tessa, I wasn't there? I know you were only a child, but you were my confidante, the sister of my heart. And yet, for you, I was

just a gap, a hole in your story. What I remember . . .” She grabbed her hair with two hands and wrung it out. “The world changed for me Tessa; all of the little happenings, mistakes, things done to me finally had meaning – the world was hell and people, everyone including you, were torturers.”

Tex had wanted the truth, but this wasn't a truth that had anything to do with her, or maybe even Sarah, just another story or evasion.

“But you were gone and I was only a child as you said, didn't know anything. Fay acted like nothing had happened and if I said anything, or asked where you were, and where George was, she stopped me, you know how she does – flutters away with her busyness.” Sarah subsided back into the water, sinking under Tex's words. “She tried to keep things the same, but the salon was shut and she still got up every morning and put on her make-up and packed her handbag and . . . I don't know what she did. Mr Comley started drinking again and I would hear them, he and Mrs Comley, at night walking past the house, shouting and falling over and he'd be crying, wailing. I'd lie awake and wait. What for Sarah?” She had slipped under the water, her hair fanning like seaweed. “What happened? Was George the father of your baby?”

But Sarah's ears were stopped up.

Tex sat on the mattress, her back to the curtain that was supposed to screen the sleep-out from the coming and goings of the back door. But the curtain hung drably, the draughty gaps attracting rather than hiding attention. There was nowhere to go. There was fences all along the road so any walk was pacing the perimeter, the dusty shoulder, while the local boys in their utes trailed your step then accelerated away their shouting mouths like dark holes. The yard was a bare square of stubble exposed at the front to the highway and even out the back the endless paddocks stretched away to the hills, a great blank space in between.

She felt Sarah's white shape slide past and then heard the cough and hawk and stamping of Sky and Jason on the back step. The light momentarily darkened.

"Tea, Tex? Do you want a cuppa?"

"Or beer? I've got beer in the truck."

Jason's voice was too close but she didn't turn around.

"I'll come out."

Sky was tinkering at the counter, whistling a song that was barely legible in its few repeated notes but Tex recognized it straight away.

*"Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl,
but she changes from day to day".*

Her voice trailed off but then regained confidence as she imagined the salon, the women perking up under George's voice, his fingers, his attention.

*"I want to tell her that I love her a lot,
But I gotta get a belly full of beer . . ."*

She laughed at the memory and wanted to share those innocent moments.

"George used to sing that – one of his favourites, though he had a few – and every woman in the place thought *they* were the queen or the princess he was singing to."

"Who's George?"

Sky didn't seem to be listening, but Jason was hanging off her every word.

"He was a hairdresser, my mum's boss and sort of her boyfriend as well until Sarah came and things changed . . ."

Her voice died in her throat and she thought again how everything had changed and whose fault it was – George's, or just the moment, or Sarah's? But Sky was listening. She watched his head, like an owl, turn over his shoulder and fix her there, as something to be inspected, turned over and over like a plaything – prey, sustenance, the necessity of his cruelty.

“Her majesty’s a vampire queen, Tex. She’s sucking the life out of you, me, even poor old Jason here. Richard’s the only one she can’t touch, because he’s not really alive either. Did you know that?”

Richard as an undead, a zombie, moving through a foggy world with only his bottle of wine and her arms as anchors, she could see that, but Sarah – did she suck and feed in secret? It all came down to words, the arbitrary naming of things that gave you mastery over them.

“Sky, I just wanted to have a holiday, see some things I hadn’t seen before, spend some time with Sarah and then – go home.”

“Where’s home though Tex?”

The kettle whistled but Sky ignored it. As it started to shriek Tex rushed over, pulled it off and got four cups down.

“Tea? I’m going to sit with Sarah for a while.”

Sarah had all of her notebooks out and laid open on the bed so there was no room for Tex. She put Sarah’s steaming cup on the small bedside table and propped herself against the wall and waited. The rumble of voices in the kitchen receded and then they heard the gunning of the truck’s motor and they were gone. Sarah pointed at one notebook, and then waved her hand like a fan over the rest.

“I’m lost. I’ve been lost for days, trying to find the thread that draws it all together. I walk around in a daze; Lady Macbeth wringing her hands. It drives him crazy, even when I try to explain that it’s not him, it’s not even me – it’s the story.”

“What’s happening?”

Sarah closed her eyes and started to talk, one word falling, just so, after the other.

“She – Janra – is alone now; she’s lost her companions along the way. Brun betrayed her, Chez has a wasting disease and is suspended in a magical web awaiting a cure that Janra must find and now that she is in the walled

land her telepathic powers are blocked, so all of her ancestral voices for the first time in her life are silenced.”

It wasn't what Tex had meant, but Sarah's eyes remained closed and her voice, though low, drowned out everything Tex had wanted to ask.

“How did Brun betray her?”

Tex liked Brun, his silences and sideways eyes. Sarah had given him muscular thighs though, when teased, had insisted that he was how he was, how he existed in the world that her pen and roving imagination had stumbled upon, when it was something and someone else she had been trying to create.

“His loyalties lay elsewhere.”

But Brun had been her slave, literally and metaphorically for the past 40,000 words, - from page one.

“Another woman?”

Sarah grimaced.

“You sound like Fay, even think like her sometimes. Of course not. He has allegiance to his guild even if they sold him into slavery as a child.”

“His guild? You never mentioned it to me. I mean there's been nothing in what you've read me so far.”

“He kept it secret, even from me.”

“Brun's a songspinner.”

“What does that mean?”

“He can call up the past and get it to act for him.”

“Like Janra, calling on the ancestors for guidance?”

“No. Janra can access the Recordia through her ancestors, get all the magic and knowledge of the ages but they, the ancestors, are inert, unable to effect physical change.”

Sarah looked down at Tex who had her head cocked to one side – Tex at six years old, Tex at ten – and she continued.

“What will we do for dinner?”

“They won’t be back until later. They’ll stay at the pub until closing, then sit out the back with more beers until the moon comes up – it’ll be late tonight – and then they’ll take the rifles and head for the hills. That’s how it’s been the last week, since you’ve been gone.”

Tex felt like she’d travelled for thousands of miles, or perhaps slept for a hundred years to awaken to this place, where Sarah was not the heroine of her own story after all, but just a victim of circumstances like the rest of them.

“Cassandra will be here shortly with her mewling babe and fuss around the kitchen, cook greasy eggs on toast for us then fall asleep on the mattress in the lounge room. Sky and Jason will sleep in the back of the truck surrounded by bloody rabbit carcasses.”

Chapter 13.

After those last three private girls' schools Richard was weary of hormones and shadowy cleavages. These seventeen-year-olds would soon be away and were eager to test their seductive skills. Not all the girls of course, but the others - the awkward and lumpy - curled in on themselves.

Once he had returned to Willambi he was distracted by his memories of those girls, transformed by poetry into sirens that lured him with their shy glances and modest petticoats. Tex did a nightly inspection of his notebook while he slept and curled her lip at these simpering lasses. She didn't care as much as she ought, just raised her eyebrow and slapped him hard on the back as if trying to awaken him to where he was. The women, Cass, Sarah and Tex were also curled in on themselves, feeding secretly on the vigor of Jason and Sky. Sky was up at daybreak, up and away, throwing on a shirt as he heard the crunch of Jason's truck over the gravel track rolling down to rest beside the gate that led onto the paddock. Blue was beside them nose to the ground and then they were gone, tracking away to the south with gunny bags and traps slung over their shoulders. Even if he wanted, Richard had no choice but to stay with the men, the silent circling of the women through their morning ritual didn't include or allow him. He slid into bed beside Tex when the moon had passed over the house, inserting his knee between her thighs, blowing his wine breath against her neck.

Tex woke in the still of the deep night and light was leaching through gaps in the door curtain, though the louvres were still dark and the birds silent. She stood in the dark of the verandah and watched Richard and Sarah at the kitchen table, their heads bent towards each other, the naked bulb illuminating the rhythm of their moving hands. Sarah worked in a large journal with a fountain pen, the nib scratching like a whisper over the page

while Richard grasped a stub of pencil, rushing over his tiny notebook, flicking the pages over as if every moment conquered the last.

Tex heard the stab of Richard's pencil punctuate the silence and he leaned back in his chair with a frustrated sigh watching Sarah's head move slightly to an unheard beat.

"Can I read it to you?"

It was just a murmur but it startled Tex, though Sarah's hand continued to move until she was ready to stop.

"Surely."

The skin, this road, is ragged

With procession.

The deep kisses of sadness

From that place to this

Where you wait

Untouched.

Flesh, that road, is withered

Like a sail

Pushing . . .

"The flesh or the road is like a sail?"

Their faces were pure and blank. Tex waited for Richard to spring up in defense of his words, but he smiled.

"Both. Flesh fills up with thought, pushes you hither and thither. And the road is a mysterious future that your past pushes you towards."

"That may be true but I'm stopped by that metaphor, do you understand?"

Your words flow on without me."

At breakfast neither Richard nor Sarah said anything about their nighttime writing session. They all moved quietly, efficiently; Sarah buttering toast, Sky passing cups of tea, Richard stacking away the dishes while Cass sat, her feet squarely planted, the baby half obscured in folds of flesh and clothes, his tiny fist waving like a flag. When they were full of tea and toast, satisfied and restful, Sky stood and held out his arms as if to embrace them all.

"Today's the day, my brethren, my flock. We'll ascend to the heights, scale the great peak and bring home a sacrifice worthy of the Lord."

Cass opened her mouth but Sky pushed on. "Or at least a bunny skin to wrap the baby bunting in. We laid traps last night and were getting ready to come down when we saw her . . ."

"A big sow, with her teats all full and swinging." Jason was almost choking on his excitement. "She was trying to lead us away from her litter.

Somewhere in that gully they must be, where all those low bushes fill up the ground."

"The ladies are invited to picnic, while the men go hunting."

"Why?"

Sarah was like a statue though her eyes flicked around the room resting on anything other than him.

"Because she's feral, sly and deadly."

There was just time, a short time, for Tex and Richard to talk, whisper, with the doona mounded over them like a third body.

"You've seen how they're circling around each other. Well, Sky's circling and Sarah's . . . watching him out of the corner of her eye. What's going to happen once we go?"

"Go?"

"When we leave on Wednesday. You have to get back and I start at the new café next week."

"I don't have to hurry back. I can write here. Something else emerges in this place, this time. I'm getting different words."

“But what about Sky and Sarah, the atmosphere? Isn't it poisoning you?”

“Things change Tess. Time's like a road, and we either move with it or we're lost; lost in the dust of what has rushed away from us.”

“You sound like Sarah.”

Then he was gone, slipping away as easily as smoke. She pulled out the notebook hidden under his pillow.

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These three women, the Fates, the Maenads? And Sky like a goat-footed Pan and Sarah like a Diana, daring invasion and conquest. Her arrows are her words and she has other potencies – the power to madden men.

They made a half-hearted effort towards the picnic; hard-boiled eggs and a tin of beetroot. Cass washed out two empty baked bean tins that she said could be thrown in the campfire stuffed with damper dough. They packed picnic blankets, cups and bowls, a saucepan for chai, powdered milk and sugar. They could only drive halfway, bouncing over the deep ruts, groaning up the steep incline. They left the truck, a couple of rocks wedged behind the back wheels, and walked in a single file along a kangaroo track through the head high shrubs that clutched and whipped at their heads and shoulders. Cass had the baby tied to her front in a long twist of fabric, the saucepan and tin cups tied with string jangling across her back with every step.

The men loped ahead crouching and dodging while Sarah, red in the face, her hair escaping stickily around her neck, kept her head down stepping carefully over the stony ground. Tex would have liked to stop right there, duck behind a sun-warmed boulder with her bag of oranges and container of water and wait out the day. Behind her the valley opened up, the highway snaking around hills and disappearing over the horizon.

There was a last steep scramble and they were up and over. A gentle incline fell onto a bowl of grass with stands of trees dotted around rocky outcrops; a different country, the birds softer and more tuneful than the great cawing crows and diving magpies they'd left behind. A small creek burbled across a natural amphitheatre forming a shallow clear pool to which Cass led them.

Sarah made a bower, laying out sarongs on the thick yellow grass and Cass tied the baby's sling to a low branch, rocking it gently until he was asleep at last. The men were already gone, silhouettes on the low ridge, a distant whoop of delight from Jason and a prolonged barking from Blue that receded on the breeze.

"I'll make tea, but we need a fire, so go get some wood and kindling Tex. Get the stones by the river, the grey round ones, to make the fireplace."

"Aye, aye Sir."

Cass winked and took the skin bag that hung around her neck and unwound the piece of leather thong that kept it tightly closed. She made clucking noises for Sarah and Tex to get on. Another yell from the one of the men drifted over the hill. Sarah grimaced.

"Sky would like me to be a native Indian woman, sitting at his feet, awaiting his command. Next thing I know, he'll be expecting me to chew a hide to make a penis sack for him."

Dark red clay lined the creek; Sarah daubed a little on her arm and then traced a spiral on Tex's hand, but it looked like a wound and Tex washed it off in the surprisingly cold water. Tex gathered the rounded grey stones in her skirt and dropped them in a pile at Cass's feet.

"Is that enough?"

"It'll do. Hurry and get the wood; I have a special treat just for us gals."

Tex snapped the thin branches across her shin into uniform length, arranging them in a neat pile and broke up the remaining twiggy ends of the

branches into another pile. She collected the dry fuzz of yellow weeds and pulled this out of her pocket. Cass ground seeds on a flat rock with one of the round stones. She took stalks from her bag and ground them as well. Her shoulder muscles rippled like snakes.

“Are we going to drink that?”

“This is for the smoke we’ll have after the tea. Light the fire Sarah. I see you can handle some things when the men aren’t around.”

“There are lots of things I know how to do Cass.”

“Then why do you act like a film star?”

Sarah arranged the wood log-cabin style, with a thatch of twigs on top and dried grass poked into the gaps at the base and lit the match. She squatted back on her haunches and eyed Cass.

“I didn’t want to come. It’s Sky’s trip, a boy’s game to impress the women, or maybe scare them into submission.”

“But I’m not a boy, and I’m not playing a game. What do you think of me?”

“You work too hard, you do most of the hard work while Sky and Jason swan around like kings of the land. Is this how you imagined your life, Cass, in the middle of nowhere with a baby and no washing machine and no female company?”

“Well, you’re here now and so I’ve got my own little circle of witches.”

She swung down to the creek and scooped pure, clear water into a pot and put a black chewy looking substance into the pan and balanced it carefully on the fire.

“This will simmer for a bit, not too strong, maybe ten minutes. Come for a walk Sarah while Tex watches the baby, hmm?”

Tex dreaded the baby waking – what would she do with his grizzles and his eyes and his little mouth trying to shape speech – so sat in an anxiety gently rocking the branch, hoping her thoughts were not communicated in the thin air to his animal brain.

Small movements in the undergrowth near the river, rustling, or was the sound coming from over the hill – giants striding across the valley using the trees as their spears? Steam came off the top of the pan and a few bubbles. Tex scraped the embers to one side and with a couple of sticks manoeuvred the pan to the side so it didn't boil too furiously. From the main mass small bits broke off and swirled in the water, which was becoming milky grey and slightly thick like jelly. With a light branch Tex fashioned a small broom and swept and raked the area around the makeshift fireplace. She rearranged the rugs until they formed a circle and hung cups, bags and hats from the encircling branches of the tree until she had formed a wall of familiar objects. She would fashion a temporary mattress, gather the soft fuzz of autumn harvest, while away the afternoon in her little nest.

“He's done shit – all over himself.”

He was awake, eyes crossed concentrating on his bowels. Cass scooped him from the papoose, a thin yellow mess down his legs, dripping from his rough red balls. The smell was sweet though, like milk and dates and rice.

“A patch of sun for my little man.”

He kicked his legs in rhythm to the movement of the light and leaves, pumping his hands as if he could box the breeze and the sky.

“It's ready. Are you ready?”

Cass strained the brew through a square of muslin into three tin mugs.

“What is it?”

“My secret; a little magic”.

It tasted like the bottom of a pond, rich and rank, but alluring in a mossy, froggy way. In the bottom of the cups after they've drunk was a residue like tar – Cass tells them to chew on this, the ‘best bit’.

“Lie down now.”

She patted the rug and Sarah and Tex subside beside her. Tex smells the slight oiliness of her scalp and see deeply into the complex whorl of her ear. “You’re always reading Sarah, reading for escape and writing for escape. Now it’s time to be here.”

Tex’s breath is like a fire, roaring through her chest. She watches Sarah’s profile, one dark hair curling from her chin. With a great effort she lifts her hand, watching the blood rushing through the veins and capillaries, and lets it drop on her chest where it sits like an anchor. She feels her legs drop deeper and deeper into the earth where small things scurry. It is right that she is half dug into the ground – her eyes belong to the sky and her blood to the earth.

“Are you heavy?”

Cass straddles Tex’s legs and her thumbs press deep into the small cavity where her shoulders connect to her arms. It is like a trigger, and Tex floats free. The three of them start laughing – the baby laughs too – and they are in the creek, the coldness whistling down the bones, washing them away until the women are just the murmur and the movement of flow. The water saturates Tex’s skin, works it way through her gut, lungs, and spine and erupts as points of light from every pore. Cass is beautiful, glowing like a moon, a fire, a tree. Sarah is a shadow on the water, wading ankle deep away from them against the thin current, searching for the source.

Tex is washed up. “Is it over?”

Cass is silent, her profile etched against the horizon, watching the distant figure of Sarah, a speck pulling itself up and over the giant boulders and disappearing into a cleft in the land.

“You city girls are always in a hurry to be finished and move onto the next thing.”

The fire is almost out and Cass crouched low to breathe some life back into it. Tex felt drained, as if all need and motivation had flowed away down the small river leaving her bereft. The baby was asleep, but Cass was alert, too alert, her eyes darting from side to side.

“We won’t wait for them. I want to get back.”

She is clumsy; breathing raggedly as she drags the limp baby onto her back, kicks sand over the ashes and scatters the rocks. As Tex tries to stand her body lists to one side and she giggles at the circle of objects arranged around the camp like a teddy bears picnic.

“Hurry with that, pack it in the string bags. I’ll start to walk while he’s still asleep.”

Tex is parched, rattling like an empty gourd, as she bends her face into the clear cold water of the creek and opens her eyes. The shifting sand of the creek bed is a roaring universe red with the pulse of her blood that is draining like a wound.

They are silhouetted on the hill, lean and black against the horizon, rifles on their shoulders or is it spears? Tex drew her sarong up and wiped the water, which had congealed in dusty droplets, off her neck and chest and arms. She’s aware of the sudden taut attention of the two men, even at this distance. When she turns away there is a whoop, a primal cry, and they course down the grassy slope to arrive, blood-smeared, in front of her.

“Are you hurt? Where are your clothes?”

Sky extends one bloody finger and runs a line from the hollow of her throat to where her hands are clasping the wet rag against her chest.

“I’m not your mumma pig, piss off.”

“Come on darling, we’ve done the hunting, now we’re after a little bunting. Where’s Cass?”

“She’s started walking back. I’m going too.”

“She must’ve heard us coming – the mighty warriors.”

He thumped a hard fist into his chest and pushed her, just hard enough so she lost her balance and in a sudden move hooked his ankle around the back of her knee and fell on top of her so the wind was knocked out of her chest and she could only stare at Jason's back as he turned towards the track and Cass. She felt Sky's penis hard against her thigh.

His hands grasped her hips and he was gasping and pushing. A line of drool slipped in a long stream from his mouth onto her breast as she felt him jerk and momentarily slump, before leaping off her to sit in the flow of the creek, defeated.

"Happy?"

Tex pulled her shirt over her wet muddy chest and retied the sarong around her waist, sat on the grainy beach beside him nudging his shin with her toe.

"You're an idiot Sky."

He mumbled and dropped his head.

"What, I can't hear you? Was that an apology? Look, we're all wasted Sky; I just want to finish the adventure, get back to the house and pack and get out of here. You and Sarah can sort stuff out or she can come back with us if she wants."

This was how she could patch it up, patch a normal moment over the ragged edges of the last week, sew herself back into the life she imagined – Richard, work, the cold little flat.

"They're together."

He looked her straight in the face, his eyes wrinkled against the sun behind her back, trying to penetrate the glare and get through to her, really through to her.

"Up there."

He swung his head and she followed the direction, seeing the tumble of massive boulders, the shadowy clefts and footholds, the thin trail she could just make out.

"What happened?"

“We went down into the canyon where we laid the traps yesterday. It was completely still, not a bird or a lizard anywhere. The sow was watching I reckon, cunning and old, knowing what we’d come for. There was a rabbit in one of the traps, pulverized through the middle, and Jason wanted the paws to make a purse for Cass – a good luck charm.”

Tex could imagine Jason’s nervous skinniness and the bowie knife that he kept clipped in its holster to his belt.

“Old Richard got squeamish at that point, said he’d had enough, he was getting hot and wanted to find a quiet spot.”

“What happened then?”

She felt like a mother, could imagine herself standing over him, arms crossed and tapping her foot. It was all Sky’s fault; all of it had been, all along, ever since he came into their lives. He shivered, the cold water streaming over his thighs, his shriveled penis wafting in the flow.

“Jason had some of Cass’s magic potion, said we could snort it, I told Richard to wait, that the drugs would bring him closer, let him write something true for once instead of roses and june and moons and . . . all those fucking white lies he uses, she uses too.”

“And then?”

If she could follow the story correctly she could find Richard, could track him down, rescue him.

“The universe exploded in our heads; each of us was the universe with every planet, solar system, black hole whirling around in our blood. I could watch Richard, knew it was him, and he was a speck at first, then he got closer – I was a big green and blue planet, could feel my gravity, the poles shifting and sliding, and I was the master of our cosmic destiny. Do you understand Tex?”

Two worlds colliding. She nodded.

“He was a rogue, a comet spinning in from the furthest reaches of space, but I remembered from a million trillion years before when he last came

swinging by and all my little creations – the birds, and dragonflies – were destroyed.”

“What happened?”

He started shaking, with laughter she realized.

“We had a boyish scuffle in the dirt. Jason said I threw myself on him like I was trying to ride a wild horse – that’s what you do with comets hey Tex? Jason had to break it up; I was pounding his head on the ground it seems. He wasn’t too happy.”

She couldn’t help it, it bubbled out of her too, the image of Sky riding Richard. Lord and master taming the wild beast.

“Shall we go find them?”

Despite the clarity of the air and her thoughts, they stumbled and held onto each other’s shoulders. The grassy plateau seemed to stretch to infinity, the bouldered hills a mirage, some Shangri-la. The sun that had warmed their shoulders when they first started walking was no longer on their faces and now it was chill with long shadows looming.

“Why don’t they come down? They should know that it’s getting late. Maybe they’re lost, maybe they’re not together at all and both of them are lost, wandering around these tunnels – like Miranda.”

“Miranda? Is that some Greek Goddess, one of those who lusted after humans? Sarah would fancy herself as a goddess, bestow the gift of her cunt on mere mortal Richard, hey, don’t you think Tex?”

She drew away from him, put on a spurt of speed and dodged between the maze of walls, her footfall silent on the powdery dirt. Sky was running now too – she could hear the stamp of his feet and the rasping of his breath – but she took a fork and clambered hand over hand upwards towards the rim of orange sky.

“Cooo-eeee!”

Cass's cry was distant and Jason's response nearer. Tex didn't respond, felt herself like that mother pig, furtive and darting away. She couldn't hear Sky now, though she imagined his breath on the back of her neck. It was the wind, the breeze that blew across the land as if the sun exhaled once in defeat before falling. She heard a gentle moan and was scared; everything was present now – the bogeyman, the beast with tusks, the end of the world.

She clambered up to her feet – she was standing on the rim, the whole world stretched out below her though, for a moment, nothing that she saw made sense. On a grassy ledge beside a steep drop, a tangle of arms, legs – Richard's pale back burrowing into the enfolding arms of Sarah. A flicker of movement; she saw Sky, the last rays of sun catching his hair in a fiery halo, striding across, Richard's head turning, his mouth a long cry of defeat and Jason was there too, skirting the outer edge of the whole scene, while Sarah looked straight up and, even at this distance, her eyes caught Tex and her mouth moved in words that Tex could not hear, would not listen to even if she could.

Tex had found the job at the roadhouse three days after leaving Willambi – flagging down the huge semitrailer before it had picked up speed, getting off in some forgotten town, finding the caravan park with the on-site vans dumped in cleared spaces by the riverbank, lying on the narrow bunk for a day, before she roused herself to walk into town, to the job agency that matched the desperate to the unlikely. She had arrived on a Trans-Australia coach and was now stranded somewhere in the middle between home and there – not sure if she was running to or from, so had paused; one of the people wrecks – the burned out truckies, the battered wives, the Goth girls with scars on their wrists – that populated this in-between outpost.

That night she had run all the way back to the house, Blue hot on her heels, dodging the restraining branches that clawed at her shoulders, slipping and sliding over the scree of stones, passing the truck and continuing on down through the paddocks. She threw her stuff into a bag and stood, panting, on the silent highway. For Tex now, here, that following hour waiting on the road outside the house in Willambi was a hallucination that came back again and again, as she was chopping up mounds of onions in the roadhouse kitchen, or twitching the soiled sheets off a lonely motel bed. She remembered the truck careering, lights blazing, down the track through the paddock, through the open gate to where she stood, the headlights catching her in the glare. She couldn't make sense of the scene – Jason at the wheel, Richard in the passenger seat clasping the wailing Raphael to his chest. In the back, Cass and Sarah crouched over a form that lay still and bloody on a pile of gunny bags – Sky. Blue, who had been waiting sentinel at her feet, leapt onto the tray and whimpered and clawed at Sky's feet. Cass was cursing Blue, Jason, anyone, to get a move on, get to the hospital – now! Richard was grappling with the door, trying to shove the baby across to Jason, calling out to her – Tess, don't go. Wait for me, I'll be back. And through it all, Sarah; head bowed, her hand on Sky's bloody forehead, a Mary Magdalene.

Tex had finished her shift, dispensing weak coffee to travellers blasted by the distance, stumbling across the sun-bleached forecourt to the soft hiss of the air-conditioned door where she stood, completely disinterested, at the counter. After lying on her bed she had wandered out to the bowlers hoping to catch Brian, cadge a smoke off him. Kerry was looming with her cat eyes at the plate glass window. A sudden gust of wind threw a shower of pebbles and grit against the reflecting surface. Tess shouted against the roar of the wind.

“I'm going to Petrol Mountain.”

Kerry peered around the doorway.

“You shouldn’t go alone.”

Tess shrugged. It was not as if Kerry was going to leave the shade and safety of the roadhouse.

“I’ll take a book and then I won’t be alone.”

Kerry’s round eyes filled with tears. Why did she attract people who needed her more than she wanted them? Except for Richard; that had been the other way around and was she supposed to learn a lesson from that? A broken heart, take her down a peg or two. But it hadn’t taken her down; it had released her so she floated away.

“Can I have it after you’ve finished?”

“I don’t know if you’d be up for it - it’s huge - besides I’ve already said Joanne can borrow it.”

“I loved reading when I was a kid. Well, I loved my Dad reading to me at night and I would pretend I was Bessie from that book about the tree with all the pixies and stuff living in it.”

“*The Magic Faraway Tree*. It seems Enid Blyton abused her children, she was a terrible mother.”

Tess wouldn’t allow Kerry any illusions; wanted to destroy all the false comfort even reading could bring.

Petrol Mountain was visible from the road; a short walk you thought to yourself the first time. The land was so flat you could see all the way to the curve of the horizon. Petrol Mountain was a crazy pinnacle of wrecked cars, a graveyard of forgotten commodores and kombis and unrecognizable rusty frames and chassis creeping off into oblivion – a monument to the unrelenting thousands of kilometers of nothingness – but at least it was a feature, a destination. The car bodies created a kind of microclimate, pools of shade and nooks and crannies that plants clung to and animals sheltered in. Tess wouldn’t climb into any of the cars not after she’d seen a brown snake uncurl himself from under one of the seats and slide out an empty window. She had a favourite spot under the hanging ledge of an old pick up

truck perched atop a huge flat rock. With the sun-warmed rock as backrest and the car as an umbrella she had a view away from the roadhouse with only miles of rippling dirt and spinifex between her and the sky.

Kerry would like *The Thorn Birds* for all the wrong reasons, get sucked into the romance, believe in Father Ralph's kindness and his battle with his soul against the delicious vulnerability of Meg. He was a despoiler this Ralph de-bloody Bricassart, his eye on the main chance, his overweening ambitions. He was like Angel and did Thomas Hardy expect you to like him or despise him? At school she had asked her teacher, Mrs McDonald, but she just threw it back onto Tess and said that the answer was in the text – but where?

"I may as well just bugger off."

"Why don't you? You can take me with you."

Brian was hanging like a comma on the step to his donga, scuffing the fine powdery dust and sending up clouds that settled over her feet. She was on her way to the ablutions, her formerly white towel a delicate pink from the invasive bulldust that crept and penetrated everything.

"What about Lorraine? I don't want to go without her."

Tess thought that he should have considered that before he fucked Kerry on the mattress in the back of his van. And there was Lorraine with her cronies, Joanne and old Marge, eyeing her and Brian from the door of the shower block. Tess didn't want to be seen to be consorting with the enemy so gave Brian a kick in the shin, told him to buck up, and followed the women into the comparative coolness of the communal change room.

Lorraine was like an oversize kewpie doll, all rolls and dimples and curly hair and little pouty mouth.

“Watcha wanta talk to ‘im for?”

The Geordie accent from the pink lips was incongruous but Lorraine was a tough little shit and Tex knew she had to be careful, go along with Lorraine’s drama.

“He’s broken-hearted Lorraine. He adores you.”

“He shouldn’t have done the dirty on me then and especially not with that scrag.”

“She’s been after him, all girly and touchy, ever since she got here. He was really drunk that night, you remember, we all were. He said he can’t even remember.”

Marge nodded her head, her cheek pouches bouncing up and down.

“Men can’t help themselves – it wasn’t his fault – it was that bloody Kerry you should be angry with.”

“Don’t let him off the hook too easily Lorraine. If he’s done it once, he’ll do it again.”

It was obviously the wrong response. Lorraine turned her round brown eyes and scanned Joanne’s boxlike body from head to foot.

“And what would you know about men? It’s not always like in books, Joanne, this is real life!”

Disappointed and defeated before we even start? Or without a plot? Or not even the main character in your own story?

Chapter 14.

Perth 2005

Simon tracked her down; perhaps Fay had told him where she worked. Sarah had inveigled her way back into Fay's life and now letters and phone calls were rushing back and forth across the country like telegraph lines linking their old life to the new, whatever that may be. He'd found out where her office was, the days she was there and, warned by Sarah he said, hadn't rung just fronted up.

"He insisted", Margaret said later. "Said it was a surprise, the nephew you hadn't seen for so long. I didn't even know you had a sister."

"I don't. She's my aunt, my mother's younger sister. He's only a cousin, if even that, being adopted and all."

Over coffee in the café that overlooked the working port, the massive red cranes delicately lifting steel shipping containers, Tex gave Margaret a few details, the ones she rehearsed to the world: Sarah's illicit and hidden pregnancy and Simon's adoption, estrangement from the extended family – it was a common enough story except, of course, Margaret with her brimming eager eyes was reading more or maybe less into it. Margaret had given up a baby for adoption when she was sixteen and had neither married or had more children.

"It's a gift Tex and you've got to grab it before it slips away. Go to Sarah and let the healing begin so you can share a future together as a family."

As if these words, little puffs of air, could knit together the past with a future that they could bear to even contemplate.

She'd been at her desk, deeply inside an online catalogue of artifacts associated with the age of steamship travel, and then perusing the copies of photos she had of a ship that sank off the coast in 1865. He loomed over her desk, and she didn't recognize him at first, thought that he may be the graphic designer who had been contracted to design the brochure.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You're Tex one minute, then sweet Tessa the next. I think you're a bitch."

She wasn't going to let him see she was intimidated, this little prince, this golden boy, this stealer of her childhood.

"Nice to see you again too Simon."

"She's waiting for a letter from you. She's been waiting, how long now? Twenty years!"

"Things aren't quite what Sarah has told you, Simon, I'm sure of that."

"It doesn't matter what happened, don't you see? We need to sort this stuff out because of the now. You need to come to Melbourne and face the music once and for all. Something has to be done about this Sky/Stuart character."

They would fly to Melbourne on Monday, to meet Sarah, have a good old cry Fay said about all those wasted years. For Tex they hadn't been wasted; every year was a step away from the muddy confusion of her girlhood into the clear, calm and singular life she made day by day. Even the affairs, those sweaty men she met at conferences, were part of her insistence on her own secrets.

Fay had a week off from the Salon and Tex had arranged to borrow a laptop from her manager on the agreement that she would meet her deadline for the printer. It was an educational package on the Batavia mutiny – a combination of forensic archeological facts balanced against the need for a story, a story that involved real people, not to mention blood, torture and treachery. Tex was allowed in this matter a small flight of fantasy Margaret said; perhaps tell it from the perspective of one of the shipboard children,

one that the visiting school children could relate to. Tex, however, felt scared of betraying those lonely skeletons under the sand, afraid that her make-believe would obscure the truth. The best she could do was gather the bits and pieces of the scanty facts, paste them together so they resembled a narrative that proved the eventual fate of those children, lost to history.

Simon would catch a flight on Wednesday, couldn't get away sooner and Tex was relieved. Fay treated him like a grandson, patting his strong shoulder, hanging off his litany of accomplishments and ambitions as if his golden future might secure her own. Tex had first met him at a stiff afternoon tea at Fay's house. She was surprised by his tall bloneness and his confidence, where she had imagined a waif. Fay said he had been fortunate; adopted into a wealthy family in one of the better beachside suburbs. He was already there when Tex arrived, seated at the table smiling and complimenting Fay, though when her back was turned to attend to the tea things he gave Tex a look of such hostility she was at first shocked, then vindicated in her immediate dislike and bristling contempt of him.

"Who's your father?"

"None of your bloody business."

Fay had shushed Tex, smoothed Simon and the afternoon was not declared a success.

To Tex he resembled no one, or perhaps Brun from Sarah's first book. He, Brun, had come back into the fold, rededicated himself to Andra in subsequent books, but in Tex's mind he remained an accuser, a betrayer. Tex, of course, had asked Fay.

"I don't know."

"Was it George?"

"I don't know. Who else could it be though? Maybe that's why he scarpered." Simon didn't look like George and his small neatness; instead he sprawled outside his margins with a wide white smile and gesturing hands.

Richard wouldn't come, not for a moment had either of them suggested it, though Tex imagined how it might all unravel, the cocoon of everyday, if the three of them stood once again in the same room. He'd found Sarah's website, maybe had explored it before, though he wasn't a great one for the computer, preferring his notebook and pen and a darkened room or a rattling brightly lit cafe. It was Sarah's writing, and the writing alone, that interested him, he said; the way that one could trace the evolution of character and plot from one fantasy book to the next – the glorious pretensions and expansive vistas of world-making.

Tex had read them too, had bought Sarah's first book when it was published eight years ago, secreting it in her work bag along with folders and files and discs, reading in her lunch hour at the office or, when working from home, over her sandwich at the kitchen table then drifting to the bed, imagining in the curtained dimness Sarah in the river, Sarah's reflection wavering in the mirror then, finally, Sarah and Richard's figures together on the hillside.

"I am alone," Andra thought. "Alone in my body, in my quest and my eventual destiny."

It was dangerous, but a temptation that she succumbed to – this pity that overwhelmed her, made her weak . . . Made her decide to trust Brun again.

Melbourne was, as always, cold and atmospheric, as the taxi pulled out of the airport car park onto the slick highway, streaks of red and white light leading their way into the heart of town. They'd booked a twin room in Prahran Mansions, the mustiness of the velvet curtains and the creaking wooden beds a ponderous reminder of the thick history of this city.

"We'll have a night off to settle in, do the town if we want to."

Fay unpacked her suitcase layer by layer, the trousers, blouse, beads, shoes, beads and scarf for each day – red accents, black for formal, floral in case the sun broke through or she needed cheering up. The scarves and belts were draped over the open door of the wardrobe, powder spilt on the bathroom tiles and, with a sigh, Fay was at home.

“I need to get some work done.”

“Not tonight Tex, we need to talk.”

Tex couldn't bear 'talk' swamped by Fay's things; the intimacy of her feminine disarray disallowing true disclosure. They got advice from the young man at the front desk - somewhere quiet and private. He dismissed their tainted secrets with a wave of his hand in the general direction, a block or two away, of café curtains and low lighting. It was a cavernous restaurant with rows of booths down each side. The large tables in the middle were reserved for groups, mainly extended Vietnamese families, the grandmothers diminutively exotic, and the teenagers pudgy and pimply in the Australian style. The clamorous activity and talk was a distraction and cover for Fay and Tex's conversation.

“Who's Simon's father?”

“Simon doesn't want to say until he's made contact with him. He's sent a letter; well, that was two months ago and his next step is to go up to Geraldton, confront him, if he doesn't hear anything soon.”

“So it's not George?”

Fay shrugged as if now, at last, this meant nothing to her. She carefully peeled the tail off her crumbed prawn so she could get at the enclosed tender flesh, she shoved the greenish wedge of tomato around her plate and then took a massive gulp of the sweet white house wine.

“It's about Harry, your father, and the accident.”

Why did she make it sound like that life-shattering event was in inverted commas?

“She was concussed, hysterical – we didn’t know in the face of it all, the blood, the white coats coming and going saying ‘what do you remember?’ It’s like giving birth; do you say what you remember? It’s already gone – the pain and terror – and here you are with a beautiful baby girl, the most normal natural thing in the world and what makes you so special, that you would talk about being ripped apart?”

“What didn’t you know? What did she – Sarah – say?”

Fay fussed around like she always had – stacked their plates, tidied the condiments, brushed off the crumbs of their repast into her humble hand. Tex felt like a statue, a monument to their storied history.

“What happened to Sarah?”

“She had stitches, just a gash, she was lucky. She could have been disfigured, but all she got was that little white line, you’ve seen it, running from the edge of her eyebrow up to her hairline.”

“What did she say?”

The little Vietnamese grandmother with her puffed up hair standing away from her scalp paused in her bird-like picking over the food on her plate and watched, as if sensing the moment that preceded a new chapter in histories that get written again and again with lies and evasions.

“You know what she was like, still is – I don’t even know if it’s deliberate, the constant storytelling. Does she believe it, should we believe it, whose story should we believe and Harry wasn’t there to defend himself and Dad would believe anything against him, would’ve kept Sarah locked up if he had his way.”

“She was sixteen.”

Fay sank back, no longer buoyant, as if she might drown if she had to continue.

“She had a babysitting job, every Saturday night for the Mercers, the doctor and his family, who lived around the corner from us. Harry would pick her up

on the way home from the pub and she would stay the night with us, save tracking all the way back across town to Mum and Dad's."

"What happened?"

"She said it had been going on for a month or so. He started watching her she said, then he would say things, how she had become a woman right under his nose. He'd kissed her she said, then . . . other things. She said that night that she told him she was going to tell me, which would stop him. Then . . . there was the accident."

Tex remembered the place that Sarah had made down the narrow piece of land that ran between the blank wall of Nan and Pop's house and the high picket fence shrouded in the blind blue of plumbago. She'd run pieces of fencing wire scrounged from Pop's shed to the eaves so, over time – all that summer – the vine had crept and finally enclosed them in a bower to which they brought rugs and old cushions and packing boxes. This was where Tess would find her when Fay, still wearing black, dropped her at the front door, or where Sarah would lead her, trailing away with a backward glance while Nan was busy with other things, a permanent perplexed look on her face. And it was there that the stories began – the changeling child, the girl who walked on knives, the beasts and ghouls that circled and threatened.

"You didn't believe her?"

"She might have been mistaken; he might have been teasing, flirting, a little heavy-handed." Fay reached across the table to touch Tex's hand. "He was your father Tex, my husband. I don't know anymore, it's been so long, and now I've seen, heard so many things . . . know what people, men, are capable of. I don't know."

Chapter 15.

Richard had found her ten years previously and had never left again. Back then he would spend his days on the winter beach, a sarong wrapped around him like a burnoose. He was gone before Tex woke and she would collect him on her evening walk along the coastal path. She would pause for a time and observe him, his gaze fixed on the tidal detritus, the coiled black kelp and precious fragments of shell. He usually knew she was there; perhaps it was the light, the sun behind mounted clouds on the horizon casting, just for ten minutes, a golden dream over the walkers and joggers. In this breathless moment the dogs were the only animated feature in the landscape, leaping at seagulls and forging through the curling breakers.

He couldn't write; could no longer trust he had it in him, the deep source that could locate and dredge the right word, the correct arrangement of sounds and echoes that floated in the depths. A photo, central to the whole higgledy-piggledy arrangement on Tex's noticeboard, showed the two of them at a late night Melbourne gig not long after they had first met. Tess looked out of the frame away from the camera, as if in a second she might disembark from that tabletop of spilt drinks and trashed wrappers. Richard's face was bleached like a moon, his singular attention reaching out to detain her – a love photo. But Tex didn't want him anymore and he, apparently, didn't want her, though every night he slipped from his sleeping bag into her bed, a nocturnal creature to her arms and legs; her breath, an automatic sigh of release, admitted defeat.

Tex had the apartment to herself though she could barely afford it. She had learned over those intervening years to be alone. The shabby apartment block across from the beach was a refuge for gangs of surfer boys their sandy wetsuits draped over the stair-rails, the plaintive cowboy music and shouts and laughter drifting under her door.

Tex felt old already, invisible, in her plain trousers and baggy jumpers that she wore every day to go to the dark storeroom with its single desk. The Deaf Association sat atop the coastal ridge, its warren of rooms and narrow windows turned away from the sea. She sat or sometimes crouched surrounded by boxes of yellowing paper – minutes of the association, copies of correspondence – and ledgers of accounts, a musty miasma stirred in the half light at every flick of a page. Here she arranged and boxed the papers in date and subject order, keeping careful notations of significant documents. The collected and notated information for the association's one hundred year anniversary would, in due course, be passed on to the official writer.

She kept the door open to the grassed service area with its flock of clothes lines draped with rough sheets that snapped and careered in the sea breeze. Aaron, the laundry assistant, was silent even for a deaf person but he watched and knew just the moment to interrupt, pointing to a dramatic bunching of clouds above, the persistent aggression of a tiny willy-wagtail, or with a morning cup of tea in the solid institutional blue crockery, a dry biscuit and a cube of sugar on the saucer slid along the desk to nudge her elbow. "Thank you Aaron. The sun is out but it's still cold in here. A cup of tea will warm me."

He was the only person she looked right in the face, had to so he could catch the words from her lips, the roll and shape of them. His eyes moved without shame from her lips to her eyes and back again. Usually he shrugged or responded with a quick gesture, his long fingered hands a semaphore – ok, sad, tomorrow – of the graceful language of the deaf. She only knew a few words, enough meaning to get by.

She had lunch with Fay once a week, meeting her at the Italian café in the central city mall. Fay liked the hustle and bustle, enjoyed the salon where she worked, it's large window letting in the colour of people rushing by,

lovers lingering and old people taking their time to get from point a to point b. Fay would have coffee and cake, her weekly treat, an overblown teetering column of sponge layered with cream and fruit jelly.

“This letter came for you, from that Yop I suppose. Posted from Holland anyway, I can tell from the stamps. Tulips.”

He was faithful in his way, a letter arriving every few months, following yet another disappointment in his quest for the perfect woman, but she didn't want to open it now, fuel Fay's speculation about what it could lead to; complicated romances, the best sort. Two men - imagine that - vying for her attention.

They went as always to the book shop next door, Fay peeling off to the recent fiction section, scanning the tall shelves for the correct combination of colour, font and style – pastel blue or mauve, large gold title with curlicues. Her old faithfuls, the Danielle Steele's and Barbara Taylor Bradford's, she could get from the local library. Tex was reduced to true crime, having winnowed away even travelogue and biography, appalled by the blurry confusion of fact, the jarring insertions of the writer's bias and passion. The best of the true crime writers let the facts – the childhood background, the scattered remains, the forensic profile, the behaviour and movements of the victim and protagonist – speak for themselves.

Richard left minimal evidence, neat as always, the rinsed cup on the draining board, his toiletries packed away into the black suitcase stowed behind the single armchair. He would be on the beach until sunset and Tex had the sun-warmed room to herself. She opened the letter from Yop:

My tall Tess,

How is sunny Oz, even though it is winter there it might be sunshine more than here. It is warm just yesterday though my heart is cold, frozen in winter still. Sani is no longer, gone home to Opa. I sent her

because she lost her smile somehow, her lively way and then I am not there, I am gone in my heart.

You remember our room in Trivandrum, poor but comfortable with all the silk and little statues and the incense cover up the drain smell? I do! I think of you like the native women pouring tea from up high into the little cups for me and Rory, your bare ankle bone with bells on jingling as you walk in and out to the balcony carrying the washing and hanging it like flags off the rail. I hope your heart is nice and open like your cunt – one is no good without the other. You are too thinking and not enough feeling because of your bad experience, but life is hard for us all – remember those beggar children below our window, sleeping under the box every day and night?

Maybe in winter here I will come to your summer and we can be lovers, friends, both – let us wait and see!

Love,

Yop.

p.s. I am working on computers again and writing songs all the time.

She could write back and tell him that Richard was here with her, but although she had told him about that time on the hill, the mundane language of love's betrayal – the sight of Richard crouched between Sarah's open knees, her face open to the sky – he didn't know the rest of the story.

India, where she had met Yop, had been a kind of penance she thought. For what? For believing in the word of others she told herself, for believing that words represented truth. And there, with the thin and harried people of the streets clustering around, the children with their fly blown eyes, it was clear that any explanation – karma, choice, call it what you will – was just a gloss over the bitter substance of theirs and any life.

Rory's golden handlebar moustache made him look like a nineteenth century pioneer or cowboy. The one thing he missed about Montana, he said, was the hunting and the clear reach of the high plains – and the silence. In fact, he missed almost everything but couldn't tear himself from the busyness of existence in India. Basic bodily functions – eating, shitting, washing – occupied the day; the thinking and conferring and making endless plans with the ever-changing circle of compadres, rivals, lovers. 'The wild colonials', that's what Rory dubbed himself and Tex. She'd sung it to him that drunken night forgetting most of the verses but patting his mop of golden hair at each refrain. Their countries had a dark history they agreed. Rory collected sage aphorisms and performed native American rituals on rising or at sunset standing on their balcony his arms outstretched like a messiah. Tex knew next to nothing about the first people of Australia, couldn't even equate the sprawling mass of the Comley family with an authentic source. Yet she had always known, had it drummed into her at school, about the desperation and violence that prowled the fringes of what passed for civilization in Australia.

She knew little more now than she did then; the artefacts in the glass cases at the museum – the battered tin cup, the faded diary, the scrap of hat – were softly lit, arranged just so as a poignant record, but there was a falsity to these objects, inert and displaced from the dread and sweat. In the next room behind a rope barrier, styrofoam and ferro cement had been carved and moulded to recreate a deep overhang in a desert cliff. 'Early Indigenous Life' displayed coolamons and spears, grinding stones and baskets lain around on the gritty soil as if the people had, just a moment ago, been called away from their daily labour. Perhaps one of them had spied the dusty men and their thin horses appearing on the horizon and called out to the others to come, come and see this strange sight. A month previously Tex had conferred with a group of women, elders of the Nyungar people, to ensure that this rough academic translation, this carefully worded web of lies, represented to some extent what it was they wanted to say. Even after four

years working at the Museum and the various brochures and educational packs she'd conferred on with indigenous people, Tex still found the idea of two languages, different vocabularies, almost unbearable. Especially if they, the people with their disparate words, shared the same country – the hot waves of the easterly breeze, the detail of red and yellow rock washed by the high water of winter. How do boorna and tree mean the same thing? Tree for her meant shade, a drooping elegance and that's all. For others it might mean food, or a beauty that was to be found in the difference from this tree to that or, she didn't know . . . so many words she didn't understand.

Richard's black suitcase back then was an impeccable catalogue of his meagre requirements and behind the carefully folded shirts was a zipped folder full of working drafts – printed pages with his characteristic rushing hand all over them with asides, arrows and corrections. Another folder titled 'complete' contained a slimmer, pristine stack of paper bound by a stout rubber band and an A3 spreadsheet listing publications, dates and payments. And behind these folders were his notebooks laid like a row of tiles on the base of the suitcase; plain notebooks of all sizes each with a start and an end date. The relevant dates were missing; there was no notebook prior to 1987 and Tex wondered if there was a cupboard or a box somewhere, perhaps in his parents' silent house, that was a repository for those lost years. Richard had been in Sydney for the past two years he had told her, working in a bookshop, reciting poetry around town, retreating to his one room bedsit and avoiding human interaction just as he avoided her now. She inspected the spread sheet and found the relevant poems published from 1985 to 1987 and they were invariably short, almost haiku, as if everything – pain and loss and joy – could be reduced to moon, breeze and bird wings. He had his current notebook on him of course, tucked deep into his coat pocket where it stayed most days but the one prior was denser, the words snarling the page, running into every edge, page after page.

Chapter 16.

She rang Richard from the balcony while Fay was in the shower. Below her, all the bustle of Prahran, the slick Melbournites in their black couture. It was only 7am there and his voice was soft and slurred with sleep though she still had to ask.

“No I haven’t been drinking alone Tess, I was drinking with Jean. She invited me for dinner. I got home a couple of hours ago after scraping myself off her recliner chair.”

She didn’t worry about Jean, she wasn’t his type. His type she knew only too well – the drifting tendrils of hair, the innocent curve of the cheek and, most of all, the downward shy glance that disguised their motives. They were a type that frequented poetry readings and literary festivals, a select few amongst the plain and dowdy, and Richard with his wing of dark hair and night-pale skin promised poetic abuse. She’d learnt to protect him; it was what he wanted, though she wondered how he fared when she was unable to be there. She didn’t really care and they both knew it, though she didn’t admit her affairs, made sure that those brief liaisons were hers and hers alone.

“It seems my father tried to seduce her . . . She was only sixteen”

Richard was silent, his breath whistling down the line in distress for Sarah or Tess or maybe himself.

“We’re going to her apartment in a while; Simon’s coming straight from the airport.”

He was still silent and she knew he was struggling with his relief at being two thousand kilometers away from Sarah, Tess, and family entanglement. Then he rushed on with his own day, his primary cause for getting up every morning.

“I’m going to ride down to Freo and sit in a café in a cocoon of creative fervour.”

“What will you write?”

“The third section of ‘Elegy’”.

His mother had died the year before and six months later his father expired gently and without fuss in a darkened cinema, a slight figure amidst the spilled popcorn.

“I’ll ring tonight and tell you all about it, give you some fresh inspiration.”

She didn’t regret her cruelty. He was scared of her and had been for years; her unasked questions, her silence, her condemnation.

“Was that Richard? Is he coping?”

Fay emerged in a peach slip, great gusts of steam enveloping her moist fairness. Tex could see them reflected in the mirror and wondered when it was that they stopped looking like mother and daughter. She remembered the younger gingery soft version of herself that bore no relation it seemed to the lean woman with her shoulder-length hair, her jeans and boots perhaps a little young or butch for someone forty years old, but she could get away with it in the environment she worked in, the people they mixed with. She wore negligees and lacy bras for Richard when he required romance, though her current lover liked her plain and boyish, a playmate. Fay was nearly sixty-five though well preserved as Richard liked to point out; making an effort was what Fay put it down to.

“I wish he’d been able to come, we could’ve done with some moral support.”

It amused and annoyed Tex that Fay was so sure of the protective, benign force of Richard’s devotion to her.

Tex had kept her innocent of what had happened between Richard and Sarah, why their relationship now was a careful one. Fay had never interfered; wasn’t her place to come between man and wife, steadfastly insisting that, for all intents and purposes, that’s what they were. She saw

him as charming, the strong silent type, 'Byronic' she'd picked up somewhere in her reading. In his turn, he appreciated her fluffy helplessness, her dizzy dame routine as Tex called it. He was rebuked he knew for his romantic ideas, his unvanquished desire for Tess to be how she once was and to that memory he would pour every word, every phrase. On her birthday, the anniversary of their first meeting, and Valentine's Day, she would receive a poem in the mail as if from a secret admirer. And it was true that the person who wrote these poems and their recipient were strangers to both of them.

"We've got time to have a stroll down the main street, pick up some souvenirs at the market, it's only a few blocks down, we can catch a taxi from there."

Fay was nervous standing there at the mirror while Tess looked on, spraying another layer of lacquer on her hair, wondering if she'd have time to duck into the ladies at the market to repair her make-up. She too had a copy of Sarah's book, kept in pride of place on the coffee table, though it was to the back cover she turned inspecting the photo for any sign of her sister.

The apartment was at the back of the block along a path crammed on either side with dripping hibiscus and large-leaved plants. The carpark was full of BMW's and other play cars and the people coming and going, squeezing past them on the path, were well-dressed and coolly polite.

"I'm Cilla and you must be Tessa", there was a slight hesitation as she peered behind to Fay who was studying the lead-light in the door, " And Fay."

She was brisk, though pulled a wry smile acknowledging the awkwardness of the situation.

“Come through, Sarah won’t be long.”

The wide hallway was crammed with antique knick-knacks and Tex wondered if Sarah was part of Cilla’s collection. Fay cooed and complimented though, truth be told, she had no time for historical artifacts unless they were repackaged into romance and intrigue. There was a glimpse through into a bedroom with a wide bay window giving out onto a private walled courtyard. The next door was closed and the tap-tapping was rhythmic and unhurried.

“Tea or coffee? Simon’s flight was delayed but he should be here any minute.”

There was a loud ring from the doorbell and Sarah emerged from the bedroom casting one long glance back before hurrying to the door. He was silhouetted in the sunshine, filling up the door and Sarah, despite her height, looked small as she drew his head down to her shoulder and held him for a long moment. They stayed murmuring there while Tex and Fay, shy of affection, surveyed the room, the heavy oak dresser arrayed with silver candlesticks and embellished photo frames.

“My sons, Mikhail and Troy. They’re nearly grown now but it’s my favourite photo.”

They flanked her, this Cilla with the long blonde hair and the enclosing arms, their chubby shoulders nudging at her breast as if they were fighting to get away, back to their video games or rugby or whatever these well-fed boys of the middle-class did for fun.

“They’re younger than Simon – 22 and 19 – and they look up to him like an older brother. Lovely.”

Her hair was short now, graying, and although she wore some sort of lesbian uniform – plain trousers with belt, tucked in shirt, large man-watch – her short plumpness and age, around fifty, might just mean that she was a

woman who had dispensed with adornment, was married to a stripped practicality, although the clutter of heavy gilt and velvet cushions denied this.

Sarah led Simon into the lounge-room and stood, gripping his hand, looking at Tex her head slightly tilted, inspecting the changes, the similarities. Fay hardly merited a glance, she being always as she was. It was a tableau that Simon broke, gently disengaging from his mother to give Cilla's shoulder a squeeze, Tex a curt nod. But it was to Fay that his peck on the cheek was the most natural, boyish and cheeky as befitting his age after all. They all bustled then, making as much noise and movement as was seemly, all except for Tex and Sarah who eyed each other across the room. Sarah was not as Tex had expected, had thought that the photo on the blog and in the back cover of her books was vaseline soft, but at fifty Sarah had attained an out of focus gentility in her full brocade skirt, her hair a mass of silver and brown drawn up into butterfly clips.

"You look happy Sass, content."

"At last Tessa."

And at last they were able to embrace, easier for the moment to hold and breathe and rest their eyes from the sight of each other.

"So you're a psychologist Cilla? I couldn't do that – dealing with people's problems day in and day out."

Fay and Cilla were seated at the large oak dining table that was arrayed with platters of fruit, mini quiches, tarts, bowls of dip with sliced vegetable.

"My home and my life with Sarah keeps me sane. This is my sanctuary. We don't socialize much, eat out a couple of times a week, go to the movies occasionally. We try and go on holiday a couple of times a year; Simon and the boys came with us to an eco-village in far North Queensland in April."

"Don't your sons live with you?"

"Up until two years ago, but they decided they wanted to live with their father and then Sarah and I moved here."

Tex and Sarah joined the others at the table. They sat next to each other; Tex could feel the warmth of Sarah's shoulder and watch her languid hands out of the corner of her eye. Simon sat across from them, leaning over to Sarah, pulling apart bread rolls and generally infecting the room with his energetic presence. Tex wondered how Sarah and Cilla had met, how this seemingly conventional woman declared her love for Sarah, when Simon had come back into her life, how Sarah lived her life now? But this was all old news for Simon and he wanted to get to the business at hand.

"So, it's important we present a united front at our meeting tomorrow. I've made some notes from the information Cilla sent me and she has the legal stuff that she's been interpreting. Cilla?"

Sarah watched Simon with a half-smile; Tex had seen it before and wondered at her ability to make other's act on her behalf without them even knowing. Cilla reached over and restrained Simon's hand.

"We've got a bit of time Simon. Give Tess and Fay a while to feel comfortable, it's been a long time after all. So much has happened since they've last seen Sarah."

Simon's face darkened, as if behind his golden skin lurked the parentage of greater passions and loyalties.

"Sarah's made the best of a bad job, without any help from them you mean."

He rose abruptly from his chair. "I'm going to have a shower."

Cilla half-rose as if she wanted to follow, but just smiled at him.

"That's a good idea Simon. There's a towel and some guest soap on the end of your bed." She turned to Fay. "We keep a bed for him and fly him over as often as we can or he can manage. It's part of the healing for him and Sarah and for us as a family."

"What does his family, other family I mean, think? Do they feel threatened?"

If the question was aimed at Sarah, she didn't respond and Cilla started clearing the table. "Can you give me a hand Fay?"

"I'll show you my room Tessa, where I write and spend most of my days."

The Victoriana stopped at the door. If Tex had expected the silks and ribbons of Sarah's former rooms, immediately she understood that nothing was the same for Sarah. There was a small faded kilim on the polished floor and a chaise longue against one wall. Occupying the full width of the room was a built in desk of plain white painted wood. A couple of plants, some polished rocks, some notebooks and a cup full of pens were in front of the window, any view obscured by the thick wisteria. On either side of the window were shelves reaching up to the ceiling and it was to these that Sarah inclined her head inviting Tex to explore.

On the bottom shelf was a pristine set of Sarah's books, and a copy each of the American editions and those books that had been translated into German and Danish. The next shelf held five small black framed photos; a close-up of Tex as a nine-year old with a magnifying glass, a birthday present, held up and making her green eye monstrous, a photo of a swaddled baby, the figure that held it cropped out of the picture with only the hands visible and the slight swelling of breast, Simon's graduation photo, a photo of Cilla and Sarah in profile and facing each other, and a single group photo – Richard and Tex and Sarah standing in a circle facing each other and laughing. Tex recognized the golden light of that Melbourne autumn, their plan to get away and explore all that they had to offer each other.

"How is Richard? Fay reports that you are happy together but she never did see what was right in front of her face, did she?"

"We're like most couples Sarah, trying to live day by day. Richard's still teaching, still writing poetry – had a book published by the local press a couple of years ago."

"Yes, I know, I heard. I bought a copy. I liked it very much, it brought back memories, some of them pleasant some not so."

Tex felt breathless, realized her breath had been held ever since she stepped into the room but was it safe to release, to let her lungs fill up with the mingled breath and secrets that permeated the air?

"I miss you Tessa, every day I think of you and wonder. There is a little bit of you in every book I write."

Was it a matter of treating the past as spent, without colour or energy or any power to keep on effecting the present?

"Mum told me about what happened with her husband – with my father I mean. What he did or what you said he did. I believe you Sarah. Why would you make something like that up? I'm so sorry Sarah."

Sarah had turned away.

"How long have you known?"

"Since yesterday."

Sarah's shoulders started to shake and she was crying, then laughing a little, holding Tex at arm's length to look into her face and then pulling her close.

"I thought I was over it, thought I'd done 'the work' Tessa, but this is what I needed."

Tex allowed herself to be held, knowing in a cool moment that she also needed forgiveness for, after all, it hadn't been just yesterday that she knew, had been aware for all those years, had watched with her child eyes and seen, and had known deeply and surely that it was because of Sarah that her father had gone, never to be heard or cuddled or feared again.

There was a slight scrabbling at the closed door, a gentle tap, Fay.

"Can I come in?"

"We'll come out Fay, just give us one more minute."

Sarah held Tex's face in both her hands forcing her to hear.

"You can ask me anything Tessa and I will tell you the truth as much as I understand it and believe it to be. That is my promise to you, as I promised you when you were a baby, although of course you don't remember me standing over your cot making my fairy godmother pledge. That was my gift to you – no secrets."

Fay and Cilla stood in mirror-image of each other, hands anxiously clasped. Tex couldn't tell whether they were hopeful or fearful of the sight of herself and Sarah emerging from the green-lit room.

Chapter 17.

Cass was blockish and plain as she'd always been, though tired looking with all her blatant curiosity erased.

"The fact is I couldn't have him at home anymore. It was too much for me and I can't watch him every single moment of the day, not with Rafe being the age he is and the things that Stuart does when he gets agitated."

They were all crammed into a small office at the front of the hostel – Simon, Sarah, Cilla and Tex along with the Coordinator of the service and Cass.

"Why didn't Richard come? I hear you got back together with him Tex and he's as responsible for this mess as anyone else here, maybe more."

Simon leapt to his feet, filling up the small space.

"No one, I repeat no one, is responsible for Stuart's condition, Mrs Guthrie. We're here to assist and that's all, you understand?"

The Coordinator, Myra, a small Scottish woman made settling gestures.

"I suggest we stick to the agenda as agreed by everyone last week. Tess you haven't seen it yet, here's a copy along with a summary of his health report that Cass as guardian has agreed to release. I'll give you all a chance to review it while I see if Carla's ready with that pot of coffee. Excuse me."

Stuart McMurtrie – housing and service agreement.

- 1. Review of health and disability status**
- 2. Current situation**
- 3. Future needs**
- 4. Funding responsibilities**

Cass eyed Tex, trying to calculate perhaps whether she was as dependable as she looked. Tex had instinctively worn her most simple clothes, pale linen trousers with a pastel shirt that usually never saw the light of day. It might

have been in deference to her reluctance to be here, or it might have been to contrast with Sarah's lush elegance.

"It's not a pretty story but it hasn't been much of a fairytale for me as well over the last ten years. He came to me straight from rehab, you know, almost nine years ago."

Health & disability summary for Stuart McMurtrie. Client No:

88910f

Prepared by Myra Banks August 2005

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Background:

Moderate-severe impairment due to head injury sustained during a rock climbing accident in June 1984. Stuart was hospitalized and stabilized at Horsham District Hospital and transferred to Brighton Rehabilitation Unit in late June where he underwent therapy and treatment until his discharge into the care of his sister, Cassandra Guthrie, in May 1996.

Health & disability:

Stuart's health continues to be good apart from epilepsy that has been generally under control for the past four years. Stuart is able to perform most self-care with some assistance and is fully independent in the areas of toileting and feeding. He needs reminder regarding appropriate wear for weather conditions and also prompting to attend to general matters of hygiene and grooming.

Stuart's behaviour continues to be of concern to the family and the local community as he exhibits a moderate degree of disinhibition especially in regard to sexuality. Stuart will also under stress or when confused become noncompliant and, on occasion, aggressive.

Management programs:

Stuart and the family receive services from Southdown Metropolitan Health Services including Social Trainer support once a week, out of home Respite care for two days a fortnight, psychology services as required. Stuart attends a day program on Mondays and Wednesdays and also attends the Head Injured Society recreational outings of a Saturday.

“Why did you bring him down to Melbourne Cass? Are you living here now?” Cass didn’t look like a Melbournite; her broad feet stuffed into open-toe sandals and a cardigan hastily thrown over a light cotton shift.

“Rafe and I have been in Taree since Jason took off. There’s the right sort of school there for Rafe. He’s got special needs as well, you probably didn’t know that, couldn’t really tell when he was just such a little bub.”

Myra shook the stack of papers in her hand to signal that the formal proceedings could commence.

“Cass, Mrs Guthrie, needed assistance and a break in her care of Stuart it was agreed. Stuart’s uncle, his father’s brother, is retired now and living in Melbourne and wanted Stuart down here where he could spend more time with him. However, he’s not in a position either financially or physically to provide in home care.”

“Is Sky here, living here?”

Sarah looked around the small office, as if Sky might be under the desk or peering through the window laughing at them all sitting there like a bunch of stunned mullets. All of this because of him.

“Yes, there was a vacant funded bed and Stuart is on a long-term respite program but will, hopefully, be able to reside here permanently once we’ve secured the necessary funding.” Myra paused to look at each and every one of them. “Which brings us to the business at hand which I understand is both delicate and distressing to all concerned.”

Simon turned away in disgust but Cilla cleared her throat and leaned forward.

"I understand from speaking to you Myra that there is a short-fall in funding of approximately \$15,000 per annum. I've discussed this with Sarah and we've got a proposal."

They hadn't talked to Tex about this and her mind was racing. How long would Sky live for? They said his health was good and he was only about 47 years old after all.

"Sarah is prepared to contribute \$5,000 per annum for the next five years, indexed of course."

Twenty-five thousand dollars. Tex wondered how they had arrived at the sum; was it the value of Sarah's moral responsibility or a purely financial calculation of the worth of getting rid of this. Cass turned to Tex.

"You can see why it would have been better if Richard was here."

There was noise from beyond the closed door – the slamming of screen doors and some guttural exclamations and the stamping of feet. The door swung open to show a stringy older man with a weathered face trying to hold back another who was leaning in.

"Myra? Myra, come see me outside. We'll have tea and biscuits and sing songs with Uncle Jeff."

It was Sky, or Stuart as he now was, his attention glued to Myra who had hurried over to pat and murmur in his ear. Over her shoulder his pale blue eyes raked the room. He looked smaller though his too short shirt rode up over a great mound of belly that he carried with care. His golden beard was as luxuriant and sheltering as ever though only a rim of head hair remained at the base of his shiny skull.

"Where's Rafe? Can he come too?"

Cass pulled out a balled-up hanky and rubbed at her eyes. Sarah clung to Cilla's hand turning her head away, but her hair was pinned up and she couldn't shield her face. His flapping hands quieted at the sight of her and his grin broadened.

"Silly cunt, suck my cock"

Myra pushed until Sky was on the other side of the door which she closed and then turned the lock.

Fay's bed was covered with a variety of plastic and paper shopping bags, little things as mementoes she said and a couple of sale items which were begging to walk off the shelf. Tex boiled the kettle for yet another cup of tea, her stomach sour with the wash of tannin.

"What's it got to do with you and Richard though, I just can't see. You only knew him for such a short while and it was an accident, sad, but could happen to anyone – no one's fault, probably his own carelessness and lack of attention. Why should you be responsible?"

"I wasn't there you know when the accident happened. I was . . . separated, got lost and panicked. I ran all the way back down the mountain. Richard was there and Sarah, Cass and Jason as well. Who knows what happened, who can tell?"

Tex turned away from Fay and away from the mirror where her own eyes and mouth might betray her. Fay sighed in motherly defeat.

"Alright, I'll give you some privacy, go for a walk in the park and feed the pigeons with these biscuit crumbs."

The phone picked up on the first ring.

"Tess, are you ok? I should've been there. I'm a bloody moral coward letting you do this without me. Sorry! All about me as usual. Talk to me."

She didn't know what to say, could've given him a minute by minute description or just cut straight to the chase, the implications for her and him – financial, moral, emotional – or told him about Sarah and how it felt to be in her writing room, the years falling away leaving them stranded. She began to cry, one wrenched sob uncorking a stream of tears that ran down her cheeks

and off her chin. Richard's voice called her, cursing at the distance, himself, Sarah, Sky – the whole sorry mess. She told him she would put the phone down for a minute, get a glass of water, grab a cigarette.

"It was just sad Richard, a normal tragic life which you and I know nothing about; Cass and her little boy who has autism, Jason gone for too long, and her looking after Sky all these years. He's a disabled guy, childish and loving and angry all at the same time. And then there's Sarah getting on with her life, spending time with Simon who I still think is a complete little bastard by the way, and Cilla, her lover, trying to sort everything out and look after her and . . . where have we been Richard?"

Tex and Sarah had agreed to meet on neutral territory, away from the smothering affections of Fay and Cilla. Sarah continued to work for three hours in the afternoon three days a week, though she didn't need the money. They, she and Cilla, were financially secure, but the hours at the library kept her in touch with stories, she said: the recovering drug addict and his 'research' into alien abduction, the retired teacher and her husband with Alzheimer's who she treated with brisk deference, settling him into one of the comfortable chairs with a sip-cup of juice and the most colorful and torrid of the gossip magazines while she investigated the roots and sources of her family, her heritage, how her people had got from there – a coracle, a stone cairn – to here, the lonely fat boy who only wanted to use the computer, book an hour online, no matter how many times Sarah might coax him to the angst ridden young fiction section. She was finished for the day and Tex waved to her from the lawn as she emerged from the library which sat at the centre of the floodlit municipal gardens.

"Alone at last."

Sarah was affectionate, maybe a little distracted by the end of her workday and the start of her evening, her time off with Cilla and all the comfort of that pushing her home. Her life lay lightly on her and Tex felt like a penitent. The canna lilies, a suburban answer to exotica, crowded around the back and side of the concrete bench on which they sat. It felt like a moment out of time, an alternative vision of her life if she had never strayed away, but for Sarah it was familiar territory, the shape of this day like any other.

"I want to know everything. I want to know what happened between you and Richard – how long did he stay with you? What did you think about me? He never told me, won't talk about it."

Sarah raised her eyebrow and grinned wryly at her.

"I'm surprised Tessa; you were always good at searching out others secrets."

"I couldn't find the journal from that time – 1984 to 1986 is missing. His poems don't tell much do they? Too much allegory for it to feel like it happened to him or to me."

Sarah continued to gaze out over the floodlit foliage.

"Why weigh this one moment Tessa against all the time, the hours of stories, we shared together? And Richard has been by your side for many years, day in and day out. You must know him so well, all his insecurities, his talents – his devotion to you, his muse."

It wasn't like that at all Tex knew. Her life pivoted on that moment and all the years, the words, the stories she told and others told her, radiated out from that single night, that event.

"What happened to Sky?"

"You were there Tessa, why don't you tell me."

"No, I was gone. I ran as soon as I saw you. I saw Sky running towards you and Richard, and Jason and his knife. That's all I know."

She was a sibyl, serpentine in her hard look and then her face dissolved and, for the first time, Tex realized, Sarah did not know from one moment to the next what was going to happen either.

“I’m shocked Tessa, speechless. I thought you threw a rock, there was so much happening, I was trying not to look, so ashamed, and Sky bellowing like a bull and no moon, so it was all bodies and noise . . . then he was there, all broken and bloody on the ground.”

And after all, it was as she said: There was no mystery, all was known, with or without the evidence. Whether she believed her or not, Tex could leave now; she could leave and not look back, though in the face of that blank future she was empty. She could feel Sarah warmly at her side, their thighs lightly touching, their hands as she gazed down so similar in shape and texture.

“But I also want to know about you – what my father did to you, who Simon’s father is and what that means to you, and, also, though it seems trivial and far away now - with Simon and Cilla in your life and tropical holidays, and international publishing contracts – but still I wonder, what do you know or what can you guess about what happened to Didie Comley?”

Sarah had declined to come with her; it was over, in the past, with just the details, like a ghost, to vanish. She would write, she said, and what she said, whatever she revealed, might be an allegory of the past but, nonetheless, true.

To be honest with herself, Tex knew that this was a cursory visit; that there was nothing more she could find out especially from one whose very language center had been damaged. After years of being inadequate with the deaf she knew that she had just one language. Sky didn’t know her; in his limited world people were of assistance or a source of aggravation and he paced the floor of the recreation room throwing sniper glances over his

shoulder as if he might catch her out, that she might reveal in an unbidden moment how he would proceed.

And there he was, in the flesh, a shambling child-man who could be quelled with the threat of liberties withdrawn, or time out by the burly staff with their easy camaraderie and jokes.

“His bark is worse than his bite, most of the time anyway.”

Sheila was a feisty little woman, managing the movements and moods of the four men who circled each other in their daily routine.

“Here, Stuart, why don’t you play Tess some of your music? Go get it from your room, you can put it on out here and we’ll all listen, won’t we fellas?”

The others, the one with the greasy strands of hair plastered over his skull and the one with droopy brown eyes that followed her like a lamb, were acquiescent, whether through disinterest or respect for Sheila or fear of Sky she didn’t know.

It was a battered old cassette player. He carried it under one arm while trying to manage a clutch of cassettes in his other hand. They spilled onto the floor with a clatter, a couple of cases shattering. Sky groaned and Tex rushed over to help him. As she was leaning to pick up the two halves of a plastic case he pushed her shoulder so she fell back against the leg of one of the men who had started rocking and moaning as well. He screamed as if she had belted him; a poor frightened child who expected the worse from any noise, upset, things breaking.

“Stuart, settle!”

Sheila held her arm outstretched, her finger as direct as a gun or a bolt from heaven. She cast a quick glance at Tex, more out of irritation it seemed – life would be so much easier if well-wishers just kept themselves to themselves. Sky sighed and placed the tape player gently on the table, plugged the lead into the wall and stood with his hands on his hips as he studied the array of music he could offer.

“This one’s for you. Sorry.”

“That’s alright Sky, I know you didn’t mean it.”

Now he really looked at her and a smile, his full red lips, burst through the tangle of his beard. Tex stayed on the floor, her back against the legs of the man who had stopped moaning but continued to rock so it felt as if she was on a boat, gently lapping on the shores of some faraway lake.

“This song is for you, because it wasn’t your fault, you weren’t wrong, you were right all along.”

The gravelly voice of Johnny Cash was like every truck stop she had ever been in; the wounded shy men leaning over their lonely meals.

*The beast in me
Is caged by frail and fragile bonds
Restless by day
And by night, rants and rages at the stars
God help, the beast in me
The beast in me
Has had to learn to live with pain
And how to shelter from the rain
And in the twinkling of an eye
Might have to be restrained
God help the beast in me*

Chapter 18.

Tess had the day off, had managed amongst all the upset of Melbourne, the emotion so unfamiliar to her nowadays, to finish the proofreading and corrections to the museum brochure. She had five days now of unbroken time, with Richard off at school with his poetry and his gentle encouragement of the grubby and defiant kids who found in him a broken, but kindred spirit. She was planning to do little more than potter around the garden and cook a pot of slow cooked meat and vegetables, take a long soaking bath in perfumed oils and eventually greet Richard at the door all scented and sweet – a salve to his wound.

She heard the clatter of the letterbox and wound down the path through the native grasses, the scent of summer coming hard on the easterly breeze, skating across the great empty heart of desert that separated her from Sarah. The handwriting on the envelope was looped and graceful, a memento from an earlier age. She weighed the freedom of the day and considered for a moment putting the letter aside. Inside, a bundle of paper held together with a paper clip. On top was a note, a small square of paper, in Sarah's distinctive hand: *These words on paper, as always, say far more than I could ever speak.*

Two pages were printed, with dates written on the top in the same pen as the note. The next two pages were handwritten in a hand that was instantly recognizable as Richard's. The pages fell at her feet, the wind picking them up and flicking them fitfully around the floor until if there was any order in what Sarah had intended, it was now lost.

A Pure Maiden

In this dark room you stray in my eye,

Glow like a moth, gold dust,
a scent path.
You speak and I hear, a bell,
the minutes of blood.
Your breast rises on my breath;
A soft river cradling
the long night.

The seeded earth is ripe
And our wings are still, my dear.

Your skin is a veil that parts in a dream.
You show everything to me:
The flawed stone, cupped in your hand,
And all the green things, the fire in your thigh, rise up and reach
Through the walls where I am
Reading and waiting.

VEGETABLE LOVE (for Simon)

S. Winter

1993

The soft fuzz of the peach grazing my lip, an omen of your head against my
cheek; the delicious bite of juice a sweet memory as I take your tiny hand,
each little finger into my mouth, tasting them one by one.

In here, in his potting shed, the bottles of red peppers glow like lamps,
illuminate the long muscle in his brown arm as he reaches with strong
fingers, cupping in each hand the tender globes of tomatoes.

In my earth, delicately seeded and moist, you clung in the dark turning your petal eyes, tendril fingers reaching to hold the light, that soft sun, the promise of rain and wind.

He knows the ways of fruit and soil, each living thing he holds dear, sees its beauty, the single essence that forces life to rise like sap. And I am a weak plant too long in the shade, my beauty marred and spotted, diseased by every thing that thrives and feeds on the delicate tissue of my innocence.

And all the growing things of my earth blossom in you at last; the flower, the fruit, the sweet flesh of life, the leaves that greenly insist and beckon to you.

In here, in this bountiful darkness, there is the scent of seed and stems and we turn like sunflowers, like the wheeling planets, to the center of all that must be; the cup, the rod, the furrowed soil, the seed, the rain, the sun.

The Lost Child by Sarah Winter. (March 1978)

The little girl was miserable as usual. That's how it seemed to her, though she didn't think of it as unhappiness, such was her limited life experience; just that every day was a struggle up from the fuggy warmth of her blankets, scented by the combined urine of little Robby and her own body rich and pungent since her last bath. At night she roamed the yard watching the lighted windows, the blurry movement of her mother, her big sister, from the stove to the table and back to the sink. When the window was blank then she could creep up the steep wooden steps and slip past them to the dark corridor with the open doors breathing with the sounds of her brothers and sisters wrapped in whatever they could find to shelter against the sudden

cool of autumn and the bogeyman who came deep in the night searching for naughty girls and boys.

At night always at night, around the campfire and other places where old people and kids sprawled, heads nodding nearly asleep, the stories would start: 'He's huge and grey with shambling locks of hair all the way down to his knobby knees. He carries a wooden club and a gunny sack. Sshhh, you can hear him moaning, and do you know why? He smells little children, his favourite meal, especially the naughty ones coz they've got that smell, a rotten whiff of sin clinging all over them.' Her own sins were pale and quiet, sneaking around the edges of her boisterous family who spilled out of the house and yard filling up the streets of their small town.

She crawled in, climbing over the bed end and pushing and shoving until there was a wedge of space between the wriggling bodies and the wall. In the morning, if she waited hunkered down on the damp earth under the rainwater tank, they would get tired of calling and leave, hanging onto and out of the battered ute and, after all, Aunty Peggy was here – she wasn't going anywhere with her gammy leg, would sit on the battered couch staring for hours on end at the square of window, a view of blank blue sky.

This was her sin – a pale thing – the relief of being alone so intense that she might slip off her panties and wee on the red receiving earth, shuddering with pleasure at the silent ticking of the morning-warmed corrugated iron, the far away cawing of the crows in the big pine trees.

These hours stretched beyond the small tasks – a tin cup of strong tea from the pot on the stove for Aunt Peggy, her fingers avid for warmth. She would go to the canyon, the rearing buttresses enclosing the narrow lushness where worn tracks gave evidence of the rabbits and roos and the thrilling danger of wild pigs, their scat lying in ponderous piles. What would she do in

that narrow track armed as she was with her spear – a brittle bent branch– if the mumma pig should take fright and attack? She took an apple, would've liked a square of cheese or bread, but it was all gone. There was nothing to put water in, but she would find a puddle, demonstrate her survival skills, and still be back for supper before anyone – who might that be? – would notice.

**

It was his time, after the fuss and frivolity of the day, to restore himself to – what, he wondered? Perhaps merely what he could not resolve in his own deeper nature. Still, with the lowering sun at last casting a kindly light and his motor purring under him, and with every mile between the mean town with its milk bar and department store and pharmacy and the convent school and church with the grossly monumental crucifix casting a shadow over everyone from early afternoon until, blessedly, the sun, in a vulgar orange arc, sank into the sea amidst all the crayfish boats and freighters cluttering up that far horizon, he could take a breath at last.

The breath was a song, an Irish Air, that puckered his lips with memory; his father leaning and slouching in the kitchen as if his bones had dissolved in the acid presence of his wife who furiously chopped onions, slapped the tears away, roared at the children to wash up – the tinkers, the peasants with potatoes growing under their fingernails. His father would gather them one by one, remembering with his fingers the roll of curl at the base of his little sister's neck, the fine bird bones of the youngest, as he bathed and wiped them with the rough flannel, soothing the angry hours away. And he himself liked the silence of touching. He liked it when they closed their eyes, watching in the mirror as their eyelids flicked and dropped, his breath blowing back on him from their exposed necks into which he leant coaxing the hair to fall – just so.

Up here atop the mesa, the green swords of vegetation ruffled in her flanks cooling the hot wind that ceaselessly worried at the town, he pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket and while the smoke wreathed his head for a moment then was dispersed upwards, streaming away until it dissipated in the confluence of light and song, he wondered if it was time. The time always came, a restless surging in his guts first but finally when his face, his mouth could no longer shape themselves into what was right and necessary, then it was a relief to not fight, could no longer maintain, and move on.

The darkness rushed in from the east while the faintest green tinge stained the western horizon and the great yellow lights of the port poured over the skeletal cranes. He turned away and saw a slight movement on the track that wound away over the hill. A fox? No, by instinct, her animal knowledge, she would sense him before he was even aware and lurk in the bushes watching and waiting. It was a small girl, curled in on herself, clutching her stomach as if she held a secret there.

**

She saw the red glow of a single angry eye waiting up ahead for her when, at last, she had found the track with its double wheel ruts that headed for home. There it was, that fearful thing, standing on the edge where the road curved around and the world, the whole world, opened up below. Fear clenched at her, she needed to pee, but it was a matter of life and death; he would sniff her out, track her down, no matter what she did. She felt the warmth, the thin dribble like a snake down her thigh and over her knee; drops like blood in the red dust. The eye spun high in the sky and arced over the cliff but the dark bulk of the figure remained. She watched and all was silence, all around her the world waited in a hush, and it was lonely after all being at the center, the one who made the next moment come.

**

He sighed at his own reluctance, or excitement – he couldn't work out which. A moment ago he could have escaped, from himself, this town, the slowly tightening bonds of obligation, the temptation to blow it all away, come what may. A final drag of his cigarette, the smoke scouring away the last vestiges of inaction. He flicked the butt and watched it sail high and over the rim falling like a comet over the poor houses and roads and lives of those below.

She was gone, slipped past perhaps- the little creeping thing - or she had retreated into the thick scrub that lined the track watching and waiting for him to leave – or follow, find her, hunt her down for her own good, deliver her from the evil that clustered around the edge of the day.

Writers in love

The twining night curls like a secret
 We gasp, one on the other, for oxygen.
 Distance a million miles
 Space limitless
 The other a void

What does history mean to us,
 Who slip and slide along the dizzy
 Curve of wishes and fear?
 And who will read the words
 We spoke to the sky
 In question of you and I?

The moon is a light
The crowding sky presses close
They come, each alone, to touch
She of a thousand words
He that never spoke
Witness only ink, paper.

You speak, my lips move
Those mute words roll away
And gather the world
All those striped stones and
Mottled leaves;
Everything subtle and distinct
Becomes one.
Even the curled or far song
Of the birds is held
Gently, in my malformed ear.

Exegesis

**Out of the shadows:
Representations of the reading and writing process
in fiction.**

Introduction

Sarah Woodruff of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles (1969) is variously described as 'Tragedy', 'the French Lieutenant's whore', and likened by the narrator to Calypso who lures sailors to their death. The character of Charles has recently read *Madame Bovary* and when he looks at Sarah, the name of Emma Bovary springs to his mind. Sarah is a mystery; she is the compelling subject of speculation and interpretation. The character of Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was partly inspired by the doomed figure of Tess of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. I have also as a reader and a writer felt compelled to rewrite the fate of Tess, get her to take action, resist the blandishments of Alec or refuse to substantiate Angel's moral claims. However, every attempt to rescue fictional characters from their fictional fates, every re-reading of Tess, is also over-writing.

From the development of the romantic author as solitary genius to the status of author-function, from the reader as passive recipient to the aggressive source of all meaning, the categories of reader and writer have often been conceived as binary opposites representing the poles of passivity and production. The question of narrative authority in this case must rest with one or the other. Conversely, when subjectivity itself is conceived as dispersed and contingent, authority disappears and meaning becomes a momentary and partial event in time.

This exegesis examines the locus of narrative authority and requires some attention to the theories of textuality and its various interpretations. However, the more compelling focus is the operation of this argument in various fictional works – the question of narrative authority as played out between author and reader. The creative component of the thesis, the manuscript ‘Tex Surfacing’, is a complementary exploration of the notions of narrative truth, narrative authority and the relationship between reading, writing and subjectivity. The characters of ‘Tex Surfacing’ play out the argumentative positions of author versus reader, and reading versus writing in order to establish who gets to tell the story and what, indeed, the story is.

Though half in love with any author whose novel I enjoy – imagining myself in their chair pulled up to the writing desk, grasping the pen and feeling the thrust of those words coursing onto the page – it is eventually the experience of reading and my immersion in an alternative narrative that I most treasure. The ambition to write, however, requires a doubled reading experience; on the one hand the affective experience and on the other a close attention to the discursive manipulation of language. Like most developing writers my earliest poems, stories, and almost completed novels are emulations of an authorial style. Reading novels is a kind of apprenticeship into a particular form of language. As reading subjects have the recourse of hundreds of years of the novel form; the literary canon is those distant voices echoing through a progression of influences and intertexts down through the ages, no one author or era or genre the progenitor of our own writing. Our own personal libraries, then, whilst a touchstone for our most immediate influences, are only indicative of the potential intersections and allusions in which all literary works share. Each individual literary text is worked upon by the vagaries of history and the interpretative capacity of every reader.

I have located myself as a research subject within this exegesis in relationship to the categories of reader/writer and the reading/writing

process. Inasmuch as memory may involve acts of deception, I trace the impulse to write from my earliest memories of reading within the family environment to a library of literary works which formed the tissue of citations that became 'Tex Surfacing'. Within my family, reading was a constant, and literature was a touchstone of experience wherein every event or feeling or characteristic could be likened to the qualities and stories within a book. A habit of self-narrativization and unhealthy immersion in the life of fictional characters is a mode of reading that over-runs the page and leads, eventually, to writing.

The novel 'Tex Surfacing' was written over three years during my PhD candidature. I have a folder full of stories and early drafts from which this final product eventually emerged. The process of writing, choosing and editing is evident to me in the final text; the ghost of an adjective or an adverbial phrase deleted in a fit of good taste still lingers, the hasty and embarrassing grammatical mistakes now corrected, the decision to rename a minor character because his name rhymes with that of the main character, the compression or expansion of time and events as the narrative sprawled or, conversely, pinched tight against my failure to imagine fully, or well, enough. At this point it is impossible for me to approach this text with a reader's anticipation; I read the end into the beginning, my mind looping at the first paragraph into the climactic scene – is it foregrounded?

I also kept a writing journal, as I always do, which fulfilled a number of functions. I write longhand into a notebook and some notes are textual asides – questions of motivation, plot, or simple logistics of dates and settings that need to be resolved to ensure that the fictional world is believable. These longhand notes are then transcribed into a Word document on the computer and during this process I have often also written about and around the overall project; the theoretical and intellectual concerns which are filtered through the discourse and story. Matters

pertaining to the everyday leak in; it is a diary after all and charts the days and hours not only of this writing process but also my life as it intervenes or finds its way into the script. The writing journal, fragmented and incomplete as it is, is a narrative of the subjectivity of the writer and, more importantly, a site of investigation of the intentions that I brought to bear on the proposed manuscript and an analysis of my writing as it progressed¹.

In the process of writing the exegesis and the novel, I spent a lot of time perusing the net and the library for authors' explication and description of their writing process – the room in which they sat, the tools they used, how they began, how they finished and how they 'felt' before, during and after the writing was finished². A number of these writers, actively engage with the notion of the 'author' in their works and I turned to John Fowles and J.M. Coetzee as an example of this practice. Fowles and many other writers keep an accompanying journal during their writing process and these provided a useful comparison to the writing process and the resultant text and, for the biographical reader, a secondary narrative which conflates the life of the writer and his/her writing process, with the text.

Alongside the early writing of the manuscript, I reconstructed my own reading history during the 70s to allow myself to imagine how those literary works might influence, or mirror, identity development. A couple of these texts, *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* which I read as prescribed texts for high school, in turn led me to more contemporary reworkings or reimaginings of those earlier works. They are, respectively, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Just as for Rhys and Fowles, it was the poetical figures that stayed with me; the mad woman in the attic, Tess's rosebud mouth. I used a contemporary reworking of the figure of Tess in 'Tex Surfacing' with the intention of re-empowering a young woman

¹ A complete copy of the typed notebook is included at Appendix A.

² Guardian.co.uk. (2009). "Writer's Rooms." Retrieved 6 August 2011, 2011, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/writersrooms>.

to go and do battle with all the representations she has been prey to. Those early readings, all those texts from the 19th century, had insidiously worked upon my conception of the female and therefore I both furiously resisted and succumbed to these representations.

If a literary text does something to its readers, it also simultaneously reveals something about them. Thus literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, inclinations, and eventually our overall makeup.

(Iser 1989:vii)

I also read at this time the biography of Jean Rhys (Angier 1992) and John Fowles's notebooks (Fowles 2003; Fowles 2006). The thrust of my research was an attempt to find evidence of the *process* of writing, and how elements of the writer's disposition and experience find their way into the text. I read many novels, writers' interviews, biographies of writers, and books of literary theory with this question uppermost in my mind. At this point I began to construe myself as a sort of research subject, as 'writer' or 'reader' in these configurations. My theoretical notebooks, as an accompaniment to reading, trace the interpretative struggle which is resolved in an act of rewriting. Cixous says that 'writing starts with reading' and whereas I had previously understood this to mean a physical movement from passivity to activity, I now came to believe that a particular form of reading *a/ways* leads to a type of writing that is not necessarily a physical act and, therefore, does not leave a material trace.

When Cixous (1990:15) says that 'we are made by what we read – writing starts with reading', she is referring not only to desire and motivation but equally to the effect of our immersion in language. Poststructuralist narratology delineates the narrative levels where textual power and influence reside. In a hierarchical system that owes a lot to its structuralist and

formalist precursors, the author and reader reside at the topmost level, the level of non-fictional communication. The top of the narratological framework is also the level of textuality (O'Neill 1994) where contexts of subjectivity, history and society come to bear on the work both in the guise of the writing process and the interpretative strategies that the reader is able to employ. If readers are, metaphorically, writers, then writers are also readers both metaphorically and literally in as much as writers also read, sometimes voraciously, and they must also occupy the position of reader in relation to their own writing. The writer has an additional subjectivity operating during the process of putting pen to paper, they are doubled, imagining a figure, that of the implied reader, then reading their own work back to themselves. The fragmented and open-ended nature of the writing process closely resembles the reading process located as it is in particular times and spaces. What I have come to understand about the nature of the subject as reader, I believe can equally be applied to the figure of the author. Dimock points out that when we talk about the reader 'we are still bound to encounter not a unified entity but a sedimented construct, a figure traversed by time and dispersed in time, making its staggered appearances in a variety of stages, in its residual, established and emergent forms, and through its inflections by class, gender, and race' (1997:642).

'Tex Surfacing' was initially conceived as a creative work that would explore the power of a fictional author to construct and indeed conceive the 'truth' that lay at the centre of the story. The means by which this was achieved changed over the process of writing. As the work developed, and this can be traced in the writer's journal, narrative sympathy moved from the position of the writer to the reader. For purposes of plot, I changed my initial conception of point of view from the writer to the reader. The reader, my writerly eye deduced, had more freedom to adopt various positions whether they be disbelief, or appropriation, or judgment. The reader had freedom to range over the text, applying a forensic eye or the luxury of immersion into the

reading experience. Tex relies on the available texts and her developing capability as a reader to ascertain what will be judged to be truth. 'Tex Surfacing' ultimately figures a tight third person point of view through Tess, or Tex, or Tessa. Of course, all of Tex's assumptions, deductions and her very practice are both a form of close reading and also the writing of an alternative text.

As my theoretical reading progressed along with the decisions over choice of voice and narrative positioning in 'Tex Surfacing', I became overly replete with psychological and philosophical explanations of subjectivity, agency, history and materiality. Whilst this is the material of the discourse of 'Tex Surfacing' and my attendant exegesis, I needed to find a method of testing the text. Once I had moved through a review of *what* a text does in relation to its effect, and *why* it does in relation to the discursive intentions of the implied author, my concern then was to *how* it does in relation to the actual textual material and the building blocks of language and grammar. Narratology has been criticized for its lack of attention to the historicity of texts, and therefore the socio-political dimensions of engagement or otherwise. Fludernik, however, argues that 'descriptive narratological categories also provide [us] with ideas that are decisive for [our] interpretative textual work'(2009:9). The 'us' that Fludernik is addressing is the reader and, as I have mentioned earlier, this category must also include writers as they are engaged in a process of interpretation, much like reading, during their writing process. Bal (1997) asserts that narratology, as a heuristic tool, presents a system to examine how a text is structured and where the agency and responsibility of the reading position can be assessed.

Until early 2008, my exegesis was developing as a close reading of a number of literary texts, paying particular attention to literary representations of the author and the reader. The object was to investigate how these

representations might come to bear on how we construct ourselves as reader and writers. I kept separate notebooks for my comments and responses to these novels, associated journal articles and theoretical books. Although the theoretical underpinnings of this draft were applicable to the creative process and the overall scope of the thesis, the resulting text was, quite consciously, distanced in form and content from the creative work and the writing journal. The narrator of the exegesis was omniscient and the language was formal and striving for objectivity. The silencing, or deletion, of the above voices was my attempt to conform to an academic authorial style and was in response to challenges from the academy regarding the legitimacy of a Creative Arts PhD.

Although the demands and structure of a creative arts thesis will invariably result in different perspectives and approaches to themes and theoretical issues, the exegesis as it now stands is *explicitly* structured as a dialogic exchange between different voices that are constructed as a standpoint from which these perspectives can emerge. In using the term ‘standpoint’³ I am invoking the uses and value of the personal and private voice, not as opposed to, but in conjunction with, the formal scholarly voice and the textually constructed voice of the narrator and ‘implied author’ of the novel. In an attempt to break down a simplistic dichotomy between author/reader and writing/reading, I will contend that the situated subjectivity of the writer slides, under different conditions, into the situated subjectivity of the reader, and vice versa of course.

Structure of the exegesis

The exegesis has four chapters, the first and the last chapters, respectively are descriptive of the process of developing the manuscript ‘Tex Surfacing’

³ Hartsock, Nancy C. M. (1999). The Feminist Standpoint Revisited & Other Essays. Boulder, Westview Press.

and then an exploration of the text to see how the various positions of the reader and the writer as they have been explored theoretically come to bear on the fictional work.

The middle two chapters, using a narratological approach, analyse particular texts which informed the development of the exegesis and the manuscript. Chapter Two looks at textual representations of the reader and the writer in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Foe*, particularly in regard to the positioning of the narrator and the narratee and how this comes to bear on the reader, implied or actual. Chapter Three undertakes a biographical reading of Tim Winton in relation to his book of interlinked short stories, *The Turning*. This chapter also, however, undertakes a close reading of the stories using a narratological apparatus. The positioning of these two approaches, biographical and narratological, was intended as a performance of the inherent subjectivity of any interpretation and a companion to the drama which is played out in 'Tex Surfacing'.

Chapter One, From Notebook to Novel examines literary biography and how it finds the causal link between the author and the text by close examination of the other texts that remain as material proof of the life of the writer and the process of writing. More recently and increasingly, the author and his/her motivations have become accessible through biography, interviews and online presence in various forms. Despite my academic studies, the idea of the writer as solitary genius has persisted and I have assiduously inspected the writing desks, the day-to-day life, and every utterance of the author to uncover the mystery of how to write. As a reader I have conflated the writer with the literary work and, therefore, created an extratextual reading which far exceeds the text of the novel. The roman a clef has aided this romance; from Hemingway to Kerouac, representations of the author and the writing process perpetuate the idea of the singular struggle of the subject to express an original and new voice.

Biographical reading is undertaken to try and find the figure of the author in the text. In this case, the writer's working notebook gives substance to the traces of the 'actual'⁴ author's voice in the text; a voice that the forensic reader constructs from the rag-tag of numerous sources. These extratextual sources provide an opportunity for a ludic, and imagined, engagement with the writer and, more importantly, the writing process.

Through these notebooks, the writing process is revealed as congruent with the process of reading, as the notes express the individual subject's struggle with language and its interpretations. Whilst the possibilities of language are innumerable, hence the undeciderability of the text, the individual's progress through language is not. As readers and writers, this progress, situated as it is within the temporal and the particular, is effaced and mysterious exactly because of these factors. However, the writing process as recorded in the notebook and journal is an artifact of this event. I contend that the writer's notebook juxtaposed with the written text provides compelling evidence of how, as individuals, language becomes meaning (and vice versa).

Despite the above assertion, another central theme of the creative work, 'Tex Surfacing', is the intrinsic unreliability of narration, compounded by the effects of narrative voice – Who speaks? Do they speak the truth? Despite being an avid reader from a young child, quite early in my reading career I began to question the position of the narrative voice particularly in regard to whose stories that narrative stance might efface or deface. Perhaps it was a burgeoning inkling to write or, at least, overwrite those narratives where the female character lacked substance. The questions I was asking in my own journal, my reading of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Foe*, and my own propensities, led me to write 'Tex Surfacing' in the third person, with the focaliser being the character of Tess who is a reader. Tex, as she appears

⁴ Not the implied author as called for by the text, but a reader's construction.

initially, is a naïve reader believing that texts are, or contain the seeds of, truth. However, as the plot develops it becomes clear to Tex that her aunty as ‘the author’ may be eliding some of the facts and making use of language to devise her own (narratorial) ends. Tess is both a biographical reader and a resisting reader. A strongly focalized reader character, I deduced, had more agency to interrogate the inadequacies of narrative representation than an author character. Tess’s limited range of reading, however, renders her unable to interpret the available texts. The decision to narrate from this limited reader’s point-of-view had repercussions on the manuscript which are taken up in Chapter Four.

The early inspiration for the plots and characters of ‘Tex Surfacing’ came from childhood memories and from a survey I conducted with my three sisters of the novels we read as young women in the 70s. The concept of shared reading amongst a community of women, and a personal library that reflects or influences our own life narrative is taken up in ‘Tex Surfacing’ and in this chapter of the exegesis.

Chapter Two, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and the female reader concentrates on some specific formative texts from my personal library that I had the urge to overwrite, namely *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. John Fowles had written *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as a reworking of Victorian morality and the doomed Tess. This representation of Tess, however, had left me as a reader wanting to recover her from yet another male gaze. It became clear that reading engages widely differing interpretative strategies and, therefore, meanings. Despite this, the Canon creates a shared reading history for a certain class of English-speaking and educated subjects. Novels such as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, *Foe* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* explicitly address this shared reading history and, therefore, allude to the actual reader and the actual author that haunt the margins of the text.

In each of these cases the author commences from the standpoint of a close reader of the earlier text. How they go about it, however, engages wildly differing narrative strategies and the positioning of the narrator in relationship to narrative authority. The discussion in this chapter analyses the use of narrative technique and what effect this has on the discourse, and on the implied and actual reader.

Narrative voice is the most overt indicator of narrative authority within a text, and *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* narrative voice moves between an omniscient third person narrator to a first person narration embodying a figure of the author during the writing process. This rupture of diegetic levels has the effect of interrupting readerly immersion.

This dramatized author character of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* addresses fictional readers; in the early chapters the fictionalized reader is Victorian, hypocritical and judgemental. In later chapters the fictionalized contemporary reader is characterized as voyeuristic; overspilling the story to ask questions of the author. The relationship between the actors on the diegetic levels is the real drama of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The paired communicative modes of narrator/narratee, implied author/implied reader and actual author and actual reader are thrown into stark relief by this diegetic play.

Foe opens with a first person account by Susan Barton. This is, however, in quotation marks, so the address is made to an invisible reader or listener. Susan Barton requires someone to literally 'authorise' her story which has been elided by (a fictional) history. The narration of *Foe* is subtle, unlike that of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and even the fictionalized author, Foe, is weary and incapable of writing. Each of the characters in *Foe* requires an

audience, and each of them is unable to use language as a communicative practice without the material presence of another.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the metadiegetic narrator operates as both reader and author, writing then commenting, reading then interpreting, becoming so immersed in the play of the story they lose themselves, their agency, momentarily. Despite an assertion by Fowles to recuperate the figure of Tess, Sarah Woodruff does not succeed in getting a voice in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* that enables her to be the author of her own story. The reader, however, has some agency to overwrite the text. Susan Barton's account requires the coherence of an active audience, an addressee, and this is, eventually, the role of the reader and the reader alone.

Foe and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* invite discursive play through the unusual positioning of the reading/writing and author/writer nexus. These two texts self-consciously invite the reader to overstep the traditional boundaries of author and reader to partake in the construction of meaning-making, or textuality. Other texts may unwittingly hail the particular reader into a communicative mode that is not inherent in the discourse.

Chapter Three: Tim Winton and the Located Reader takes us back to the biographical reading position, but also examines a set of texts by the one author that correspond to events, places and characters in the author's own life.

Where *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Foe* engage with rereading of the literary canon and play with an autobiographical author, other texts bring the reader into an uncomfortable proximity with the author, not due to the discourse but to the material conditions of the reading and writing process.

Tess in 'Tex Surfacing' stands too close to the author, Sarah, to be able to separate her life from the text. For Tess, Sarah's writing is a mythologized account of her own life. 'Tex Surfacing' takes up the notion of life as narrative and, more specifically, life and experience modeled on literary narrative.

I am the same age as Tim Winton, we live in the same town and I am very familiar with the settings of most of his novels. Like the 'resisting reader' the located reader is at odds with the implied reader called for by the text. While the 'resisting reader' is unable (or unwilling) to comply with the implied reader due to a lack of identification with the discourse, the located reader feels overinscribed in the discourse. This chapter again locates me as a research subject – a reader and a writer – to understand how the carefully constructed narrative can fail if the actual reader is not ideally situated to enable the discourse to work.

Reading biographically, in this case, limits the open-ness of the text and makes it explicable in relation to a fixed point: the writer's life and the reader's life. This has the function of the author's own narrative being recognized as the authentic source, much as is played out in 'Tex Surfacing'.

Tim Winton's *The Turning* reprises characters and setting from his earlier novels. The stories also reprise biographical details from Winton's life such as the time and place of the fabula, the age and social position of the narrator and/or focalizer, events and memories from his own life as recorded in interviews. The practice of re-reading has been regarded by some as a means to encounter a younger self through early reading or the sum of one's library. In the construction of a narrativity of self, however, not only literary texts, but places, spaces and time are elements of the discourse.

The chapter also addresses the qualities of places and spaces as markers of the particular way we tussle with ownership of narrative practices. The use of specific geographical spaces as characters in fiction is always fraught with the issue of readers reading outside of the text. Although Winton has said that he writes 'for the reader anywhere', problems of interpretation arise where the reader and the writer have a narrative stake in the time/place as represented in the book.

The autobiographical textuality of *The Turning*, quite apart from any over-readings by the located reader, is enabled by the differing narrative positions and how they interact with each other through the linked stories. I undertake a close reading of the stories and, using narratological tools, unpick these elements – narrator, focalization, elements of the fabula – to present a table of congruences and departures in the discourse. The narrating distances in *The Turning* are not dependent alone on instances of third or first person narration, but also the temporal distance between the narrating voice and the narrated instance. It is in those stories where the narrator is reflecting back, in a time future to the younger self in the story, that the reader is alerted to the governing consciousness behind the discourse. This is not, of course, Tim Winton or even the implied author, but a readerly outcome of the textualised narrative voice.

Chapter Four: The Author and the Reader is the final chapter of the exegesis. The journey from idea, writing notebook to manuscript is complete. All of the concerns and themes discussed in the previous chapters find themselves represented in 'Tex Surfacing', either within the narrative discourse or embedded within the plot and action.

This chapter examines representations of the reader and the writer and reading and writing in 'Tex Surfacing'. The first section excises descriptions of the characters as readers and their own idiosyncratic reading processes.

The theorized reading positions I have examined elsewhere are here personified: biographical and located reading, feminist and resisting reading and, the more consciously controlled, close reading or forensic reading, as I like to call it.

Tex as a child is, obviously, a naïve reader and with her mother, Fay, enables a characterization of what is a phenomenological account of reading. These characters also personify the 'interpretative community' of Stanley Fish's account and the uses of romance and genre fiction within a community of women as analyzed by Janice Radway. Fay is the personification of Radway's 'romance reader'. She is also a consumer of the materiality of publishing – the familiarity, the safety, the 'already read' of popular fiction.

As Tex gets older she first resents the lack of strong female characters then finally rejects much of the literary Canon. She becomes what Rita Felski identifies as a 'resisting reader'. Notwithstanding this however, Tex's identity development in relationship to sexuality and male/female intimacy is still dependent upon the literary models she is familiar with. She likens herself to Emma Bovary and, of course, Tess.

Tex's reading position is, however, complicated by her relationship with the author, Sarah. For Tex, the text obscures and obfuscates the truth of her own history and material standpoint. The idea of the 'located reader, as discussed in the previous chapter is taken up here in 'Tex Surfacing'.

Tex attempts to unravel the mystery of Sarah and the shared events of family history by undertaking a biographical reading. She shares this predisposition with Randall who, however, reads for illumination and higher truth. For Randall, the veracity and worth of the text is measured against the stature of the author. In this, Randall echoes the exhortations of Matthew

Arnold and it is the moral failings of the individual author that cause a schism between the text and the reading experience.

The character of Skye does not read at all. He is openly hostile to the lies and romanticism of the novel and poetry, though he does have a fondness for country and western music and the lyrics of Johnny Cash.

All of the above characters discuss their reading, and intrinsic to the conversations is the character of the author, the writing process and the value of the outcomes. It is only Fay who has a relatively uncomplicated relationship between her reading and the figure of the author: she trusts the author to fulfill her expectations. Tex, Randall and Skye are all, to varying degrees, hostile towards the figure of the author, if not reading itself.

The second section of this chapter examines the representation of the authors, Sarah and Richard, and their writing processes. Whereas the previous section on reading shows the characters reflecting on the nature of the author and the writing process, Sarah and Richard pay little attention to reading and the reader. Like my conclusion of the narrator position in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the writers in 'Tex Surfacing' are their own readers.

Richard and Sarah are observed by the other characters primarily because they are writers and therefore threaten to either steal or misrepresent the narratives of the others. Sarah is an enigmatic character, like Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and therefore Tex's reading of Sarah's writing always over-runs the page in an attempt to penetrate the character of the author. Sarah communicates with her readers via a blog and in this she states that all of her writing is autobiographical, though allegorical.

There is, however, very little explication on the writing process from either of these two characters; there are mere glimpses of Sarah or Richard scribbling away at their desks or an occasional comment in regard to the struggle to find the correct words. Sarah makes comments in regard to the 'muse' or characters making decision for themselves (in reference to the narrator's comments in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), but there is almost no attention paid to the actual work or editing and re-drafting. Richard also struggles 'finding the right word, the correct arrangement of sounds', but these references are occasional and oblique in 'Tex Surfacing'.

What is foregrounded by having two writer characters is the historical struggle for women to assert themselves not only as writers, but characters warranting a deeper representation in literature than is found in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Richard, despite his incipient alcoholism and depression, has a career that supports his writing and also the opportunities to teach workshops and perform his poetry. Like Jane Austen, Sarah works in small domestic spaces, at the kitchen table or on her bed and her dedication to writing is in opposition to her identity as a suitable woman or partner.

The ultimate intention to use a closely focalized third person point-of-view through Tex, was to position the implied reader to identify with the readers in 'Tex Surfacing' and therefore deconstruct the literary work done by Sarah and Richard. Tex, though a resisting reader, cannot, in the end, resist the seduction of storytelling. She asks, one more time, for Sarah as the author to stitch together all the disparate events and experiences to make a coherent narrative. 'Tex Surfacing' ends with four randomly arranged excerpts, stories and poems from Richard and Sarah. The inference being that these scraps

may lead us back into the text for a second closer reading or, perhaps, a completely different one⁵.

⁵ Tex's failure is the result of her not claiming the agency of the reader, to recontextualize the material, to not actively engage with these peripheral texts and, most importantly, she maintains the rigid dichotomies of author/reader and text/not text. She cedes authorship to the writer.

Chapter One: From notebook to novel

Literary biographers pore over the notebooks, diaries and letters of their subject in an attempt to create a narrative that explores and, ultimately, proves the causal link between the history, geography and lived experiences of the author and the resulting fictional work. The working notebook in this case is proof of the writer's control of the ineluctable progression of language from concept to draft to completed work. Biographical criticism places the writer as the central governing authority of language and its text and any subsequent reading or interpretation of it. Over the last fifty years the critical emphasis has shifted to the text itself and/or reading, as products or processes that are constantly becoming. Monolithic conceptions of the author and therefore authoritative meaning have been challenged and the experience of the text and the production of meaning have been ceded to the interpretative strategies and economies of reading. Wolfgang Iser has argued that a text always contains 'blanks' that only the reader can fill (1978) though Umberto Eco (1979) differentiates between 'open' texts which require the reader's collaboration to create meaning and 'closed' texts, such as a Mills and Boon romance, in which meaning is predetermined prior to the reading. From Reader-Response theory to a phenomenological focus on experience to the final rupture which displaced the Author as God (Barthes 1977:148), the tendency in literary theory over the last fifty years has been to shift interpretative authority progressively from the author, to the reader and, finally, the text with all its opposing codes and aporias (Selden, Widdowson et al. 1997).

In the redress of the balance of where interpretation or, indeed, even apprehension of the text resides, there has been a tendency for the writer to be relegated to the position of yet another reader. In this position, language

will exceed the intentions and the interpretative apparatus of both the reader and the writer. As Barthes says, “literature is . . . the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (1977:143). Therefore, the writing process and the historically located subject of the author have tended to become conflated with the reader, adrift in the possibilities and potentialities of language. If we accept that all subjectivity is provisional, then the process of writing, configured as it is within the temporal, does not produce a singular authorial entity that is embedded within the text (or located outside it), but an array of positions that shift between the poles of activity and receptivity, or reading and writing. Just as reading is marked by *différance*⁶ (Derrida 1978), the writing process is also located within a shifting though materially located time/space. The text, of course, is not reliant on the biography of the author, though the biographies of authors are invariably reliant upon an examination of their writings to illuminate that which is not materially evident in the other artefacts of their lives. The writer and the forensic reader, therefore, can track a lived history from text back to writing in the incidental writing – the diaries, letters and journals - that precede and occur after the matter of the text. The book is a collection of disorder masked by the appearance of material order and unity. An extratextual engagement with the journals, interviews and biographies of the author, however, creates a ludic space for an imagined engagement with the writer and the writing process. Rushdie writes:

Literature comes into being at the boundary between the self and the world, and during the act of creation this boundary softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the author and the author to flow out into the world. The reader and the author merge into a collective being, who writes when he reads and reads when he writes. (1991:427)

⁶ Inasmuch as it over-reaches the words on the page and that meaning is always deferred.

The act of creation that Rushdie alludes to is the process of reading and the process of writing that happens in a particular time, in a particular space and, of course, to a particular person.

Despite the ascendancy of reading in the contemporary field of literary theory, the burgeoning of the internet has provided another extratextual means for the reader to engage with the author and her/his writing process. Whilst every reader brings a culturally conditioned or idiosyncratic mode or capability to their reading, this second reading irreducibly links the author and their individual writing process back to the text. I certainly do not want to mount a counter-revolution that re-sites the author as a singular point for interpretation of the text or court the ‘intentional fallacy’, but I do want in this exegesis to pay attention to the fact that an activity has occurred – the actual physical rendering of words upon the page – and that evidence of this activity remains in the form of notebooks and first drafts that can be a powerful locus of investigation into the subject’s struggle with language, meaning, agency and communication. This focus does not preclude the agency of the reader but the reading process as it occurs is marked by a lack of material evidence. The writer’s notebook, however, offers compelling evidence of the subject-in-language and also language in its process from the individual to the text (Carr and Zanetti 2001).

Recent debate regarding the rights or wrongs of publishing Nabokov’s last manuscript against his express wishes are a testimony to enduring notions of inherent authorship and, more particularly, a belief that the ‘text’ will assemble itself as a whole despite the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the historical ‘work-in-progress’⁷. Nabokov had requested that, on his death, the incomplete manuscript be destroyed and, one could guess, that he is

⁷ The term ‘work-in-progress’ (WIP) has been especially taken up by Fantasy and Sci-Fi writers on their weblogs. Excerpts of the WIP are posted on the weblog for readers comment. ‘WIP’ in these cases tend to cede agency to the writer-as-reader who struggles with interpretation, but will, and must, ultimately assert themselves as Author of the work and close off interpretative possibilities.

establishing the right to judge the moment of provisional finality when the process of writing and rereading becomes 'text'. "“Save it,” says Irish writer John Banville. “Burn it,” says English playwright Tom Stoppard’ (Marsh 2008). Stoppard argues that due to its fragmentary nature, the manuscript does not reflect the textual product that Nabokov was intending to produce. As a writer, he also has a shot at the ‘Nabokov industry’:

In all honour, we must honour the only fact: that he said “Burn it.” Everything else is speculation – mostly self-serving speculation on the part of the Nabokov industry, the last people we should listen to. (Marsh 2008)

Banville, however, feels that the personal wishes and whims of the writer expire not only on his death, but also at the moment that the book is in the public domain:

Personally, I would very much like to see what Nabokov was working on at the end, though my expectations would not be immensely high. A great writer is always worth reading, even at his worst. (Marsh 2008)

For Banville, any writing becomes 'text' once it is framed by the critical attention of a reader whilst Stoppard identifies closely with the figure of the author in the midst of the writing process.

Derrida famously stated that there is nothing outside of the text (1976:158), and readers, writers and critics continue to pursue the figure of the author, in its many guises, in peripheral texts. In this respect, the working notebooks, the physical evidence of an amended first draft, exert a powerful fascination as they come to bear on the reading experience, if not the text itself. Nabokov's 'manuscript' may provide some clues to the novel which never

eventuated and, in this way, are a record of the writing process rather than an accurate predictor or fragment of that supposed work. Sartre proposes that 'the writer meets everywhere only his knowledge, his will, his plans, in short, himself' (1988:51). Yet despite the difference in the processes in which the writer and reader are engaged, the goal is always to use the inexact medium of language to communicate: Sartre goes on to say that 'the art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy' (1988:69).

In terms of a democracy of prose, where the reader and the writer are equally mystified, or swimming in the choices that an inexact representation through language can deploy, the writer's notebook points to the sort of work, and discursive, linguistic choices, that interpretation requires. The writer's notebook, then, is a point of reference to the agency that is inherent in any subject embarking upon interpretation and, indeed, the communicative practice that is language. The choices that the writer makes are recorded in the notebook or journal; the choices resulting from the events, books, discourses that circulate in the material world of the writing process. As Barthes says: 'the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them' (1977:146).

Whilst the book can, and must, speak for, or of, itself, the notebook opens up the possibility of a reading outside of that specific text; a reading that renegotiates the relationship between the reader and the writer, and the reader and the text.

When we encounter the personal diaries or notebooks of an historical figure, the first question that arises will be one of authenticity. By their very nature, diaries are the most personal and monologic of genres and the reader may

question what alterations and deletions have been made by the writer or an editor prior to publication. Virginia Woolf always intended that her famous diaries would be 'the quarry for a later memoir' and gave herself leave to discard entries as she saw fit (Duyfhuizen 1992:75). Other than the facts of the lived life which can, perhaps, be verified from other sources, there is no evidence for the reader to judge the honesty or authenticity of the diary. Duyfhuizen makes the point, however, that 'the diary text . . . is never edited with the ending already known' (1992:76; Marsh 2008). Hence, the writer's journal and the working manuscript, with all its comments and scrawls, point to the possibility of an alternative text, or many texts, to that of the published work.

The writer's notebook, however, illuminates the similarities between the reading process and the writing process. *The Golden Bowl* was published in 1904 but *Henry James's Notebooks* offer some keys to the development of a particular character on May 22 1892. James saw somebody 'civilised, large, rich, complete, but strongly characterised, essentially a product. Get the action – the action in which to launch him – it should be a big one. I have no difficulty in seeing the figure – it comes, as I look at it' (2008). This notebook extract describes quite precisely the anticipations inherent in reading, the projections of what lies ahead in the text. Only after the fact, when the novel is complete, can the draft scenes or ideas in the writer's journal be reconceived as fragments of a whole text. The writer's journal then serves a forensic purpose, uncovering the evidence of how language becomes meaning.

The author and reader are the subjects of a communicative mode above the level of discourse/story, but I will argue that the subject of the author during the writing process, dips above and below the textual levels, and back and forth between the poles of reading and writing. The journal then is historical

evidence of a process, that cannot extrapolated from the text, though traces of that process may remain.

Precursors and early days

Raymond Williams (Storey 2003:60) explored ‘structures of feeling’ which ‘link the personal to specific historical and cultural moments’ (Pearce 1997:11), that is, ideology as it is ‘experienced from the inside’. Colebrook (1997:149) points out that Williams’ use of experience was crucial for the development of a literary theory which, ‘instead of dismissing the private sphere as an illusion of ideology’ enabled cultural materialists to investigate the ‘politicisation of everyday life and the question of the individual or subject’ (1997:148). The exploration of the journal then is an attempt to unmask how the particular subject of the author grappled with language, reading influences, the context of literary theory and its application to the creative product, the figure of the author and reader as they are constructed by ideology and within language.

An early journal entry in the construction of ‘Tex Surfacing’ illustrates the nature of the early writing process, an idle trawling through memories and images:

15/3/05

It is memory that constructs narrative – the story only becomes story in hindsight. When it is happening it has no meaning or purpose other than the purpose we inscribe it with saying: “It’s like Romeo and Juliet, or Mrs Dalloway, or Tess and Angel” – it’s about the uses of representation.

(Notes)⁸

⁸ A copy of Romance-notes is included at Appendix A. For the sake of clarity, all excerpts from the notes are referenced as such.

From early 2005, when I commenced the PhD, I knew that this creative work would explore the development of narrative, and therefore meaning, from two perspectives: that of a reader, and that of a writer. The narrative reconstruction of memory within an extended family would provide the tension with Tess, the youngest female in the family, being the focalizer or point of view from which the writer is observed. However, in the early imaginings of how the discourse would develop I wanted to maintain some threshold of ambiguity in regard to who was recording and retelling these stories:

29/07/05

The book opens with a chapter of the Jardine/Dowdell story then leads into first-person narration – is she reading or writing? . . . It becomes important at some point for the reader to know if Tess is reading these assorted stories or writing them – is she constructing these fateful romances or is she influenced by them? (Notes)

Initially, Tess was imagined as a romance writer, hence the title of my working journal, 'Romance-notes'. This was taking into account A.S. Byatt's usage of the term borrowed from Nathaniel Hawthorne in her novel *Possession: A Romance*:

' [The writer] has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances . . . of the writer's own choosing or creation . . . The point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us'.

(Byatt 1991:frontispiece)

Tess, at a crucial period of her life, is exploring the history of her female kin. A distant sorrow or scandal in her Aunt Sarah's life has cast a shadow, so it

seemed to the young Tess, over the lives of all the women in the family. As an adult Tess wonders if she can unravel the mystery, hampered as she is by the silence of her mother and Sarah, though as she enters into womanhood they allow her glimpses, give her hints of what it might be:

15/03/05

It was all hush hush – such were lives and flaws treated in her family, but as you approached or crossed some threshold to womanhood these secrets were gradually, partially shared. Is it some sort of moral lesson passed on from generation to generation? Or is it a wish, the desire, the burning need to reconstruct in order to relive these heartbreaks when time and distance has made memory of them?

(Notes)

In 2004 I completed Honours with a creative arts thesis comprising a novella, *Scraping the Bones*, and an exegesis that explored the continuity of a colonial vocabulary in describing the Australian landscape in terms of threat, violence and redemption. *Scraping the Bones* uses a variety of voices originating from colonial settlement up to the present day. These were voices I reconfigured from a number of sources: pioneer women's accounts, explorers' journals, and contemporary media reports. The figures of Grey, an early colonial explorer; Bott, an early settler speared by local Aboriginals; Robert Bogucki, the American who 'lost' himself in the outback; Joanne Lees, the surviving victim of Bradley Murdoch's rampage on a lonely highway in the Northern Territory; and Bradley Murdoch himself, were re-imagined occupying the same geographical space with a fateful intersection of events. In 2002 I wrote a short story *Approaching Bordertown* which is a first person account of a woman escaping her life and driving across the Nullarbor where she picks up a young hitchhiker. She begins to feel threatened as they drive through the night and his slight figure, at least in her imagining, is transformed into that of a serial killer. The story ends

unresolved; is she being led to her fate, or is there a more innocent outcome? There are thematic precursors to 'Tex Surfacing' that are found in my other writing – the 'killer on the road', the intersection of the past with the present – as well as a stylistic and discursive approach – unreliable narration, first person account, transformed memory.⁹

16/08/05

The recollections must be told in 3rd Person to make clear that this is a narrativization of memory. This also gives scope for different POVs but of course with the knowledge that the writer, in this case who is also the narrator, is manipulating the facts. (Notes)

Secrets and lies, the victim and the perpetrator, the 'evidence' of first-person accounts - these issues had fascinated me for a number of years. The books I chose to read reflected this desire to be suspicious or doubting of the 'voice' that presented the story, whether that be an omniscient narrator such as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a first person account such as in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the recounted first person in *Foe*, and certainly all three of these novels put unreliable narration at the center of the dialogic play between the implied author and implied reader.¹⁰ The question of 'who' tells the story and at what narrative level continued to occupy my musings:

25/04/06

Other texts, the 'panorama of what is possible' insert themselves into Tex's consciousness, so she starts to reread these. So is Tex reading

⁹ For example, Tim Winton's *The Turning* (2004) reprises the locations and many of the characters from his earliest works written when he was in his twenties.

¹⁰ The post-modern literary novel is inherently intertextual, and these three novels explicitly refer to their canonical precursors. They are respectively, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Jane Eyre* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Of course, they each have intertextual allusions to social, literary and personal texts specific to the particular 'horizon of expectations' operating at the time of production.

or writing? It could be as it stands now that she is writing a revisional text. . . Of course, the whole writing of 'Tex Surfacing' is the author's attempt to rewrite the story through memory of where she is now.

(Notes)

The above reference to the 'author's attempt' is a rushed mistake in my note taking because I am not, of course, referring to myself, or even a disembodied implied author, but the narrator, unreliable as she is, who selects and describes according to the discursive requirements of her own story. However, it does indicate the confusion of this particular writer as to through which character the narrative will be focalized. Between April and May 2006 as I became deeply immersed in the textual analysis of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, especially as it applied to representations of the author and the reader, it became clear that Tex was not the writer, she was the reader and the embedded narratives were written by Sarah.

25/04/06

.We understand that all of the previous narrative although written from Tess's POV is actually an author who is invading Tess's story. Sarah, an independent woman who continues to transform herself with texts she writes for herself, albeit with the aid of other texts that she uses and is not used by. (Notes)

The Sarah of 'Tex Surfacing' was inspired by the Sarah of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* who in turn was inspired by Tess of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.¹¹ Fowles re-imagines and rewrites the Victorian story of the fallen woman but Sarah remains, however, an enigma to both the narrator and the central male character of Charles just as Tess remains a delectable

¹¹ '[N]ever was an English genius so devoted and indebted to one muse and one muse only. It gave us all his greatest love elegies. It gave us Sue Bridehead and Tess, who are pure Tryphena in spirit' (263).

but mysterious figure to the narrator of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Initially, I had hoped to give 'my' Sarah the final authority she lacked in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; she would not only tell stories, lies even, she would also be the (represented) author and have the narrator's voice. How then, I wondered, could Tess emerge from the weight of history and the stories that surrounded her? If all representation of Tess was at the mercy of a single narratorial voice how could she ever emerge from the shadows?¹² The answer, of course, is that it is through the reader that other interpretations and other representations occur.

The plot of 'Tex Surfacing' slowly emerged during the writing process. Although I had some ideas and events sketched out, the background, motivations and, indeed, the very characters themselves developed in response to the story.

15/05/06

Sarah (though we don't know this) is writing in the present and she also maintains an author's weblog (what would be the strategic problems/advantages with this?) So it could be Tex is in the 1st person? And she is READING and also responds via email and phone calls to Sarah. Is Sarah in jail? . . . then we move to Tess's story – but who is writing this? (Notes)

The above extract from the notes demonstrates the slippery positions inherent in the early writing process. On the one hand, there is a distinctively authorial tone that addresses strategies and results and, on the other hand, the explorative tone of the reader as she processes the available information and poses the questions that must be resolved to enable the progression of

¹² 'Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?' The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* later acknowledges the source from which he writes: 'I have now come under the shadow, the very relevant shadow, of the great novelist who towers over this part of England of which I write. (262)'

the narrative. During the writing process the writer constructs her own reader, as Rushdie has alluded to, swinging between these two subjectivities.

What's the story?

By mid-2006 I had resolved the questions of point-of-view and voice; the story would be told in third person from a limited point-of-view, that is, Tex's. Some of the early drafts of events and episodes had been written in first-person and although I attempted to directly translate these into third-person they eventually had to be substantially rewritten. The only first person narration would appear as excerpts from Sarah's blog and her letters. The embedded narratives, that is, extracts from Sarah's novels and short stories, were also written in third-person. My resolve to use the limited third person point of view was to exploit the 'voice' of the narrator as mediating the 'vision' of Tess as focalizer, in reference to Bal's distinction between the two.

Throughout 'Tex Surfacing' there is another embedded though discontinuous narrative, the poems of Richard, Tex's lover. In the early chapters, these fragments are separated from the main narrative; they tell us about Richard but they are hermetically sealed from the present action. Richard writes from memory, his revelations constructed from hindsight rather than insight. However, Tex later comes to believe that a sort of evidence is available hidden in the prose and is, in the end, the only 'truth' she can trust.¹³

¹³ Richard's poems and Tess's reference to them as 'truth' are intended to underline to the reader the metaphorical nature of the undertaking or, putting it more elegantly, Fowles says: '[A] novel is really a kind of metaphor, a poem about reality rather than a report of it' (Fowles, John (2006). The Journals: Volume Two 1966-1990. New York, Alfred A. Knopf. 28).

Tex is variously called Tess, Tessa and Tex by the main characters – Tex to her mother, herself and others, Tessa to Sarah, and Tess to Richard. Tex is, of course, my authorial play with the idea of a person being a text that is written upon and by others. Sarah's use of Tessa diminishes Tex and keeps her in the position of younger sister or niece and Tess is, as Richard claims when he first meets her, his projection of the romantic and doomed figure of Hardy's Tess onto the object of his affection and musings. The key figures in the narrative are Sarah and Tess and they have been deliberately named to explore how the female figures in an authored work struggle against archetypal representation, especially literary precursors. The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* asserts himself as the sole creator of his characters: 'This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind' (Fowles 1969:97). Later the narrator, foregrounding the slippage of positioning in the writing process, acknowledges his debt to Thomas Hardy and the character of Tess in his own creation of Sarah.

My adolescence in the late 60s coincided with global social and cultural changes just then reaching provincial Perth, and at this time my reading choices diverged from the sphere of my father's literary guidance. He had studied Australian Literature at College in the 50s and had a canon of edifying, educational and nostalgic texts that represented both a disjunction from, and continuity with, earlier colonial literature – *Seven Little Australians*, *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie* and later, *The Getting of Wisdom* and *My Brilliant Career*. My favoured novels, however, were those that enabled me to 'enter' the text through the female character.

The first scene I wrote of 'Romance', as I called the work-in-progress in 2005, sprang from a childhood memory: I recalled a mother and daughter who lived briefly in our tiny town. The mother was a hairdresser and a slightly louche figure in my young eyes, therefore exotic and fascinating.

They seemed to occupy a world that was populated with figures from the romantic novels they read and it was to this fantasy world that Barbara, the daughter, introduced me. Barbara was four years older and I played the part of the secondary characters, acting out at her direction. At the time I drafted the first scene of *Romance* I was conducting research on the *uses* that reading could be put to, especially as Proust (Calinescu 1993:96) says, as 'the only calendars we have kept of days that have vanished'. However, I was also interested in the *influence* of reading on subjectivity:

30/01/06

She is the daughter of a deserted woman – when the story opens they are living in yet another midsized western town. Her mother is a hairdresser so hears all the 'stories' of the women and at home the mother and daughter act out the roles. They also read a lot of romance fiction. Barbara, the daughter, in this way is co-opted into her mother's life and her mother's story and begins to feel she has no story of her own. (Notes)

I shared my reading as a child with my three sisters, and as I grew older with an extended network of sisters, cousins, mother and aunties. We could agree, or disagree, on the actions of the protagonist – the wisdom of 'Tess' making her fatal late confession to 'Angel' or whether Rachel from *The Thorn Birds* was seduced or an equal partner in her unholy relationship with Ralph.¹⁴ Yet there was a common understanding that women were chained to a gendered destiny; their varying degrees of skill, rebelliousness, morality or beauty were but plot devices.

I was writing scenes at this point that were located in the 70s in Perth and they were developing in response to my own memories and experiences

¹⁴ Stanley Fish's concept of 'interpretative communities' does not render the reading entirely subjective but constrains the reading within a field of linguistic competence. (Fish, Stanley E. (1976). "Interpeting the "Variorum"." *Critical Inquiry* 2(3): 465-485.)

and, more particularly, in reflection of the great leap from childhood reading to adult reading:

30/01/06

1970s Part two: they are now living in Perth and Muriel is still hairdressing, but the stories of her customers have radically changed over this period – they want different things now, and Muriel is lost because she has no stories to bring home to act, so she starts to trawl the libraries and second hand bookshops for the novels of the previous ten years. Barbara is in high school and she is being presented with different books and, as is her habit, starts to act out some of these narratives. (Notes)

My tentative thesis title in 2005 was ‘The autobiographical impulses of reading fiction’ and to this end I conducted research into Western Australian high-school reading lists of the 70s, best-sellers of the 70s and also a personal reading list that I compiled with the assistance of my three sisters. It is as follows:

READING LIST 70s– Connolly girls

Title	Author	DO1stP	Comments
The Women's Room.	Marilyn French	1977	Read 3/05 Use this for her coming to the awareness of her oppression.
The Diceman	Luke Rhinhart	1971	Read 4/05
The Far Pavilion	MM Kaye	1979	Read 5/05 Use this in India, with <i>Drifter</i> , <i>Far Pavilions</i> , <i>Siddarta</i>
The Drifters. Caravans	James Michener	1971 1963	India
The Thorn Birds	Colleen McCullough	1977	Roadhouse/ Tess's mother
Steppenwolf Siddartha	Herman Hesse	1961 1973	India
The Timeless Land	Eleanor Dark	1941	Roadhouse/ Frank and James

Shikasta	Doris Lessing	1979	Read 6/05
The Adventurers	Harold Robbins	1968	
Surfacing	Margaret	1979	Read 3/05
The Handmaid's Tale	Atwood	1985	
The teachings of Don Juan	Carlos Castenada	1968	Read 5/05 Richard in Eden
The Crystal Cave	Mary Stewart	1970	
Lord of the Flies	William Golding	1962	Eden
The Catcher in the Rye	J.D.Salinger	1958	Melbourne
To Kill a Mockingbird	Harper Lee	1960	
Jane Eyre	Charlotte Bronte	1848	Later when she is spinning out /Peggy
Cashelmara	Susan	1974	
Penmarric	Howatch	1971	
Woman on the Edge of time	Marge Piercy	1976	Read 5/05 Later when she is spinning out
Lady Chatterley's Lover	D.H. Lawrence	1959	
Tess of the D'Urbervilles	Thomas Hardy	1903	Read 4/05 This pervades the whole story/ Gwen
The Getting of Wisdom	Henry Handel Richardson	1910	Read 3/05 Melbourne/ Emily
In Watermelon Sugar	Richard Brautigan	1970	Read 2/05 Melbourne
Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance	Robert M. Pirsig	1974	Read 2/05
Brave New World	Aldous Huxley	1952	Read 4/05
Fear of Flying	Erica Jong	1973	
Capricornia	Xavier Herbert	1937	
Jamaica Inn	Daphne Du Maurier	1936	Read 6/05
The four-chambered Heart	Anais Nin	1959	Later when she has an affair with a married man
The Fringe Dwellers	Nene Gare	1966	Roadhouse

My Brilliant Career	Miles Franklin	1901	Don't know about this one./Maybe Peggy
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It's a strange assortment of books, much like that of anyone who reads indiscriminately, taking what is offered or recommended by friends and family, or reading what is required. We obviously read many more novels, but the list is what remains in our memory, of what was most influential or marks a certain passage in our own experience. Lynne Pearce (1997: 9) muses on her own reading process as 'an interweaving of textual associations, as some cue in the text prompts us to the scripting of a parallel text based on some aspect of our personal or intertextual experience'. These parallel texts of the reading experience can lead, though not inevitably, to the murky beginnings of a script that surfaces through all these allusions to become a fully formed narrative of its own whilst retaining the ghosts of these other texts, these intertexts.

Unlike most of my other writing, which arises from a real life event or news item that piques my curiosity, in the early stages of writing 'Tex Surfacing' I was concerned with the rationale and the development of the discourse as is clear from the excerpted journal entries above. I had two scenes written; the first with Barbara (later to become Tex) and her mother acting out a scene from a romance novel they had shared and a second scene set in a rural-alternative community where Tess and her boyfriend encounter the charismatic though dangerous Stuart and his German wife. I knew at this stage that Tess as a child and as a young woman filtered experience through the lens of her reading – it was through books that she made sense of the world. I intended to use the reading list I had compiled as markers for the development of the story line as indicated in the table above. For instance, I have marked *In Watermelon Sugar* by Richard Brautigan, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Getting of Wisdom* as texts that would inform the development of the plot and characters in the Melbourne section of 'Tex

Surfacing'. Whilst I can perceive the traces of these influences in the finished product, the story did not proceed as systematically as my initial intention.

One of the beliefs of the Romantic era that endures in the popular imagination, if not the academy, is of the solitary genius visited by the muse and my writing habits appear to have developed in response to this¹⁵. Whilst I use the journal and take notes to ask questions and explore motivations and possible events, the story, per se, develops during the writing process. That is, it is not a logical or 'forced' progression but what follows in the story arises, seemingly, 'inevitably'¹⁶.

29/07/05

Will her memories be in 1st or 3rd person? Should there be one continuous 'other' text or many? It could be off-putting to the reader to have too many. Should it be a historical text or a modern one? It could be like *The Thorn Birds* and move from the past to the present?! Should it be written from a male or female POV, or perhaps it could alternate points-of-view from a few different character? Yes. (Notes)

The above is from the very early stages of story development, but a year later the story, through writing, had unfolded and the backgrounds, appearance, and 'voices' of the individual characters had asserted themselves. These characters seemed to independently make decisions, or fill in details, hitherto unknown to me. The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, as the dramatized author, says: 'When Charles left

¹⁵ 'The Romantic conception of inspiration thus tended to ignore or minimize revision as the central locus of creative activity because composition presumably comes effortlessly to geniuses' (Calonne, David (2006). *Creative Writers and Revision. Revision: History, Theory, and Practice*. A. A. B. Horning. Santa Barbara, University of California.)

¹⁶ 'Dialogue flows, future situations float down from nowhere; I spend a lot of time just sitting and listening to all the messages from the unwritten' (Fowles, John (2006). *The Journals: Volume Two 1966-1990*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf. 171).

Sarah on her cliff-edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy' (Fowles 1969:98) (98). It seemed that my task was to fill in the gaps, to render faithfully this world that was presenting itself to me.

15/05/06

In 1982 Tex is 18 – in 2004 she is 40

In 1982 Sarah is 28 – in 2004 she is 50

In 1982 Faye is 38 – in 2004 she is 60

In 1982 Richard is 21 – in 2004 he is 43

In 1982 Alex (Stormy or Flash) is 25 – in 2004 he is 47

(In 2004 Sam is 67)

(In 2004 Jason is 29)

In 1974 Tex is 10

In 1974 Sarah is 20 (Jason is born in 1975)

In 1974 Faye is 30

In 1974 Sam is 37. (Notes)

The characters had come to life; the interior of rooms was thick with detail; I could smell the river, the grassy banks stirred by the breeze. I had become immersed in the reading experience whilst I was still writing, waiting for the plot to resolve itself or for the characters to take control. I found myself in a strange situation, where I knew what happened in the book but I didn't have access to what wasn't written. For instance:

22/1/08

So? What next? I could work on Ch 1 because I still haven't resolved the situation that they find themselves in at present (that is, Part 1 and Part 2) but I need to write out what actually happened, not that the reader will know BUT I need to know. (Notes)

Two months later I was still frustrated with the opacity of the characters¹⁷:

6/03/08

I did not write this within the chronology of the narrative; it was the reason it has all taken so long, because I would come up against it and then turn away. As I said to Mick yesterday, it was NOT a failure of the imagination – I could not see what had happened any more than the reader could. (Notes)

This was reflected, though I didn't intend it so directly, in Tex's dilemma; after she has collected the facts, put together the evidence, there are gaps, and she comes to realise that there is no truth that can be reclaimed – it is all point-of-view and narrative uncertainty between the speaker and the receiver. The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* declares that in order to be free himself, he must give all of his fictional characters their freedom as well. This appears to be an invitation to the reader: to reject, ignore, or skip over the discursive commentary and concentrate solely on the story. The transgressive reader, a woman for instance, may take up Sarah Woodruff's story, fill in the gaps and allow her to speak through her textual silences. The actual reader then can create a 'complementary story' (Stanzel 2004:203). As Stanzel points out, this is not a completely free creation; the complementary story is constructed from textual precursors and will often occur at the end of a chapter or section when the author has chosen not to pursue a scene, or event or conversation, or at the conclusion of the novel:

[E]very reader who has not been taught to suppress it automatically indulges in such speculations. . . No reader can be blamed for

¹⁷ 'It is like groping in the dark; feeling the future of these two evading me; though knowing they are there, very real now. It is a prime sign that characters are 'real' when they grow so difficult; like trying to manipulate two people (or penetrate their privacy) in the actual world' (Ibid.189)

wondering, after reading Defoe's *Moll Flanders* how many children Moll had in the course of her adventurous and amorous life and what became of them all. (:204-205).

It may be that the novel is still unfinished; that the solutions I found to 'end' 'Tex Surfacing' – Richard's poems, fragments from Sarah's notebooks – are only indicators of where the writer should exercise control over the material. Alternatively, it may be that 'Tex Surfacing' mirrors in its gaps and lack of closure the processes of reading and making meaning. What happens when the writer takes up the position of the reader, passively waits for the next scene to unravel before her, whilst entertaining flights and excursions outside of the text?¹⁸

It was only in early 2008 that I decided these notes could, and maybe should, form a part of my theoretical musings. I wrote by longhand in a notebook and put a box around 'notes' as they occurred during the process. I don't date the writing in my notebook so the dates in the 'journal' are when they were typed up. As such, the journal found in the Appendix is already expunged from its context, cut off from the life-blood of the creative process. For me, 'Tex Surfacing' is those series of scruffy school exercise books, the spilled coffee and evidence of my hand moving across page after page.

The journal operated predominantly as a memory device, a neat filing system, to enable me to track the original note from the notebook and savour/worry over the moment of revelation or the continuing obscurity of a particular character's history or motivation. However, in isolation, the journal has become a narrative of its own, a species of footnote that allows me to reinsert the author back into the text, much like the narratorial pretension in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*. Diaries are generally written without a

¹⁸ This is an extreme case of a disengaged reader or resisting reader. What resulted was the closing off of interpretative routes in the narrative which would have resolved some of the lacunae which developed in 'Tex Surfacing'.

receiver in mind. In the case of Virginia Woolf, however, the diaries were a self-conscious dialogue between her writing persona and future readers. This poaching of the intimate diary form is reminiscent of the uses that writers now make of online journals.

The epistolary form lends an intimacy to the communicative relationship; letters are written and then, literally, sent as a material article to the receiver. Sarah's online blog is an open letter to her readers; it is an invitation to the reader to overstep the boundaries of her fiction and enter into an extratextual relationship between the actual reader and the author. Sarah acknowledges that details from her life seep into the literary action, though she also acknowledges that the reader's reading experience is their own. Excerpts from Sarah's blogs indicate that her readers give advice, feedback and criticism of the work-in-progress. Genre writers will often maintain an online relationship with their 'fans'. A typical fantasy writer's website will include: a biography, novel excerpts, readers forum, online diary, and links to published interviews and articles ¹⁹.

The 'authored' sections of 'Tex Surfacing' occur in a number of mediums: letters, blog journal excerpts, published poems and novel excerpts and also, more importantly to Tex, Richard's handwritten fragments that act as a kind of forensic evidence of past events that she has been unable to 'read', that is interpret. Chandler says that 'writing done with a word processor obscures its own evolution' (1995:64) and it is the origins that Tex requires to construct the metanarrative that will make sense of her life.

Tex does not perceive herself as a writer; she fails to understand the very real agency of the reader to *construct* the text. Her frustration lies in the fact

¹⁹ Douglass, Sara. "Sara Douglass Official Website." Retrieved 6 December, 2010, from <http://www.saradouglass.com/>.

Cooper, Louise. (2009). "Welcome to the website of Louise Cooper." Retrieved 6 December, 2010, from <http://www.louisecooper.com/>.

that she constantly cedes responsibility to the author as a God-like figure, then interrogates the text against notions of mimesis and truth. It is no irony that, ultimately, the point-of-view in 'Tex Surfacing' resides with the reader figure. The experience of writing is much like reading; the conscious self grappling with representation through language is constantly met with inexactitude and the sense of an inauthentic rendering of experience.

The writer's notebook, much like early drafts with handwritten corrections and notes, provides the reader with an opportunity to interrogate the text against the intentions of the author.

Conclusion

The decisions that were discussed in my notebook resulted in the manuscript of 'Tex Surfacing'. It is a closely focalized, third-person narrative without an overt narrator. Representations of the reader and the author occur without recourse to a narratorial commentary. As mentioned earlier, there was a time when I had conceived of the discourse as being more closely aligned to the exegetical concerns of reader agency and author intentionality. I considered using a more overt narrator who would comment on the actions and motivations of the characters to highlight the levels of diegesis. Ultimately, I could not find the authoritative voice that could sustain my argument; my own need to immerse myself in the reading experience and the need for a genderless reading space mitigated against this.

The characters of Tex and Sarah both owe something to the representations of Tess of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and the reworking of the Victorian themes and contexts in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Before I commenced this exegesis I had been equally appalled by, and fascinated with, this book though I had not fully explored my responses and the reasons

for them. I had assumed, rightly, that the reworking of *Tess* was in response to a particularly male point of view. What I didn't take into account was the skill with which this text manipulates, teases and challenges the conceptions of reading and writing and how, therefore, for this particular female reader, the agency of reading lies at the heart of textual creation. How the reader and writer are represented textually by John Fowles and J.M. Coetzee are taken up in the next section.

Chapter Two: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the female reader

Jon Thiem points out that '[a] sharp, sometimes painful sense of belatedness is one of the defining features of the postmodern outlook' (Hoffman and Murphy 2005:142). Everything, it seems, has already been written and repeatedly read. Therefore, the postmodern literary writer becomes a species of reader, unraveling a chain of contexts and allusions to recreate a story bricolage. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines bricolage as: 'to make creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are at hand (regardless of their original purpose)'. Derrida comments regarding the condition of the postmodern subject that 'if one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur' (1978:290). Whilst acknowledging this to be the case, I wish to specifically examine the concept of bricolage in relation to the 'horizon of expectations' of the actual author and reader, and how, in this sense of belatedness, the process of both reading and writing is always a rewriting.

In 'Tex Surfacing', Sarah, the young writer, reads or recounts her stories to the child, Tess. The character of Tess developed in relation to my teenage infatuation with the romantic and doomed figure of Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. At about twenty years of age I read *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and was appalled that once again the figure of Tess had, far from being 'liberated', been exploited once again by a male author for the purposes of literary symbol. A highly emotive and affective reading of both texts! Like the dramatized reader figure in Stephen King's *Misery*, I would have liked to tie the author down and force him to rewrite Tess and her destiny the way 'it should have been'. It is no accident, therefore, that the two major figures in 'Tex Surfacing' are named Tess and Sarah; it is a

homage, a literary clue and a substantial recovery and rewriting of my own formative reading myths. The second section of this chapter reflects on the status of the female characters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Foe* and how they struggle, respectively, with how to assert their identity through telling their tale and in which form, as women storytellers, our stories are accorded a reading.

During the writing of 'Tex Surfacing' I attempted to recall the readerly intentions I brought to the original and subsequent readings of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and, through association, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and extrapolate these intentions towards a Sarah/Tess figure if she operated as a literary symbol/motif in the present. As such, Sarah, like Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, remains an enigmatic figure who has, however, the agency to write her story as she pleases. In consequence, her story overwrites the narratives of others. Conversely, Tess, while often reduced to a character in Sarah's stories, has the agency of objective observation and therefore analysis; she operates, in this respect, like a 'close reader'. Jameson commenting on the value of close reading says that this mode becomes a rewriting that uncovers the text's own 'rewriting or structuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext' (Veeser 1989:34).

I was interested in a close reading of novels that attempted to recover or rework fictional figures, in particular those that deliberately called on the author's (as reader) culturally contextualised interpretation of those canonical texts, and how this comes to bear on the intratextual discourse between narrator and narratee and how this discourse can be extrapolated to a notion of communicative discourse between actual author and actual reader²⁰. This first section of the chapter undertakes a close reading of how the reader and the writer are represented in two novels that are recognized

²⁰ The narratee is distinctly different from the actual reader of course, being a fictional device and the other side of the communicative pair of narrator/narratee.

as influenced by and influencing debate on the postmodern status of narrative.

The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles and *Foe* by Coetzee explicitly address a shared reading history and therefore illuminate the spectre of the actual author and the actual reader haunting the margins of the text. The discursive material is a dialogic play, a subtext of irony, between the writer and reader. Intertextuality becomes, in these cases, an overt signal to the reader to enter into active and intentional communication with the discourse.

Classical structuralism restricts the area of communicative interaction to that which can occur within the text – that is, narrator→narrative←narratee. Patrick O'Neill proposes a post-narratological model that incorporates the actual author and actual reader into the play between narrative levels.

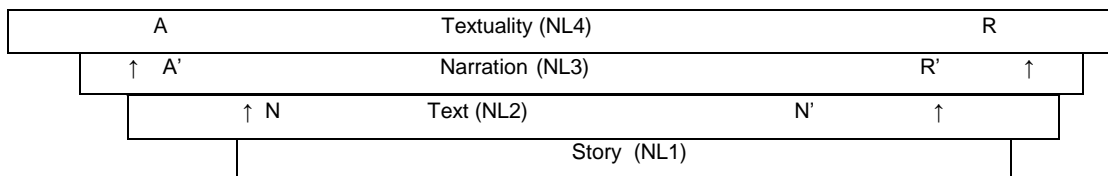


Figure 5.3 Nested narrative worlds
(O'Neill 1994:114)

This model accounts for the practice of historical texts being reworked in recognition of the changing historical/material space of reading and interpretation. It also acknowledges the prior reading done by both the author and the reader before they encounter this particular text, either in the reading process or the writing process.

Julia Kristeva (1980:69) identifies two axes of interpretation: the horizontal axis that ties the author and the reader in relationship to each other; and the vertical axis that connects a text to other texts. Narrative authority is a key

theme and struggle between the characters in 'Tex Surfacing' and I was particularly interested in *Foe* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as they challenged the relationship between writer and reader on both the intratextual and extratextual level. On the vertical axis that Kristeva refers to, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Foe* connect explicitly to two canonical texts which are, themselves, of course, implicated by numerous other texts. On the horizontal axis the reader and writer share in the historical discourses of cultural reformation, shifting political landscapes and post modern conceptions of the historically situated subject.

This then is the bricolage of historical, cultural, literary and political material that creates the interpretative space in which *Foe* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are written and read. The approaches to a priori reading and the reworking of the textual and cultural material is treated very differently however. Whereas the dramatized author of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* never cedes control of the narrative, the narrator of *Foe* is diffused and *Foe*, a re-creation of Daniel Defoe, is a degraded figure too weary and defeated to write at all. The reader is represented and addressed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, whilst the reader in *Foe* is never implicated within the text or addressed. As such, they both have their models in the canon but through two radically different uses of the discursive material, they re-read canonical works and transform the codes and characters in order to problematize narrative authority. The issue of how the characters of Tex and Sarah developed in 'Tex Surfacing', their struggle to maintain an active voice, was mirrored by my analysis of the treatment of the reader, a strangely female gendered figure, in *Foe* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The various positioning of the reader and the writer in these texts, to me echoed the hierarchical order of male and female authority. A close reading of these two texts revealed yet again, the historical figure of the woman forgotten by history and her reworking through ideological and literary discourses.

I have undertaken an analysis of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and, to a lesser degree, *Foe*, in order to locate how these texts represent the relationship between reading and writing and how, then, the real author and real reader are 'hailed' into communicative relationship with the text.

The French Lieutenant's Woman and Foe

The French Lieutenant's Woman published in 1967 is a rereading or a rewriting of Victorian themes using the traditional form of the omniscient narrator. The story is one of thwarted lovers, separated by class, circumstance and gender. Fowles recreates the world of Thomas Hardy; Sarah Woodruff, the female protagonist, is written, like Tess, as a fallen Victorian woman. Fowles, like Hardy, introduces an omniscient, intrusive narrator but, in the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, also a metadiegetic narrator who attempts to write himself into the text both as author and reader. Stanzel says that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 'combine[s] a Victorian story with a sort of complementary modern consciousness' (2004:215). The modern subject can occupy various positions, but the occupation is always unstable and temporary. As such, the positioning of the narrative voice shifts throughout the text, moving from an authoritative mode associated with pre-modern conceptions of the author as god, to the writer-in-process who shares characteristics of the reader.

The narrator, overt or covert, is the complement to that who is addressed through the text. As such, the narrator, whether it is focalized through one of the characters or not, indicates the first level of dialogic exchange. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* commences with the traditional form of the omniscient narrator but at a point in the narrative this narrator becomes embodied, a character narrator, and represents himself as the actual author. The narrator transgresses the narrative levels in what Genette calls 'an

author's metalepsis' (1980:234) to highlight the extradiegetic communicative relationship between author and real reader. It is at the fourth level of textuality as indicated by O'Neill's table above, outside the boundaries of the actual text, that the author and reader communicate through an implicit understanding of the canon and how it can be read by the modern subject. Jauss's 'horizon of expectations' (1982) is conceived as a context that historically limits what can be spoken about, what can be read and what can be written. As such, it presumes a limited horizon of intertextual references available to the author and a similarly limited field of interpretative strategies available to the reader. Whilst *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Foe* create historically stable fabula, the implied author and the implied reader communicate through an explicit understanding that these are modern novels.

The French Lieutenant's Woman reworks and revises the style and concerns of the Victorian era and its texts but it is predominantly a novelist's post modernist play with the concept of authorship and readership. The narrator assumes the various positions of sole author, the omniscient narrator, and also the reader. Written during the period when the death of the author was being proclaimed and the ongoing relevance of the novelistic form was in doubt, the novel charts a historical moment when the dominant paradigm is under alteration from historical/social forces. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a frame narrative (Bal 1997:52) with a complete story which is told at the second level. This secondary text is thematically linked to that of the primary metanarrative through the main character's necessary rereading of established truths.

Jon Thiem believe that 'much postmodern writing is attractive to the escapist reader because . . . many postmodern works are "double-coded"' (Hoffman and Murphy 2005:346). One code mimics forms of popular fiction, while the second code pertains to techniques and issues of concern to the

postmodern writer and reader. Despite the enthralling story of Sarah and Charles, the primary concern of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the dramatized history of the author and the processes of reading and writing.

Whilst we may attempt to 'read for closure and coherence' (Cornis-Pope 1991) in the first instance, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is structured through its metadiegetic commentary on reading and writing to work not only against closure but also against readerly immersion. This novel never seeks to disguise its own fictionality, indeed it continually strips away the illusion of reality and, therefore, the possibility that the reader may lose him/herself in the story. Barthes, quoting the motto of Descartes, says: 'The whole of Literature can declare *Larvatus prodeo* "As I walk forward, I point out my mask"' (Hoffman and Murphy: 80). *The French Lieutenant's Woman* engages a number of discursive strategies that continually remind the reader that this framed narrative is written, and should be read, for a specific interpretative purpose.

Above each chapter in the novel is an epigraph from poets, social commentators, scientists and novelists who were published between 1840 and 1890, the Victorian Age. These quotes give the context of the story; quotes from Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and Tennyson are juxtaposed by quotes from Marx and Charles Darwin, along with commissioned reports such as 'Report from the Mining Districts' (108). These juxtapositions prefigure the representation of Sarah, Charles, Mrs Poultenay and Ernestina and indicate to the modern reader the purposes and eventual fate of these dramatized Victorian figures.

The narrator uses historical events, figures and scientific essays of the time to give verisimilitude to his own discourse. This commentary serves not only the rhetorical strategy of the author-character but also serves to create, as Booth says, 'aesthetic distance' – that is, 'whatever makes [the reader]

aware that he is dealing with an aesthetic object and not real life' (Hoffman and Murphy 2005:90). Whilst the epigraphs stay strictly within the context of the Victorian Age, the footnotes provide a contemporary commentary and are indicative of the research of the fictional modern narrator. The footnotes serve the rhetorical purpose of an additional narrative which, seemingly, plays out in 'real time', that is, the historically located process of writing²¹. The reader needs to deal with multiple shifts in the chronotope (literally time/space) of the text. The reader is faced with the figure of the author, as through a glass darkly, as the narrating persona shifts through time from the present to the past and back again.

In Chapter Five the narrator engages in an essay on Victorian sexuality and society. The epigraph above this chapter is an excerpt from the *Children's Employment Commission Report (1867)* detailing the rape and ruin of young working class girls and a quote from Hardy:

In you resides my single power
Of sweet continuance here.
'Her Immortality'

The narrator details the inconsistency and hypocrisy of Victorian Society in regard to the conditions of the working class compared to the ruling and middle classes and uses excerpts from reports and numerous footnotes. This is the narrator at his most diegetic; it is, as the narrator says, a digression to remind or educate the reader on how they should be reading. The hectoring, Victorian narrator, with the over-use of 'I', actually undermines the reliability of the narrative voice (Herman and Vervaeck 2001:91). The narrator has called the reader into a direct relationship with the narratee, but when the historicized narrator gives direct address to the

²¹ Coetzee has also played with the device of the footnote to destabilize the reader's trust in the stability of the chronotope of the text, most notably in *Slow Man*. Coetzee, J.M. (2005). *Slow Man*. London Secker & Warburg.

narratee, the reader cannot occupy this historical position. The reader that the narrator addresses here has a strangely Victorian flavour. The narrator berates the reader but says he will not argue with their ideas of 'Time, Progress, Society, Evolution'. He says: 'I will not argue. But I shall suspect you' (99).

The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* characterizes itself as the voice of the author, in an attempt to dissolve the ontological distance between the world of the text and the world of the reader. The narrator directly addresses a fictionalised reader, but this reader is not the idealized narratee of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*²². In fact, the narrator's address is slightly hostile or contemptuous:

I would have you share my own sense that I do not fully control these creatures of my mind, any more than you control – however hard you try, however much of a latter-day Mrs Poultenay you may be – your children, colleagues, friends or even yourself.

(99)

The narrator, as the author-character, says he wants to share this new reality (that all existence is fictional), but seems to fear that his 'ideal' reader is also a fiction and the narratee, in this case, is just the mirror of his own voice. He says:

But this is preposterous? A character is either 'real' or 'imaginary'? If you think that, *hypocrite lecteur*, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or

²² Gerald Prince makes the point that in fictional works the narrator's 'voice' can tend to over-run that of the narratee. '[A]fter all, the individual who relates a story and the person to whom the story is told are more or less interdependent in any narration' Prince, Gerald (1980). Introduction to the study of the narratee. *Reader-Response Criticism: from Formalism to Post-structuralism*. J. Tompkins. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.

blacken it, censor it, tinker with it . . . fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf – your book, your romanced autobiography.

(99)

The narrator as a writer-in-process shares the same historical space as the narratee. The narrator, characterized as the author of this work, cites Hardy as one of his inspirations. He says:

I have now come under the shadow, the very relevant shadow, of the great novelist who towers over this part of England of which I write.

(262)

The narrator then gives a clue as to the context and inspiration for the character of Sarah:

[N]ever was an English genius so devoted and indebted to one muse and one muse only. It gave us all his greatest love elegies. It gave us Sue Bridehead and Tess, who are pure Tryphena in spirit.

(263)

The narrator here is representing the process by which a read character is reconfigured through the (his) writing process; how this text is read through association with its predecessors. However, earlier in the book the narrator has asked:

Who is Sarah?

Out of what shadows does she come?

(Fowles 1969:96)

A different narrative standpoint, that of the writer's, answers his own question at the start of the next chapter:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind.
(Fowles 1969:97)

This narrative figure is reduced to that of the man, John Fowles, who, as a historical subject, like ourselves as reader, is unaware of the discourses that constrain and sustain his 'horizon of expectations'. The narrator, engaging in dialogic play with the narratee, muses that he has met modern women like Sarah and has never understood them. In this fictional instance he stands inside history, without the benefit of the authorial gaze.

Genette (1980:235) says that an instance of metalepsis 'produce[s] an effect of strangeness that is either comical . . . or fantastic'. Narrator commentary and intrusions are familiar forms in canonical literature, most notably *Tristram Shandy*. The intrusive narrator's voice reminds us that narrative forms are dialogic; that the tradition of storytelling included the audience's knowledge that every teller tells their own tale, altering, deleting and subtly altering the conditions for reception. The intrusion of the narrator emphasizes the discursive function of the text, though in the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* it is a postmodern play on identity and history masquerading as a Victorian moral fable.

Up until this point and despite the contemporary incursions into a Victorian story, we have a first level extradiegetic (or omniscient) narrator. We read with and above and below the insistences of this narrator. However, when the narrator declares himself as the sole author of the story and the creator of these characters he disallows the dialogic form²³ of the novel, despite the inferences towards Hardy and other novelists. Genette goes on to say:

²³ Bakhtin speculated that the dialogic text (eg. Dostoevsky) is in constant communication with other and multiple literary works unlike a monologic work (eg. Tolstoy) where the characters mirror

The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratee – you and I – perhaps, belong to some narrative.

(Genette 1980:236)

Whereas the narrator of *Tristram Shandy* invites the reader ever deeper into the fictional world, the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 'never, as it were, yields the privilege of the narrative function to anyone' (Genette 1980:247). The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* fulfils all the functions required for a text – he is writer, commentator and, most importantly, the reader. The narrator as the dramatized author, as alluded to in a previous section, says:

When Charles left Sarah on her cliff-edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy.

(Fowles 1969:98)

The intrusive narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* constantly reminds the reader of the artifice of the story and effectively his dual role as creator and reader of these characters. The narratee becomes dramatized and a protagonist in the discursive metanarrative but without the textual agency to become active at the lower narrative levels. This is not the complicit and empowering exercise that Hagen alludes to when she says:

Fowles' 'revision style' . . . aids in creating for the novel some version of the perfect reader, the participatory reader who will restore the 'fluid

polymorphic livingness' of the writing process by imaginatively merging with the author.

(Hagen 1991:443)

The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is extradiegetic and heterodiegetic until the conclusion of the book where the narrator describes the author who has descended to the level of the story. He watches one of his characters who also watches him. For example:

A whistle sounded, and Charles thought he had won the solitude he craved. But then, at the very last moment, a massively bearded face appeared at his window. The cold stare was met by the even colder stare of a man in a hurry to get aboard.

(Fowles 1969:387).

The narrator variously describes the author as 'prophet-bearded' and 'aggressively secure' and his gaze as 'leechlike' and 'cannibalistic in its intensity' (388-389). The author is presented in the third person as a character by the narrator. Two pages later the narrator declares:

And I will keep up the pretence no longer. . . Charles has opened his eyes and is looking at me. There is something more than disapproval in his eyes now. . . He picks up his hat, brushes some invisible speck of dirt (a surrogate for myself) from its nap and places it on his head.

(389-390)

However, in the next paragraph, the concluding sentence of the chapter, the point of view returns to Charles. As he alights from the train he turns but '[t]he bearded man has disappeared in the throng' (390).

He ²⁴, the characterized author, is set up as a counterpoint to the potential of the resisting reader as he acts out the processes of a 'resisting' author. O'Neill names a 'systemic unreliability' (1994:63) as in this case, where the narrator far from hiding the truth is actually seeking to uncover the unreliability of narrative in general. Rimmon-Kenan has said that 'modern self-conscious texts often play with narrative levels in order to question the borderline between reality and fiction or to suggest that there may be no reality apart from its narration' (1989:95). The narrator, as author-character, reflects from his contemporary position on the characters he has created:

I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography; perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction; perhaps Charles is myself disguised.

(97)

Jonathan Culler says that '[t]he reader becomes the names of the place where the various codes can be located: a virtual site' (in Mills 1994:12). The author is also a virtual site, the name of a place where codes of interpretation and intentionality reside. Non-fictional communication between the actual author and actual reader of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* will include biographical details available to the reader, previous and subsequent novels by Fowles, critical reception and commentary on the novel, along with the intertextual references within and from without the text. The reader may have seen the movie of the book starring Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep which uses the device of the making of the film of the book as a metatextual commentary in place of the book's narrator. This is a level of nonfictional

²⁴ I use Genette's code that if the narrator's gender is not specified in the text, one should use the author's gender. This has implications for the distance between the levels of non-fictional and fictional communication, but I will not take up this argument here.

communication and, for writers such as Fowles who are discussed and widely critiqued, forms part of the reading process:

[T]he 'I' who will make first-person commentaries here and there in my story, and who will finally even enter it, will not be my real 'I' in 1967; but much more just another character, though in a different category from the purely fictional ones.

(142)

The 'I' that Fowles uses is, as he says, in a different category from the purely fictional ones. The 'I' that the narrator is proposing attempts to span the narrative levels of narrator and implied author. Because the narrator announces that this 'I' is not purely fictional, the reader is led to believe that this 'I' may not only be the narrator, but the implied author and actual author as well. Wayne C. Booth points out that 'we all know, of course, that "too much" of the author's voice is, as Aristotle said, unpoetic. But how much is too much?' (Hoffman and Murphy: 85). The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* plays with this very notion of the 'unpoetic', if we are to assume that poesy depends upon the most mimetic representation of reality, carefully disguising its own construction.

Much of the framed narrative of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is focalized through Charles. Though he is often absent from the events, it is his world and his perspective that dramatize the themes. O'Neill makes the point that whether or not there is a character-focaliser such as Charles, in fact 'every narrative is created by a narrative voice that is by definition external to it' (1994:87). The character of Sarah operates much like the pathetic fallacy so loved of authors such as Hardy; she is the expression of the protagonist's destiny and mirrors the existential dilemma of Charles as she reflects back to him the pitfalls and possibilities of a future beyond the shadow of the Victorian age. Mieke Bal (1997:116) says that focalization 'is the most

important, most penetrating, and most subtle means of manipulation' in the narrative text.

Sarah tells the story of her seduction and Charles, as the receiver or reader of her story, fills in the gaps:

He saw the scene she had not detailed; her giving herself. He was at one and the same time Varguennes enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down; just as Sarah was to him both an innocent victim and a wild, abandoned woman.

(172)

The narratorial voice, focalized through Charles, indicates the possibilities of different narrative standpoints within the story. As Sarah tells her story, he imagines himself as Varguennes and then repudiates this. He accepts Sarah's reading of herself, then rejects it. The character of Charles acts out the potentialities of reading to simultaneously absorb and re-read and re-write the presented story.

The first proposed ending of the story occurs at Chapter Forty-Four; Charles marries Ernestina. The narrator, mirroring the cowardice of Charles, says: 'And so ends the story. What happened to Sarah, I do not know . . .' (324). In Chapter Forty-Five, however, the narrator denies the truth of this ending and attributes the narrative voice of the previous chapter to Charles because 'we have a habit of writing fictional futures for ourselves' (327). The narrator, as author-character, is acknowledging the competing voices within his story, the multivocal propensity of texts, therefore, the competing points of narrative authority.

However, Rabinowitz (1987) posits a reader position he calls the 'authorial reader'. This reader enters into an interpretative compact with the

(supposed) textual intentions of the author. Rules of notice 'tell us where to concentrate our attention' (Rabinowitz 1987:53) and the dizzying ventriloquist trick of narratorial voice in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the author's flag to notice what has become of us, our provisional speech, our belated attempt to write ourselves into history. '[T]he fictive narrating of that narrative, as with almost all the novels in the world except *Tristram Shandy*, is considered to have no duration; or more exactly, everything takes place as if the question of its duration had no relevance' (Genette 1980:222). Genette is referring to the narrating instance, that is, the actual writing process. The narrating figure in *Tristram Shandy* explicitly refers to the time it has taken him to write the episodes, though of course this is a fictional construct as well. The narrator, before he exits the story, has tried all the positions – that of the man, the writer, the author, the reader. The narrator's story eventually fades into insignificance:

And the 'I', that entity who found such slickly specious reason for consigning Sarah to the shadows of oblivion, was not myself; it was merely the personification of a certain massive indifference in things.
(328)

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* was published in 1986 almost twenty years after *The French Lieutenant's Woman* after the theory wars were over, and the victor had been proclaimed. The author, as such, is absent in *Foe*. The character of Foe is the miserable shadow of a productive author; he is dried up, unable to create a narrative despite having the dramatic and compelling story of Susan Barton at his disposal. Barthes says:

Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer contains within himself passions, humors, sentiments, impressions, but that enormous

dictionary, from which he derives a writing which can know no end or halt.

(1977:170)

Foe opens with Susan Barton's voice:

'At last I could row no further' (5).

The voice is contained within quotation marks and the reader is immediately alerted to the scriptor who records this story. Susan Barton's story is recounted to a direct addressee:

'Also there were apes (of whom I will say more later) . . .' (7).

A couple of pages later she says:

'I have told you how Cruso was dressed; now let me tell you of his habitation' (9).

From the outset it is clear that the addressee is no idle listener; Susan Barton is at pains to give correct and detailed impression as if the other has some sort of authority to confirm or substantiate her tale.

Her back story, how she came to be on the desert island, is recounted as she has told it to the castaway Cruso (11). However, she can't say how Cruso came to be there or what his previous life was because he refuses to speak or, when in the grips of fever and therefore disinhibited, his story changes so she cannot verify the truth of what he was before. This long first chapter, almost a third of the entire book, is Susan Barton's account of her year on the island with Cruso and Friday and their eventual rescue. In the final passage of the chapter she addresses her confidante directly for the first time:

'Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Cruso or as a bold adventuress? Think what you may, it was I who shared Cruso's bed and closed Cruso's eyes, as it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island' (45).

Unlike the conflated author/narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the dramatized author of *Foe* is a historical figure and therefore, seemingly, does not disturb the ontological world of the fabula. The disguised author of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, now stands in as a potential enemy of the true story – one that has been elided by history. When Fowles says *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a book that *should* have been written by a Victorian author, and then proceeds to stand a dramatized author in place of the omniscient author in order to fill in historical and contextual omissions, whilst the implied author of *Foe* works through the interpretative strategies of the reader. *Robinson Crusoe* does not, of course, contain a character called Susan Barton and the narrator of the text claims to be an authoritative witness to these events. The figure of Foe in this case is already, to the implied reader, unreliable and downright deceitful. While *The French Lieutenant's Woman* transgresses the ontological levels between narrator and reader, *Foe* never acknowledges itself as an authored text. While the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* directly addresses and challenges the reader into the narrative's discursive play, it is also clear to the reader of *Foe* that there is abundant opportunity for discursive play in the invocation of a barely disguised though fictional author, Daniel Defoe, and the text of *Robinson Crusoe*. The textuality of *Foe*, its play with the notions of authorship, is subtler in its 'rules of notice' (Rabinowitz 1987:44) than *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

As readers we accept, and expect, narrative communication through the seemingly ontologically discrete narrative levels. The text acts upon us

because we retain awareness, even whilst 'in a trance', of the many levels at play. A text like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, with its self-aware narrator throws us into communicative relationship with the discourse rather than the story. *Foe* is also a work in which the reader must pay less attention to the story than to the 'metafictional critique of narrative practice itself' (Macleod 2006).

The narrative of *Foe* is an account that is constantly awaiting coherent authorship – Cruso will not speak, Friday is unable to speak as he is assumed to be without tongue and Susan Barton speaks but has no way for her story to be told. At her first meeting she believes that an author is one 'who has heard many confessions' (48) and is doubtful if Foe deserves her reverence:

'You looked me up and down but did not reply, and I thought to myself: What art is there to hearing confessions? – the spider has much art, that watches and waits.' (48)

Barton, in fact, authors her own version of Foe – smelly, old and weary – but someone who has the language that will literally enliven mere story:

'When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all storytellers?' (51)

As a text, *Foe* is not only asking questions about truth in fiction, but the reader through the implied author is brought to examine the nature of literature and the ascendancy of narrative discourse over story. Though Barton has her own story to tell, she also seeks the narrative right to recount, and therefore overwrite, the stories of Cruso and Friday. It is however the

'dictionary' of the Scriptor that she lacks, so she must turn to an established author to transform her story text.

'Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: That is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth. . . . (51) To tell the truth you must have . . . at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it fades. I have none of these, while you have all' (Coetzee 1986:52)

In the story Foe, however, has disappeared and so Barton writes her story by letters that she sends acknowledging that he will probably never receive them. She is forced into long monologues with Friday although he never responds by look or gesture that he hears much less understands. Although rescued from the island she and Friday are still castaways: Barton because she has an urgency to tell her story and no one to tell; and Friday because he literally starts to lose substance, fade away, with the lack of a story or a personal history.

Up until this point, Foe is emasculated, that is, without authority. With the richness of the story that is laid before him, however, the character of Foe is enlivened, much like the spider that Barton has suggested earlier in the text. When Foe asserts himself finally as the author who will render her words into literature, and therefore history, he commences a reconstruction of the 'facts' that Barton has supplied. She becomes aware that she will be written out of the historical tale of Robinson Crusoe:

"Better had there been only Cruso and Friday", you will murmur to yourself: "Better without the woman" (Coetzee 1986:71).

The character of Friday has invited much speculation amongst critics, and the text explicitly frames him as a voiceless though powerful presence; a

voice, which if it was heard, would fundamentally alter the narrative trajectory. Who is it who has cut out his tongue? How does his personal history intersect with that of Cruso's? How, indeed, did he get to be in this story at all?

It is Friday, though, who finds Foe's robes in a trunk and a flute and enters into a trance of language, a few notes on the flute, that Barton cannot comprehend. And it is Friday who, dressed in Foe's robes and with his paper and quill, is seated at the desk writing. Foe has earlier suggested that writing can replace speech. *Foe* concludes with a short five page section which is narrated by a different voice:

But to return to my new companion. I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spoke; and he was the aptest scholar there ever was.

(Coetzee 1986:213)

The unidentifiable narrator who characterizes the new writer as 'apt' and 'useful' and a 'handy scholar', seems to suggest that literary representations are always at the behest of that 'dictionary' which is without cease or end. Claire Colebrook (1997:255) says that this narrator has been seen as 'Coetzee himself', but she claims that 'the unnamed narratorial 'I' offers an overt invitation for the reader to enter the undefended territory of the 'vacant' pronominal space'.

Much has been made of *Foe* as an allegory of the conditions in South Africa²⁵ especially in the light of Coetzee's oeuvre which includes such

²⁵ David Atwell, an esteemed Coetzee scholar, says that "Friday's enforced silence represents what a monocultural, metropolitan discourse cannot hear". Atwell, David (1993).

works as *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace* which are more overt critiques of the racialised power struggle in South Africa. However, such a reading of *Foe* diverges from the text and takes in the extratextual sign of the actual author. This authorial reading historicises *Foe* as an element in a continuum of the singular work of J.M. Coetzee which, given the textual material, is an intentional fallacy. Whilst *The French Lieutenant's Woman* invites discursive play amongst the narrative levels through its dramatization of the narrator across all narrative levels, *Foe* does not invoke the actual author and reader in the text. Whilst *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is actively concerned with the individual subject in the reading/writing process, *Foe* is concerned with narrative discourse and textual representations alone. The characters of *Foe* are literary artifacts and do not represent singular subjects.

Whether it is as textual codes or as literary symbol or story protagonist, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Foe* both have the problematic figure of woman as storyteller, struggling to assert authority, at the centre of the textual discourse.

Women as writers in The French Lieutenant's Woman and Foe

Whilst Barthes eschewed the notion of the author in the work, others such as Stephen Greenblatt have understood the role of the author as 'a conduit for ideologically charged discourse' (Fludernik 2009:13) and many modern works play with the author's autobiographical details in relation to the narrator. The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not singular.

Diala finds that Coetzee, along with Nadine Gordimer and André Brink, are "three of South Africa's most distinguished white writers, all with definite anti-apartheid commitment". Diala, Isadore (2002). "Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and André Brink: Guilt, expiation, and the reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa." *Journal of Modern Literature* 25(2): 50-68.

Whilst, as Mieke Bal points out, all of the narration in a text has a narrator, the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is dramatized into a number of roles: the autobiographical, the author, the reader as writer, the reader, and even the amateur historian. Despite the putative call to the reader to become involved in the resolution of the text through the doubled ending, this seems just another discursive twist to enable the narrator to return to the position of the narrating reader. The actual reader, must look to the text and, in particular, the story to enact their interpretative role.

Whilst all of the characters are historically located it is Sarah who is divided by the social/historical conditions of the time. O'Neill makes the point that while the embedding narrative, in this case the narrator's play with fictional reality, will undoubtedly 'color fundamentally our reception of an embedded narrative, it may itself always in turn be challenged or even displaced altogether by the narrative it embeds' (O'Neill 1994:65). The reader that the narrator addresses, despite the attempt to collapse the ontological levels of narration, differs from the implied reader. The narrator, as the author character, works to resist a linear reading and the implied reader is the one who will give primary attention to the demands of the meta-narrative. However by disturbing the levels of fictional mediation – the narrator to addressee – *The French Lieutenant's Woman* actually works to 'hail' the actual, or historical, reader into a resisting or interrogative communication with the text.

The narrator says at the start of Chapter 13: 'These characters I create never existed outside my own mind' (97), but on the next page he reports – 'and I am the most reliable witness – that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself' (98). The narrator declares that in order to be free himself, he must give all of his fictional characters their freedom as well. This appears to be an invitation to the reader – to reject, ignore, or skip over the discursive commentary and concentrate solely on the story. The

transgressive reader, a woman for instance, may take up Sarah's story, fill in the gaps and allow her to speak through her textual silences. The actual reader then can create a 'complementary story' (Stanzel 2004:203). As Stanzel points out, this is not a completely free creation as the complementary story is constructed on textual precursors.

When Charles associates Sarah's dark eyes with 'foreign women' and 'foreign beds', he is faintly repelled as most men of the Victorian age would have been, the narrator explains. However, his keen investigation of Darwinism and his scientific hobbies give him an alternate explanation for Sarah. The narrator explains that Charles has read *Madame Bovary* and when he looks at Sarah the name of Emma Bovary springs to his mind. The narrator comments:

Such allusions are comprehensions; and temptations.

(120)

The narrator also likens Sarah to Calypso the nymph who delayed Odysseus on her island for seven years. Sarah is a plot device, the lure, that guides Charles sometimes unwillingly away from his fate as a true Victorian gentleman, albeit one who would be stifled by the role and its expectations. Sarah, as indicated above, is variously called the French Lieutenant's Woman, Whore and Tragedy and is likened to a psychiatric case study (Dr Grogan) and by the narrator to Tryphena (Hardy's muse) and by Charles to Emma Bovary. It is of vital importance to Charles that he finds an appropriate representation for Sarah – whether she be siren, fallen woman, intelligent new woman (as he remarks later in the book comparing her to the young women he meets in America) – but she eludes all of these categories and hence her fascination for Charles and the author-narrator:

Who is Sarah?

Out of what shadows does she come?

(96)

Sarah Woodruff is from the start aware of the forces acting against her and though presented as a victim in the opening pages by the author-narrator, he very quickly sows the seeds of doubt in the reader's mind – is she perhaps a femme fatale? Charles wrestles with the representations of Sarah throughout the book and, even at the end, curses her for the very deliberate acts she has planned that will disallow her from conventional rescue. Sarah, however, has carefully evaluated the options available to her as a woman in Victorian society and knows that she must put herself 'beyond the pale' if she is not to be subsumed within the suffocating roles available. She deliberately cuts herself off from the conventional choices and instead embraces the two social roles left to her– either 'Tragedy' or 'Whore' as she is named. The greatest crime that Sarah commits, in Charles and Grogan's estimation, is to create her own story; the fact that she is the author of her own story causes the two men to consider less appealing conclusions about her character. Grogan submits that she must be mad, but Charles must consider that he has fallen prey to a siren that will extinguish his own mastery of his fate. For Charles, and the narrator, Sarah represents the possibility of liberation from the suffocating hypocrisy of Victorian mores. She is both threat and promise:

Charles stared down at her for a few hurtling moments, then turned and resumed his seat, his heart beating, as if he had just stepped back from the brink of the bluff.

(172)

Both *Foe* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have women as central characters who have, through circumstances and unconventional choices, been cast out of proscribed social roles. Both characters have a strong need to tell their story. Sarah Woodruff is essentially an unreliable narrator

because she changes her story in an attempt to make it more *emotionally* honest. Charles and the narrator doubt the truth of her story and therefore the truth of her. They must struggle with the literary representations that are available to them (Calypso, Emma Bovary) and their own experiences (Charles with his foreign beds and dark eyes, the narrator who expresses the essential unknowability of women) to uncover the 'truth' of Sarah. It is they, Charles and the narrator, who must reconstruct, rewrite her story. Katherine Tarbox says that 'the reader cannot experience Sarah as author without being aware of her as authored, and her role as artificer is clearly conditioned by her function as artefact' (1996:101).

Whilst there may be the signs of a struggle for discursive authority in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the real battle is between the narrator and the narratee that is reflected in the rigid dichotomies between the male and female characters. Though much has been made of the gender inequities and postcolonial/colonial nuances in *Foe*, Lewis MacLeod points out that the relation between power and discourse has less to do with gender and politics and more to do with 'who gets to establish and maintain the narrative frameworks . . . it is narrative power or narrative skill that does the real work' (2006:3).

The character of Susan Barton requires the authority of writing so she can ensure that her story is told. Any reader and, in particular, a female reader cannot help but note and identify with the plight of Susan Barton; she has an arresting and singular story, one that will, eventually, be canonized and be read for hundreds of years. She, however, will disappear without the historical authority of the text. The irony of *Foe* is that, of course, the reader hears and, therefore, authorises Susan Barton's story.

Conclusion

The world of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a shadowbox of the real world, a facsimile that the reader can view from on high (that is, extratextually). He/she may draw parallels from the fabula to the ontologically separate world of the reader, but despite the harrying discourse from the narrator to the narratee and the discursive play of authorial control, it is the text that performs.

Bakhtin says that 'these real people, the authors and the listeners or readers, may be . . . located in differing time-spaces, sometimes separated from each other by centuries and by great spatial distances, but nevertheless they are all located in a real, unitary and as yet incomplete historical world set off by a sharp and categorical boundary from the represented world in the text' (1981:253). The incomplete historical world that John Fowles shares with this reader has not exhausted the representation of Tess of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or, for that matter, the representation of Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Whether it is the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* or the recovery of Bertha in *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, the figure of the literary heroine or femme fatale will be taken up and reworked by every reader, whether they actively engage in the act of writing or not. Cornis-Pope (1991:110) points out that 'active feminist reading . . . is always *re-reading*' because it must be produced in opposition to, or *after*, the dominant reading.

Feminist reading or 'resisting' reading will fundamentally alter the readability of any text. How our pre-reading or re-reading affects textuality is taken up in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Tim Winton and the located reader

For as long as I can remember I have read. Writing came a little later, but the two are conjoined; the one has never existed without the other. The narrative in every book was conflated with the previous one in an ongoing epic narrative which I created and played out on those long summer afternoons of childhood. These childish narratives occurred alongside, but entangled with, the texts by my bedside. At every reading the individual reader invokes their own fluid and ever-evolving metatext that becomes an overarching framework for every subsequent reading. Sometimes, even now, I pick up a book and find in its pages an exquisite sum of those magical occurrences and experiences that comprise the history of my reading life.

In recent years, Wolfgang Iser has turned his attention to an ‘anthropology of reading’(1989) and the human propensity to reach past mere experience to a resolution of sorts that we find in literature. The manuscript, ‘Tex Surfacing’, is an exploration of how a reader who stands too close to the story deforms the text to her own ends. The agency of reading – the freedom to deconstruct the text along various idiosyncratic lines – leads this particular reader through a series of labyrinthine alternate truths or realities. The text she is reading is open only in as much as it is a cipher, its analogous mythology a facsimile of the truth. These interpretative paths are suggested by the text, or suggestive within the text, but do not ultimately reveal the character of the author, which has been the main character’s reading goal²⁶.

²⁶ The interpretative paths suggested in the text, do not lead to a resolution of the narrative strands. ‘Tex Surfacing’, in this regard, is a monologic text inasmuch as the narrator does not enable a dialogic exchange between the available texts.

My intention in writing 'Tex Surfacing' was to explore the relationship between an individual's reading history, their personal library if you will, and the ways in which subjectivity is constructed. Liedeke Plate (2004), amongst others, has explored the notion of reading as a means of constructing subjectivity. The post-Romantic concept of life as narrative²⁷ has been absorbed into the ways we think about the construction of our selves, and literature provides models of plot, motivation and character that feed our personal narrative. Proust describes one function of rereading. We leaf through our childhood books because 'they are the only calendars we have kept of days that have vanished' (Calinescu 1993:96).

The Turning reprises locations and characters from Tim Winton's earliest published work of twenty years ago and represents a self-conscious act of rereading. There is a 'constitutive relationship between identity and narrative history' (Friday 2003) and Winton unfurls the canvas of his characters' lives, to reveal the inescapable impact of the past on each of the characters' present positions. A turning, both personally and culturally, is a moment that has already been imagined; events, historical moments lead us back to a present that was implicit in our origins. By overtly referencing his own earlier works Winton is asserting the right to be recognised as the author of this work and therefore *The Turning* operates within a particular autobiographical textuality and the *located* reader, as an instance of an idiosyncratic moment of interpretation, also exhibits an autobiographical practice in the mode of reading. Cornis-Pope points out that 'interpretation opens a space of conflict and variation, negotiated differently by every reader' (1991:11-12). The interpretative space responds to a particular text and combined with the differing context and standpoints of the reader will create very specific conflicts and variations. Judith Fetterley's 'resisting reader' (Blackford

²⁷ 'Peter Brooks talks of the 'narrativization of explanation' in nineteenth century thought in as much as we could track the development of individuals and social movements in terms that explicated the 'narrativity of origins, in relation to endpoints' Eakin, Paul John (1985).

2004:17) is at odds with the implied reader called for by the text due to her/its differing interpretative strategies. The located reader's proximity to the material world that is represented in a text disallows an immersed reading. Just as Tim Winton, the author is situated within a particular historical/geographical milieu so, too, is the reader.

Tim Winton is around my age, he lives in the same small port town of Fremantle and, like me, was born and bred in and around country Western Australia. I frequently see him on the beach, in the cafes and at environmental meetings. I have been reading his books since he and I were both in our early twenties, so my reading of *The Turning* becomes another milestone in a narrativity of self, congruent with a narrativity of place. However, through the ubiquity of his presence in the local media and my recognition of the towns and tracks and beaches in his books, I also construct a narrative of Winton that I conflate with the implied author and narrator in the text. By this extratextual ploy, the 'irreducible plurality' (Bennett 2005:5) of the text is limited by locating the author as the singular place of origin.

The implied author called for by the text is concretised according to a reader's particular interpretative strategies, and therefore understood as singular. The implied reader, however, is a textual function and is necessarily a composite effect that is open enough to allow some diversity of reading strategies and competencies. Winton says: 'I'm writing for strangers basically, and that's strangers anywhere' (Rossiter and Jacobs 1993:12). Angelus, the town featured in many of the stories in *The Turning*, is actually Albany, a small town in the deep south of the state that I know well. The text, however, calls for an implied reader that is a step removed from the represented space/historical moment of the story and, therefore, the history, the landscape, and the very physical experience of this place is overwritten for the located reader.

A map constructed by Ben-Messahel (2006) at the front of her recent critical work on Winton links his books to various iconic locations throughout the state. For the located reader, not only is Winton reified in any reading of his books but the landscape itself becomes over-inscribed, weighted with textual and intertextual codes that disallow the same rich dialogic exchange possible for another reader, the stranger anywhere. The located reader must find a reading position between the political and aesthetic, with the landscape, both eerily familiar and somehow strange, as it is transformed through text into discursive function.

Landscapes are, as Christopher Tilley (2006:7) says, 'structures of feeling, palimpsests of past and present'. Over the last two hundred years popular conceptions of Australia as a nation have been inextricably linked to landscape. There has been much written of the settler postcolonial condition where concepts such as 'homeland' or a sense of deep belonging are located elsewhere in ancestral homelands. Just as narrative is interplay between anticipation and repetition, much of the literature of Australia has been conceived in the terms of a postcolonial perception that distances itself from the centre and has a returning gaze (Ashcroft, Griffiths et al. 1989).

Winton, however, born in 1959 and raised in and around the bush and the coast, is a new breed of Australian writer who finds meaning and redemption in the landscapes of his childhood. In 2002 Winton won the West Australian Premier's Award for *Dirt Music* and donated the \$25,000 prize money to the *Save Ningaloo Reef* campaign. In his acceptance speech Winton said: 'As a writer and a citizen I consider myself lucky to be West Australian. My life and my work owe an enormous debt to the State's natural beauty' (Wilderness Society 2002). Winton's oeuvre occupies a niche in the national literature that speaks for and of the locale.

In his Australia Day address in 2002, author and ecologist Tim Flannery (Stephens 2002) said Australians could only become a 'true people' by developing 'deep, sustaining roots in the land'. He goes on to say, 'Our best hope for the future, is that this wide, brown land might claim us as its own'. The 'returning gaze' that is recognized as a feature of white settler postcolonial literatures, the comparison with the landscapes of a mythic traditional homeland becomes, in Winton's books, an imperative to seek and find redemption here – in this bush, on this coast, in this great emptiness. Winton has said:

When I got to Europe I knew the moment I set my foot down that I wasn't European. I'd been brought up all my life to think that I was a European . . . I felt torn, almost, like torn out of the soil from home. Then when I came back I knew what was going on. I knew this is where I belong. (Rossiter and Jacobs 1993:13)

This sense of belonging is often represented by the landscapes of childhood. John Storey says that 'our autobiographical narratives are primarily sustained by memory' (2003:81) and the familiar landscape of our homeland and particularly the landscapes of childhood operate as mnemonic devices; they stimulate and cosset memory. Winton's work is associated with a nostalgia for the lost times and places of childhood and young adulthood (Ben-Messahel 2006:74).

Albany, the town of his childhood, is represented as Angelus in the fictional world of *The Turning*. Therefore, this fictional world should not be read as a facsimile as such, with all the attendant errors and flaws of copy, but whole and complete. It is the located reader that struggles with notions of authenticity and, therefore, deception, as if the recognizable qualities of a shared landscape must be rendered accurately in the contract between reader and writer.

The manuscript 'Tex Surfacing' contains a number of quintessentially and recognizable Australian landscapes which presented some problems in their representation. I was raised in and around Geraldton, so those places are named as such. Chapter Seven of 'Tex Surfacing' takes place at Noondemarra Pool an iconic location of my childhood and one that I return to every year. It was whilst standing on the banks of the pool in 2005 that I began to remember, then to imagine, the group of children constructing a raft. The actual place in which I was standing was transformed to take into account the characters in my developing story; the pool became wider, the river rushed through, the chill morning of autumn gave way to the long, lazy heat of a summer afternoon. For those few people who know this location well, my presentation is a fraud, the requirements of the narrative over-running the integrity of the material. However, a number of the towns and wild places where the action takes place have been given fictional names, deliberately not alluding to known places. Willambi is the location for Chapters Nine to Fourteen in 'Tex Surfacing' and it was, for a period in the writing, an imperfectly imagined place, stitched together from my own memory with fictional places from various Australian novels. When I return to my working notebook of that period, this section was set in Northern Queensland in a small settlement where I had lived. For reasons of plot – simple logistical matters of timing and distance – it became clear that I would need to place these scenes closer to Melbourne, perhaps southern New South Wales or Northern Victoria, not a region I am greatly familiar with. It was to my library I turned, though not literally. As readers we inhabit imagined landscapes, and those landscapes do not cease to exist when we turn the last page. When I reconstruct the process of writing, I become aware of how the landscape was manipulated to take account of the discourse, of what I borrowed, and then transformed, from my reading history. The rocks where Tex and the other characters picnic, and where Skye is injured, lend a lot to the filmic location of the movie *Picnic at Hanging*

Rock. It is not just the landscape that has been borrowed however; the image of Tex and Skye pursuing each other around and over the rocks, obscured from each other's sight in the confusing maze is clearly influenced by the climactic scene in that movie. Similarly, the bush landscape of *Seven Little Australians* assisted in my development of this landscape and, it is interesting to note, that Judy's fate under the branch of the big gum tree drifted through my mind when imagining the destiny of his Skye. I could also speculate that the atmosphere in the house at Willambi lends itself to the cloying, sinister domestic background to Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*. This is, however, the dizzying though fascinating route through the inherent intertextuality of all literature.

Tim Winton's *The Turning*, like his other work, speaks of and for a locale, a small niche in the more familiar landscapes of world literature. *The Turning*, however, presents a challenge to the located reader; and it is a challenge for authority; a struggle to maintain a subjectivity who would have the landscape – the tracks through the dunes, the long flat view – speak for oneself.

The Located Writer

Tim Winton was born in Perth in 1960 and, at 21 years of age, won the Australian Vogel National Literary Award for his first novel. Since that time he has always made his living as a writer, won numerous awards and twice been nominated for the Booker Prize.

The Turning is a collection of 17 linked short stories. Characters appear as central in one story and peripheral in others; as a child in one story and an adult in another. The adult characters invariably return to the landscapes and places of their earlier childhood stories, with their lives fraying under the pressure of the unrealised hopes and dreams of their younger self. This sense of loss is also reflected in the decay and/or destruction of

remembered landscape features. But at forty-eight years of age, and at the peak of his career, Tim Winton chose to reprise the locations and many of the characters from his earliest works written when he was in his twenties.

*And I pray that I may forget
 These matters that with myself I too much discuss
 Too much explain
 Because I do not hope to turn again
 Let these words answer
 For what is done, not to be done again*

T.S. Eliot
 'Ash Wednesday'

These lines form the epigraph in the frontispiece of *The Turning*. The epigraph traditionally ties the literary work into a larger field of thematic antecedents and/or authorial influences. In this case, the lines from *Ash Wednesday* can certainly be seen as a thematic guide to the reading of these stories, as the characters all variously grapple with a moment in their lives that represents a turning point. However, Winton has noted in interview (Rossiter and Jacobs 1993:15) that in parochial Western Australia he has attained a monolithic status as 'the author' that he finds oppressive. Therefore, using a different reading approach – an author-centred one – the epigraph, these lines, could be seen as an attempt by the writer, Tim Winton, to destabilize the historicized and monumentalized 'author' that has accrued around his status and corpus of work. Conversely, it could be read as an assertion for the writer to claim his body of work as his own, a reiteration that these are *his* thematic concerns as a man and as a writer; the link between narrative history and setting, the inescapable logic that a created narrative history leads towards an already written destiny.

The cover of *The Turning* as it was reprinted in 2006 shows the paratextual evidence of the author's status (Genette 1997). *The Turning* is acclaimed as a national bestseller and a review line from the *Boston Globe* also indicates international acclaim. A 'pure' reading is of course never possible but when the author attains this sort of status the literary work can become a species of biography. The figure of the author looms large and obscures the actual text, and this is accentuated when the reader, the actual or 'located' reader as I call him/her, occupies the same metaphorical and geographical landscape. The located reader's 'horizon of expectations' is so close to that of the author's that the extratextual impact of place/landscape/history text intervenes in the development of a textuality that is aligned to the textual codes.

Quite apart from the plethora of biographical information and the reader's knowledge of the social/political/historical context of the actual writer and writing process, the new work also grapples with the textual ghost of the earlier writer that becomes embodied through the inclination of the reader to find evidence, narrativize, the development of the person, Tim Winton, through his, and I use the word advisedly, corpus. While we accept that language in general and literature in particular is, in Barthes' words, 'a tissue of citations'(1977), I am actually courting the intentional and affective fallacy here to explore the uses that writing and reading, in particular, are put to. That is, that the material circumstances of literary production when aligned with the concrete proximity of the reader to those contexts, may produce a textuality that significantly departs from the intentions of the textual codes, but nonetheless produces a specific and localised social/political reading.

Winton eschews the celebrity of the literary star but nonetheless makes himself available for interview when a new book is being published or when his name will assist an environmental cause. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Andrew Denton in 2004:

Denton: I'm intrigued with this book of short stories, *The Turning* . . . How do you come up with these people? They're not just inventions. How do you know these people?

Winton: I know the country. But the rest of it is, simply, that they're all me. Every character is a version of me. There's a bit of me in every one of them, and especially the really creepy ones. (Australian Broadcasting Commission 2004)

'Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough?' (1984:12). So asks the narrator of Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*. And the answer is that apart from the ghostly textual presence of the writer in the text, the machinery of literary promotion and literary prizes coupled with the extra-literary actions of the flesh and blood writer, invites us to do so. However, despite the pleasures of the chase, just because Winton asserts that he is scattered throughout his books and characters doesn't necessarily make it so. Foucault's exploration of the author-function indicates how as readers we place the author back into the text and this play 'marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning' (Rabinow 1986:159).

The fascination with the author has, over the last twenty years, been aided by the ubiquity of the world-wide-web and the ease with which information can be collected and disseminated. The author is present on television, at writing festivals and through interview, let alone their live presence on their own created websites and weblogs²⁸. An individual reader can compile a

²⁸ Marillier, Juliet. (2009). "Juliet Marillier Website." Retrieved August 25, 2009, from <http://www.julietmarillier.com/news.htm>. Marillier comments on her diagnosis of breast cancer and updates readers on the progress of her treatment. She also comments on the progress of her latest manuscript and expected date of publication.
Harding, Traci. (2009). "Traci Harding." Retrieved 25 August, 2009, from <http://www.voyageronline.com.au/traciharding/index.htm>. Harding publishes excerpts of her work-in-progress, has a reader community bulletin board, and in 'Notes and Glossaries' publishes details of her historical research and how it used in her books.

dossier of information on the writer: their writing habits and the physical place in which they write, their favourite food, books and hobbies, their marital status and family of origin, political affiliations and leanings. The writer in interview will be questioned and offer comment on the context, writing process, influences and personal investment in their book. Reading biographically then limits the openness of the text, makes it explicable in relation to a fixed point: the writer's life. The shadow of this other text, the writer's biographical narrative, casts itself over the reading. The discourse, plot, story of the novel are now read as allegorical, a mimesis of the actual, and it is the author's own narrative trajectory which is the authentic source.

In 'Big World', the first story in *The Turning* the young narrator experiences an ineffable moment of the sublime:

We turn our attention to the sunset. . . We don't say anything. The sun flattens itself against the saltpan and disappears. The sky goes all acid blue and there's just this huge silence. It's like the world stopped. (2006:14)

This narrator, Vic Lang, who has appeared in a number of his earlier works is a copper's son like Winton and, like Winton, had moved from the city to Angelus/Albany in his formative years. He will appear again and again throughout the collection, aiming a loaded gun through the window of his bedroom at passersby just as Winton told Andrew Denton *he* had done at that age. Vic Lang appears ultimately as a middle-aged man dogged with neuralgia and doubt and alienated from his childhood landscapes. But in 'Big World', the first story of the collection, the middle-aged Vic Lang intervenes in the narration of his younger self. Following on from the above quote, it continues:

Traci Harding Community Message Board. (n.d.). "Trazling." Retrieved 25 August, 2009, from <http://www.trazling.com/>. Harding's community of readers has created this webpage where Harding is dubbed as Queen. Members create their own heraldic orders based on Harding's books.

Right then I can't imagine an end to the quiet. The horizon fades. Everything looks impossibly far off. In two hours I'll hear Biggie and Meg in his sleeping bag and she'll cry out like a bird and become so beautiful, so desirable in the total dark that I'll begin to cry. In a week Biggie and Meg will blow me off in Broome and I'll be on the bus south for a second chance at the exams. In a year Biggie will be dead in a mining accident in the Pilbara and I'll be reading Robert Louis Stevenson at his funeral while his relatives shuffle and mutter with contempt. Meg won't show. I'll grow up and have a family of my own . . . All of it unimaginable. Right now, standing with Biggie on the salt lake at sunset . . . I don't care what happens beyond this moment. In the hot, northern dusk, the world suddenly gets big around us, so big we just give in and watch. (2004:15)

It is at this proleptic moment in the text, that the reader is brought face to face with its construction, and begins to conceive of the shape of the implied author – what is being called for in the text, how the reading will progress. 'All of it unimaginable', we read, but the function of the prolepsis alerts us to a governing consciousness. The intrusion of the older narrator, this voice from the future, emphasizes the intrinsic quality of nostalgia and rereading inherent in Winton's work. Calinescu (1993 :18) speaks of the 'circular or quasi-mythic time' that occurs in rereading, which is often an attempt to re-experience an earlier time and younger self.

'Let these words answer for what is done, not to be done again'. Since the publication of *The Turning* Winton has published *Breath* (Winton 2008), which remains preoccupied with a heroic landscape and the other thematic concerns notable in *The Turning*, and in particular earlier works such as *That Eye, The Sky* (Winton 1986) and *In the Winter Dark* (Winton 1988) which were all written and published in the 1980s. The frustration and pain of not

being able to escape from formative childhood experiences links all of these works. Just as in the story 'Big Sky', the narrator of *Breath* is the older self reflecting on his younger self as a way to make sense of where he is now. Pikelet, the main character of *Breath*, is eleven years old in 1970 and the narrator is fifty years old at the time of recollection and reminiscing; these dates correspond exactly to Winton's age at the time of writing the manuscript.

The thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces. A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. (de Certeau 1984:xxi)

de Certeau's description of reading and the text itself, does not annihilate the author, instead traces of the writer remain in the text; that is, not the author as such²⁹ – the authorial function aside – but the evidence of another consciousness at work in another space and time. It acknowledges the real work, the spatial and concretely located writing process that remains within the text. Winton's characters make sense of their present in relation to their past. By reprising characters and themes from his earlier works, Winton also makes sense of where he stands now as a writer.

It is in the Romantic Period that the conception of the author as solitary genius arises. As Bennett says, this period 'marks a turn in poetics and literary theory away from a focus on the literary work towards the subject who makes or creates the work, towards the poet or author as a site of analysis and exploration' (Bennett 2005:3). Another literary giant on the Australian literary scene is Helen Garner and, like Tim Winton, her works are prey to biographical reading. Whilst, like Winton, she mines the experience

²⁹ The authorial function remains in the text and is not part of the writing process as such but intrinsically constructed by the reading of the text – that is, necessitated by 'readability'.

of her own life for her novels her most recent novel is more consciously autobiographical. *The Spare Room* (2008) is her first work of fiction in sixteen years. As Kate Legge writes:

The “me” character in Garner’s book is called Helen. She lives as the author does, beside her daughter’s family, their houses joined by a gap in the fence for the three grandchildren to come back and forth, as they do in real life. (Bradbury 1977)

Another of the central characters is called Nicola and is inspired by Garner’s friend, the late Jenya Osborne. What textual games are being played here? Garner says she intended this as fiction, but common sense draws the many parallels between her own life and that of her character. This is not a case of metalepsis, as in narratology this term generally denotes a breaking of the boundaries that separate distinct ‘levels’ of a narrative and the confusion between narrator and author is happening here at the extratextual level. Nor does Garner, like John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, introduce a purported self as a meta-narrator (D’haen 1983). In an interview with Romana Koval on ABC Radio National’s Book Show Garner says:

[T]here was this obsession that people had with whether this book was fact or fiction. People seemed to have this crazy obsession with pinning me against the wall to find out if these things were based on real stories, or had I got the right to call it a novel . . . (Australian Broadcasting Commission 2008)

Later in the same interview, Garner responds to a question about the decision to use the name Helen for the first person narrator:

The whole time I was writing this book I was thinking, geez, I’m going to come out of this looking really bad. It was frightening to think of those feelings of intense rage and even a kind of bullying. So I

thought, well, okay, this is a novel, I've taken enormous numbers of liberties with it, but there's one thing I do want to own as mine and that is those feelings.

Garner is famous amongst her friends and acquaintances for mining the details of her own and other's lives and transforming it into fiction. She says:

What I want in a book is someone to say to me, 'This is what happened to me, this is what I did, this is what I thought about it'.
(Legge 2008)

Fiction, in this day of fake memoirs, can then become a convenient category that enables one to 'leap and skim, compress and conflate things' as Garner puts it (Bradbury 1977; Legge 2008). However, the danger is that the writer will be held to account for the authenticity of their reporting, the clarity and effectiveness of their polemic, and, unfortunately, the morality or ethics of their representation. Garner, in her previous books, has not tried to hide the autobiographical details that she uses in her writing; *Monkey Grip* (1977) describes her own experiences and those of her daughter, lovers and friends in 1970s inner city Melbourne³⁰. *The Children's Bach* (1984) traces the disintegration of the narrator's marriage and the involvement of her sister as it happened in Garner's life at that time.

I note that most of the overseas reviews concentrated on the content and style of *The Spare Room*³¹, while those reviews from within Australia were more concerned with the line between fact and fiction. Because the Australian reviewers know Garner's body of work, the details of her life, her previous marriage to Murray Bail and the circumstances of the disintegration of that union, in short, because the readers are located within the same

³⁰ In an interesting aside, Garner's daughter, Alice Garner, plays the character of Gracie, the protagonist's daughter, in the 1982 movie of *Monkey Grip*.

³¹ Schillinger, Leisl (2009). Helen Garner's "The Spare Room". *The New York Times*. New York, The New York Times Company. Laing, Olivia (2008). A passionate end to a bohemian rhapsody. *The Guardian*. London, Guardian News and Media Limited.

geographical, social, historic space of the author it is always difficult to separate the writer from the work. Like Winton, Garner is a large figure in Australian letters and given that she has so publicly eschewed in the past the idea of the novel, *The Spare Room* is read as a continuity of her previous works – the journalistic, the polemic, the long essay. Lynn Pearce has commented that when she surveyed readers from the UK and Canada about the books of Margaret Atwood, it was the Canadian readers who repudiated the verisimilitude of her work, who rejected the naming and describing of their own experience. She was, as Pearce said, ‘overinscribed’ and therefore the reader could not take control of the text as their own (1997:25).

Whilst the notion of the ‘located reader’ is explicable as a reading position and extrinsic criticism can create a variety of standpoints from which the author, the narrator and the text form an interpretative triad, a closer textual examination can provide an alternative apparatus with which to interpret the textuality of *The Turning*.

The Dialogic Turning

The ‘I’ of the first-person narrative can set up an uncomfortable identification for the reader with the idea of the governing consciousness behind the work. First person narration hails the reader into a direct communicative relationship with the narrating voice as the addressee of these utterances. The intimacy of this address, conversely, may give room for doubt on the part of the reader to whether the narrator is believable or trustworthy in their account of events. Third person narration creates a distance between the reader and the text-as-writing. In this case, the text seemingly opens itself to the reader without the intervention of an overt communicative relationship.

The seventeen stories in *The Turning* demonstrate the varied use of narrative mode, and focalization, which alternatively draw the reader into communicative relationship with the narrating voice and then create a distanced reading. I constructed the table below to unpick how *The Turning* worked as linked texts quite apart from the settings, plots, characters and themes. In other words, an intrinsic criticism enables an examination of how the discourse is constructed that links the stories together.

Story	Narrator/tense	Focalizer	Location /Period	Focalizer/narrator relationship to Vic Lang
<i>Big World</i>	1 st present & past	Young man/ schoolmate	Angelus/70s	Schoolmate (f)
<i>Abbreviation</i>	3 rd past	Vic(boy)	White point/70s	Vic (f)
<i>Aquifer</i>	1 st present & past	Man	Perth present & 60s suburbs	Angelus local (n)
<i>Damaged Goods</i>	1 st present	Woman	Angelus/90s	Wife (f/n)
<i>Small Mercies</i>	3 rd Past	Man	Angelus/90s	Angelus local (f)
<i>On her knees</i>	1 st past	Vic(young man)	Perth/80s	Vic (f/n)
<i>Cockleshell</i>	3 rd present	Teenage boy	Angelus/70s	Angelus local (f)
<i>The Turning</i>	3 rd present	Young woman	White point/90s	None-White point local (f)
<i>Sand</i>	3 rd past	Boy	White point/70s	None -White point local (f)
<i>Family</i>	3 rd past	Man	White point/90s	None - White point local (f)

<i>Long, clear view</i>	2nd present	Vic (boy)	Angelus/70s	Vic (f/n)
<i>Reunion</i>	1st present	Woman	Perth/90s	Wife (f/n)
<i>Commission</i>	1st past	Vic (man)	Goldfields/90s	Vic (f/n)
<i>Fog</i>	3rd past	Man	Angelus/70s	Father (f)
<i>Boner McPharlin's Moll</i>	1st past	Girl	Angelus/70s	Angelus local (f/n)
<i>Immunity</i>	1st past	Girl	Angelus/70s	Admirer (f/n)
<i>Defender</i>	3 rd past	Vic & wife	Perth/90s	Vic/Wife (f)

The stories in *The Turning* speak to each by a variety of means. The shared landscapes and history of the fabula link the characters into a dialogic exchange. The narrating distance in *The Turning* – the temporal distance between the experience and the narration – is not confined to the stories told in the first person or even the ones that are focalized through the character of Vic. In the aforementioned excerpt from ‘Big World’, the narrator’s voice clearly emerges from a time future to the story.

Vic, as mentioned earlier, most closely corresponds to the biographical details of Winton’s life. The character of Vic is focalizer in five of the stories, but in only two is the first person used. Both of these narrations are in relation to Vic’s relationship with his mother or father and despite the intimate voice, the gaze, or focalization, of the character is turned outwards. It is in the stories narrated in the third person that Vic is seen most clearly

and his interiority revealed whether the character of Vic is the focalizer as is the case in two of the stories, or others are.

Whether the stories are set in Angelus, White Point or Perth, and whether they directly allude to Vic or not, the chronotope of *The Turning* is stable throughout. All of the characters share the same time/space whether they are present or absent in the individual stories. What happens in the various stories, however, is a shift from the present to the past. As can be seen above, there is no pattern to the immediacy of the narrating voice in relation to historical time, or in the relationship of the narrating voice to Vic Lang. Some of the stories from Angelus in the 70s are told in present narrative time, and some in the past. This is not an uncommon device as, after all, historical time dissolves in narration. The stories set in the contemporaneous time of writing are also a combination of first and third person narration and past and present tense. It is the two stories, 'Big World' and 'Aquifer' that tie the historical and geographical world of *The Turning* together. In this, the stable chronotope of *The Turning* is assisted by the three stories that at first read seem slightly out of place. 'The Turning', 'Sand' and 'Family' all take place in White Point with a set of characters that have no relationship to Vic Lang or Angelus. However, Vic has visited White Point as a child on family holidays and, it later becomes clear that Vic knows of the two brothers as one is a star footballer. The world of *The Turning* through this textual ploy, becomes bigger than just the world of Vic Lang and his associates; there are other stories, other lives, that are similarly betoken to the past and memories.

Conclusion

Winton returns again and again to the landscapes, story modes and subjects that have led him to writing. Whether this writing is a reworking or

resolution of personal dramas remains pure speculation, as the intentions of the author will always reside outside of the text. The plight of the located reader is to find a comfortable reading space aside from the extratextual elements that crowd his/her reading of the text. Any reader, and every reader, will always bring a specific, though not unchanging, set of conventions and practices to their reading however.

The drama of the located reader that I have played out in the first section of this chapter lends itself, of course, to the situation of the character of Tex in 'Tex Surfacing'. Tex feels that her narrative, her experience, her history and landscape have been over-written by the proximity of the authored texts of Sarah. She is hailed into a relationship with this text that is too close to allow a distanced, or immersed, reading. She is the epitome of the 'affective fallacy' in as much as it is her knowledge of the author alone that shapes the text. Where this sort of affective reading may arise from a naïve or immersed reading, for Tex it is the lack of distance between the materiality of her (and Sarah's) experience and the text. How the notion of the located reader has been put to use in the manuscript 'Tex Surfacing' is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: The Author and the Reader

There is 'The Reader' – an imagined audience – and then there is the act of reading, and then the actual reader. A single frame of reference can not succeed in explicating the various theoretical positions involved in defining and exploring these concepts, nor can notions of efficacy or agency be equally distributed across these categories. Whilst other sections of this exegesis deal with how textuality is created at the intersection of language and interpretative strategies, this section deals with the representation of the reader and the writer socially and in literature, and how in turn these representations are treated in 'Tex Surfacing'.

Barthes replaces the author with a 'modern scriptor who is born simultaneously with the text (1977:145)'. Who is this Scriptor we may ask? Barthes would ask that we consider *what* this scriptor is? I imagine myself, an actual reader, responding to the above. My imagined reader then asks the questions:

"Should I ignore the biographical knowledge I have of this author as I read his/her text? Can I?"

"Are my impressions/interpretations valid? Is there another interpretative source which may invalidate mine?"

"What was the writer trying to communicate? Do I have the codes to interpret that/Do I have a moral imperative to attempt that?"

These are the dilemmas that variously confront all of the readers represented in 'Tex Surfacing'.

Whilst we may accept that at a metaphorical level all readers are writers, the fact remains that writers invariably have some proof of their process within language through their working notebooks and amended drafts that readers

generally don't have recourse to in their process. The text, after all, as Barthes says, is 'eternally written here and now' (145), therefore, though the Author may be dead, the reader and the writer both are subjects-in-history where *this* instance of language occurred as J. Hillis-Miller says 'in a certain spot to a certain person in a certain historical, personal, institutional and political situation (2005:44). Hillis-Miller is discussing the act of reading as an event, but I would argue that the writer shares the same performative possibilities that open up in a very similar process. Barthes' project is to liberate the text and reading from the Author-Function. However, whilst opening up the possibilities of language beyond the boundaries of the materiality of the book, he eliminates the agency of the subject, and the reader and writer are, therefore, reduced to a textual function.

In this section, I lift sections from the manuscript 'Tex Surfacing' that directly address the subject of the reader, reading itself, and the author³². Paul Goetsch (2004) in his discussion of representations of the Reader-Figure in literature, differentiates between the fictive reader and the fictional reader; the fictive reader is the addressee of the narrator when that dramatized persona elaborates upon the communicative situation. The fictional reader operates at the level of the story as a character. The concept of the fictive reader is taken up in Chapter Two of the exegesis, '*The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the female reader'. 'Tex Surfacing' uses the device of the fictional reader as an address to the implied reader. The referenced texts – the books the characters are reading or discuss – act as clues to the development of character and plot

In the early drafting of 'Tex Surfacing' I was interested in how my reading led to writing, both as a trajectory of identity and, more specifically and urgently, to the characters, story, and discourse that were forming. In the context of

³² Unless otherwise indicated by reference, the quotes in this chapter are taken from the unpublished manuscript 'Tex Surfacing'.

the theoretical reading I was doing, I began to develop a narrative where the plot development mirrored the reading material of the characters. In this initial writing, Tex's character, or her narrative of self, is inextricably tied up with her devotion to the character of Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. As she grows up, and her reading broadens, she revises her earlier reading allegiances and becomes a 'resisting reader' of certain canonical works, and turns to feminist works such as *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood. Whilst 'Tex Surfacing' as it stands is still concerned with matters of reading and interpretation, it became clear to me that without the character of an active author, the work would degenerate into solipsism. Whilst the reader may engage with an implied author through textual codes, and concur with or reject the discourse, the actual figure of the author, as the reader conceives of him/her, is a ragbag of prejudices, projections and presumptions – in short, an affective fallacy.

At this stage, I rewrote the character of Tess so that she was not only a reader but also a writer. As I mentioned above, this presented problems with a certain circular interiority of drama which I had neither the interest, nor the skill, to maintain. As I continued to research different theories of reading and reading positions, I felt that I had occupied many of these positions depending on the text, my historical/political standpoint, and proximity emotionally, physically, and so on, to the action or characters. Reading remains at the centre of 'Tex Surfacing' and is enacted through the various characters. As the action is focalized through the character of Tex, I decided to separate out the characters of writer and reader, to personify the tension, resistance, and acquiescence that as readers we project onto the narratorial voice.

In what follows I separate the instances of reading and writing in 'Tex Surfacing', and the characters that personify what I have theorized as 'readers' and 'writers'. Whilst it may be artifice to dissect the manuscript in

this fashion – indeed, it feels like this to me – it creates another readable text and illuminates yet another reading position; the freedom of the reader, as I’ve said, to create the story which suits their ends³³.

The Reader

“I’ve given up reading”

As one would give up alcohol or heroin. (8)³⁴

Tex’s silent response to Randall’s pronouncement records her recognition that reading can function as an escape, or release; that some read to ‘lose themselves’. The *delerium* (Derrida 1978:391) of reading occurs at a margin, when the undecidability of the text demands, or allows, the slippage of a fixed identity. Marguerite Duras records how her reading creates a relationship between the reading self and the text on the page:

Perhaps one always reads in the dark . . . Reading depends on the obscurity of the night. Even if one reads in broad daylight, outside, darkness gathers around the book. (Bennett 1995:159)

Phenomenological accounts of reading stress the immersion of the subject into the fictional world resulting in a momentary erasure of the self. In this model of subjective criticism Holland says that ‘interpretation is a function of identity . . . That is, all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves’ (Crosman 1980:30). According to Jonathan Culler, however, Holland has replaced the idea of the unity of the text, with the ‘error of accepting the notion of the unity of the self’ (30).

³³ This end may be ‘unsatisfactory’ to the reader, as it demands a ‘writerly’ position in regard to the ending of the manuscript. That is, the reader is left with too little information in order to interpret the scraps of textual material to create a cohesive work.

³⁴ Unless otherwise indicated by a specific reference, all the indented quotes in this chapter are excerpted from ‘Tex Surfacing’.

Various reading positions, then, are theorized according to models that tend to privilege the subject or the text. For instance, when Genette discusses narrative immersion it is the effectiveness of the narration 'silent in its evocation' that shapes the transparent 'receiving instance' (Blackford 2004:22). From Jakobson's model of linguistic communication to Stanley Fish's radical reinterpretation of reader agency, models of reading are concerned with *where* meaning resides. Elizabeth Freund traces how various academics have theorized the reader: 'the mock reader (Gibson), the implied reader (Booth, Iser), the model reader (Eco), the super-reader (Riffaterre), the inscribed or encoded reader (Brooke-Rose), the narratee (Prince), the ideal reader (Culler), the literant (Holland), the actual reader (Jauss), the informed reader or the interpretative community (Fish)' (1987: 7).

Sartre echoes the experience of all writers, and those avid readers, when he says: "I began my life as I will no doubt end it: among books", (1964:36) and it is within our personal reading choices and the way in which we invite these texts to act as or stand in as examples for our life narrative that is the fascinating locus for any examination of reading. 'Tex Surfacing' features a number of readers: Randall reads to illuminate his own life and experience – he is looking for a universal and philosophical truth; Tex reads as if words and books were codes for a truth, or the means to recover the events of the past; Sarah and Richard, the writers, read to identify with the community of writing and literature; Fay reads to lose herself in an experience that is repeatable and secure:

They went as always to the book shop next door, Fay peeling off to the recent fiction section, scanning the tall shelves for the correct combination of colour, font and style – pastel blue or mauve, large

gold title with curlicues. Her old faithfuls, the Danielle Steele's and Barbara Taylor Bradford's, she could get from the local library. (91)

Fay pays undue attention to the material production and marketability of the text, but who amongst us has not read those marketing signals when in haste to satisfy our established reading habits. Maurice Blanchot differentiating between popular and literary texts says, 'before it is read by anyone, the non-literary book has already been read by everyone, and it is this preliminary reading that guarantees it a secure existence' (Bennett 1995:192). Blanchot is referring to the qualities of the text, much like Barthes' differentiation between 'lisible' and 'scriptible' texts (1975:4-5). But at another level the actual physical signs of the book guide the reading and the reading experience. To ensure their sales, publishing houses rely on this sort of 'pre-reading' skill on the part of readers; genre, product placement, cover art, graphic design, endorsements and blurbs are a set of signs that guide readers towards their preferred reading material.

Wimslatt (1954) believed that a feature of New Criticism was the avoidance of what he and Beardsley coined 'the affective fallacy', that is, that a text's affect on the reader should not be confused with the work of literature itself which should be analysed objectively for its intrinsic value. Whilst this sort of categorization may serve the purposes of value as opposed to commodity, it also fails to take into account the anarchic and individualistic uses that reading may be put to. Reader-response theory and New Historicism rejected New Criticism for its ahistorical, universalizing tendencies, and Reader-response theorists in particular rejected the notion that there was a single meaning or effect that could be judged by text alone. In the case below, Fay must encounter language at every reading. Though she is committed to a reading experience that is 'repeatable and secure', she must work to overcome resistance to a new text. That is, she applies herself to the task, in fact, of over-writing the text:

Fay had finished *Penmarric* the night before and had picked up *Cashelmara* from the library that morning. She had ordered it from the library when she was two chapters from the end of *Penmarric* and she could see already that so much was still left undone – she wasn't to be satisfied, because after all she said, books were like life and things went on, children were born, old loves and feuds were resurrected through the generations. But *Cashelmara* was a new story with new people, and she was disappointed. It was going to take a while for her to get used to the new people, but she was resolute – she trusted Susan Howatch. (34)

In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1987), Janice Radway undertakes an investigation into the uses of popular romance fiction in the lives of women. Whilst 'consumption is also a form of production' (Storey 2003:78), in as much as we create and re-create identities for our selves, it is also a matter of interpellation as we are hailed as subjects into a complex relationship between agency and representation.

Genre fiction, such as romance and crime, has a wide readership, but book sales also indicate the preponderance of women aged from 25 to 45 years who are purchasers (Gabriel 1997). These same figures however do not indicate or track the reading habits of individuals; perhaps these women read all sorts of stuff. Gabrielle Lord, an Australian crime novelist, says that readers often tell her: "Normally I never read crime but I read your last novel and really enjoyed it." Lord says, 'Hearing this, I'm never quite sure whether they're implying they normally read nothing but Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Jacques Derrida' (Adelaide 2006). Alison Light (Ashley 1997:224) insists that for her as a reader of genre fiction, these novels are 'valued precisely as ritual and as repetition'. Although reading may be a solitary act, many academics working in the area stress the shared nature of book

consumption. Light says, '[r]eaders often collect hundreds which are shared and recycled among friends. Reading romance fiction means participating in a kind of subculture' (224). Pleasure occurs in a number of ways, as ritual and repetition as Lights says, and also as a pleasure which is partly deferred until it is shared amongst a community of readers. The Australia Council's 1989 survey of book buying and borrowing showed that just over half the population were currently reading a book and 17% of those readers borrowed books from family or friends (Hans Hoegh Goldberg Economic Strategies Pty Ltd 1990:4). Stanley Fish (Crosman 1980:20) brings us the notion of 'interpretative communities' as a set of shared conventions within a community of readers, and alerts us to the possible locations and constituencies of these communities, and how they are enabled through discourse.

Radway's work in *Reading the Romance* gives us some insight into the development of subjectivity or the agency that might inhabit that consumption through her collection and analysis of the personal testimony of individuals into their reading habits. For Radway, romance novels function as 'compensatory literature' and reading as 'therapeutic' (1987:85-95).

Tex, as a child, is inducted into the social shapes allowable for women through sharing the stories and books of her mother. Tex, however, also reads adventure books and those children's books that allow her to play out more empowered examples of subjectivity.

As a child and a young woman books, for me, were a means to an end; a loss of the historical self into a boundless, ahistorical, transgendered self that could only be found in the reading experience. However, the common element that I recognise now, but didn't all through my girlhood and early womanhood, was that I felt excluded from many novels and stories because they were told from a male point of view. My inner world was seemingly so

different from theirs that no point of identification was possible or, more importantly, pleasurable. '[T]he female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself' (Blackford 2004:17). So the pleasures of the text were the story, of course; but a story filtered through the lens of a particular way of seeing the world, one that enabled me to enter into the text, and all its glories and tragedies, through the female character.

The literary canon is, of course, a historical construct, requiring retrospective construction by critics and academics of how a work of literary art is reflective of, or stands in for, the whole sweep of social and cultural change. Canonical status does not necessarily preclude a work from being entertaining or melodramatic, but it is the historical, moral, political value of the work in the present day that is at stake, not the reading experience per se. Critics and academics have long been derisive of the reader who becomes immersed in the text. Pearce (1997: 5) points out that Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Affective Fallacy* 'signals the reader's lack of control over both the text and the reading process, and such lack of control is, in modern Western culture, a mark of both the feminine and un(der)educated working class'.

Whilst we may attempt to 'read for closure and coherence' (Cornis-Pope 1991) in the first instance, undertaking a hermeneutic practice to uncover meaning or, alternatively, produce meaning if we are 'reading against the grain', much literary theory ignores the affective aspects of the experience or the social, emotional uses that reading fulfils. A colleague, trained in 'discrimination' via methods of New Criticism, says that when she wants a 'break' from cerebral work and reading she will reread books, such as those written by Georgette Heyer; books she enjoyed *before* she received academic critical training. She says she is able to suppress critical readings

of style and content and will re-enter (or re-visit) the original pleasures of her first reading. Georges Perec also enjoys the familiarity of rereading:

The words were where they should be, and the books told a story you could follow; . . . and on re-reading, re-encounter, enhanced by the certainty that you would encounter those words again, the impression you had felt the first time. (Calinescu 1993:frontispiece)

When Tess arrives in Melbourne, as a young woman, her childhood reading is both a comfort to her, and a reminder that memory is deceptive:

She grabbed *The Getting of Wisdom* and *Jane Eyre*, wanting the familiarity of rereading and the distance of nostalgia. (9)

Liedeke Plate (2004) points out, there is a 'perhaps (post) modern trend in autobiography; to write about reading as a way of constructing the self' and our reading history can recall the past into the present moment as we revisit the novels and readings of an earlier self. As a reader, Tex is positioned somewhere between Fay and Randall – she enjoys the immersion and loss of self and the rereading of old favourites. However, like Randall she had once believed that canonical literature, in particular, could serve as a model for the development of her own narrative identity:

She had brought a Tom Robbins book with her - it didn't matter which because they were all the same; also *Madame Bovary* to serve a pose that might accustom her to being a muse or, if Richard took notice, might alert him to her potential fate. (63)

Janet Batsleer, an academic, muses on her development of literary discrimination and appreciation whilst studying English Literature, and her

subsequent rejection of the pulp fiction romance she had avidly read for years:

I thought that being able to tell the difference meant success in life. Knowing a great work of literature when I saw one, meant I had miraculously shed subordination. Being a woman from a poor family didn't matter very much. I was one of the cream. (Ashley 1997:218)

After her initial early infatuation with fiction and canonical literature, Tex becomes disenchanted with the hidden truths supposedly immanent in literature. She finds, as others have, that 'the sort of text prioritized by many critics was complex, 'opaque', even seeming to "turn its back on the reader"' (Brown in Birch 1989:125). As a young reader in the 70s, Tex explores, then ultimately rejects, the depiction of women in novels. She begins to understand that to relate too keenly to representations of the female in literature is to subscribe to a disabling condition. Judith Fetterley comments on the schizophrenic nature of reading for many women: 'Alien from the women I saw most frequently imagined, I mentally arranged them in rows labeled respectively insipid heroines, sexy survivors and demonic destroyers' (Eagleton 1996:303).

Did Thomas Hardy expect you to like Angel or despise him? Tess had asked her teacher, Mrs McDonald, but she just threw it back onto Tess and said that the answer was in the text – but where? (82)

Tex holds Thomas Hardy ultimately responsible for Tess's fate, knowing that Angel is a cipher put to work to the author's end. Because Tex has grown up listening to her Aunt's stories and reading her short stories and novels, she recognizes that her life, real events and memories are taken by Sarah and distorted to create her fiction. Fiction, then, becomes a counterfeit of what is true and authentic. Unlike Emma Bovary, Tex is not going to be led astray by

her reading. The pleasures of immersion for Tex must be counterbalanced against her need to resist, to strategically position herself as a 'resisting reader' against the seductions of Sarah's narrative:

Tex was reduced to true crime, having winnowed away even travelogue and biography, appalled by the blurry confusion of fact, the jarring insertions of the writer's bias and passion. The best of the true crime writers let the facts – the childhood background, the scattered remains, the forensic profile, the behaviour and movements of the victim and protagonist – speak for themselves. (91)

The question remains, of course, how historical figures can speak for themselves outside of the limitations and inadequacies of language. For Tex, the author is over inscribed in the text. Lynn Pearce, as indicated above, conducting a reading survey in Canada notes that the local female readers rejected Margaret Atwood, finding her stories 'too autobiographical'(1997). Rita Felski also notes that in popular conceptions of authorship, we are inclined to see the book as an 'extension of the writer's soul' (2003:61).

Ongoing debate regarding the influence of popular television on the minds and souls of the population is indicative of the continuity of the idea that the writer's responsibility is, as Matthew Arnold would have it, to bestow 'sweetness and light' (Collini 1993) on their readers:

"So, what's good?"

"Good? Fun, will-change-your-life, or something to lose yourself in?"

(8)

Although Randall acknowledges that reading may serve a number of purposes for the individual, he remains relentlessly moralistic regarding the true or pure purpose of literature: Randall reads for insight and meaning. The

character of reading, Barthes' theorises, is shaped by the text. Therefore, popular novels by their nature are already read, are eminently *lisible*, requiring no skill or even activity on the part of the reader, whereas the *scriptable* work demands the intellectual engagement of the reader to render an interpretation and disallows immersion, though the *desir* that lies at the heart of the encounter with language remains. Barthes' separation of fiction into dichotomous categories is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's conception of the uses of literature as a tool for moral improvement of the masses.

For Randall, literature should not only be 'improving', he also conflates the weight of truth within the text with the life of the writer. In the following case, the author's life has betrayed the literary work and illuminated the historical and social distance between the writer and himself:

He pulled out *The Words*.

"I thought this would help. Existentialism might give a meaning to my misery."

"And did it?"

"I didn't believe him. Sartre was famous, could sleep with any woman he wanted, hang out at French cafes with other intellectuals smoking Gauloises and drinking Pernod. His life and mine? I was a poor drunken bastard – it wasn't the same." (8)

Tex also uses biographical knowledge of the author to confirm or reject the value of literature. In the case below, she subverts another character's reading pleasure by calling into question the 'truth' that underlies the text, that is, a truth that is immanent in the literary work. Tex's reading is to some degree a Marxist deconstruction, where the ideological background of the writer remains as a code within the text:

“I loved reading when I was a kid. Well, I loved my Dad reading to me at night and I would pretend I was Bessie from that book about the tree with all the pixies and stuff living in it.”

“The Magic Faraway Tree. It seems Enid Blyton abused her children; she was a terrible mother.”

Tess wouldn't allow Kerry illusion. (113)

As a response to the biographical criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Wimsatt and Beardsley warned against the ‘intentional fallacy’ in which the author is studied to reveal the message of the text. They were instead concerned with close reading as the sole strategy to ‘uncover’ the codes inscribed in the language that alone creates the effect. At the conclusion of ‘Tex Surfacing’, it is not the reader, the written words, or the writer in which meaning is inscribed, it is textuality:

Inside, a bundle of paper held together with a paper clip. On top was a note, a small square of paper, in Sarah's distinctive hand: These words on paper, as always, say far more than I could ever speak. . . . The pages fell at her feet, the early morning easterly wind picking them up and flicking them fitfully around the floor until if there was any order in what Sarah had intended, it was now lost. (106)

A bundle of pages, their authorship obscured, intentionality dissipated by the random events of history; all that is left is for the reader to again set to the task of creating meaning from these fragments. The ending of ‘Tex Surfacing’ was inspired by the quote below from Michel de Certeau:

The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in texts something different from what they “intended”. He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the

space organised by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings. (1984:169)

The question of how to resolve the mystery of Simon's parentage, the fate of Didie Comolly, the nature of the relationship between Sarah and Richard, became pressing towards the end of the writing of the first draft of the manuscript. Whilst this is normal and understandable for a first draft, the process of 'reading' – that is, groping towards a coherence of plot, theme and fabula – became suggestive of the contract between reader and writer, which John Fowles so skillfully manipulates in his alternative endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. I had intended in the final draft to make clear the context of these scraps of text from Richard and Sarah – some material evidence of the time and place from which they emerged – but, like an Agatha Christie novel without the benefit of Poirot's exposition, the clues for what transpired 'out of scene', I hope, are scattered throughout the text. Whilst as a reader, I object to a 'difficult read' when I feel that the author is consciously hiding and obscuring essential facts, I believed, eventually, that to be true to the spirit of the subject-in-process that this narrative would require re-reading and the willing adoption by the reader of the agency to interpret and create meaning with the textual material.

The Author

The author and the poet in 'Tex Surfacing', like the readers, struggle with the transformation of experience and authenticity – a sort of truth – into language. Whereas the readers, however, must assert their own agency and indeed subjectivity over what they perceive as a misrepresentation of themselves and their lives, Sarah can exercise a measure of control over the tone and content of her own narrative:

'To my mind all writing is autobiographical, and I use it to find a way to rewrite my own history, to imagine myself in a different place from where I ended up. . . I know from your correspondence that many of you understand that my life and experiences penetrate my books – how could it not! – and perhaps this makes your reading experience richer as well. There are also many readers out there who don't know my personal situation. Is the book they read different from the one you read? In the end a book stands alone; these words aren't mine once you open the first page, the story is yours.' (4)

The character of Sarah, the writer, is the least fleshed-out of all the characters in 'Tex Surfacing'. Like Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* she makes up stories in order to rewrite her destiny but she is always seen through the eyes of others. Her dialogue with the other characters is invariably enigmatic but, just like Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, she is the subject of the gaze. The character of Sarah is inevitably filtered through the perceptions of Tex, Skye and others and she is the subject of interpretative speculation primarily due to her position as a writer. From the vantage point of distance and memory, Tex begins to construct her own narrative of Sarah:

Did Sarah recognize herself in the dangerous powers of this young woman, or was she just a weary amanuensis copying down all the voices and confessions of everyone she had ever known? (7)

This is the voice of a reader, but it is a reader who knows the author. The passage above follows on from Tex's online reading of an excerpt from Sarah's novel. For Tex, this writing is evidence of who the author is, what she has become in the intervening years since Tex last saw her. In the mind of this located reader, the text is an allegory for the writer's lived experience. Positioned as they are in the same shared history, Tex's impulse to read is

not to 'lose' herself but, through her coolly analytical reading, to find a means to reassert her own story. However, because she is not a writer per se, Tex requires Sarah's textual material to enable the shape of her own story. Barthes' 'tissue of citations' refers to the inherent intertextuality of all literature, but Tex's reference to Sarah as an amanuensis places the narrativity of subject-formation and therefore the narrativity of memory as the central core of the literary work.

In this first chapter of 'Tex Surfacing', I am attempting through the indirect discourse of the narrator and the tight third person point-of-view to position the implied reader to identify with Tex and therefore deconstruct the literary 'work' done by Sarah. Despite the academy splitting the literary work of art from the author, popular responses to the relationship between reading and the author continue to place the writer not only as being responsible for the success or otherwise of the reading experience, but the novel itself is imagined as a cipher that the skilled or located or fan reader can use to decode the writer's history. Tex's opinion is confirmed when Sarah writes in her blog:

'I write in allegories, but that doesn't mean that it's not emotionally real to me. To my mind all writing is autobiographical, and I use it to find a way to rewrite my own history'. (5)

Zadie Smith confirms that most writers she knows, and she herself, judge their writing as a failure, or success, of the self: 'A writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner'(2007). However, Tex does not see the relationship between Sarah and her writing so directly. While Smith puts the author in control of the writing, Tex questions whether Sarah creates herself with her writing or is some sort of sibyl fated to record everything she has seen or heard and experienced. In this respect, Sarah becomes a personification of Barthes'

Scriptor and her existence is dependent upon language. It is only through her stories that she is able to communicate:

He is still and Sarah also subsides, sinking under the weight of ‘what she tries to say’. (21)

Tex resents what she sees as Sarah’s representation, whether it be allegory or not, of her own life. Within the world of the novel the author, for some readers, is god-like. The author is ultimately responsible for the fate of the characters and therefore for the reading experience. Stephen King made this potential conflict – the reader’s desire to ‘write’ their own story – the central device of *Misery*. The idea of a fiction-fan kidnapping the writer and forcing him to write the story in a way that suits her is a play between authorial control and reader agency taken to its extreme (Lant 2007:145).

Much like the fan-reader in *Misery*, Randall holds the writer responsible not only for the fate of the characters but also for the meaning in the text. For this type of reader, an authorial reader as Rabinowitz would have it, the intentions of the author are inextricably tied up with the work of art. Randall’s confusion between the literary work and the history of the actual author on the one hand leads him to over-identify with the author. On the other hand, in an effort to retrieve agency and repudiate the author-god he denies the act of creation and instead invokes the notion of the scriptor:

“The book isn’t the author, Tess, the story isn’t even his own. . . it’s still only bits and pieces, we make up the rest. That’s why they hang out at cafes – to eavesdrop, so they can catch fragments.” (10)

Randall has been reading *Mots* by Sartre and the autobiographical nature of work has disallowed immersion. He imagines the figure of the author, the historical/social context of the writing process. The attempt to undertake a

biographical reading process results in Randall feeling that he loses his own subjectivity in the experience; he is literally occupied by the mind of the writer:

“I stopped reading fiction, it was messing with my mind. It was bad enough being inside my own head and worse being in the writer’s head; claustrophobic, like being locked in a small room with a stranger for days and days.” (9)

Like Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Sarah recreates herself as if she was one of her own characters. From an awkward teenager to the bohemian woman in Melbourne, Tex sees Sarah as a woman with mysteries and secrets that can only be divined through the allegory of her stories:

Sarah never seemed to have a history, either then or now. (30)

Sarah’s writing process in ‘Tex Surfacing’ remains opaque. Although Sarah occasionally discusses story or character development, the narratorial voice is generally suspicious or resentful. Randall has given up reading fiction, as Tex does later, because for him the author is either inauthentic or a thief. In the first instance, Randall expresses the idea of the literary work as a ‘tissue of citations’, as if intertextuality means that the writer is a sort of vampire who trawls the life of those around them for material.

There are, as indicated above, two writers represented in ‘Tex Surfacing’, Sarah the female novelist, and Richard the poet, and the source and practice of their writing are treated very differently. Whilst Richard’s inspiration is represented as an exuberant rush from a wellspring within, Sarah’s writing habits are represented as discreet, as seen in the excerpt below:

Richard and Sarah at the kitchen table, their heads bent towards each other, the naked bulb illuminating the rhythm of their moving hands. Sarah worked in a large journal with a fountain pen, the nib scratching like a whisper over the page while Richard grasped a stub of pencil, rushing over his tiny notebook, flicking the pages over as if every moment conquered the last. (100)

Richard has managed to construct a life for himself that supports his writing – he teaches, he performs, he is recognized and remunerated. Tillie Olsen in 1978 wrote passionately of the plight of the woman who is drawn to writing. She quotes Anais Nin: ‘The aggressive act of creating; the guilt for creating. I did not want to rival man, to steal man’s creation, his thunder. I must protect them, not outshine them’ (2003:30). If, as in the case of ‘Jo’ from *Little Women*, she may try to make something ‘better or greater of herself’ her female desire will lead her to conventional choices and, if she is lucky, to a ‘womanly’ moderation in her previous desires to be a ‘writer’. Ursula K. Le Guin muses on Alcott’s treatment of the character of Jo as a writer:

We first meet Jo as a writer when sister Amy vengefully burns her manuscript, “the loving work of several years. It seemed a loss to others, but to Jo it was a dreadful calamity.” How could a book, several years’ work, be “a small loss” to anyone? That horrified me. (1989:213)

When Jo has her first story printed, Le Guin notes the deflating irony Alcott uses:

The March family makes a great fuss, “for these foolish, affectionate people made a jubilee of every little household joy” – and there again is deflation, a writer’s first publication reduced to “a little household joy”. Does it not debase art? And yet, does it not by refusing the

heroic tone, refuse to inflate into something beyond the reach of any “mere girl”? (1989:214)

Though dedicated to her writing, Sarah is also a product of her history and culture, and her writing places are in corners or at kitchen tables or on her bed as if she must make her production a small thing. The writerly aspect of herself is in opposition to or alongside her identity as a woman. She comments to Tex in regard to her relationship with Richard:

“You unman him.”

“Does Sky ‘unwoman’ you, or ‘unwriter’ you?”

“There’s a part of me – many parts – Sky will never touch. He doesn’t even know they’re there.” (86)

Like Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, this Sarah is also a teller of tales and therefore treated as a potential liar. When Fay finally tells Tex what Sarah had recounted to her as a young woman, her status as a writer, a teller of tales, undermines the authenticity of her account. Fay says:

“You know what she was like, still is – I don’t even know if it’s deliberate, the constant storytelling. Does she believe it, should we believe it, whose story should we believe. . .” (126)

Sky doesn’t read; he collects country and western music, finding an appropriate song for every occasion. He is anti-literary, suspicious of the transformation from experience, or truth, to fiction. For him, the observing eye of the writer in his midst is a theft or appropriation of the lives of those around them:

“Her majesty’s a vampire queen, Tex. She’s sucking the life out of you, me, even poor old Jason here. Richard’s the only one she can’t touch, because he’s not really alive either. Did you know that?”

It all came down to words, the arbitrary naming of things that gave you mastery over them. (70)

The unspoken rejoinder above comes from Tex. She and Sky both appreciate the power of that representation but play out the struggle to name and own their own experiences with a different intensity and ultimate intent. For Tex, the writing obscures the material circumstances of experience but for Sky the literary work is a counterfeit:

I told him that the drugs would bring him closer, let him write something true for once instead of roses and junes and moons and all those fucking white lies he uses, she uses too.” (79)

How the reader characters in ‘Tex Surfacing’ see the nature of literature and the act of writing differs quite sharply to how Sarah and Richard do. How the writers characterize their own writing process was developed from interviews I read on various online sites and magazines and in particular, from John Fowles’ notebooks. This seemed a fitting tribute to the character of Sarah; that she could reassert her position as a ‘real’ writer and come out of the shadow of her representation. Fowles has recounted many times how the inspiration for *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* arose from an image in his mind as he walked the Cobb at Lyme Regis. He imagined a woman, clothed in a black cloak, her back to him and staring out at the horizon (Fowles 2006:23).

As homage to John Fowles, and the copious reading I had done of his Journals and interviews, the ways in which Richard and Sarah represent their writing process owes a lot to his conception of what he does, what

happens, when he writes. He says: ‘Even to say, “I want to be possessed by my own creations, is not enough”; all natural or born writers are possessed, and in the old magical sense, by their own imaginations long before they even begin to think of writing’ (Bradbury 1977:137). Les Murray in an interview talks about the process of writing a poem:

Fredy Neptune appeared and said 'write me'. I only discovered the ending when I got to the last page. It wasn't like making it up, it was as if I was discovering it out of a deep place in my head. When I got to the ending he just walked away and never bothered me again. (Wroe 2010)

Sarah is visited by the muse, and the conversation below between Tex and Sarah is in regard to the development of a character in one of her stories. Tex has been reading excerpts of the story and is surprised at the turn of events in the plot:

“You never mentioned it to me. I mean there’s been nothing in what you’ve read me so far.”

“He kept it secret, even from me.” (71)

The novel as we know it and the conception of the author as we know that figure, as I have indicated above, arose during the Romantic Period (Bennett 2005). In the context of the development of the subject as an autonomous individual, the idea of the poet and writer as solitary geniuses also emerges. In the passage below, the character of Richard, in indirect discourse, indicates how this romantic conception of the self and the writing process persists. However, this representation also shows that Richard has an awareness of the arbitrary codes of language:

He couldn't write, could no longer trust he had it in him, the deep source that could locate and dredge the right word, the correct arrangement of sounds and echoes that floated in the depths. (90)

Despite Tex's distrust of fiction, and Sarah's ability to dissimulate their shared experiences into the allegories of her fantasy writing, she tries one last time to elicit the truth from Sarah:

"You were there Tessa, why don't you tell me."

She was a sibyl, serpentine in her hard look. And after all, it was as her look suggested: There was no mystery, all was known, with or without the evidence. (147)

Tex hardly pauses, digests that this communication between them is authentic, that she, in fact, can surmise, the narrative of events just as accurately as Sarah. Tex's need is for more stories, an imagined rendering of events that she only dimly remembers. Despite her resistance to the half-truths that she feels Sarah deals in, Tex ultimately succumbs to the temptations of Sarah's narrative skills:

. . . "But I also want to know about you – what my father did to you, who's Simon's father and what that means to you, what you remember and, also, though it seems trivial and far away now with Simon and Cilla in your life and tropical holidays but still I wonder, what do you know or what can you guess about what happened to Didie Comolly?" (103)

It is interesting to note that it is an oral tale that Tex requests. The act of writing was initially a means to record tales and tradition handed down through the story-teller; the physical presence, the facial expressions and the

breath filled out some of the gaps and aporias that open up in language alone.

The representation of reading in 'Tex Surfacing' concludes with Tex receiving an envelope containing scraps of writing, some of it clearly written by Sarah but some she suspects, and recognizes, as the hand of Richard. What follows is these excerpts: love poems perhaps written by Richard, ambiguous as to who or what they might represent; a story about a lost child and her pursuer; and a prose piece seemingly about conception and birth, though possibly an allegory of writing. As mentioned in 'The Reader' section preceding this, the reader when presented with an indeterminate text must undertake interpretative work again. In respect to my reflections on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, it is only at this point in the narrative that I am seeking to make explicit the communicative relationship between author and reader, or implied author and implied reader if you will. The implied reader at this point has no recourse to the voices of the character, or further exposition, they are thrown out of the fabula and must attempt, if they so wish, an interpretation through a re-reading. Conversely, of course, they have the agency to reject all of the above and can come to their own conclusions, perhaps that the writer has failed in their contract.

The voice of the lost child in the embedded text stands in here for the voice of the writer, who must ultimately make choices that will render language into meaning:

All around her the world waited in a hush, and it was lonely after all being at the center, the only one who could make a difference, make the next moment come. (155)

Conclusion

It is a conceit, of course, to suggest that it is the author, or even the text, that makes ‘the next moment come’. The reader is quite able to take the textual material and transform it to her own ends or continue the narrative long past the point that the words on the page end. In this regard, readers are writers, inasmuch as they weave a tale in their minds, communicate their stories and their interpretations to others, and construct an identity using a narrative-like framework. As soon as this material is transformed into written language, they are authors. Writers and readers are subject-in-process; the object of their process is language. An author is the subject that has once-been-in-process, and the words on the page are merely a trace of that process. The writer’s journal and its relationship to the literary work are yet another narrative that could give rise to another authored work – much as this exegesis is – but they do not illuminate the text to a greater degree than any other specific reading or interpretative practice.

The idea of agency and authority is, of course, outside of the text in the end. The mobilization of the argument entails a dialogue, a communication between two parties. The dialogue, or drama, is played out in the story in ‘Tex Surfacing’ between the characters and, at the next level, in the relationship between narrator and narratee and, ultimately, in the discussion in the exegesis which is a dialogue entailing a limited field of reference; that is, the narrative framework as understood by specialized and close readers.

Writers are readers, both literally and metaphorically. The writer as a subject of discourse, historically, socially and politically, is held in the same tension as any reader between the possibilities of individual agency and their own representation in language. The intertextual references, the literary allusions and influences in ‘Tex Surfacing’ that I read into the manuscript three years down the track are quite separate from those intended. As a reader, I can

now invade this text with all the suppositions and assumptions of the reader
anywhere.

Concluding Remarks

At the time of writing – the soft pencil rushing and pausing, as the soft autumn breeze ruffles the edges of the page – there is a guiding consciousness that links one word to the next. The resulting paragraphs and pages are something more and less than the intentions I brought to this process . . .

It is now Spring, and I am still writing or perhaps ‘then’ writing. The performative ‘I’ of this text is, of course, fictional, dispersed as it is through time and space. This attention to the materiality of this process is not sophistry or even an undue solipsism. As a reader, or perhaps a writer now, I must make apologies to the author, John Fowles. The text stands, open to the vagaries of time, context and individual propensities. The writer can play with the representation of the self in the midst of all this textuality – what will endure after all of their own self; certainly not the textual artifact which will have its own momentum as it skids and collides with the all those alien and unfamiliar contexts of the future? – but the narrative of the self that we pay such assiduous attention to, will not endure. The reader will experience – something – and how can that be recorded, except in hindsight? As Roman Ingarden points out, different readings of the same reader ‘take place with the essential help of acts of memory which, of course, involve various dangers of deception and error’ (2003:403). In our urgency to create narrative it is easy to overlook these self-deceptions and factual errors. We look, then, for certainty of our own narrative in some reputable historical record, as if that would confirm our experience, indeed, authorize it.

We turn to the diary, the journal, the writer’s notebook, because we no longer trust those other historical records that perpetuate a grand narrative.

Surely, here, in this intimate record – the wobble of the pen, the ink blots, the particular tracing of that hand with that instrument – we can authenticate a personal, small, lived experience. It is the personal that we treasure; the sense of a voice, with its own timbre and idiosyncrasies speaking through time, that makes our own a particular and momentous moment in history. So what then to make of this text, the exegesis, and that text, ‘Tex Surfacing’, and that other text, the writer’s notebook, that I kept for a short period of time?

The figure of Tex and Sarah collide in ‘Tex Surfacing’, just as in my reading history the Tess of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and Sarah of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* interacted in ways that were outside of what was called for by those texts. In my earliest imaginings, Tess and Sarah were as one; they would be writers and they would be read, accurately and as they (I) intended, by their audience. It was a singular and political intention, arising from my ‘resisting’ reading of the progenitor texts.

But dichotomies endure – whether that is because of my historical position or not, I cannot say at this point in time – and Sarah and Tess were eventually divided into reader and writer with all of the attendant dramas and misunderstandings. If, for instance, I had made the discursive choice to write the text in first person there may have been room for a shifting perspective that encompassed the various subjective positions in the writing process: the experiencing narrator, the omnipotent narrator, the retrospective narrator. All of these are in thrall, however, to some degree or another, with the story, whether it be an imbedded narrative or not. Perhaps if I had paid more attention to the discursive material of *The Turning* I may have decided to rework those snippets that I had; allow each of them to have their own voice and perspective. And through this surrender to the multivocal propensity of texts, my intentions, however attenuated, might have been resolved in a particular, individual, and idiosyncratic reading.

The decision, however, to take a third person narrator stance, believing at the time that it was the most objective, gave the reader the most agency, effaced the signs of the author in the text, were, it came to pass, fraught with all of the confluences that, in narrative, we bring to bear on the actors and narrators of the story. We ask: who is the reliable witness of the story? Susan Barton, while present and an actor in the story, does not have the discursive capacity to render her story into text. She remains an autobiographical author, a diarist, monotonously rendering the facts in strict chronological order, unreceptive to the other characters stories that may, in narrative terms, be more dramatic³⁵.

We require, then, a heterodiegetic narrator; one who will order the facts into narrative reliability, tell us when and why to pay attention to perspective and focalization in order that the story may progress correctly in terms of narrative time. Events, time, and the personal urgencies of individual, perhaps peripheral, characters are glossed over to make way for a singular reading. Personally, as a reader, I often reject a book that has a heterodiegetic narrator. Perhaps it is because I am a woman – though I have rejected the overinscribed femininity of Fay Weldon as well – and am sick and tired of being told how to read, and whose perspective to pay attention to and which to reject.

Of the earlier trawling through memories and vantage points, various drafts and snippets remain; perhaps they can be reinvigorated and the story of Sky or Cassandra, or Stuart and Barbara as they were known in those other narrative scraps, will be told. These characters owe something to real people I have met in those places which the fictional fabula borrowed. It is not as if I have betrayed those people and their own stories, but I have distorted my

³⁵ Hence the limitations of the ‘monologic’ text as Bakhtin conceived it – where the text is hermetically sealed due to the limitations of the character which may, in turn, reflect on the limitations of the narrator to call upon other texts and, therefore, routes toward a narrative resolution.

own memory of times and places to conform to the needs of the narrative as it progressed. What remains in my memory of the urgent or poignant stories of those individuals remains untold, at least in this particular narrative.

The earlier embedded narratives I wrote, more than the excerpts from the notebook, reveal the transformation of memory and personal experience into story, with all its requirements for climax, back story, and cohesion. The notebook, however, is a diary and, as such, can only be read as narrative in the overall context of 'Tex Surfacing' and the resultant exegesis. If one were to keep a diary of the reading process it would be, indeed, similar. The notebook asks questions of the character of Tex as focalizer: Who is she? What is her role in this story? Is she reliable? Can her perceptions be trusted? The notebooks also ask questions in relation to the stability of the fabula: How old is Tex now? How far is it from Melbourne to Willambi? What is the season in Melbourne; is it congruent with the passage of time in Willambi? The notebook also asks predictive psychological questions in regard to motivation and resolution: What happened to Didie Comolly? What happened between Richard and Sarah? Is he in love with her? Who is Simon's father? What does this mean in relation to Tex's questions of Sarah's life and her secrets?

The earlier drafts of some of the scenes were not only written in first person, they were also written in present tense, for instance the climactic picnic scene at Willambi where Sky is injured. At that first writing Sky actually died, though the details of the accident were not written as I was not sure at that point which character had been responsible. This draft sat for a number of months, while other scenes developed and the dynamic between the characters and, indeed, the narrative authority shifted. The various scenes in 'Tex Surfacing' eventually resolved as a, tightly focalized through Tex, third person narration. Eschewing the omniscient narrator figure left me, as the writer, in a readerly position; I could only view the action through Tex's

perceptions and found it difficult, therefore, to come to a resolution in regard to Sky's accident, the disappearance of Didie Comolly and Simon's parentage, as Tex is not present at these events.

Tex, as reader, believes that it is Sarah who can resolve all of this unfinished narrative, tie off the ends, allow us to reach a conclusion. However, the discursive decision to write through a tightly focalized third person resulted, interestingly enough, in the fictional author remaining an elusive figure; the texts she writes revealing nothing conclusive about the experience and events of her own life or those around her. The reader, Tess, is eventually seen as the creator of the overarching narrative, as she patches together fragments, hints and her own interpretations of the available textual material³⁶.

Many authors have reflected on how the text is dead to them once it is published. Daniel Chandler quotes John Steinbeck: 'I truly do not care about a book once it is finished... The book dies a real death for me when I write the last word. I have a little sorrow and then go on to a new book which is alive. The line of my books on the shelf are to me like very well embalmed corpses. They are neither alive nor mine' (1995:57). 'Tex Surfacing', as you read it now, has sat relatively untouched for the past year. Some of the uncertainties inherent in the narrative I have resolved in the meantime; the final scraps of authored text are suggestive of the fate of Didie Comolly and Simon's parentage. However, the complementary story (Stanzel 2004) that as readers we construct alongside or after our original reading, has also acted upon my own perceptions of the characters and narrative, throwing up alternative and peripheral readings.

³⁶ The narrator of 'Tex Surfacing' does not, however, enable access to this reading by Tex. As a reader of my own writing, I certainly create an ending from these textual scraps that tie up the loose ends: Sarah dropped a rock on Sky's head; Tex's next door neighbour in Geraldton is the Simon's father; Sam was responsible for the death and disappearance of Didie Comolly. Perhaps further work is required on the manuscript earlier in the narrative to enable a route into these conclusions.

Edward Said points out that a text is 'exorbitant' (2005 :93) through its supplementarity and that textuality is 'a practice' (89) which, being temporally-historically determined, remains in flux. The completion of the writing process is, of course, only a momentary exhaustion, much like the reading process. The process of imagining, of writing and reading, continues on long after the final page is turned.

Appendix A.

Romance-Notes³⁷

15/3/05

A caravan park in southern-north Queensland. Richard is working at a packing plant – Tess stays behind in the small tent. But Anton has a large caravan, there he has been camped for months – she is not inquisitive about his life, he is in his 30s, gentle, domesticated. One night he makes a roast, instructs her, slit the skin and put a sliver a garlic and a sprig of rosemary in each little incision. That night, she can hardly sleep, so unused is she to the rich food. She gets up to shit, makes her way to the ablution block and sees the shadow of Anton, sitting stiffly in his chair behind the curtains – it is 3am she sees on the large clock in the campers kitchen.

It is a detective story to some degree, she is trying to work out the dynamics of her relationship with Richard now that she has breast cancer – it is all so subjective, her feelings about her body change, so then she feels differently to him – and remembers the inadequacies, the inevitability and also the impossibility of them getting together in the first place. This is contrasted with her trying to reconstruct her aunties life – already an old woman in any of her memories, her and her grumpy old fat, somehow hilarious husband. It was all hush hush – such were lives and flaws treated in her family – but as you approached or crossed some threshold to womanhood, these secrets were gradually, partially shared – is it some sort of moral lesson passed on from generation to generation – or is the wish the desire, the burning need to

³⁷ As mentioned in Chapter 1, these notes were typed from handwritten notes and served the dual purpose of a diary and working journal of textual tasks to be done. They were never intended to be seen by anyone else and, as such, are raw, unedited and with many spelling and grammatical errors. I resisted the urge to correct mistakes and amend embarrassing comments in the interest of presenting the notes as an authentic artifact of the writing process.

reconstruct these heartbreaks and scandals when time and distance has made memory of them? It is memory that constructs narrative – the story only becomes a story in hindsight, when it is happening it has no meaning or purpose other than the purpose we inscribe it with saying ‘it’s like Romeo and Juliet, or Mrs Dalloway, or Tess and Angel’. It’s about the ‘uses’ of representation.

29/07/05

The book opens with a chapter? Of the Jardine/Dowdell story then leads into the 1st person narration – is she reading or writing? The story she is reading/writing sparks off musings and memories of her own romances, there is also a present story – her relationship to Richard – why is it so strained – this is obviously bothering her but she doesn’t muse on it at this point (she actually has breast cancer and it is destroying her and her relationship with Richard, but we don’t know this at this point).

It becomes important at some point for the reader to know if Tess is reading these (assorted) stories or writing them – is she constructing these fateful romances or is influenced by them? But I won’t show that, because hopefully by the end it will become clear that writing is an act of reading and vice versa.

Issues:

Will her memories be in 1st person or 3rd person?

Should there be one continuous ‘other’ text or many? It could be off putting to the reader to have too many – should it be a historical text or a modern one? It could be like Thorn Birds and move from the past to the present??!!

Should it closely shadow Tess’s life or come at it obliquely? Should it be written from a male or a female point of view – or perhaps it could be one of those with alternate points of view from a few different characters? Yes.

The two stories gradually segue together and Richard becomes a character in the ‘text’. At last we get his perspective and find out about Tess’s breast

cancer – his pity, his revulsion but ultimately his loyalty for her, which after all is a kind of love - perhaps the best.

16/08/05

The recollections must be told in 3rd person to make clear that this is a narrativization of memory – this also gives scope for different pov's – but of course, with the knowledge that the writer, in this case who is also the narrator, is manipulating the facts. Like Sartre, or Poulet in *The Words*, I remember the young person (up to the age of 20?) thinking “I will remember this moment for always” a promise to fix that moment of existence because there is a feeling of standing there with the past and the future sliding away either side, while the moment is isolated as a point of being.

12/10/05

Each of the vignettes is at a crucial period of Tess' life and the present day Tess can only trace what this may mean, through a re-reading of the texts that she was reading at the time, but in doing so she re-writes the memory. There could perhaps be a third intervention – that of a journal, or perhaps the present day Tess is presented through her journal. Yes – better. What is her purpose in doing this? Is it because she is a writer?? Don't know.

21/10/05

Conversation with Jo-Ann re: cults and male cult figures we have met over our life – This is where Skye type character can come in – the piece on Stuart and Gudrun can be rewritten so this is more obvious and also the type of hold Stuart has over Richard and what happens subsequently – Tess does not submit, but is passive in her refusal to join the dominant ideology of the time – Does Richard sleep with someone else? Yes, probably so it propels her away from him, but she returns and the relationship is on a different basis – this is when Tess finds a voice. (How??)

30/1/06

She is the daughter of a deserted woman – when the story opens they are living in yet another midsized western town. Her mother is a hairdresser so hears all the ‘stories’ of the women and at home the two women (or mother and daughter) act out the roles. They also read a lot of romance fiction.

Barbara, the daughter, in this way is co-opted into her mother’s life and her mother’s story and begins to feel she has no story of her own.

1970s Part two: they are now living in Perth and Muriel has taken up with a recently divorced man, she is still hairdressing, but the stories of her customers have radically changed over this period – they want different things now, and Muriel is lost because she has no stories to bring home to act – everything is failing her, so she starts to trawl the libraries and second hand bookshops for the novels of the previous ten years. Also his wife is still pursuing him to come home, and Muriel finds it hard to accommodate herself in this version of romance as the wicked other woman. Barbara is in high school and she is being presented with different books and, as is her habit, starts to act some of these narratives. At this point she intersects with the Manson Family story and is unclear whether it is a great horror or a story that is not ended and the denouement will justify their actions. Barbara is bored with the boys though she likes to see how she is reflected in their gaze, she imagines herself as mysterious and unreachable, until she meets Jesse the older man who tempts her with his guruness, his certainty that she is what he thinks she should be.

25/4/06

The author is tied into a dysfunctional relationship with Richard although her real lover is in jail for the torture and murder of backpackers – a charge he denies. Tex is not so sure that he is innocent but Richard acts as a sort of minder, and as an author of the story, he perpetuates the old story, the story he and Tex believed when they got involved with Stuart. But other texts, the

'panorama of what is possible' inserts themselves into Tex's consciousness, so she starts to reread these to find what has changed from her first interpretation which has led her into this disastrous relationship, and a different reading based on new knowledge or a new subjectivity. So – structurally, is Tex writing or reading? It could be as it stands now she is writing a sort of revisional text though apparently classic in its approach, style and themes it starts to transform itself over the duration of the book OR it is a journal of her writing. I think the first approach is stronger, interspersed with musings on her formative reading and some, to make it immediate, phone calls, e-mails and letters from Stuart in jail. Or reports of these to Richard who acts as a sort of agent for Stuart's writings. YES

Of course, the whole writing of Tex Surfacing is the author's attempt to rewrite the story, through memory, of where she is now.

Sarah is strongly implicated in this, like Fowles' Sarah, she appears to be all written over, but she lies, that is she creates her own story. So, Sarah is a central character. To start with she is almost retarded in her seclusion – but like the other Sarah it is only apparently passivity – she wants to go 'beyond the pale' so allows herself to be seduced and impregnated as a way out of stifling conformity. It is Sarah who introduces Tex to an 'alternative lifestyle' but is horrified when Tex is lost in the stories of others. So there might be letters and e-mails from Sarah as well, as a more independent woman who continues to transform herself with texts she WRITES FOR HERSELF albeit with the aid of other texts that she USES and is not used by.

9/5/06

I've been a bit stopped because it is too all over the place – I just read 'The Time Traveller's Wife' and thought maybe I could give alternative stories – but I think that can be achieved by Sarah's storytelling – the woman who is half and half magic. However, I think it would be better if in Part 2 the narrator, that is the author, is actually Sarah. Then we understand that all of the previous although written from Tess's pov is actually an author who is

invading her (Tess) story. So how do we get to know Tess – through her letters and emails and phone calls. So Part 2 is much less a story told over time which has that sort of progression and more an examination of the flaws that lie at the root of that story – or how it has been told. So – structurally it may not need Author interludes etc. (or it may). It might be better for it to read like a straight narrative.

15/5/06

So – where does this leave the structure?

Author interlude – Sarah (though we don't know this) writing in the present – she also maintains an authors weblog – (what would be the strategic problems/advantages with this?) problem – conveying the multilayered nature of a blog – So it could be Tex in the first person? And she is READING and also responds via email, comments and phone calls to Sarah. Is Sarah in jail? Is it her that commits the murder?? A la Tess? She has been wronged too often and can't see her way out? Then we get to read the excerpts (novel in progress) and then we move to Tess's story – but who is writing this?

OK – good – written Ch 1. Tex and Richard in the present – Sarah's blog and excerpt that Tex is reading, though hiding it from Richard. She has had a letter from Sarah and so has her mum which brings up history they'd rather forget.

Sarah has killed (or disabled? Stuart – better) Why? Because he has betrayed her and also raped Tex. Tex catches up with Sarah in Melbourne where she has gone with her illegitimate child (who she has then adopted out) to 'start a new life' unburdened by the stories imposed on her by her family. (Substory – she has reconnected with her adopted son and convinced him of her noble role in protecting Sarah – he is now

spearheading the appeal to have her released – and contacts Tex and Richard for their support).

Ch2. Sarah runs a bohemian household she is a little older though an elegant enigmatic figure who collects figures and characters around herself – Tex discovers her with a man that is supposedly the boyfriend of a poor helpless girl she has ‘taken in’. Sarah works in a library and writes children’s fiction in her spare time – (Ch. 3 –First time back to Tex’s childhood and Sarah’s arrival - this is a continuation of the story she used to tell Tex as a child). It is in this house that Tex meets Stuart and Richard – they are friends, Richard is in awe of Stuart and at this point both vie for her attention. THIS SHOULD PROBABLY BE chapter 4 now. - Sarah is skeptical of Stuart and wary - he is too domineering and takes over the atmosphere of the house with his guruness (Manson-like)

In 1982 Tex is 18 – in 2004 she is 40

In 1982 Sarah is 28 – in 2004 she is 50

In 1982 Faye is 38 – in 2004 she is 60

In 1982 Richard is 21 – in 2004 he is 43

In 1982 Alex (Stormy or Flash) is 25 – in 2004 he is 47

(In 2004 Sam is 67)

(In 2004 Jason is 29)

In 1974 Tex is 10

In 1974 Sarah is 20 (Jason is born in 1975)

In 1974 Faye is 30

In 1974 Sam is 37.

Sarah murders Flash (or Sky) in 1987 – so this is five years after Tess has met him, and she has been away with Richard, but she comes back at

Sarah's request (she is 33 by then). In the meantime she has lost Richard, or he has lost himself, and Tess is now 23 and already done it too tough, and is disillusioned. However, Sarah is not found and jailed until 1992 – because she escapes to – WHERE??

27/05/06

I think the chapters at this point at least in the first writing need to be longer – I need to advance the story before I get into clever structural stuff – So as it seems at the moment – Ch1 – the present and this sets up some dilemmas about what the conflict is?

Ch2 – a long chapter with setting up the relationship between Sarah and Tess, Sarah and Sky, Tess and Richard, Richard and Sky. (Hmmm might need to be two chapters – maybe they could go away up the coast - or better still a journey into the outback might happen later (five years when Tess comes back and JUST before the murder)

Ch 3 – Childhood and Sarah arrives.

Where do the blog and present narrative intervene in this – I'm not sure as yet? But what the present does is introduce the – adopted son, the flawed narrative, but Sarah's own unfolding as well, Tess's struggle between the stories told by Sarah, Faye and then her own stories – they have become entwined. AND then there is Richard – he is a poet so what does that say about him – that his vision is sometimes oblique but nonetheless it is still a testimony.

16/6/06

I will change the Frank 1910 excerpt (sob). I have already started Sarah's storytelling in 1984 in Ch 2 which is a fantasy and really there needs to be continuity in this – so Excerpt from Sarah's website in the present in Ch 1 would be book 3 or 4 of this same character (Andra – need to find a new name and not rip off Ish's). So Andra is fully constituted and is in the process

of finding out why she was robbed of her body as a young girl and who she will wreak her revenge on. This leads to a meeting with the wise women who explains and apologises for her actions (this should be the last excerpt because it wraps up the conflicts between Sarah and Tex in an analogical way)

In the bit where Tex is a child and Sarah is telling stories to her it is about the magical kind aunty who to protect her beloved niece from an attack by demons (this can have a slight seductive element to it as it will reflect on the Sky character and Sarah's response to him) turns her into a ball of energy and potential that merges with the landscape.

28/7/06

I have already decided that when they go up North Richard has a job workshopping poems etc at schools and Sky has inherited his Dad's property . . . At present in Ch 6 I am back in Geraldton in 1974 – Sam falls for Sarah – the question is – is Sarah a complete innocent which is what Sam is attracted to – Back in 1984 on the north trip Sarah basically seduced Richard and Sky takes revenge by forcing himself on Tex – well that is the short gross version – so Sarah kills Sky and of course this is the great guilt that Tex and Richard carry – for they have been part of this whole plot too. Now the question arises of whose truth this is – who is writing this, who has the authority? The book will close with a final excerpt from Sarah's writing – and it becomes clear that maybe Tex has painted this picture of Sarah to alleviate herself of responsibility – The final fantasy piece will be a story of betrayal and lies. (Will there still be a son – that is a bit of a subplot that might happen in Part 111)

2/08/06

Part 11 could potentially be a bridge – maybe only a chapter of two – but it could present the only 'authentic' voice of Tex we actually get . That is,

Sarah is away – in jail or on the run? – and for the first time Tex is elsewhere (in India) and has the time or necessary space to reflect on what has brought her here – Richard is slipping away into paranoia or madness, but he never impinges in the same way that Sarah does or Sky does, that is why she in the end decides to stay with him – because they are disconnected.

12/8/06

Ch1 needs to be expanded and there should be a Ch 2 – with some communication via e-mail (and the letter needs to be in there too – as it's a very different language from the blog and email) – this could take in the appeal (or is she already out of jail?) and her relationship with her son and obliquely refer to the events of the past (and Tex and Richard's relationship to them). Sarah in the past has authored her own story through her fiction – but now wants to take control over her story as it is told now and in the real world.

6/9/06

All of them have stories that they tell in different ways – THIS IS IMPORTANT –so, Tex tells her stories to Richard and Richard's poem's are an oblique way of commenting on his story. Sarah has her fiction/her fantasy – Sky is a dramatist – so he wants them to ACT OUT his stories.

26/9/06

The last chapter set in 1974-76 Geraldton is after the events at the pool when Sarah finds the drowned boy. Tex is still in Geraldton/ it's 1976 the long school holidays - Tex is going to start high school in the new year. She is in the back yard and Robert says he's got a letter for Tex – it is from Sarah – she is working as a governess at sheep station in western Queensland. She wants to explain to Tess what happened and also wants her to write to her. She/or is the family who have rejected her – anyway she has little

contact other than a note now and then to say she is still alive. Grandad has died – they have been down to the funeral but of course Sarah wasn't there. She's had a baby that was adopted out.

21/10/06

It's good because I haven't read the notes for a while and was getting a bit lost. I'm writing the bridging bit where Tex and Fay have returned to Geraldton after the death of Grandpa Jim. Realised that the chapter in Melbourne is too short – it is only so impressionistic at this time – and there needs to be some sort of conflict at the base of the relationship between Tex and Sarah. Although Tex was only a child when Sarah got pregnant – the rejection (or that's Sarah's story at least) came from the whole family and Sarah has unconsciously (?) implicated Tex in this. This makes sense of why Sarah would seduce or try to seduce Richard.

A week or so ago, I was musing on the impact of readers on writers live journals, or on the WIP and it would be good to include some reader responses (they are fans really, but they also try to control the development of the characters and the plot) and the writers response to this sort of communication. One of these readers (perhaps the head of the fan club) is present in the blogs early in the chapters and becomes a support for Jason as he tries to exonerate Sarah of the crime. She is quite heavy handed and her 'evidence' of Sarah's innocence is Sarah's books – that is, she believes she knows Sarah's true character through her writing/storytelling.

30/10/06

I realized that Tex and Richard get the news of Sarah's arrest when they are in India – they have been a bit lost but this galvanizes them to sort out what their own story is going to be and what sort of role their personal history (and Sarah) is going to have on it. I had some sort of revelation about Sky's

story/s last night just before I fell asleep but now I can't remember what it was . . . hopefully, it will come back.

10/11/06

Was thinking about the Patrick White conference next year and realized I needed to get some sort of history of Aust. literature in, then started thinking a bit more about their reading habits – Sarah reads English fairy tale and myths (both Celtic and Greek/Roman) and fantasy sci-fi; Tex will read most things but likes it to be contemporary, Richard has a good background in literature because of his parents and especially Aust. Including Patrick White (which he shares with Tex) but also the Timeless Land – he is well aware of the preoccupation Aust writers have with landscape but being Tasmanian this has always felt foreign. At the school visit the teacher has primed the children with a potted history of Aust poetry including A.D. Hope which Tex and Richard find a bit grim . . . (Need also to throw in some references to current news – when was Lindy Chamberlain?) Sky is not much of a reader but has stories – hodge podge of myth and is also into his music – likes a bit of country which he is a bit embarrassed about, and can also quote bits of 'the Sentimental Bloke' care of his father and grandfather.

11/12/06

Tess is in Bali (or India) with her casual German boyfriend when she get the news from her Grandmother saying that Sarah has been found and arrested (it also contains a garbled account of Tex's dad 'interfering' with Sarah) Sarah has asked for Tess to look after her manuscripts and diaries and journals and bring them to her once she is sentenced and has a secure prison place. Tess hasn't seen Richard for five years, but knows that as soon as she gets back she will contact him – the intervening years without Sarah gave her a kind of freedom that is now over and it seems natural and inevitable that she and Richard should go through this together.

28/2/07

Have just finished reading Salley Vickers 'Miss Garnet's Angel' and it is a beautiful book but also very well controlled in the telling – especially in respect to her control of the linear narrative. The past is treated in the present – that is, past events that Miss Garnet recalls are filtered through her current perceptions so, as a reader, we are not dragged willy nilly all over the place which is what I fear with *Tex Surfacing* – that the reader will become disoriented (I am probably a little disoriented myself). In discussion with John Cregan over the last month or so, he has reflected that I have probably not decided on my story as yet, or maybe more particularly – whose story it is. I also wonder about multiple points of view. For instance, the other day I had a strong urge to relate a bedside scene with the disabled Sky from Sky's POV – maybe I will give it a go, or maybe it is told from Tex's POV but she projects the story onto Sky – hmmm might be better.

16/3/07

Why is the story told from Tex's POV? She has been just a sort of device for me – a voice that is accessible to me – but things only seem to happen to her; the active character is Sarah or Sky. I have been rereading Deb Robertsons's *Careless* and realize that Tex is the forensic eye that operates throughout – she is the witness for the reader, the one who sees the significance of events and moments.

23/07/07

In Part 2 Fay is at last able to openly blame Sarah for Harry first of all then Sam – Sarah's 'crime' has liberated Fay's story. Sarah sees herself – or maybe not – because they are only stories, she writes herself as the victim cum heroine. Tex is between all the stories – the forensic eye and Richard is

the poet and they, in the end, are the only point where a truth may be available.

6/08/07

Chapter 12 and I am stalling at present – things are growing to a crisis or climax in the relationship between Tex and Sarah, and certainly between Sarah and Sky. Sky seems to be trying to make a truce or alliance between him and Tex, but is he sincere or what is his motive? After all both of them want or need to subvert Sarah's power – Tex so she can get a sense of her life/her story as her own and Sky simply because he cannot allow Sarah to have the balance of power, he must have power over her so he can stop her from leaving.

20/10/07

Tex and Richard 1995. Contact with Sarah that unsettles what is unspoken re the past. Sarah's voice (from the blog) is still asserting the primacy of her story and she introduces the fact that she has found and reunited with her long lost son. Tex receives a letter – though the content of this is not revealed until later.

Melbourne 1984. Tex reunites with Sarah and meets Richard, the drunken poet. Sky and Sarah are in the first stages of a romance and Tex pulls away a little from Sarah due to her growing intimacy with Richard. Sky wants to pull them all away, isolate them, at his dead father's property in the north. Sky only speaks in fables and doesn't reveal his background or his personal story and maybe this is what fascinates Sarah.

Road trip. Sarah is drawn to and antagonistic of Richard due to his poetry and his relationship with Tex. Sky comes on to Tex in a rough careless way but she feels herself responding.

Willambi an empty sad space that is too full yet of his father's small small story. Sky withdraws but Cass, Sky's sister, fills in his story.

Richard comes back for Tex and in this time Richard and Sarah share a real exchange of their writing passion which excludes Tex and Sky.

Richard and Tex on the road, stories and intimacy, but Tex realizes she is extra to Richard's poetry and teaching. Tex talks to her mum on the phone, a need to get at the truth of the family story, so she can work out her own. Tex catches the bus back to Willambi.

15/12/07

Chapter 12 is a lot of circling around the lead up to the event of accident. Their stories are causing conflict especially now Sarah is writing furiously, going off into worlds where Tex can't follow her anymore – Tex is too concerned with the here and now drama, and also wants to uncover the 'true story' of her childhood, Fay's life and what part Sarah played in it. So their stories constitute who they are and each of struggles to place the others in roles or dynamics that will force a denouement or give closure to a narrative they feel trapped in. This is how Sarah relates to the Sarah of TFLW – she spins stories but allows (has allowed) seduction by the men around her, but the power somehow stays with her despite her 'victim' story because all of these things 'put her beyond the pale.' (which is where she thinks she belongs).

18/1/08

This may be told from Tex's pov but I was wondering last night – in the aftermath of the 'incident' whose story is it? Although Cass is a peripheral character in Part 3 it is she, it becomes clear to the reader, whose life has been most impacted – it is something Tex, Richard and Sarah are running from but it is Cass who has assimilated the aftermath, the consequences into her life. It is Cass who has looked after Sky as he has deteriorated and it is Cass who must arrange some long term care for him, so therefore she raises a civil action – she has EVIDENCE of who struck the blow that felled Sky. Simon is the one who brings this news to Tex and Richard – a call for justice

now that Sarah is threatened. The thing is, it must be that Tex can NOT know what happened – she has already taken off down the hillside after an altercation with Sky.

SO . . . what happened is that Sky discovered Sarah and Richard in a compromising position and he FELL hitting his head. They alerted Cass and Jason and he was brought down the hillside and rushed to hospital. Richard stayed and Tex left though she corresponded with him. None of the above is mentioned in Part 2 but comes out in Part 3 – Simon tells them that Sarah has told him what REALLY happened.

22/1/08

So? What next? I could work on Ch 1 because I still haven't resolved the situation that they find themselves in at present (that is, Part 1 and Part 2) but I need to write out what actually happened, not that the reader will know BUT I need to know. I could use butcher paper or stickies for the snowflake method (yes) but first I need to write a little more.

30/1/08

What does Tex do? Maybe Dept of Justice – victim mediation. I THOUGHT she did editing/web based research – putting things right, making it accurate – who for? Museum? The point is Simon through Sarah tracks her down at work, so he fronts up to her at the office. The advantages of this is – it takes Tex into a new environment ie: away from relationships which is all that she had been defined by up until now – Richard, Sarah, Fay – shows her living a life independent of Sarah and memory and that story. Sarah now is successful, living with a successful female lawyer who protects/shields/supports her – something creepy in this. Simon works as an environmental consultant or a property developer. Maybe Tex and Richard are back in Perth (Freo) and after all that's where Simon would be too – WA.

Cass has raised a civil action against Sarah (because she is the one with money) for the care of Sky who needs have increased due to his violent and over-sexualized behavior (masturbating at the window to passersby etc) and he needs to move to a group home OR conversely back in with Cass.

2/2/08

Just a thought, that maybe Part 1 could be from Richard's POV and Part 3 from Simon's. That way, they get sort of equal air play and it makes more transparent the enmeshed relationship between Sarah and Tex so it is obvious that neither of them is an 'objective witness' – why is that important? Also it casts a different light on these two and takes away from their 'authority', or am I just backing off from these characters now?

11/2/08

Tex or Richard or Faye (better Faye) ask Sarah why her books are so different – the colonial literary romances and her fantasy. Sarah replies that one (fantasy) is an escape – a whole new world to populate – playing make-believe – whilst the other is how things really are, history and this world are inescapable and 'the truth' is a responsibility that the writer must bear.

13/2/08

In Part 3 in a flashback to when Tex and Richard get back together she asks him what happened – he thinks she means the affair between him and Sarah, but Tex means up on the hill, what happened to Sky? He won't/can't speak but Tex mines his poetry for clues to the facts and this is the secret disaster of them – they can't share their story.

22/2/08

In 1982 Tex is 18 – in 2004 she is 40

In 1982 Sarah is 28 – in 2004 she is 50

In 1982 Faye is 38 – in 2004 she is 60

In 1982 Richard is 21 – in 2004 he is 43

In 1982 Alex (Stormy or Flash) is 25 – in 2004 he is 47

(In 2004 Sam is 67)

(In 2004 Jason is 29)

In 1974 Tex is 10

In 1974 Sarah is 20 (Jason is born in 1975)

In 1974 Faye is 30

In 1974 Sam is 37.

This is copied from earlier – 06 – and it seems too large a time frame now. I chose to start in the 70s because I was writing from my memories of settings especially Geraldton and Melbourne – a sort of confusion, style, streets, music, reading etc of 70s and 80s – probably better to stick with that and pull in the final scene to the 90s rather than 2000s . . .

6/03/08

For instance – provisional versus intentional – the climactic scene with Sky, his accident – going towards, turning against.

I did not write this within the chronology of the narrative; it was the reason it has all taken so long, because I would come up against it and then turn away. As I said to Mick yesterday, it was NOT a failure of the imagination – I could not see what had happened any more than the reader could. Oh sure, there were motivations and psychologies and buried secrets, let alone for me, some idea of WHAT the outcome would be, yet still that scene was veiled in mist – I would come up and then it was all obscured.

8/06/08

I'm getting close to the end, can see how Part 3 loops around and connects with Part 1 which needs another chapter but that will have to be written when I've almost completed Part 3 – well, chapter 2 then the final chapter. I have a

reluctance to sew it all up – I feel that there are threads which haven't be told resolved – still despite thinking I had earlier on worked out whose story it is, though I suspect after all it is Sarah's – Tex at this point in time is thinking it is after she finds out the truth of her father's attempted seduction/rape of Sarah – but what does this do to Tex's story, let alone her relationship with Richard – is he a despoiler just like the other men in Sarah's life – so this revelation from Faye perhaps gives the result we will find in 'the end' – maybe Tex leaves Richard at last – gives her allegiance back to Sarah or at least moves into a new phase. How to wrap it all up – the disappeared child DIDIE??

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