“the lonely and the road” (novel)

“What’s your road, man?”:
my experiences with the life and work of Jack Kerouac in relation
to the development of “the lonely and the road” (exegesis)

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Candidate Declaration

All of this thesis is my own account of my own research, except where other sources are fully acknowledged by footnotes or referencing.

This thesis contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any university.

Signed:                       December, 2008
Abstract

Thirty thousand feet above the Pacific Ocean—somewhere between Sydney and Los Angeles—the narrator of “the lonely and the road” doesn’t really know where he is going, or why. His is a quest written spontaneously—‘on-the-go.’ It is a journey of uncertain motivation, of uncertain means, towards uncertain ends. From Los Angeles, to Vegas, to the Rocky Mountain states and beyond, the narrator travels with and learns from his friends, his family and even his ex-girlfriend as he searches for that which continues to elude him. But what is that exactly? Does it even exist?

While the novel details a journey, the exegesis is a phenomenological account of the intersecting of my road with that taken by Jack Kerouac. It explores my experiences with the life and work of Kerouac—the creator of spontaneous prose—in relation to the development of my writing, up to and including this novel. In doing so, the exegesis is itself a quest that seeks to understand more fully the essence of Kerouac’s and my own representation of the quest motif in content and in form. Both the exegesis and the novel, then, constitute part of the search for my own artistic road, and aim to assist others in search of theirs.
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“the lonely and the road”
december 6

thirty thousand feet above the pacific ocean on the way to los angeles, california—
dark night outside. michael is asleep next to me, his long body stretched out over
his seat, brown hair in curls above his eyebrows, stubble on his chin and upper lip,
all of him surrendered to the flight. i wonder what he’s dreaming about—maybe his
girlfriend amy, maybe an architecture assignment long-ago finished, maybe playing
basketball and landing another three-pointer with a swish, maybe one of our many
nights of madness in perth pubs behind us. whatever it is, i’m glad he’s with me
now.

i’m not exactly sure why i’m writing this to you. i guess i just want to understand
things a little better. i have some questions. there are things i need to share. perhaps
i’ll even have some answers before it’s all said and done.
in one sense maybe all i’m doing is talking to myself—it wouldn’t be the first time a human being has done so. but then again, maybe it’s more than that—more than just me.

i sit back as michael rolls over to face the shutter-covered oval window, and i’m wondering if he’ll wake soon with excitement or relief or surprise, or perhaps just a general weariness following all the preparation that’s carried us both this far already—all the paperwork of tickets, passports, visas, resumes, job applications, not to mention the hours of internet pages and mouse-clicking research. all this, and i still have no real idea what’s going to happen.

but what i do know is that sydney is behind us, perth is behind us, and so much of ourselves is back there too. the pacific is underneath us, america is ahead, and right now we’re in the stomach of a boeing-747. everyone else is either asleep or watching movies.

i’m writing this to you in the dark.

**december 6, later**

fell asleep. dreamed. the same dream i’ve been having for a while now. in it i’m just a kid again, running down the hill at home in the darling ranges just outside of perth. it must be summer because all the long grass is gold and dry. wombles is
there, coming out of the strawberry patch to bark and wag his tail before we both go sprinting down the hill, my legs moving faster and faster, out of control, my arms spread out like the wings on all the planes i’ve watched passing over the shining corrugated iron roof of our house over the years. running down towards the jarrah and other eucalyptus trees further into the valley, wombles barking, grass rushing by, and then suddenly i’m up, off the ground and up, into the air, everything going quiet, floating gradually higher till i’m level with the top of the trees and only blue sky above, completely filled with the joyous feeling of the flight. and then it happens—i look down and notice how high i’ve actually gone, and i begin to fear that i might fall, that i might hit the ground and break bones and teeth and head—and this fear, like an anchor or kite-rope, gradually brings me back to the ground.

december 6, later

i wander through my memories sometimes like i’m wandering through this world. i think about anna again—her thick dark hair curling down, her pink lips so soft, her smooth white skin. i wonder where she might be, what she might be doing, saturday night western australia back there. i wonder what she’s wearing right now, how she’s feeling. i’m sad that we knew it would come to this all along, glad we went through with it anyway. i think about one weekend spent with her in albany fishing on rocks, at the local pub the star, in her parents’ house, first getting to
know each other—how on the drive home i watched the sun set gold and pink over the empty wheatfields of williams and felt immeasurably happy.

and i’m not exactly sure why, but i’m also thinking about our old school mate jay white who stepped out on his own path all those years ago, straight after school finished, the first of anyone i knew who actually went. i wonder where on this planet he might be now. the last i heard he was delivering fish and chips on a scooter somewhere near second avenue, new york city. who knows, maybe we’ll cross paths in this great and infinite dreaming.

my mind also wanders to my first real girlfriend clair—my longest relationship so far, and the only woman i’ve ever lived with. she’s in san francisco right now because her grandma died. helping her mum take care of things, i guess. i think about her many stories of america, of california—visions of endless bridges and hills and bays of frisco. i think about everything that fell away and died inside me when she and i broke up. i think about the nights in mosman park when i walked away from her house, from the river, and from her. i think about the nights she turned and left me sitting on the beach, tired and done. i even think about the one saturday afternoon i drove out to perth airport to see her before she left for rome—i made it too late—the boarding gates had closed. instead, i watched her plane take off above me as i drove the airport road home.
so maybe this really began—this looking for you—when she and i broke up.
because in turning away from her, i found myself turning towards something else—
something full of shining darkness and mystery, something full of the unknown. i
think i turned towards myself, but in doing so, i think i began to look beyond
myself. it’s hard to explain. i think i was trying to find a bridge between something
i dimly felt in me, and something i dimly sensed in the world—whether that
something is you, i’m not exactly sure. but in any case, here i am now, actually
writing these things to you—possibly to make better that bridge.

but now we’ve started our descent out of the clouds and down into america—into
the city of angels, los angeles.

michael wakes up at the captain’s call, looking around and stretching like a dog—
like a big brown labrador shaking himself awake. he looks at me, eyes all groggy
with sleep. “was i out long?” he asks. “a few hours.” he yawns and scratches his
bushy hair, looking strangely like the actor david hasselhoff. “what ya been
writing?” he asks. “ah,” i reply, unsure of what to say, “just drafting an email.” i
don’t really feel i can tell him or anybody about this writing, at least not yet. he
seems satisfied enough with my answer.

“So after all that flight,” he says smiling, “we’ll be arriving in los angeles hours
before we even left?” “yeah, feels like we’re cheating time or something.” he
smiles and pulls up the blind on the window. “jesus christ,” he says, rubbing his
eyes, looking down on the morning city, “mate look at this—it’s huge.” i look down over his shoulder and see all the beaches of venice and malibu giving way to houses and industry, to endless rooftops and skyscrapers, to hills way over the back, to infinite cars moving, to the freeways unrolled like ribbons and bowties in every direction, careering off towards eternity. this is michael’s first time to los angeles. i’ve only been once before—a year earlier with mum, because dad gave me his ticket at the last minute, unable to go—a mere week-long trip for christmas with mum’s aunts and my cousins in santa fe, new mexico—the first time i ever saw snow. i watched one flake fall from clouds above the blood of christ mountains down to the sandy courtyard of an indian pueblo where i stood on christmas day, the flake landing soft and moist in my open right eye. the sage and pine trees looked down on me with the mountains, silent. the chief couldn’t believe that i’d never seen snow before—he kept pointing at me, saying to everyone, smiling, “like a child!”

and back then i flew into l.a. just like we’re coming into it now, looking down on all the houses and cars and people climbing over each other to reach the top of the mountains—mountains of hollywood, or mountains of glass and steel, or the mountains of stardom, or some other man-made mountain. and i remember thinking the same thing then as i’m thinking now—how big and wide the world must be, how many people there are to fill it and be filled by it, wondering what they’re all doing in this instant, wondering where the angels of this world and this city are. are they on the hills overlooking the boulevards? in the studios? on the sets? fluttering
like prayer flags from skyscraper peaks? or are they burning inside the upturned cars of south central? maybe simply resting beside a solitary malibu palm tree overlooking the final goodbye march of the sun towards the loneliness of its own reflection.

and as the flaps on the wings grip for air, and the plane stretches out its wheels towards the city, towards america, towards planet earth, i can’t help wondering—will i find you here? now?

we grab our bags and walk off the plane to see a big photo of george w. bush smiling above the escalators at the end of the walkway, stars and stripes behind him. we take the escalator down into the bowels of the terminal, finding the long lines of immigration divided into american and non-american citizens. the twang-filled accents of immigration staff when they ask, “so how long do you intend to stay?” the loud thud of our passports being stamped, the indifferent look on the face of bag checkers when i declare vegemite so they won’t notice all the extra rum we’ve brought, the sniffer dogs, the ramp up and out into america, the crowds of people by the arrivals walkway, the expectant looks on the faces of locals—african americans, hispanic americans, white americans, asian americans, even an american indian—plus the many airport staff, cleaners, money changers, cops, the tourists walking around lost, the lovers re-found, the drivers with black caps holding little signs with people’s names written on them (checking to see if my name is there,
just in case), the search for the exit and finally the air cool and soft outside, where
the light is almost orange with fog and smoke.

“well here we are, mate,” i say to michael as we walk along the footpath—the
sidewalk. “can’t believe it,” he says, “thought we’d never get here.” i smile and
slap him on the shoulder, “and still a long way to go yet.” we find a spot and stand
with our backpacks resting against a stop sign under the concrete walls and roads of
the airport, waiting for our old school friend zac, feeling the differences of the
world rush by. “check out all these cars,” michael says, leaning forward a little, his
eyes brown and wide, “every one of them looks brand new.” he’s right—shining
lincolns and buicks, yellow cabs, limos, massive dodge or ford or gm pickup
trucks, some v-8’s, some v-10’s, some with an extra couple of wheels on the back,
the stars and stripes flying from every backseat window, all of them polished,
roaring past in every direction, stopping, going again. “this is all pretty full on,” he
says, looking up and down the road, then back into the arrivals area from where we
came, “i’m glad i got some sleep at least—think we’re gonna need it.”

strange that we’re now actually a part of it—the hazy glow of the city, the horn
honking rush and go, the rolling waves of america racing along freeways towards
wherever it is they’re going. and time enough now to wonder again where it is
we’re going, what it is we’re looking for, and remember what it is we’ve left
behind. it feels like we’re stretched and stuck someplace between. “i think part of
me is still in perth,” michael says, reading my thoughts. “or scattered across the
pacific,” i add. “mmm,” he replies. i hope we can catch up with ourselves soon.

yet another limo cruises past, and i suddenly see our battered reflections in each of
the black-windows as it goes by. we look totally spent, out of place, backpacks
scattered at our feet like tired thoughts. “i think there’s something wrong with my
eye,” michael says, feeling around with his fingers, “might be a stye or something.”
i take a look. the eyelid’s red and swollen and pushing up in a little lump over his
left eye. “yeah, maybe we should get some drops for that,” i say. he nods, digging a
cap out of his bag, “maybe it was all the dry air on the plane.” “maybe.” “how’s
your throat?” he asks. “seems okay at the moment.”

we end up sitting down next to our packs, cars and people passing constantly—
everybody else going somewhere. “this how you pictured it?” i ask. “nah,” he
replies, with a slight smile, “i was thinking there’d be at least one stretch limo
waiting for us, as well as some playboy bunnies or something.” but then, just when
we’ve almost lost hope, zac and lachlan roar up in an old black mustang. we get to
our feet as zac gets out to meet us. he looks different than the last time i saw him,
hair longer in a little pony tail, slight beard over his square jaw. “hey there,” he
says in his deep voice with the slightest american accent. “hey mate,” i reply. it’s
good to see him again—he’s become a genuine celebrity in the movie game now,
but in many ways i’m sure he’s just the same friend we went to school with all
those years ago—same big smile, same blue eyes shining, same warmth. “it’s been
a while,” he says, “so good to see you both.” there are hugs all round as we pick up our bags. “howdy boys,” lachlan says, slowly getting out of the car, laying a big bearhug on each of us with his strong, tanned arms, “glad you could make it,” he smiles. lachlan left perth a couple of weeks before us and already seems comfortable here. “looking well,” i say. “ah, you know,” he replies, pushing back his short, strawlike blonde fringe, “living the dream—can’t complain.” zac forces down the boot, our bags only just fitting in. “let’s get out of here, hey,” he says, “jump in.”

and as we pile into the mustang, stereo pounding, i’m filled with flashing visions of zac and myself sitting together in art class doing absurdly quick impressionistic paintings of the still life in front of us, stealing beers from the cricket pavilion fridge to drink in the shadows of a long hot saturday afternoon before a social in the old school hall, smoking in the grass by the drama centre, driving out to trigg beach with his sister on monday afternoons to surf in the wind and swell of winter storms. but of course the sun slowly set on all that—so long ago now, though some things take longer to change than others—his warm, almost cheeky grin still there (just that the entire world sees it now too—in movies, magazines, papers, more).

“how was the drive from san francisco?” i ask lachlan, thinking briefly of clair living in a house somewhere up there. he turns back from the passenger seat and smiles, green eyes sparkling with excitement. “maaad,” he replies, drawing the word out with a laugh. he came over with another friend of ours, deano. during the
last couple of weeks they slowly drove the wild big sur coast down to los angeles. “seals and fog and cliffs and eating vegemite sandwiches off the boot of the hire car,” he says excitedly, with little space for breaths, “took some crazy photos of storm-blown surf at mavericks, and then went and claimed pebble beach golf course for australia,” he laughs.

lachlan—fellow half-back flanker on the school football field, an animal science degree now under his belt, still surfing, still rowing, still strong and fit from his early gymnastic days—though a giggly, innocent laugh often betrays his huge barrel chest and solid arms. deano played football with us too—called ‘the enforcer’ because he’d come off the bench with curly locks flowing, short legs sprinting in overdrive, a lunatic smile on his face, then take out an opposition player. but he’d always share a beer with them after the game. deano of dry wit and humour, able to quote from any simpsons episode on demand. deano and lachlan met in a science class at university one day when lachlan came in with a huge surfboard-inflicted cut on his chin. everybody else pretended not to notice, but deano walked right up and said, “jesus mate—what happened to your face?” from that time on they quickly grew into close friends—surfing together, playing together—the same sharp oddball sense-of-humour bouncing off each other and everything around them. a couple of months ago deano finished his degree as well—petroleum engineering. so with studies done for now, both are hungry for the world.
“ah guys, you’re gonna love this city!” lachlan keeps saying over the stereo from the passenger seat as we rocket onto the freeway. “you’ll love it!” he shouts again, and i don’t think i’ve ever seen him so excited, not even after final exam of year twelve human biology when we walked out together and went straight to rottnest and sat in the warm, turquoise ocean drinking under sombreros while our eskies full of emu bitter floated past—our minds’ textbook knowledge emptying as quickly as the beers. “forgot to tell ya!” lachlan shouts, looking back over his shoulder at us, “there’s a party tonight, and not your usual party either!—it’s a christmas party put on by some phone company—all the stars will be there … including us!” lachlan yells over the aussie hip-hop now on the stereo—nfa’s flowing poetry with the band 1,200 techniques—another old school mate. zac weaves in and out of freeway lanes like a madman, leaning over the steering wheel slightly, smoking a cigarette with the window down, his small pony tail flapping in the wind. “where’s deano?” i ask. “what?” “deano?” “couldn’t fit in the car, so he’s back at zac’s,” lachlan replies, looking right at home with elbow resting out the window, the strands of his hair blowing all around him as we speed along. “you’re gonna love the house too!” he yells, “wooooo!”

zac drives like he’s in his go-carting races of old, passing between cars like they’re not even moving. “check it out!” he yells, pointing with cigarette to where a car lies burning by the side of the road. a fella pushing an empty shopping trolley with parrot on his shoulder stands there staring into the flames and smoke, looking like a ghost. nobody else on the road seems to even notice, or care. “someone obviously
not happy with their hire car,” lachlan shouts, then adds, smiling, “ain’t in perth no more!” soon after, we pull up at a set of lights and the girl in the car next to us has her red dress caught in the passenger side door. zac signals for them to wind the window down. she slowly does so and zac yells across, “your dress!—it’s caught in the door!” she looks puzzled. “your dress!” she eventually figures out what he’s saying, her boyfriend looking over, both of them saying something to each other and pointing at zac, smiling, recognising him i guess, surprise on their faces. she opens the door to fix the dress as we roar off.

we drive further along the freeway, and i watch the houses and parks and palms and the long, thin, deep-blue glass buildings of downtown float past in a sea of soft light as we head towards the hills. zac points out hollywood boulevard, sunset, melrose place, shining mansions of greek pillars and emerald green lawns, big oak trees and fine white picket fences. people jog along the sidewalks or walk their dogs. “almost there!” lachlan yells.

zac’s place is nestled in the hills. we pass mercedes benzs and ferraris on the narrow winding roads to his house, which is built in the style of a two-story spanish hacienda. “you guys have gotta look at all this,” lachlan says as we tumble out of the car—zac only smiles, happy just to have us here i think. on the other side of the front gate there’s a fountain in a tiled courtyard surrounded by plants, a guesthouse with ensuite bathroom off to the side, rolling red rooftiles covering all. the main entrance is on the upstairs level, zac’s room to the left, the living-room with
couches and stereo overlooking the city through big glass windows, timber rafters exposed above, other bedrooms and bathroom further around. A front room of windows opens onto a view of the entire city of Los Angeles, with a couch near a huge pile of records and two turntables positioned perfectly in front of the windows. “Love the design of the house,” Michael says, looking with his architect’s eye. Everyone agrees. “Shame about the view though,” Deano says, appearing from one of the side bedrooms, smiling his big broad toothy grin, eyes wide, lean and muscular as ever, shorter than Michael and Zac—around the same height as me and Lachlan—hair in blonde curly locks, the first signs of a moustache appearing, as well as a mullet haircut. He’s looking relaxed and happy in jeans and Torana t-shirt. “Well … you can take the bogan out of Perth …” Michael says to Deano, smiling. “Ha!” Deano laughs as he shakes my hand, then Michael’s, “What took you guys so long?” “Dunno,” Michael replies, “But it’s bloody good to be here now.” And then we all just stand there looking out at the city of Los Angeles for a moment. “Isn’t this just fucking amazing?” Lachlan keeps saying, as Zac smiles, “Fucking amazing?”—“Yes!” Deano keeps answering, “Yes!”

Zac leads us downstairs past a big, dark TV room with long, wide leather couch, through the dining room with massive timber table but no chairs and nothing on it, then out through the glass doors opening up onto a patio area with gardens in front, and the city below. The kitchen is further on, open and empty, a Guinness keg and laundry out the back. “Love it mate,” Michael says to Zac, “But doesn’t seem like you’ve got much stuff here.” We stand on the balcony with all of Los Angeles soft...
and moving in the midday light of winter sun below. “yeah, i’m hardly ever here these days,” zac says, “usually i’m filming somewhere else, so it’s worked out really well—you’ve caught me at a good time.” and then we’re all just staring out at the unending hypnotic movement of the city again—all the aeroplanes coming in and out of l.a.x. from all over the world, helicopters flying into the valley, all the rooftops and buildings of business, the tall peaks of the city skyscrapers in the centre distance, the beaches to the far right, the gentle light, more hills and desert way off to the left, all the cars on the snaking freeways, and a lone palm tree sad and bent to the wind on a nearby hill.

“How did you like the trip from san francisco?” i ask deano, wondering if i’ll ever make it there myself—wondering if i’d cross paths with clair if i did. “i had a bit of a freak-out getting onto the freeways,” he smiles. “whereabouts?” michael asks. “oh, just coming out of san francisco,” he says, tilting his head back to laugh his high care-free laugh that goes pouring out over everybody’s heads, and over the city too. “so i had to drive the whole way down,” lachlan says, slapping deano on the back, which gets him laughing even more. “well,” zac says, his face lighting up in his now-famous smile, “i’m glad you’ve all made it finally—i think it deserves a toast. who wants a beer?” no-one declines.

Hours later we’re still sitting on his balcony above manicured gardens and hedges, looking out over the city, talking, catching up, the lights gradually turning on below as the sun sets pink and gold and red over malibu and the pacific, the stereo blaring,
our minds racing towards the impossibility of all this, towards infinity, towards each other, maybe even towards you.

december 6, night

we go to a party at a club where crowds of people and press line up in a courtyard outside. we’re wearing ripped jeans and smelly, crumpled t-shirts, but the bouncers talk to zac and they let us walk right through the airport-style security on red carpets while photographers scream for attention—“zac, zac, over here! zac, zac, one more! one more!”—a wall of exploding flashbulbs lighting up the night. it’s terrible really, and zac knows it better than any of us. he does what he has to and looks at them, a thousand photos taken in ten seconds. but i can tell (from the way he holds his blank expression and seems to look past the photographers) that he sees through the unreality of this, and this place. the rest of us stand around in the background and shadows, staring into the night, wanting to just go in and have a drink.

inside it’s a big, open club with a couple of long bars in the corners, a spot for dancers in the centre, and a balcony outside that looks over the lights and boulevards of hollywood. everything seems to be polished clean and shining—the bottles behind the bar, the bar tops, the lights and mirrors, the dance-floor, people’s faces. we must be early because it’s pretty empty, but the dj has started playing and the bars are open so we slide into things easily enough. we order round after round
of free heinekens, ten at a time. “you wanted tear?” the bartender asks surprised. “yeah, you’re right,” deano replies, “better make it twelve.” the place gradually fills up with people i recognise, people i don’t, and people i probably should. in the end i decide everyone must be famous and leave it at that, which makes it much easier to deal with—the illusion within this illusion. this must surely be the greatest card-trick smoke-screen of them all—this movie world, this fame. “check out all the cash,” michael shouts over the music as we wait for another round. i look across the surface of the bar and see tips of twenties and fifties starting to pile up, the bartenders letting them just sit there. “i reckon we could fund the rest of our trip with one quick swipe,” he says. “yeah,” i reply, “but it’s probably the lowest possible thing to do in a place like this.” we add a couple of dollar bills to the pile. “yep,” he says, “no-one here actually needs the money.” “except the bartenders, i guess … and us.” then michael takes a drink and looks serious for a brief moment. “it is bloody nice of zac to show us all this.”

we meet a black power ranger, saturday night sitcom stars, models who used to be married to famous singers, their sisters, their agents, their managers, girl bands, boy bands, the working bartenders, waiters and bathroom attendants. a couple of lap-dancers start up on a tiny stage in the centre of the room, giggling as deano slips a dollar into their shorts—the smallest note in the whole room except for the ones we leave on the bar—but they love the stupidity of it and so does he. in the queue for the bathroom a guy from a 70’s sitcom dares lachlan to piss in the rubbish bin, but security steps in quickly. “please sir,” he says, “don’t take a leak in the trash cairn.”
“but he told me to,” Lachlan pleads, looking around for the actor who is suddenly nowhere to be seen. On the balcony a waiter offers us little pieces of banana on a stick. “Tell me friend,” Deano asks with a serious, creased-brow look, “where do you grow these mini bananas?” The poor guy can’t tell if he’s joking, and doesn’t know what to say. Lachlan answers, brushing back his fringe, “on mini plantations south of the border, of course.” The waiter walks off with a sigh. The night gets hazier as the Heineken flows—models can’t understand our accents, actors don’t get our jokes, singers don’t like our voices. But it doesn’t matter, we’re the only ones with nothing to lose—the only ones not celebrities, their agents or managers. In one final act of craziness Michael and I start belting each other with couch cushions as a well-known girl band sits across from us shaking their heads. And then suddenly the dancefloor, the balcony and the entire city of Los Angeles is spinning.

Things eventually start to quiet down in the club. The tips are collected by the bartenders, the dancing girls get down off their box, and the room starts thinning out. Everybody seems keen to go. Zac asks Lachlan and me if we want to escort outside a blonde teen-movie actress. “She wants to come and hang out with you guys—she seems to like all of you,” Zac says, tucking a long, slightly-curving strand of hair behind his ear, “do you two think you could walk out with her?—no offence or anything, but you know what the paparazzi would be like if she and I left in the same group.” Lachlan smiles, his eyes thin and glazed, swaying as if we were on a ship. “Of course mate,” he replies, “for you, I will walk out of this place with a
famous actress—but only for you.” zac smiles a cheeky grin and slaps us on our shoulders, “it’s nice to have such good friends around.”

so lachlan, the actress and i walk out arm in arm in arm. i have no idea who she is, but lachlan obviously does because he keeps coming over, elbowing me in the ribs and listing movies she’s been in. i don’t recognise any of them. “you guys sure are fun,” she says, giggling, drunk, as we stumble out towards the lifts. lachlan replies, puffing up his big chest even more, “yep, stick with us love and we’ll make you a star.” we manage to dodge photographers who come running after us, lightbulbs flashing, as we get in the lift. “but i’m already a star,” she laughs. “well then,” lachlan replies, “stick with us, and you’ll make us stars.” we go down onto the cool and brightly-lit hollywood street where the other guys pull up in zac’s car soon after, and we’re away—the first night and first party of los angeles, of america, of this whole thing unfolding … but it’s hard to find you in all this smoke and fog and haze.

it’s a short winding ride back up to zac’s place in the hills where we sit in his upstairs living room drinking straight rum and whiskey on couches, listening to music, the city winking at us outside, the music blending with the words of the actress, such loneliness in her voice. “you know,” she says to me, letting her bright blonde hair fall down over her face just a little, “i never talk to any friends from my home town any more … and i don’t think i even have any real friends here, in this city … god, i feel closer to you guys than anyone else in this whole fucking town,
and we’ve only just met.” I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything so sad, especially from someone as famous and popular as her. And maybe that’s why it’s so hard to listen to—her fame, rather than connecting her to people, probably makes it incredibly difficult for her to connect with anybody at all. Lachlan looks down on our conversation, hanging upside down from timber rafters above our heads with gymnastic ease, his face red from rushing blood, his hair dangling down, “this is a different perspective on the world,” he smiles, and Deano, sitting on another couch with whiskey in hand, looking up at Lachlan, laughs his high jackal laugh. Zac talks quietly with Michael by the window, pointing things out through the glassy holes in the night.

The hours tick on, all of us staggering through it. Eventually everyone turns to look at the come-on of our first American dawn together, staring out from Zac’s window as the soft, golden sun emerges from out of the rest of the country on the eastern horizon, the whole sky a warm magenta, the palm trees and city buildings and freeways gradually taking shape from out of the grey darkness. The actress sits opposite me on the floor, quiet for the first time all night, her story still ringing in my ears—a girl adored by millions of people, for whatever reason, someone who’s *made it*—a celebrity—and maybe the loneliest saddest soul I’ve ever met.

I’m not sure what I want to say about all this—I know I’m only touching on some things, and probably not painting a complete and balanced picture of all that’s happened. But I do want to ask you to please be gentle with her, with everybody
dreaming large in los angles, in all cities, in all the world. be gentle with us all—stars outliving the night—outshining, exploding, falling, unnecessarily competing with the sun.

december 9

after a few days of more parties and meeting the real-life versions of television and big-screen celebrities, we pile into a cadillac that zac has hired just to fit us all in—a big black escalade of seven leather seats, chrome finishes and bose stereo—and drive straight along the busy freeways of post-work los angeles, through the golden-yellow evening, and into the mojave desert. i sit up the back of the car, staring out into the rapidly darkening desert—the hills around us becoming silhouettes against the fading sky. my tonsils feel like they’re infected again—the same painful razor-sharp stinging whenever i swallow, the same blocked sinuses, the same aching warm feeling of infection and despair—though now i’m carrying them through the middle of night-time america, with no real sign of you anywhere.

“get ready guys,” zac says, sometime later, “we’ll be seeing the light soon.”

i guess part of this trip and this writing to you is wanting to know why i’ve always wanted to go beyond the other side of the fence. why i wanted to see where the creek at the bottom of our block flowed to and from. why i sat on our warm corrugated iron roof on summer nights to see if it was possible to count the stars. i want to know why i looked up at qantas and ansett planes every day and imagined
all the people sitting inside looking out the window at me, just a kid, just a dot—why i thought about all those people coming back from other parts of australia and the world—to and from, the ebb and flow, the blow and go. i want to know where my brothers went, why they didn’t want to live with us, with me—why the world didn’t stop in-between their visits, why they didn’t love me enough to stay, or why they loved me enough to go. i want to know why i feel like i’m still looking for them in some ways, even though i’ve already found them, two men now. is it because i’m searching for my childhood idea of my brothers? is this just another part of my impossible search? maybe. but maybe it’s got nothing to do with them any more, and maybe what i’ve been looking for all along is just you, maybe it’s always been you—whoever you might really be, or whatever it might mean to actually find you. maybe it’s that simple, and that difficult. and maybe, just maybe, i’ll also find myself there eventually.

december 10

lounging in our las vegas hotel room for five minutes. michael and i share a room—two decent-sized beds, big tv, wood panelling everywhere, a small table and chairs by the thick curtains and windows that can’t be opened (i read somewhere that none of the hotel windows in vegas can be opened. apparently it’s supposed to deter people from jumping in the heat of defeat—keeping the blood off the hotel sidewalks and lobbies i guess). there’s a tv in our bathroom, a phone, endless soaps, shampoos and conditioners. the soft white towels have the ornate
bellagio ‘b’ sewn into them, same ‘b’ that’s stamped into the grey sand of the shining ashtrays by the golden lifts. our view looks over the empty, cream-coloured dirt of nevada desert and vegas outskirts to the mountains near the hoover dam, snow up there in places, jagged ranges like sharp giant peaks of english-toffee icecream. i stand by the window staring at them for quite a while as michael watches tv in the shower. lachlan and deano are in their room across the hall, probably staring down at the constantly flashing strip below. zac is in a suite upstairs.

last night we ended up coming into vegas from out of the darkness of the desert to see one single beam of light shooting up from the top of a huge black pyramid—a light that speared its way towards some kind of egyptian heaven as the rest of las vegas appeared around it, filling in the dark night with flashing neon and wild colours. what a desert mirage—perfectly improbable, impossible, imaginary, blinking in the brightest pulses and rhythms. rainbow lights everywhere—undefeated by the night. we cruised down into the strip, pulled into our hotel and kicked the football quickly in the carpark in front of the lobby, before walking inside through the polished glass and gold. i lost myself in the red and gold patterns of the carpet, the shine in the marble, the indigo petals of flowers in vases and others hanging somehow from the ceiling, the lights and jingles and yells of the gambling floor and pokies off to the side. at the reception the women behind the counter stared and giggled a little when zac checked-in. we ate chocolate-covered strawberries while we waited, eyeing off the bottles of cognac and brandy in the
drinks cabinet by the foyer couches, my throat sore. “life on the road sure is tough,”
deano said, sitting on a leather armchair with his feet up on a table, letting out his
rocking laugh once again. a beard has started to come through on his face, all of us
the same, no time to shave and not wanting to miss anything. “yeah, these youth
hostels can be a real nightmare,” lachlan added, dropping another strawberry in his
mouth as we all relaxed into the couches, knowing this couldn’t last, maybe
enjoying it all the more because it won’t go on.

zac handed us our keys, paying for everything. “sorry guys, you’re going to have to
share rooms,” he said, smiling. we put up a mock protest. “what?” michael said,
“This isn’t the tour i paid for.” “ah well,” lachlan added, “if we have to.” “but only
this once, mate.” on the way out of the shining lifts, down a long corridor
somewhere near the top of the massive hotel, we walked with our backpacks past a
texan with cowboy boots and white suit waving a huge cuban cigar. he watched us,
paused, took off his ten-gallon hat, scratched his freckled bald head, put his hat
back on and laughed a big guffaw to himself, exclaiming after us under his giant,
white, handlebar moustache, “gawd damn! i ain’t neva seen backpackers at the
bellagio befaw!”

later we went up to zac’s suite. i counted two bedrooms and five bathrooms with a
television in each one. the living room had a big screen behind cabinet doors (the
sad actress from the party in l.a. on one of the movie channels), full-length stretch-
out couches, large dining table by the windows, and kitchen bar. “this is just like a
cheap motel i stayed in once,” deano said, smiling. “actually,” lachlan said, “it’s more like this house i dreamed of building once.” we took a beer each from the bar and moved over to the floor-to-ceiling windows. “ah,” michael said, pointing out through the window, “same design problem as your place in los angeles, mate.” zac looked up, “oh yeah, what’s that?” michael took a sip of his drink. “crap view.” we laughed and stood there staring out at las vegas. “what do you think of the architecture of this city?” i asked michael. “well, mate,” he replied, “i don’t think architects designed it—i think cartoonists did.” the miniature eiffel tower and arc-de-triomphe across the strip, the empire state building, flatiron and other skyscrapers of new york, the eerie green glow of the mgm, the impenetrable gold of mandalay bay, the cars blowing this way and that, the glow of streetlights and houses barely noticeable out the back, the tiny specks of humanity moving here and there on the sidewalks, outnumbered—those touting for business, those going in and out of casinos, and those already lost and spent. seems staring’s all i’ve been doing since i arrived in america, maybe all i’ve ever been doing—trying to take everything in, but looking for something as well, without always knowing what. i wonder what the other guys saw or looked for as they stared, drank their beers and talked, their reflections fading in the windows when zac dimmed the lights to see it all more clearly.

every fifteen minutes or so the fountains in the huge bellagio pond below us started up, shooting huge plumes of water into the air like giant vertical jetstreams. dozens of fountains—all set to move automatically to the sound and light show that goes
along with them, big speakers by the sides of the pond blaring out classical music, the big streams of water swaying this way and that like pirouetting ballerinas meticulously choreographed. “that’s a lotta water to move,” deano said, all of it coming crashing back to the pond in giant splash when it ended, people moving off the sidewalk by the edge of the pond where they watched from, some of them surely wet with spray if the wind carried the water their way. and i wondered if any of them could see us standing up there in the dark. “gets ya thinking doesn’t it,” lachlan said, rubbing his square jaw. “gets you thinking what?” i asked, genuinely interested. he looked at me, “that i gotta go move some water meself,” he said, putting down his beer and disappearing off towards one of the five bathrooms.

in between shows a couple of guys headed out in a little dinghy and fixed whatever fountains weren’t working properly, having to get in and out before the next show began, people starting to gather already, waiting. michael handed out another round of beers, as we talked about where we should go out. “how bout hard rock casino?” deano asked. “we can’t go to vegas and not go to a stripclub!” lachlan kept saying to nobody in particular when he returned from the toilet. “i’m happy to go wherever you guys want,” zac said, “this trip is for you—you’ve come all this way.” i looked out across the city again, looking for you in all this maybe, as stupid as that might sound. i wanted us all to have fun of course, though my throat was getting really sore—maybe it has taken me coming all this way to realise i need to start stepping back from this drinking and madness. for i know i won’t find you truly in that. “stripclub! stripclub!” lachlan kept yelling. i held my beer and looked down on the
rollercoasters and pirate ships of casinos further down, the massive glow of the
pink flamingo, the giant guitar of hard rock, the stratosphere needling the sky.

december 11
i feel like maybe i’m drifting further away from you, rather than getting any closer.
i rang anna last night from the phone in our bathroom. “i love you,” i said, “i miss
you.” and from thousands of miles away—a thousand miles coming—i heard the
same words back. i stared down at the bright white of the immaculate bathroom
tiles, horribly clean, reflecting the light from the ceiling above. “i dunno what i’m
getting myself into here,” i said, my throat feeling tighter than ever, “dunno if i’ve
done the right thing by coming here after all.” she listened to what i had to say, then
replied softly, in her gentle, private, non-broadcasting voice, “i really do love you,
but you know this is the right thing to do. and as much as i might miss you, and as
hard as this might be for me, i know it’s the right thing too, simply because it’s the
right thing for you.” i stared at the dark screen of the television and saw myself
staring back. “i know you’re looking for something,” she continued, “and it seems
like there are things you need to write as well—and maybe in doing so you’ll come
closer to whatever it is you’re looking for.” she was right, of course, but that didn’t
necessarily make things any easier. the call ended soon after, and even though the
whole conversation lasted only five minutes, it cost me sixty dollars. still—i would
have paid anything to hear her voice.
man—it feels like this is all happening so quickly. feels like i’m spending all my time just trying to catch up to myself. my tonsils are red raw. my nose is blocked. my head aches. and it doesn’t seem like i can take all this america in.

december 11, night

we try to get into a club called the foundation room at the mandalay bay casino, but we’re wearing jeans and t-shirts, and the bouncers won’t even talk to us. so we stand around outside thinking about our next move when a guy in tux hands over fistfuls of hundreds just to get in with his girlfriend. we go to leave but the bouncers seem to have a change of heart, maybe recognising zac, maybe not. “hey,” they say, “do you still want to come in?” we look at each other. “sure.” so they take us up a lift all the way to the top of the casino, and into the foundation room—one of those names i guess. we walk out of the lifts and down through a couple of entrances, door staff staring at us, and into the club. it’s a dark and open room with bar on the left, bottles and glasses shining behind and above, couches and tables scattered around the dark room, dj in the corner, people leaning against the bar, talking to each other over the bass of the music. the maitre d’ leads us to an already-full couple of couches and actually clears a group of people sitting there so that we can sit down. they look around in surprise and dismay. it’s terrible—one of the lowest moments in my life. one girl looks at me and asks “what the fuck?” and i don’t know what to say as she shoulders her way past me to the bar.
we follow the maître d’s prompts and sit down awkwardly, looking at each other, not knowing what to do. “what can i get you guys?” asks a waitress. we sit there continuing to look at each other as if to say, “should we even bother?—that was crap.” but finally lachlan says, “well, bugger it, we’re here now, so we might as well at least have a drink.” so we order four beers and one vodka, cranberry and soda, which appears as a bottle of vodka and two jugs each of cranberry and soda. soon after, they’re ushering us through, inexplicably, to a private ottoman-style room down a rabbit-warren of corridors out the back—some kind of hole in the wall room that has a see-through table in the centre on fine wood carving frame, red couches with cushions, tapestries on the wall and red velvet curtain across the entrance. we sit down and grab a beer each. “this place is fucken weird,” michael says. “but what do we expect in a town like this?” deano replies. “yep,” lachlan adds, “i’d be surprised if this club wasn’t fucked up.”

we order round after round, and every now and then our waitress comes back in with a new tray of drinks. and i do love being with my friends, and i am trying to join the wave that everyone is riding, but i’m also finding it hard to fit everything into my blocked head with blocked sinuses and throat. i think of anna, and of what she said. and i wonder again what it is i’m really looking for here. maybe i’m just on a fool’s quest for fool’s gold. maybe it’s only difficult cos i’ve invented something which i feel i should be looking for, and therefore have set up my own disappointment when i don’t find it. bah—eventually i have to go to the toilet just to take a break. and in there i find a tired, old african-american attendant with white
shirt and black pants, shiny shoes, a small moustache and no smile. His face is worn
with years and lines, probably having seen a thousand nights unfold in places like
this. He stands next to a tray of handtowels and soaps and cologne, looking off into
the distance somewhere between me and him. When I’m done I walk to the sink and
try to figure out how the tap works. Eventually, and very slowly, he comes over and
silently shows me how to use it—an automatic tap for automatic washing. “Thanks
mate,” I say and look at him. He looks beyond where I’m standing, and nods gently.
Then he extends a hand and offers me a towel. Thanking him again, I take it and dry
my hands. He continues to look off into the distance. And I suddenly feel
immeasurably sorry for him, for all his nights spent in this place, for everything
that might have led him here, for everything that might keep him here too, and for
the family waiting for him in a house on the outskirts of Vegas maybe, hoping that
tonight the tips will be enough for them to pay the next round of bills. I look in my
wallet and the only thing I have is a twenty, so I end up putting it into his glass
bowl with the other notes by the mirror because that’s all I have and what does it
matter in this madness anyway? I look up and smile a half smile—something just to
say that I can only imagine the horrors of all this. He stares off towards the door,
holding the same gesture as he had when I walked in.

Later, back in our private drinking room in the club, Deano bursts in shaking his
head and says, “I was having such a nice conversation with a girl in a blue ball
dress at the bar.” “Cool,” Lachlan replies, “What happened?” Deano runs his fingers
through his curls and over the beginnings of his moustache. “Well,” he continues,
“she suddenly asked me ‘so how long do you want me for?’” he picks up another beer from the table. “what did you say?” zac asks. “nothing. what could i say?—i just had to walk away—i suddenly realised that everything she’d said up to that point wasn’t even real.”

i take another sip of my drink after listening to deano’s story, but soon have to leave again, this time walking through the music of the club, past the bar, and onto an outside balcony where i stand in the freezing cold, alone, visions of the bathroom attendant flashing before my eyes, my throat closing tighter still. i look out and see the buzzing orange and yellow and white lights of las vegas flicker and shimmer below, only a few stars visible above, the rest of them hiding from all this brightness. michael comes out soon after, and for a while we stand there together, staring out at the city, his tall body leaning over the rail. “pretty crazy this place, isnit?” he says, and i nod, though i’m not sure if he means this club, this city, this country, this world. “this must be one of the only casino balconies in vegas,” he adds. “yeah, i guess they figure nobody rich enough to get up here would think about jumping.” michael rests his beer up on the balcony ledge and, shivering, points off into the distance. “see those mountains over there mate, way out the back?” i squint my eyes and see a few giant shadows on the horizon, “that’s where we’re headed—but further … bigger mountains than this, higher places than vegas.” i stare off towards them, and imagine the snow soft and white like layers of icing sugar on their peaks.
“but we might as well enjoy things on this level while we’re here, hey,” he continues, standing up a little straighter, “god knows we’ll never get to experience this again … at least not in the way we have been.” i understand what he’s saying. “i’m trying mate,” i reply, “but it ain’t easy.” he nods. my throat is killing me, but i don’t bother telling him about it yet again. “i think i know what you mean,” he says, his dark curls somehow shining, “but i also know it’s bloody freezing out here. come back in when you’re ready—all this will be just another memory soon enough.” he pats me on the shoulder, walks to the door, opens it, looks back at me, then returns inside—the music pouring out before the door closes behind him. i stay a little longer, holding my beer with freezing hand, closing my eyes and enjoying the sensation of the cold—the real feeling of coldness, the freezing desert night of winter-time, of you here with me maybe. then i open my eyes again and look down on the lights of the city and its houses of any suburban anyplace, and all the people who fill it—all those working the casinos, hotels, bars, gaming tables, clubs, restaurants, strip joints, whatever—all the visitors too—everybody just trying to live their lives—me, michael, lachlan, deano and zac included.

and i am grateful for all that zac is sharing with us—all he is showing us. i just wish i was feeling better—wish i could enjoy it as much as everyone else—wish there was something i could offer him in return.

i look out towards the horizon and the dark silhouettes of the mountains again, solid and cold in their silence, knowing now where the path will take us next—where we
will be heading soon—to the rockies—colder, higher, and maybe closer to some kind of you, or me, or both.

december 12

zac takes us to the downtown greyhound station. “back to reality then,” lachlan says, partly joking, though no-one laughs. “always knew it would come to this,” deano says, looking up and down the dirty sidewalk. i try to remain hopeful that this is the right direction—that really there’s no other choice. we thank zac for everything he’s done. “it’s been wild, mate,” michael says, both eyes now bleary and red. “nobody’s gonna believe some of this stuff,” deano says as we unload our bags out of the cadillac and onto the ground. “yeah,” lachlan adds, looking a little pale from lack of sleep, “makes perth seem like a pretty small place all of a sudden.” “thank you zac,” i say. he looks at all of us and his whole face seems to grow warmer and brighter with his wide smile. he reminds me, in this moment, of a big and beautiful lion. “ah don’t thank me guys,” he says, “i’m really just happy you came … it’s so nice to be with old friends—people who don’t want anything from you other than to just hang out. i should be thanking all of you.” we all smile. “yes, you should,” lachlan replies with a grin, “you owe us for showing you such a good time.” zac smiles again before he looks down slightly, his hair falling over his face, “well, we never did make it to that stripclub … so maybe we can call it even.”
we each hug him, standing there a little lost, a little confused, like a bunch of
spoiled children suddenly left to the world. our backpacks are spread out on the
sidewalk, while homeless guys walk by, asking for change. “maybe we’ll come
back to l.a. for that new year’s party,” lachlan says, hopeful, though something in
the way he says it rings sad. zac nods, “of course—you guys are always welcome.”
we stand around looking at each other for a little longer, staring at our own shoes,
the stains on the sidewalk and street, the dried dirty gum, the greasy fingerprints on
the glass, the lines of people inside the station getting longer. “well, guess i should
be going,” zac says, looking at each of us again, our old friend, “see you soon.” he
gets back in the escalade, starts it up and suddenly he’s driving off as we look after
him, the four of us growing smaller in his rearview mirror as he sounds the horn for
the final time.

“well then,” deano says after a while, looking around, “guess we need a bellhop for
all these fucken bags.” but we’re standing on the cracked sidewalks at the broken
end of downtown, and all we get are stares from those nearby, frightful emptiness
in their eyes, our difficulties nothing in comparison. i give a guy a dollar, as if it’d
make a difference, but it’s all i have on me. he looks at it in disgust, pockets it and
goes back to his spot by the front door under the chipped red, white and blue of the
greyhound logo. and so here we are, dropped into a harsher reality. though in a
strange way, i also feel it as a kind of relief. “ah yes,” lachlan says, as we pick up
our bags, “the rest of the world.”
we carry our bags inside to the end of a long line of people—African Americans, Hispanic Americans, white Americans—some of them transporting their whole lives it seems—worn string keeping their belongings from falling out of the cardboard boxes they carry, dogs and cats in small cages, children running around, some of them screaming, everybody clutching onto their wallets. “Whoa,” Deano says, lifting his sunglasses over his curls, “this is gonna be fun.” we move forward a spot as somebody else up the front claims their tickets. “You know,” Michael leans down and whispers in my ear, “when prisoners are released from gaol, they’re apparently given a greyhound ticket to wherever they want to go in America.” I believe him, but it’s not run-ins with convicts I’m concerned about, or anything else from outside. I’m obviously capable of inflicting enough injuries on myself—sore head, sore throat, sore everything.

and as I look around again, I suddenly feel something odd. I’m surprised—because I definitely wouldn’t have thought you’d be anywhere near a place like this. But I realise now that in some strange way you’re with us, even here, even at this time, lurking in-between the old casinos and strip joints, between the cheap hotels and brothels, between the men on the street asking for change and the dirty windows they lean against, between the long queues of people in here looking for another chance to get out, their last maybe, between the buzzing fluoro lights and the plastic lino floor that reflects everything hard and real, between every atom of almost-defeated life—I sense you here.
but when i go across the road to the golden nugget casino to find a toilet i start to feel you move further away. this casino has to be the absolute ultimate end-of-the-world life-gone stopping place. the brown and yellow carpets are stained with cigarettes and more gum and a million beaten feet, the ceiling cracked and peeling, the mirrors broken and bent, reflecting midday weekday widows and divorcees throwing away all of themselves with each push of every worn-out button and dicey roll. an old guy with acne scars from long-ago youth smokes a cigarette and drinks his triple whisky shot at a slot machine, scratching his faded skin and fading life, moving within his own world as everyone seems to in here, dreamlike. i rush for the toilet where everything is faded orange and grey and piss quickly next to a swaying drunk guy in brown corduroy suit talking on his cellphone while the rest of him hangs there limp and done. “i need a ride, goddamit! come and get me you fucken whore!” he screams. i hurry to finish and get out again, and as i make my way across the gambling floor i take one last look at all these old beaten souls plugged into this empty hollow place—the way they mechanically go about their actions like they’ve become a part of the slot machines, the way they don’t even seem to care when their jackpot actually goes off.

and here’s the thing—it probably sounds stupid, but i feel like i want to take each and every one of them with me, to at least the bus station, further if i could, anywhere away from here. but at the same time i know this is where the roads they have made for themselves go, at least for now. so i stand there, not knowing what to do, feeling myself falling in the pause i make, dropping, sucked-in. suddenly i
don’t feel so restless any more. and then i realise i have to get the hell out before i pull up a stool myself, before i get trapped inside with all these beautiful sorry souls.

**december 12, night**

we pass through nevada, utah, colorado and the night of freezing america, saying almost nothing to each other. my sore throat is easing up but deano seems to have one now too, michael’s stye still looks angry and red despite drug-store drops, and a grey-faced lachlan seems so far gone he can’t come back for sleep. “what are you writing?” lachlan asks me from across the aisle, “a novel or something?” i put together a weak smile. “i don’t really know what it is.”

sitting next to me is a dark-haired, red-lipped, pink-cheeked kid from melbourne—tim—who just happens to be going to the same place as us. he’s full of excitement and hope for everything that lies ahead. he’s done his research and tells me all about the town, the ski resort, the accommodation. “i’ve been skiing since i was ten,” he tells me, “my dad used to take me to falls creek and hotham all the time, but this is my first overseas trip.” he tells me everything he knows about crested butte, colorado—“it’s going to be awesome! there are thirteen lifts! we’ll have blue uniforms!” and i’m not sure if it’s because my throat is still sore or because i’m tired or what, but i can’t seem to share the excitement with him, and can’t share what’s happened over the last few days either. so i go bumping along through the
long night with him, finding it increasingly difficult to listen to the bursting possibility in his voice, though i wish i could.

the night rolls on. we end up sitting in a freezing bus terminal in grand junction, colorado, for three hours waiting for a connecting bus, trying to sleep on plastic benches as the cold slips through the thin windows and our clothes, our bags piled on the ground around us. “soup anyone?” michael asks, sipping from the canned tomato soup he’s just bought from the small café counter, fingers wrapped around the styrofoam bowl and warmth, steam rising up from it around his face and dark curls. “nah thanks mate,” lachlan replies, looking even paler under all these fluoro lights. “but i do need something hot—this place is bloody freezing … maybe a coffee’ll do the trick. but that won’t help me sleep, will it … shit … reality sux.”
deano is reduced to grunts by his sore throat, and i’m not much better. in the end we all drink coffee and sit close to each other just to keep warm. deano even finds a local magazine with cars for sale, and so we all look down into it like we’re sitting around a campfire. “here we go,” lachlan says, half-heartedly, “we could get this truck … it’s got a snow plough on the front.” we take a look. “seven grand.” “but it could bring in some extra cash,” michael says. “that name again is mr. plough,” deano sings half-heartedly—a line from the simpsons, and the only thing he says all night.

and then, in the middle hour of this night-time limbo, the connecting bus arrives. we grab our bags, leave our empty foam cups on the table, and step quickly through
the freezing cold of that somewhere place between dark and dawn, and onto the bus. “sweet,” lachlan says, “at least it’s almost empty.” a blessing we probably don’t deserve, but take nonetheless, stretching out, trying as hard as we can for sleep, for crested butte colorado, for you maybe, for the end.

**december 13**

it’s lighter now, but everyone is still sleeping while i type this out. everything is white outside the bus—the snow in the sky falling, the snow on the road, on the ground, hanging from trees, covering rocks, in all the places between. the world is full of white snow, and for the briefest moment i can’t tell which way it’s falling—from above, from below, from within. it’s so quiet and so beautiful i almost can’t take it. this must be some kind of paradise you’ve made for us out here, some kind of sign perhaps to say, yes, keep going—despite whatever may come.

“check this out, mate,” i say to michael softly, reaching over the seat to shake him gently, not wanting him to miss it. he wakes, rubs his eyes, props himself up on one elbow, and looks out on the white morning, smiling. deano wakes up too, looking out with his sleepy eyes. “snow,” deano says to himself faintly—his first ever sight of falling snow. and i end up watching him as much as i watch the world outside, his eyes now huge like those of a kitten waking to the world, and yes, like those of a child. lachlan also wakes to look outside with us, regaining some of his colour
after a few hours sleep. “amazing, hey,” he says, “it’s so white.” and we all sit there staring, the rest of the bus empty except for tim, who goes on sleeping.

it feels like we’re now rising to some kind of whitewashed salvation from the hedonism we’ve passed through over the last few days, weeks, years maybe, longer than just america. this must surely be what heaven looks like, though i doubt we’ve managed to stumble there.

december 15

crested butte, colorado. we’ve sorted out work as lift operators on the mountain, with staff accommodation in a basic apartment near the ski-area base. i’m writing this in the living room, amazed—so many mountains, so much snow.

i spoke to anna last night. it’s getting harder—this looking back while trying to look forward. maybe i have to let her go completely, maybe that’s just the best thing for both of us. maybe it’s what i should have been doing this whole time. and maybe, just maybe, it’s the only way of letting the future arrive, and you along with it.

the guys are out buying snowboards and food. so i sit here writing this, looking out the window at the mountain. it scares me a bit—the rocky peak of it, the loneliness of it up there, the solitary ledges above the treeline, the wind, the way snow
tumbles straight down through a natural funnel towards the aspens and ponderosas closer to the base. last night i looked out the window before bed and watched the headlights of snowcats swing wildly around the mountain like fireflies in the void, grooming the runs. i wonder if that’s what we look like from some far-off place.

december 22

our time in crested butte quickly slides into some kind of rhythm, the same way we slide down the bright-white slopes of the mountain every day with greater ease. i wake to the buzz of an alarm clock each morning on my mattress on the floor in the room i share with michael, outside still dark, a new pile of snow on the other side of the window if a storm has blown through overnight. one of us eventually gets up and showers. “you go mate,” the conversation usually starts, our faces still buried in our pillows. “nah mate, you go,” neither of us wanting to leave the warmth of our beds. “nah mate, i insist.” finally, when we don’t want to think about it any longer, one of us will get up. around the same time, lachlan will stumble out of his room into the sparse living area of simple green couches and cardboard-box coffee table covered in deano’s australian flag. we cross paths in towels and thermal underwear and sleepiness. then one of us will stagger down the hallway where we have a mirror and sink for shaving and brushing teeth, the bathroom further on, the hallway ending in deano’s room. he always sleeps the longest.
there is little talk most mornings when everyone is finally up. we step around each
other, smearing toast with peanut butter or vegemite, pouring four teas with milk
and sugar. we wear thermal pants or tops in light blue and grey, the black pants of
uniform, the black fleece with yellow stitch of mountain logo, the dark blue and
black jackets of crested butte mountain resort.

most mornings, while we eat breakfast, i look out through the living-room window
at the mountain which sits in silence amongst the growing-lighter sky. and in the
faint light i can see all the lines of lifts still and resting, the bull-wheels soon to spin
people towards the peak, the runs groomed overnight while we slept. “the mountain
is so quiet this time of day,” i say one morning while the steam pours off our teas.
the others turn and look, sleep still in their eyes. “be nice if it was like that all the
time,” lachlan says, then bites into his vegemite on toast. “yep,” deano adds, milk
dripping from his spoonful of cornflakes, “no people to constantly fall off my
bloody lift.” i keep staring out through the ice on the window. “it’s going to be
bloody cold today,” michael says as we finish the last of our teas, slide into shoes,
smear on sunscreen, pull on gloves and beanies and fill up drink bottles. “it’s
bloody cold every day,” deano replies, “even at mid-day in full sunlight. i dunno
how these people do it year after year.” and then finally we draw up enough
courage to step out of the building and into the sharp bite of icy morning.

the cold hits our faces straight away—our noses and lips turn red, then blue. we
walk either along the frozen steel icicle-hung stairs and down to the road, or take a
short-cut through the snow if it’s not too thick. hardly anybody talks because it requires so much energy, and lets go of too much warmth. about the only time we do say anything is if we’ve gone out the night before. “don’t think i’ll be drinking that canadian whiskey again.” “but it looked so nice sitting on the oak shelf of that little liquor store, and that scottish owner said it was the good oil.” “he lied.” “same with that beer.” “did you see that south african girl at the party?” “which one?” “i dunno.” “how’s your throat today?” “average.” “how’s your eye?” “getting better … slowly.” and that’s about all we can manage—our words mixing with our breath to send strange-shaped clouds billowing out into the even-light of freezing dawn.

“watch that ice!” almost every morning one of us slips over, or someone from another group will fall, arms and hands flailing. “so graceful,” lachlan says one morning when michael slips, “like a butterfly.”

we get bacon-and-egg burritos from the little warm bakery near work if we’re hungover, leaving a small tip in the big glass jar probably once used for pickled eggs or onions. “hey, thanks again guys,” the brunette american girl behind the counter says, nose-ring shining, “not everyone tips you know.” we walk outside eating our hot, steaming, overflowing burritos. “well if i had known that, i wouldn’t have been wasting a buck every morning,” deano says between mouthfulls, “thought you had to tip for everything round here.” other workers are there too—kiwis, south africans, poms, americans. there’s plenty of foreigners because they’re not paid as much as the locals. “mornin’ lads,” ben from london will say, “like a summer’s day, innit?” “would be for you,” deano replies.
we cut through the rental places and clothing stores, through club med and down to our changerooms. “how good would it be to just stay here at club med?” lachlan asks, “no work, just skiing, spa baths, all your booze for free?” “it’d be good,” deano replies, “except you’d have to stay with everybody else who stays in big hotel chains.” “yep,” michael adds, “and we get free spa baths and can ski on our days off anyway, and our booze might as well be free.” “only because we buy petrol, not alcohol.” and i suddenly feel the burning of my throat again, remembering yet another night of wanting to do the right thing—fit in, let go, socialise, have ‘fun’—exactly what is ‘supposed’ to be done at ski resorts, i guess. but it continues to take its toll on me—the longer i continue to not walk away from it completely.

we go into the locker-room and clock on **before** we get changed so that we get paid a few more cents each day. “all adds up,” lachlan says, tying up his boots. “yeah, *fuck* em,” deano adds, tightening up some screws on his board. he’s quickly grown an aversion to management because he’s been put on the busiest lift on the mountain. “can’t even take a piss out the back of my shack cos the dumbarse texans in their blue jeans keep falling over and stopping the bloody lift.” (poor deano—i definitely wouldn’t want to swap lifts with him.) and then soon after, when we’re all ready to go, we grab our boards and walk out the door and into the cold morning again, disappearing off towards our separate lifts on different sides of the resort. “see ya fellas,” lachlan says, pulling down his reflective, gold goggles, “stay sane.”
i work on a t-bar surface lift near the base, deano’s lift is called keystone, michael way up high, lachlan over the back on goldlink. we talk on the phone every day, laying down plans for further trips, complaining, telling the story of the morning. “they all fell off of course and looked over at me to stop the lift, but i just let them all keep on falling—i figure it’s a motivation for them not to do it next time,” deano says laughing. “i made an ice-sculpture this morning!” lachlan says, “a rabbit!” michael will call most days from the highest shack on the mountain. “mate,” he says, “i think i can see all the way to mexico up here, it’s incredible … reckon we should head down there and defrost for a while, whaddya say? maybe there’s something else waiting for us there!” i look out at the snow, phone in hand. “like what?” i ask, interested, wondering if he knows somehow that i’m writing these things to you, wondering if i should just tell him. “i dunno,” he answers, “it’s hard to say unless we go—but i’m sure we’ll find something.” i sit forward on my chair, “i’m sure we will too,” i reply, “maybe even something we’re looking for.” there’s silence for a brief moment. “what are you looking for?” he asks. i pause. “not sure yet, exactly, but i do know i’m looking for something.” “yeah, i think i know what you mean,” he replies, “so … are we going to mexico then?” i smile. “we could mate, but on the other hand—maybe we haven’t looked hard enough here yet.” there is silence on the other end of the line while a couple comes up on the lift, their arms around each other, until they let go of the bar and it retracts back into itself. “yeah, maybe,” he says, “i suppose we haven’t been here that long.” “yeah,” i reply, “perhaps there’s something here right under our noses.” i look out as the couple skis off down the ungroomed run on the other side of the lift line, holding
hands, and i sigh, thinking of anna, thinking of clair. “what’s wrong?” michael
asks. “nothing mate,” i reply, “everything’s fine.” there’s more silence as i watch
the couple move further down the run. “maybe everything is fine,” he eventually
says, and i can almost hear him looking out his shack window to the endless field
of mountains beyond, “and it sure is beautiful up here,” he adds.

on my lift i work with a dark-haired, dark-bushy-eyebrowed south african from
cape town named tyrell. he’s almost as tall as michael, never wears sunglasses, is
happy to get burnt, and appears to be growing a tuft of black hair under his bottom
lip. each day we change shacks, so that one of us gets to sit at the top of the lift and
do nothing, while the other loads skiers at the bottom. “aw, cawm on man,” he’s
always saying over our open phone line, “it’s faw too cold down here, let’s swap,
fawst,” or “please … i’m way pawst being too hungover for this shit.” he’s one of
the nicest guys i’ve ever met. first thing in the morning one of us will ride the lift to
the top, then we set up the signs, check the safety ropes, test all the stops, clear
snow from the ramps and sweep it from the bullwheels if there’s been a storm
overnight, check the counterweight balance, and then we run back into the warmth
of our separate shacks, making sure the propane heaters are up full bore, waiting
for nine o’clock and the first skiers. after a while i know exactly what he’ll be
doing at the other end of the lift at every moment, and vice versa. on some
mornings, if the lift is quiet, we’ll sit and talk over the phone. “what’s cape town
like?” i ask. “really nice, man. it can get a bit bawstados sometimes with all the
poverty in the country—cawjackings and robberies and stuff. but i love it down
there. I love the surfing, except for the shawks, love the land and the people. it’s fawking awesome, really, but I just had to leave for a while … you know?” I look out as the sun moves slowly above the peak, “yeah mate, I know.”

“hey aussie,” he’ll say later, “I’m going for lunch … you want anything? lawst chawnce.” and I know the south african currency isn’t worth anything—he hasn’t even been able to buy his own board yet—but he still offers to get me something every day. “thanks mate, but I’m okay.” around lunchtime a ‘roving breaker’ shows up to sit in for one of us while we get a hamburger or pizza at the main cafeteria. if the breaker shows up before noon the afternoon always drags out. if he shows up too late the wait can be painful. “hey, man … why don’t you take an extra half hour?” one of them might say, while another says, “one hour, not a second longer, dude.” most of them are americans working at least their second year on the mountain, because breakers have to know how to sit back and do nothing on every lift. before I eat I’ll go for a quick run down a part of the mountain I haven’t visited yet, or make a lonely track through the trees—my favourite—never knowing when I’ll scratch up my board on shallow rocks, or wrap myself around a thick pine. it’s always so quiet, except for the gentle swoosh of my board through the snow. most afternoons are just a countdown till four o’clock when we pack away all the stuff we put out in the morning, board straight to the base, get out of our uniforms and usually find ourselves at rafters bar for happy-hour drinks.
some days after work we jump the fence into a nearby resort’s outdoor hot-tub to sit and watch the last rays of the sun slide up the mountain towards the peak, the snow glowing an alpine bloody red. “maybe we’re getting closer to what we’re supposed to be finding here, mate,” michael says to me one afternoon as we sit in the tub, steam rising up all around us. i smile, “yep. it’s hard not to think we’ve already found something in moments like these.”

sometimes we go back to the four seasons hotel where teagan and sarah live—a couple of new zealand girls we met, best friends, working here at a restaurant in the sheraton, both of them about twenty years old. sarah is blonde, warm faced, studying to be a nurse back home, loud when she drinks, opening herself out to the world. teagan has long dark hair, hoping to be a naturopath, more reserved than sarah, parties just as much but folds herself inwards as she goes, like a flower under passing cloud, something beautifully sad about her, blue eyes and tucked-in wings, something more organised and serious. both of them have decided to take some time off before they enter the next stage of their lives, both of them wanting to party as much as everyone else on this mountain. lachlan keeps trying to get them to say “bear,” because it comes out “beer.” “i want to see some bloody beers!” teagan will say, “doesn’t umurica have iny ficken beers?” we all laugh. “there’s heaps of beers here,” lachlan replies, “here, drink this one!” the girls shake their heads. “you boys are sully, but sura and me must be maird, cos we come all thus way to umurica, and end up hunging out with bloody aussies!” they cook for us some nights, we bring drinks and chocolate, and watch videos till late. other
evenings we all go to a party someplace, or to a bar in town like the black whale where we play pool, listen to music, dream of other travels, and wait finally in the warmer foyer of the post office for the one and only taxi in town to take us back to the mountain, where we all try to do a runner and end up falling over on the ice in a heap as soon as we get out of the van. “okay, okay, you’ve got us, we’ll pay!” lachlan says to the taxi driver, laughing. “dammit,” deano says, drunk, flat on his back, “we almost got away.”

sometimes the blue payphone in the corridor will ring. sometimes somebody staying in a nearby room will answer it. sometimes it will be anna, calling from perth, where she’s still working at a radio station, getting ready to be sent to karratha as a journalist, her voice broadcasting down the line all that way. we talk about the different places we’re at now, the generalities and events of the day. “i still love you, and i still miss you,” we say to each other. but gradually we phone each other less and less.

my tonsillitis swings back and forth depending on various things, including how much we party, and how cold it is. when it’s bad my tonsils swell up and turn red, so that when i swallow it feels like a sharp fishbone is caught in the back of my throat. with the infection comes a headcold too, my nose always thick or running, sinuses crammed for space, head aching, my whole body squeezed. sometimes a fever will arrive as well, so that i wake up sweating under my sleeping bag after nightmares about fighting strange beasts.
the little medical centre in the shopping complex by the base area get to know me by my first name. i go in and wait in a small room by the front desk with magazines. “back for more, hey?” the middle-aged receptionists usually say, “we might have to start paying you a wage—you’re in this place more often than we are.” i smile if i can. “well, no offence,” i reply, “but i’d rather not ever come back in here again.” they laugh, “uh-huh, we feel like that most days too.” before long i get called into the back. three or four hospital beds, stethoscopes, shining white floor, skeletons, skiers with cuts and bruises from their day out, others with colds or flu, everyone waiting for the doctor. he has a passion for space—the walls covered in all sorts of photos signed by nasa officials and astronauts—a framed fellowship degree from an australian university also hangs on the wall between the space photos and his other degrees. “you again?” he says, short, curly blonde hair above his hazel eyes and shaven face. he always wears a polo shirt and jeans with sneakers. “i was about to say the same thing to you,” i reply. he usually takes my temperature, looks at my tonsils and gives me some more antibiotics. once he even took a blood sample and tested me for hepatitis and mono. all came back negative. after a while i just go in, get the penicillin, amoxicillin or abbocillin, and leave.

i can always tell when a new bout of tonsillitis is going to flare up—same aching sensation in the body, same tingle in the back of the throat, same compression in the sinuses. it’s hard—it’s also when i feel like i’m furthest from finding you. i try to talk with my travel insurance company, who for some reason are in holland. i have to call in the middle of the night, and often their english is so bad we can’t
even communicate. “am-er-i-ca? … ton-sill-ect-o-my?” with the price of operations here, they don’t want to know about it. so they do things like ask for my records from my g.p. in perth, who i have to call at midnight, just so they know it isn’t a ‘pre-existing condition.’ then they tell me i have to go to a nearby hospital and see what they say. so i hitch-hike an hour and a half in the freezing cold to gunnison, but the specialist won’t be in for weeks, and they seem to want the money up front. i can’t even afford to take the time off, let alone pay for an operation.

my throat goes through a steady rhythm of painful lows and not-so-lows, manageable only with drugs that i know are rotting away my stomach, no matter how much yoghurt i spoon into my mouth. “hope it gets better soon mate,” is about all the guys can say, but there’s nothing they can do. i tell my cousin anton in boulder about it in an email and he sends me some herbal stuff and recommends a lot of alternative drops and roots. they work for a while, but the infection always comes back again. i’m even tempted to cut them out myself with a spoon or steak knife, but nobody else seems to agree. i know i’m either going to have to get them out, or get myself out of crested butte.

december 23

there are many things i still want to ask you—many things i want to know. sometimes i think i might even be on the right track. but other times i think that maybe the wandering could have taken over, become its own goal. i don’t know,
after all, tell me this—what’s an illness? what’s a blessing? what’s behind an illusion? because being aware of a condition doesn’t necessarily cure you of it. you have to want to be cured—alcoholism, drug addiction, tonsillitis, restlessness, love.

hell, i might as well ask why the moon moves with me sometimes, through starry nights like this? why smoky clouds draw long bony fingers through the day to tear apart and dissolve? why the turning of things towards a sun that cannot be still? why the great migrations of people everywhere all the time, and the huge billowing clouds of birds from south america, africa, asia to the atlantic circle, stopping at remembered places just to turn around and revisit the same departed shores?

why the impossible travels of whales and sharks through the oceans and back again, the currents in those waters, in the sky, inside space, inside our own lovely lonely bodies all soft and spent? why this reincarnation—willing or otherwise, real or not? do we actually know our endings and choose to keep throwing ourselves back into these fires? why the ticking tock of time, the possibility of damnation, procrastination, stillness and purgatory? why you, why me, why us?—why all of this?

december 24

this morning i’m talking on the phone to michael—he’s still in the top shack on the high lift, way up in the clouded peaks where he looks to the north-west over the
rocky mountains towards aspen, towards eden maybe. there are only a few mountains out there higher than crested butte, with each mountain just one in a million it seems, all of them looking back at us. each day michael sits up there in his tiny shack just big enough to fit his long legs plus propane heater, chair and table ledge. and each day i suppose he surveys all his plans and memories as we all do. and i wonder sometimes if it’s you he’s looking for up there—or his version of you at least—seeing things a little clearer for his more expansive view, if he’s looking as hard as i am, if he even wants to.

but we’re not talking about things like that today—instead we talk about twenty-five-cent chili chicken wings and dollar margaritas at the firehouse grill. we talk about going to the movies in town to see the new film set in the bellagio hotel in vegas. we talk about hiring a car and getting out of town to see more mountains, “because there are so many,” he says, “because it just doesn’t matter how nice a place is, does it? …” and you know how it goes.

then something unusual happens—i hang up the phone and look out through the ice sliding off the windows, melting slowly in the new sun, and suddenly see the orange-brown and white fur and tail of a fox creeping slowly up the ungroomed run on the other side of the lift. he’s hopping lightly across the snow like he’s walking on hot coals, picking up his paws quickly and placing them back down again in a sharp flick. then he stops a moment to bite each paw in turn, the snow probably turning to ice between them. he looks around for an instant—up the mountain,
down the mountain—then at the moving bars on the lift, but he doesn’t see me. it’s amazing—he’s all alone out there, completely exposed, naked, vulnerable in the great field of snow under yet another blue colorado sky. he trots further up the mountain heading towards the shelter of the ponderosa and the leafless skeletons of aspens. and for a moment i think he must be either extremely brave or extremely stupid to be putting himself out there like this—totally open, totally honest, totally himself—knowing this could get him to where he’s going, knowing it could cut him short, knowing he has to do something regardless.

i stand up slowly, and quietly open the door of the shack to watch him a little better. he moves silently up the face of the mountain through the snow. and it’s not till he’s about level with the shack, maybe fifty feet away, that he looks over and sees me. he stops, and stares me right in the eye—big black fox eyes. all of him and all of me. the world pauses. the lift seems to stop turning, the mountain fades away, and in an instant it’s just him and just me, and you there somewhere too, i know it. something happening in the meeting of our eyes together, the space between vanishing, filling, an understanding in there, but not in words, almost like he knows me completely—knows everything about me, and it feels like i’m the one out there in the snow, my paws icing up as i wait. and then suddenly he’s running—racing—a cloud of snow behind him—no more delicate steps but a full run towards the cover and the trees further up. and i watch him race off, snow exploding all around him like landmines, his tail flapping as he disappears into the spindly grey branches of the aspens and the pines and the mountain.
i walk away from the shack a little to try to see him making his way—but he’s gone, swallowed up by the snow and the rockies. and the only sign of him having been here at all is the wandering line of his delicate footfalls trailing themselves up the mountain.

december 25

christmas not so holy. all of us hungover from christmas-eve drinks at a bar in town. deano crawls into his morning shower to cough up blood—he’s really caught my tonsillitis now. “can you take me to a doctor?” he pleads. “sure mate, sure thing,” we reply. lachlan and i walk him to a medical centre near our changerooms, but they won’t take his travel insurance. “if it’s not am-er-i-can, we can’t ac-cept it.” i talk lachlan out of abusing them, and we go to the place i visit and they give deano some penicillin. he sleeps for the rest of the day in his room. “is he okay?” michael asks. “he’ll be alright,” lachlan replies, “the drugs should do what drugs do.”

in the afternoon michael and i kick the footy in the icy carpark behind the building. every second kick, one of us slips over on the ice. “ah, bloody hell,” he yells on his back, “should have brought my boots.” it’s funny, and painful, yet we can’t seem to stop. lachlan finally calls us in to eat—he’s cooked a seven-dollar post-thanksgiving leftover wal-mart turkey that smokes out the apartment and probably goes close to setting off the detectors in the hallway outside. “quick, get in here,”
he says as he holds the door open, wearing an apron and one baking mitten, “before everyone figures out where the smoke is coming from.” the bird comes out dry and burnt—no other food with it—our christmas dinner. “ah yes,” he says, shoving some in his mouth with fingers, grimacing, “just like christmas dinners in the movies.”

**december 26**

today deano feels a bit better, and we decide to hit the mountain for a while. “maybe it’ll take my mind off it,” he says, obviously weak. we even find some new runs through the trees on the edge of keystone lift. at one point i somehow manage to lose everyone—the path i take opening up into a flat wide-open field of deep snow, no tracks. i try to push across it to the trees on the other side but i don’t have enough speed, and end up having to unbuckle and plough through the waist-high snow, eventually lying on top of my board and paddling like i’m heading out for a surf—it takes forever. i’m all alone in the lonely heart of the mountain, in everything, place unknown, runs all around on the other side of the trees. and i start thinking, in the thin light and oxygen, that this must be what the centre of the universe itself is like—that place in the middle of everything that doesn’t turn through space or time, that doesn’t need to. i think maybe this is the kind of place i might find you in, and that maybe we all have such places inside us already. in any case, it takes me ages to get out of the snow and find a nearby run back to the base where the others are waiting. i tell them what happened, and they’re surprised.
“that’s strange,” michael says, looking at me through his dark goggles, “it didn’t seem like you were gone long at all.”
	his afternoon i walk with michael up to the top of the hill behind our apartment building, up where they’re clearing more land, making more roads and building more houses, ‘for-sale’ signs everywhere. and we stand there a while with the football in our gloved hands looking over the cardboard-cutout picture of gingerbread-man type houses in the almost-too-cute town of crested butte below.

“work again tomorrow,” i say, “and another party tonight.” michael looks at me with tired, baggy eyes. “we’ve got to get out of here, mate,” he says, “even if it’s only for a while.” i nod, and look beyond crested butte to mountains further off. “if only everything wasn’t so expensive,” he says and sighs, “if only we had more money.” if only a million things …

december 31

new year’s eve is a drunken mess at the underground black whale bar. everyone from work is there—all the lift ops, ticket checkers, mechanics, foremen, managers. we smuggle in bottles of vodka and rum in our thick jackets, adding them to our drinks while we sit at wooden tables and booths scattered around the room. “would anybody like a coke?” lachlan asks with a wink as he heads to the bar, his hair now black after a saturday night hair-dyeing incident. in fact i have black hair now too, and deano has a long, black handlebar moustache, but had to paint onto his skin the
bits that didn’t join up. one guy from sydney shouts at him, “hey! it’s dennis bloody lillee!” his american friend saying, “who’s dainiss lailee?” “only the greatest fast bowler of all time.” “what’s a faast booler?” “ah, forget it.” michael, however, has a terrible looking mess of copper curls from four failed peroxide attempts. i keep looking at the three of them and laughing, the same way i find them laughing at me sometimes. we must look like complete fools, and probably are.

i play pool with teagan and sarah on a big green table near the dj. both girls are getting a lot of attention from locals and out-of-towners alike, and they seem to enjoy it. “how bout we play for a bear thus game?” sarah asks a couple of locals. “a bear?” they reply. “yeah,” teagan says, “a couple of corona’s wud be choice.” the locals look at each other and laugh, “oh, beers.” sarah smiles, looks at me, then back at the locals as she blows the chalk off her cue, “ah don’t you bloody start, we’ve copped enough from these damn aussies.”

i look over at the bar and see there are endless lines of drinks in plastic cups, the bartenders working hard in the loud room. the place is packed. at one point deano is sitting at a table next to one of our bosses—a blonde-haired new zealander named cam—and his wife. deano looks pretty drunk. his eyes are half closed, his head is rocking slightly and he’s started to wave his index finger the way he does when he’s had too much. i watch, a little concerned, as he slowly puts his arm around cam’s shoulders, waves his finger a little more, and shouts at him, “go fuck yourself and your resort. why the fuck have you put me on the busiest lift on this
whole fucken mountain? i can’t even have a spew out the back of my shack in the morning without getting hassled by fucken texans and their kids who can’t get off the fucken lift properly—fuck!” a few people look around and cam seems a little uneasy. he tries to pull back a bit from deano and his finger, but deano holds him close. i look at cam’s wife—she’s trying hard to manage a smile, but ends up looking over at one of the tv screens above the bar instead. and i’m wondering how i might be able to diffuse the situation when suddenly i see lachlan leaping from the top of the bar onto their table with a crash, sending a huge explosion of drinks flying, everyone ending up on the floor, looking around surprised. “what the hell are you doing?” deano asks, covered in drinks, propping himself up. “just trying to change the subject mate,” lachlan replies, winking at deano, obviously having watched the conversation too. i’m a little worried about what cam might do, but he just calmly gets to his feet, helps up his wife, brushes himself down a bit, looks at lachlan and deano still on the floor and says to them both, extending his hands, “c’mon. let’s get you guys to the bar … and away from my wife,” then he adds, with the tiniest smile on his tanned face, “fucken crazy aussies.”

the scene gradually dies down and later we’re all dancing to the dj in a dark corner. at midnight everybody turns to the tv screens to watch the streamers and flashing cameras and massive crowds of times square, new york—for a split second wishing i was there, or some other place where the walls weren’t so liquid, or leaning in so much. but then the four of us stand in a little circle and say “cheers boys, happy new year—wouldn’t rather be with anyone else.” and in that moment i really feel
it—something between us, more than just us, something or someone else with us in
the little circle we make with each other, holding ourselves open like a cup—
something else that comes pouring in—you maybe, or the possibility of you at
least. i know it’s real, even in the mist and haze of the wild new-year night.

i call anna later from the payphone in our apartment building—she happens to be at
a party in subiaco with michael’s and lachlan’s girlfriends too. they both take turns
on the phone after me, then come back into the apartment looking weary and sad—
even a little teary. “who’s idea was it to call them?” michael asks, “shit.”

january 1

new year’s day we spend at teagan and sarah’s apartment in the four seasons hotel,
hungover. in the kitchen teagan bakes pre-mixed cookies that she has to cut out of a
long roll of dough. “looks like polony,” i say, “like the sandwiches my sister used
to make with polony and tomato sauce on white bread.” “sounds dulocious,” teagan
replies, sarcastically, sliding the cookies into the oven. michael sits on a lounge
chair sleeping. deano sits on the opposite side of the dining table from me drinking
two bottles of jack daniels. i have a glass with him every now and then to numb the
hangover. “hell,” deano says to nobody in particular, “if this was perth, we’d all be
at the races drinking anyway, watching the cup—did ya hear that, we’d be at the
cup!”
later in the afternoon, deano wants me to go with him to rafters. it’s almost empty inside—everyone either hungover or out skiing. i sit at a small table in the centre of the long, open, wooden hall of the place, a few other tables of workers nearby, some girls playing pool, the windows looking out onto the white snow of the mountain, too bright, too white. i’m talking to tyrell about south africa again—about the state of things there. “the fear is definitely real,” he says, “everybody lives it every day … but the country has come out of such a low place, it was always going to be a bastard of a ride—at least it’s getting better though, if only slowly … i do love it.” i’m listening when i look over and notice deano unplugging a flashing red tecate beer sign near the pool table not far from the bar. he pulls it right off the wall, then slides it up under his thick silver jacket before heading straight for the door. he walks like he’s constipated, hands in pockets, power cord dragging, looking guilty as hell. i shake my head and laugh in exhaustion, thinking i’m the only one who’s seen him. but the bartender’s noticed too, yelling, “hey, hey, stop!” chasing after him down the stairs and outside along the thin ice of the road. i go to the window and watch. the bartender gives chase but deano is quick, agile, even while he’s drunk, and manages to lose him. the bartender comes back in panting. “anyone here know that guy?” he asks. “no,” all the workers say. “mawst be a tourist visiting for the afternoon,” tyrell adds. “uh-huh,” the bartender replies, puffing, unconvinced. “i swear i’ve seen him in here before—in know a lame handlebar moustache when i see one.”
i come home later and see deano passed out on his bed with the sign in his arms. lachlan and michael get up and come into the room wearing their tight, bright, striped thermal underwear. “what happened?” they ask. “ah nothing—deano just wanted to get some artwork for the apartment, i guess.” we stand there watching his chest go up and down with his breathing, mouth open under his handlebar, a bit of drool forming on his lips, a mullet maturing out the back of his head. “do you think he’s had enough of all this?” i ask. “he’s had enough working on that lift i reckon,” lachlan replies. “had enough of being told what to do every day,” michael adds, “for six bucks fifty an hour.”

lachlan and michael soon go to bed, but i stay up and make myself a tea, sitting down by the window to stare out at the mountain—new year’s day. “this is mad,” i keep telling myself. and then i notice that the mountain is actually spinning—that the whole sky is moving—that it cannot hold, that i need change, i need out, i need you.

january 4

the new year is unfolding. i wish i could say things have changed. wish i could say i’ve found what i was looking for here. wish i could say i feel closer to you now—wherever you are. but i’m not, i’m hungover again. my throat has closed up, my head is blocked, and i have another fever. my dreams are nightmares that go tumbling through my head like broken boulders down a mountain—one where the
four of us are on an oil tanker cruising from crested butte back to australia, but half-way across the pacific we decide we don’t want to be going home just yet and right at that point the boat starts to break in half and leak oil everywhere. it all plays out like a satellite image from above—a huge black slick we leave from north america to russia. another dream where i’m all dressed in snow gear with gloves and beanie and all, holding onto my board, even though it’s summer, even though i’m back at the cottesloe beach hotel, drinking beers, wondering what the hell i’m doing there, wanting to go back to the states. and i wake up on the floor sweating, not really in colorado, not really in western australia, not really anywhere.

**january 13**

penicillin keeps my tonsillitis, fevers and headcolds at bay. the doctor has suggested that we fly his cessna to a bigger town in colorado so i can get my tonsils out. there’s been a few small-plane crashes in colorado recently, so i’m hesitant. i also need to see what my insurance company is going to say. but for now at least, i feel a bit better.

**january 25**

teagan and sarah left a few days ago—going back to new zealand to continue their studies. we had a few quiet drinks at their place—something hollow about their going. it reminds us all of a world of responsibilities still turning out there. “keep
un touch,” sarah says as they put their bags on the bus to gunnison. “maybe w’ull see each uther in ustralia, or noo zulund,” teagan says, “or some uther place.” we walk with them to the front door. “i hope so,” i say. “it’s been fun,” lachlan adds. we all hug quickly as the bus driver waits. “enjoy your trip home,” michael says. “and watch out for those beers,” deano adds as they get on the bus, waving. and then suddenly they’re gone.

january 26

australia day—every australiian on the mountain drunk (probably about thirty all up), everyone else too for that matter. flags come out, koala bears appear, there are house parties and kegs, then keg throwing competitions and cold chisel cd marathons. we hitch to one party and the guy driving gives us a cookie each. “baked them using my secret recipe,” he says, and before long we are the ones baked. we hitch home from the party in the back of a pickup—the only ride we can get. i have never been so cold. “the snot in my nose is turning to ice,” deano says, hugging himself, his beanie pulled down low over his mullet as we roar through the wind and the dark. “my teeth are about to rattle out of my mouth,” michael adds, his long body shaking, the wind coming in like shards, like icicles—each breath freezing before it’s completely out.
January 27

Things roll on. Anna is in Karratha now. I had a vision of her, busy in a dimly-lit studio, head bent over a report she’s writing, notes on the desk in front of her, minidisc recorder with its wires tangled, dark hair coming down, the blue concentration of her eyes, giving her life over to a new job in a new town. And why can’t I do the same?

My throat isn’t too bad at the moment. I’ve decided to wait on getting my tonsils out—see if I can make it through the winter without losing them, or any other body parts.

January 29

Deano left last night.

I don’t really know what to say about it. He’s probably sitting on the bus right now, his Dennis Lillee handlebar hanging low, snowboard wrapped in cardboard in the belly of the bus heading all that terrible way back to Los Angeles across all that land and all those miles, Tecate beer sign somewhere in his luggage, maybe a bottle of Jack’s picked up somewhere, a stolen straw cowboy hat probably resting on his knee as he sleeps or looks out into the dark night of America waiting for the razor wire of Compton bus terminal to arrive, then L.A.X., then Hong Kong, and finally Perth.
he found out he got into a masters’ course in petroleum engineering—had to go—though probably also glad to be leaving his lift. we all went to the avalanche bar and put a keg on for him. all the work crew came. it was pretty subdued compared to other nights. there was a joy to it, but a definite sadness as well—for everyone. and like teagan and sarah’s going, it reminded us that there is still a world out there. feels strange—like i’m ready to leave the mountain, but at the same time i’m not. each of us considering our own fates with a scratch of the head or downward glance as we said goodbye to deano at the hitching post. “went pretty quick … but we had fun didn’t we?” he asked, looking at us all intently as a ride pulled up. “yeah,” we all agreed. “so why so sad?” we looked away, steam blowing out our mouths and the car’s exhaust. lachlan gave him a final big hug—a tear in lachlan’s eye perhaps, though maybe just the cold—and then he stepped into his ride, waved and left. more than just deano leaving in that moment. the four of us now three.

i wonder if it would be different if he was going somewhere besides perth, besides home. wonder what it’ll be like when my time finally comes—whether i’ll really know the difference between going on, and turning back—whether i’d recognise you if i passed you on the street, for that matter.

january 30

a strange thing today. i’m sitting in the top shack of my lift—the tiny single room of it with books scattered everywhere—sitting and looking over the lego-sized
rooftops of crested butte below, the mountains all around, when up on the lift comes a kid—can’t be more than about five years old, no sign of anyone else with him. he gets off and i can see he’s crying, so i stop the lift and bring him over to the shack and try to calm him down. “mommmy, mommmy,” he keeps saying, his eyes shooting around inside his goggles under black beanie. “it’s okay, it’s okay,” i say, “where is she?” but he just keeps saying “mommmy, mommmy,” while he wipes his nose with the back of his mitten. i sit him down inside the warmth of the shack and give him a choc-chip muesli bar which seems to calm him down a bit. “you like choc-chip?” i ask, and he nods just a little. then he takes off his goggles and gloves while i buzz tyrell and let him know, then call base and tell them the name on his ski pass—daniel. they say they’ll look for his mum and send someone up to get him.

so i tell tyrell to start the lift again and we sit together like that for a while, daniel and i, looking out through the window, eating muesli bars and keeping an eye on who’s coming up on the next t-bar. “been having a good day?” i ask. he nods again, looking at me this time as he chews on the muesli bar and wipes his eyes. “your mum will be here soon.” he seems to understand but just keeps on eating, his short dark hair moving slightly. “what’s your name?” he asks, and i tell him. and then we just sit in silence, the two of us, looking out the window, staring into nothing, happy to have each other’s company i think—not needing to do anything but wait, nowhere else to go but here. the lift whirrs and the t-bars spin round and round,
heading both directions. it lasts forever like that, the two of us just sitting there.
silent. content.

then a woman in white jumpsuit comes up on the lift with another young kid.
“mommy!” daniel shouts, running outside to hug her as they get off. turns out his
brother fell off the lift and so his mum got off the lift too, leaving daniel to travel
up on his own. nothing to it really, no emergency or anything—it’s just a surface
lift. but there was something soothing about being up here with him, something
about him sitting calmly, maybe connecting with whatever kid’s still left in me.

“thank you, thank you,” his mum says, but it’s nothing and i tell her so. the three of
them ride the lift for the rest of the morning, and every time he comes up he raises
his little black mitten and waves to me. it’s nice—the best i’ve felt in a long time,
the closest i’ve felt to you in ages. and i didn’t even have to go anywhere.

february 15

a different feel to things over the last couple of weeks. lachlan seems less himself
without deano around—occasionally he makes four teas by mistake, then ends up
drinking two. sometimes i see michael sitting on his bed absently turning the blank
pages of future months in his diary, not even looking, just flicking them over.
march 4

been a while since i last wrote. just busy going about the day-to-day activities of things. life has unfolded here and there i guess, but still in crested butte, still waiting to see what happens, saving money.

lachlan left yesterday, going home to start an honours degree in animal science. i was pretty sick at the time—lying in the medical centre getting steroid injections while plugged into an i.v. drip. “mate, it’s hard to see you looking this bad, to leave you like this,” he said, frowning in concern, “this must be the worst tonsillitis and sickness you’ve had since we got here.” i looked over at him. “yeah, but it’s okay, i’ll be alright. you know it’ll be different without you here. just me and michael now.” he looked sadder than i’ve ever seen him. “well,” he said finally, “i’ve gotta go pack the rest of my gear. i’ll be leaving in half an hour if you get out by then.”

i left the medical centre soon after to catch him before he got his lift to gunnison. he seemed happy to see me, but so disappointed to be leaving all this—not just crested butte, not just michael and me and everyone else he had met, but america and the road too. “i’m gonna miss you guys,” he said to me and michael, standing in our apartment carpark. “right back at ya, mate,” michael replied.

he hugged us in the cold afternoon, brake lights glowing red through the steam of a nearby car. “have fun for me. and look after each other—god knows it’s the only
way you two are gonna make it out here,” he added, trying to smile. “we will mate,” i replied, feeling pathetically weak. and with a final pat on the back, he left.

and it seemed as if this unavoidable moment—this moment of turning home—wherever that might be—was stuck somewhere inside him. maybe the same thing that’s stuck inside my throat.

**march 10**

michael and i share the apartment with other guys now—americans. they’re nice enough. the tall one with short blue dreadlocks is a chef. he also seems to be the town supplier of cocaine. some weekends he’ll say to us, “sup y’all—i’m going to visit family in denver … laaaate.” but we hear through others that he makes wild long drives out to los angeles to buy more coke.

the other fella is quiet, seems kind of unhappy, dark on the inside. he’s short, solid, with skin the colour of a fresh fall of snow. he doesn’t have a job, never snowboards, never even seems to go out. he keeps to himself, staying mostly in his room with his tv, laptop, stereo, phone and dvd player. i have no idea what he does in there, or how he affords the rent. all of his nails are painted black. he never cooks anything, though sometimes he comes into the kitchen to get the takeaway leftovers he keeps in the fridge. this is about the only time i ever see him—and even when i do his eyes stay hidden behind a long dark fringe. ‘g’day’ i say. ‘hey,’
he replies, though softly. i have an inkling from overheard phone calls that he might have just broken up with his girlfriend. maybe if i knew him better i’d know what to say.

in any case, it’s a different apartment now.

march 17

mum and dad sent over a package the other day—tim winton’s *dirt music*. strange to be reading about a seaside village—somewhere like lancelin (where our old school friend jay white is from)—about crayfishermen, about the city of perth and the river, about the indian ocean, about the red dirt and lonely islands and tides of the kimberley, about the isolation, and failed love and families and secrets. something strange about reading this in crested butte with the endless mountains and snow looming down, though something fitting about it too.

michael’s blonde, tanned girlfriend amy arrived from the australian summer three days ago. turns out she got accepted by cambridge university to do an honours degree in neurology or something, so she bought an around-the-world ticket and flew all the way from perth to join him. he’s been taking days off to go snowboarding with her and show her the mountain. at night they cook spaghetti bolognaise together and talk about what they’ll be doing when they leave. they
giggle as they both lean over the stove stirring a pot with wooden spoon. he seems happy, and i’m glad.

“sure you don’t want me to sleep in the livingroom?” i ask. but he replies, “nah mate, i spend all day with her … and besides, we won’t be here much longer anyway.” he’s right—they’ll be gone soon. part of him seems gone already, and part of me with him, i guess.

this afternoon, as the sun continues to melt outside, amy cuts my hair as i sit on the green couch in the livingroom. “i don’t really know what i’m doing,” she says, hovering behind me, chopping at my hair with blunt scissors. “that’s okay,” i reply, staring out the window, half looking at the mountain, half not, thinking of you, thinking of everything, “neither do i.”

my hair is now part blonde, part dark, totally uneven in length, and yet somehow perfect for how i feel.

**march 21**

michael and amy left to meet zac on a film set in rome. it was hard to watch him go. i don’t know if i can really talk about it. in a strange way though, it’s also been a good couple of days since then. surprising. quiet. i come straight home after work. cook. don’t drink anything. read. sleep. i’m not sick any more, not taking
penicillin. the days pass silently and with relative ease. i board on my own and work on my own, finding new runs through the trees i didn’t think possible.

the snow is starting to melt even faster than before—more and more patches of grass are coming through in places. the sun is hot by lunchtime, turning the snow to mush, then the cold air freezes it like that overnight, molding it into icy patches that wait for the sun again the next day.

i wear a t-shirt at lunchtime. people ski in shorts, no gloves. tyrell and i have to work harder on the loading and unloading areas around the lift to keep the area covered in snow. “this is fawking ridiculous,” he keeps saying to me over the open phone-line. i think they’ll have to shut down some of the lifts soon, including ours.

anna calls me one night and tells me honestly and with sensitivity that she has a new boyfriend—same name as me. i don’t know what to feel. it kind of washes over me in a grey wave of acceptance. “i hope you are well,” i tell her, and mean it.

things are beginning to wind up, and i’m making plans as more and more of the snow melts, more and more of the workers leave, and more and more of the mountain rises to the surface—sensing you somewhere there.
march 23

my old friend jay white called and said he’ll be in crested butte tomorrow. sounds too like my brother campbell is going to fly over here from the mining town of newman, western australia, to hang out for a while. and even stranger still, clair sent me an email saying she has a stopover in denver on the way from new york to san francisco, and wants to know if i’d like to catch up. i have no idea how any of this happened.

seems like there’s more under all this snow than i thought.

march 24

jay arrives in crested butte with his snowboard and bag on the shuttle bus from gunnison. “good to see you again, mate,” i say, hugging him in the cold night of the carpark behind the apartment building. “right back at ya—it’s been a while,” he replies, long blonde dreadlocks protruding out of a yellow woolen beanie, stubble on his square chin, full, lazy lips and same blue eyes open and wide to everything, “too long,” he adds, looking over at the mountain, clicking a silver-bolted tongue stud on his teeth. “so this is where you guys have been hiding out?” i turn and follow his gaze onto the dark shadow of the mountain, snowcats grooming what’s left of the snow under another sea of stars. “beats flatbush brooklyn,” he says, patting me on the shoulder as we turn to walk inside.
April 2

Jay’s met all the work crowd and got along well with everybody. He’s even shackled up with Jody—a photographer working for the resort. Some nights we go around to her apartment in town—an upstairs place of brown timber near the library—where she cooks us roasts and we uncork the Napa Valley wine we bought on the way, fire going in the lounge room, the mountain outside looking down from 12,000 feet in skeletal moonlight through the windows. “Hey, why we haven’t crossed paths all season until just now?” she asks me one night. I look over at Jay, then back at her. “Well, I guess sometimes there needs to be a reason for people to meet.” She’s really nice—a pretty girl, brunette, self-assured, strong. Her family is wealthy, but she decided to leave the family home in Georgia and hit the road in a two-wheel drive pickup instead, taking photos of the country as she went.

On my days off, Jay and I go boarding on our own, or with others from work, then hang out on the rafter’s patio in the sun talking about his adventures and everywhere he’s been over the last few years.

Jay—been on the road for pretty much the last six years straight. After school finished he decided not to return to his crayfishing family in Lancelin, instead flying to Queensland while the rest of us started uni courses or apprenticeships in Perth. He lived on the Goldcoast, surfed, worked as a glazier, enjoyed himself. One day he decided to surf his way up through Indonesia. After that he found himself working on a ski resort near Banff in Canada. He stayed there for a season, working on a
mountain just like all these outside our windows now. the season ended, and he drove all the way to montreal, getting work in a restaurant where, he says, “the customers all expected me to speak french, and the boss sucked most of the profits up his nose.”

a few weeks after september 11, 2001 he arrived in new york city with a couple of mates, living in their bedfor d van on the backstreets of queens. they took craps in people’s front yards when they had to, and cooked on their camping stove on the sidewalk, unable to get jobs. finally they went into manhattan and found work repairing windows on all the buildings around the world trade centre. with the money they earned they were able to rent an apartment in flatbush, brooklyn—apparently one of the dodgiest areas in the city. “the place had no power, so we ran an extension cord every night from the apartment below, which was empty because of renovations. some nights we invited guys on the street to come up for beers just to show them we had nothing—nothing worth stealing, anyway—just like them. we were the only white guys on the whole block, but we never had any dramas. ‘the mad aussies,’ they called us.”

after a while their boss let them rent his apartment in queens. “it’s heaps better,” he says, “we can see some of the buildings of manhattan from the rooftop.” he now works at a fish-and-chip shop on second avenue, riding a scooter out into the snow and mad traffic of manhattan making deliveries, earning cash, the whole world rushing by.
his mum sends him packages sometimes too—milo, tim tams, vegemite. he hasn’t been home in years. there is the chance he’ll get caught overstaying his visa if he does try to leave, but i think he just enjoys being here at the moment. who knows how he’ll feel about it all when he’s back in new york. he says “we’ll see, we’ll see,” a lot.

back when i was studying in perth i’d get the occasional phone call or email from him. he even sent postcards—mostly of girls in bikinis—which clair would take off the fridge after a while. he’d send them from the gold coast, or surfers, bali, north america. hearing from him always reminded me there was a whole other world happening out there at those times when i was knee-deep in assignments and essays and relationships—gave me the kind of open-vision you get staring at the ocean, or standing on top of a mountain—those threshold places that can take us out beyond ourselves to something else, something more—to you perhaps, contemplating all this, contemplating us.

jay—sometimes seems like he was born on the road, slipping into other countries, cultures, lives—travelling purely for the sake of going, purely for the sake of living. i guess when i pictured him i always thought, “that’s what travelling really is, that’s what life really is.” and i still feel that way mostly, even though when i look at him sometimes now he seems tired and weary or something. but then he’ll blink and the look will disappear from his face as if it had never been there.
anyway. now i’m out here in this world too, and it’s good to have such an old
friend and wanderer with me for a time now. makes me wonder if we’re looking for
similar things.

april 4
this morning jay and i hike up to the peak of mt. crested butte—it’s the first and
only time i’ve done it all season because they only opened it recently—safety
issues i guess. we wake early and take deano’s old lift as far as it goes, then up
michael’s old high lift to the top. then it’s a short ride down through some rocks to
the base of the actual peak itself where we take off our boards and hike up the
almost-vertical face, foot-holes cut and stamped into the snow. “looks like i’m a bit
out o’ shape,” jay says, puffing, tongue stud rattling against his teeth, “don’t get
much exercise except skateboarding and the old chip-n-putt golfcourse in queens—but
that ain’t at 12,000 feet.” i smile, and find myself thinking briefly of clair in
new york city, wondering what she’s doing there, wondering what will happen
when we both get to denver.

but gradually my thoughts of her start to fade like passing clouds in this otherwise
perfectly clear day—jay and i hiking with our boards under our arms up the steep
face and along the short ridge to the highest spot on the mountain—12,162 feet—
complete. “now that’s something you don’t see every day,” jay says, surveying the
place where i’ve spent the last four months. “not even when you live here,” i add.
and something definitely shifting for me in this moment—whatever fear i first had when i arrived in crested butte, in america, in the world, now suddenly gone, replaced instead with the clearest view of all the base, all the town, all the white-capped mountains and valleys with endless trees and snow all-around. blue above, nothing but blue sky. we stand on the highest little rock in silence for quite a while, staring off into nowhere, weightless, the wind blowing slightly on our faces, not even thinking about the ride back down, not worrying about whether i’ll have enough money to experience much more of anything, not calling my cousin anton in boulder, not stressing over what might happen with clair, with campbell, with the rest of my life, with you—standing instead on a sure high point where everything can be seen—even my own thoughts.

“different than looking at skyscrapers all day,” jay says finally, “or dodgin’ new york cabs.” i smile as the two of us stand together, arms around each other’s shoulders for a quick photograph, our whole lives and world and everything so simple and transparent, like staring into a perfectly clean mirror that offers no reflection at all. here we are. this is it. anything possible.

but eventually we have to head back down the mountain again—don’t we?

**april 6**

my last night in crested butte beginning at the black whale in town and ending with
jay, jody and me watching the sun rise over the mountain from the top of the hill behind the apartment. “beautiful, huh?” she says, hugging jay as the first bleeding colours of morning pour over the mountain and across the sky. “thanks for sharing this, man,” jay says to me. “ah mate,” i reply, “i wouldn’t have even seen it like this if it wasn’t for you being here.” final morning—the sun glowing, the snow bloody and red, the sky turning from black to blue to purple to green to pink—stars disappearing, the mountain taking shape from out of the darkness, solid as ever, having seen a billion sunrises come and go, and people like me with it.
April 7

It’s finally arrived. On the road again, my bag packed, nothing left behind, heading towards Denver and Boulder on a mattress in the back of Jody’s two-wheel drive pickup, canopy overhead, the grey-green and yellow of thawed-out mountains all around. Jay is asleep next to me, dreadlocks over his face. It’s been a busy few days tying everything together. But time now at last for new things, new adventures, and maybe new ways of edging closer to you.

And so here comes Denver—Jay wakes up and rolls over next to me, facing forwards as we approach the city from out of the mountains to the south. “What ya been writing?” he asks. “Um,” I reply, still unsure about whether I want to tell anybody about the details of this, “just catching up on my journal.” He smiles and pulls back some of his long thick dreadlocks, parting them like a curtain, “think I need to do
some catchin’ up of my own—so much has happened in the last few years that i haven’t put down on paper.” i wonder about all the adventures that must have unfolded for him since we left school—especially all the little daily extraordinary things that bless us on our journeys. “is this what it’s been like for you over the years?” i ask him. “what’s that?” he replies. “this feeling of leaving and going and arriving all at once, this not-knowing?” he smiles. “there’s definitely a thrill to it.” he seems to sense my excitement as we look through the windows of the cab, jody and two of her friends up front taking us down the slopes now towards outer suburban denver—the same mad sprawl of anycity anyplace, the strip malls and flashing signs of franchise—wal-marts and home depots, mcdonald’s and burger kings, coscos and 7-elevens, dairy queens and taco bells. “but it’s not always easy, and not always fun,” jay adds. and then comes the city centre of buildings and industry smoke-stacks further off, all of it so flat and laid out on the plains—america tapering off all the way to the east coast—the front range to the west, the continental divide behind it, denver unfolding at the feet of all these mountains like a man in smoky prayer. “but there’s only ever one way to find out,” he says, as i look further ahead. “experience?” i ask. he nods as denver spreads out, the last real post and place of flatland america before the mountains begin. maybe more like the meeting of two worlds, like where the ocean meets the land—from out of nowhere the mountains rising, with nothing but endless flatlands of prairies and plains as far as the eye can see to the east and north.
but denver isn’t our final destination—not today—instead we take an interstate past the downtown area of windowglass and traffic, continuing on to the white circus tents of the airport to drop off one of jody’s friends (a strange feeling knowing i’ll be back here again in a couple of days to meet clair) before we head further north towards boulder. “this is a bit more like it,” jay says, and i agree. the front range follows us to the left, and the plains come with us on the right as we snake our way towards boulder, not knowing what to expect—jay as excited as i am, despite having to go back to denver tonight to fly to jfk. “wish i could’ve stayed longer, mate,” he says, “talked some more with you, shared in some of your experiences instead of rushing off somewhere else again. cos i also feel like i might have missed out on a lot when i left perth, when i left you guys, all those years ago.” i look over at him and think of the ocean beach hotel, of club bay view, of endless hangovers, of clair and everything else. “nah, you didn’t really miss anything mate,” i say. “well—maybe—i guess i’ll never know. it’s a trade-off isn’t it—a compromise. if you want to find something you have to be prepared to let go of something else.”

april 7, late afternoon

the flatirons lean back like cracked arrowheads, the flowering green springtime front range just there at the edge of the plains, boulder tucked right into the base of the thawing mountains. it’s a college town with a big redbrick and red rooftile university, and a lively central open mall of cafés and bars and clothing stores.
“nice feel to it, hey,” jay says as we drive in past a couple of bars already brimming with after-class students and others, “not the usual suburban america.” and it’s not—more of a leafy mapletree atmosphere of white pickets and lawns—a wealthy town of college and inquiry, outdoors all around—hiking, riding, skiing, more—music and art, buddhism and writing schools, a creek that runs through the centre of town, probably with a few trout lazily swimming behind rocks.

we drive around for a while before pulling up near the pearl street mall to find a microbrewery and late lunch. “this’ll do,” jody says, getting out, “i’m beat.” “long drive, hey?” jay says to her as we get out of the truck. “uh-huh, but not too bad though, i’ve done longer,” she says with her slight southern drawl. he puts his arm around her, and her friend smiles. and then we all go into the microbrewery, drinking ales and eating lunch until the time comes when jay has to catch a bus back to denver and on to new york, and i need to go and find my cousin anton while he’s still at home.

we thank jody as she drops us at the bus station. “maybe i’ll see you guys again some time,” she says, before kissing jay through the window. “come to new york,” he replies. she brushes back her dark hair and adjusts the side mirror. “i’ll think about it,” she grins. and then she’s driving off with her friend, tooting the horn as she goes—someone else gone. i walk with jay to the door of the bus. we shake hands. “you better come to new york too,” he says, pulling back his dreadlocks again and clicking his tongue-stud against the inside of his teeth. “i’ll try mate.”
other people get on the bus as the driver makes his last call. “here,” i say, digging into my bag and giving him my copy of dirt music, “hope it doesn’t make you too homesick.” he takes it and smiles. “it’s been great catching up, mate,” he says. and suddenly there’s nothing more to say. we hug, jay not the type to stall at final goodbyes, picking up his carry-bag and stepping onto the bus, giving me a thumbs up as he walks the aisle, the bus slipping into gear and roaring off down the road until it’s turned just another corner and i can’t see my old friend any more.

i pick up my bags and snowboard, feeling the weight of them on my shoulders again, following the directions anton gave me to his house, walking slowly through the quiet streets and leafless trees of late afternoon, early spring, stepping into this next phase of things, almost alone out here, running through everything that’s happened already and everyone come and gone, with even more on the horizon now.

as i walk i try to remember the times i’ve spent with anton in the past—my brother campbell’s wedding in bali, santa fe fishing last year by the rio grande. i walk on, watching the squirrels run from tree to tree with their big bushy tails fanning out behind them like fluffed-up wedding gowns.

i arrive at anton’s place just in time to catch him on the way out. he comes walking down his driveway, tall, all limbs gliding, face lit up by his big toothy smile. his hair is really blonde now, almost white, blonde sideburns, blonde goatee, big blue
eyes. “man … how long’s it been?” he says in his slow, steady and thoughtful speech, “awesome to see you.” i drop my gear as he wraps his six-foot-six body around me in giant bear-hug, almost lifting me off the ground. “finally made it to boulder,” i say, my words muffled by his chest, “but it’s been a long day—a long few months.” “no kidding, huh … you must be totally spent,” he says, letting me go, smiling still. “yeah, i could do with a decent night’s sleep.” “i figured as much … that’s why i’m going to stay at a friend’s place tonight … my pad is pretty cramped at the best of times, and i have to be up early tomorrow too.” “i don’t want to put you out or anything.” “are you kidding?—you’ve come all the way to colorado. i’m just psyched to see you again,” he gives me an even bigger hug, lifting me completely off the ground this time. “woo! we’ve got some catchin’ up to do,” he says, as he puts me down and i grab my stuff. “i’ll be back tomorrow, man,” he smiles, walking to his blue toyota 4runner parked on the street, “so we can hang out then … damn good to have you here, now chill out and make yourself at home … i’ll see you tomorrow.”

**april 8**

anton’s place is a self-contained basement-type studio apartment underneath the owner’s house. the side-door entrance goes down little steps into a kitchen which merges into a living room / bedroom, with a bathroom tucked in behind the kitchen. it’s morning and i’m lying on an inflatable mattress on the floor, looking up at the one side window, a couple of small flowers on the sill, a neighbour’s cat staring at
me from outside. anton’s didgeridoos lean in a group against the wall like a
colourful bamboo plant, his drums and guitars there too, computer, keyboard and
studio equipment against a side wall. space is tight.

anton comes home and sees me lying down. “good to see you resting man … that’s
what i’d be doing if i were you.” the whole time in crested butte finally catching up
with me. i get up slowly and have a shower as he busies himself in the kitchen.

“turns out i have to work most of today … last minute clients,” he says when i
finish in the shower, “but i’ve left some stuff for you in the oven—my special
brownie mix. have some and go dig boulder.” “rightyo,” i say. “not too much
though,” he smiles as he grabs his bag and a few towels and heads for the door.
“and i told you in that email that i’m heading to mexico tomorrow, didn’t i?” “yep,
that’s right.” “cool, but i’ll try to spend some more time with you before then. adios
amigo.”

i get into some clothes and go smell the brownie mix he’s made—smells warm and
delicious. so i take a bite, then take a bit more just in case, before stepping out onto
the street and into a spring day of new things unfolding.

and so what now? i’m thinking, as i walk down through the pines and maple trees
and grass next to the white of house-walls and fences, heading towards downtown.
i criss-cross roads, street numbers descending as i get closer to the town centre.
near the sidewalk ahead, a squirrel bounds towards a tree, quickly climbing the trunk as his tail trails after him. further off at the end of mapleton street lie the green mountains of spring. the flatirons lean up against them like armor, with the continental divide way off in the white-capped distance. it’s strangely reassuring to see the mountains there.

i’m enjoying the aimless wandering of this morning, the fresh steps down new paths. i like not having to wear my watch, or as many clothes—enjoy looking at the sun through the branches of trees to guess what time it is and how long i might have before it starts getting cold again, discovering a new city, a new part of myself in this new world. i’m also enjoying being on my own. but most of all i’m enjoying how the day has completely opened up for me and i’ve fallen in, smiling.

so i wonder—does the happiness i feel now count for something, or not at all?—is it a sign at least, that you are not so far away? and even then, so what?

i wonder what jay is doing at the moment in new york, what michael is doing in rome with zac. i wonder how the study is going for lachlan and deano, how they’re getting by in perth again. i wonder if anna is happy in karratha, if things are happening in her life as she hoped they would, new boyfriend and all. i wonder what it’ll be like when campbell gets here. and of course i wonder about clair and the long roads i share with her that disappear into the distance back there, maybe all the way back to the beginning of this wandering.
clair of some kind of previous-edition me. clair of late teenage years, early twenties, when all answers lay at the bottom of whatever bottle i could find—maybe not so long ago after all, even though it feels that way. i met her when a friend brought her over to my apartment one afternoon, just stopping by. her long blonde hair, brown skin, small round chin. not long after that she came over and stayed. it was amazing for quite a while. but then it ended and began again countless times. nights spent walking into dark and lonely chapters—sometimes her, sometimes me, no chance of you joining either of us there. beautiful clair of my dreams who i hurt—clair who had her revenge with me in sad-faced time. clair, who’ll be here tomorrow.

but now up ahead i see a farmer’s market, so i cross another couple of streets, remembering to look left first, and walk into the market of stalls for all sorts—seeds and plants, vegetables and fruit, cornjack type things, tea, fish, jams, crafts. it’s all slow-rolling saturday simplicity and everyone is easy in the warm morning and gentle wind. i walk around a while, looking at the stalls, not really wanting to buy anything, then cut across to pearl street where there are buskers with drums and guitars singing, kids dancing in front of them, and people passing by with fistfuls of shopping bags and take-away coffees.

i go into a sandwich store and buy a roll with a hundred—it’s the smallest note i have from my final pay-cheque. the guy behind the counter looks me up and down then holds the note up to the light, checking it for something. he hesitates. “is it
“Real?” he asks, looking at me. “I dunno,” I reply. But he’s already made the roll and there’s a line forming behind me, so in the end he takes it, and I take my sandwich. I go outside and eat it on a park bench listening to the buskers and the other sounds of Boulder.

The brownie kicks in some more as I walk a random street out of town away from the mountains, finding myself sitting in a dusty old brown leather armchair on the front porch of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics—a writing school started by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman. It only takes an instant before I start wondering what the hell I’m actually doing sitting on this old chair—maybe Ginsberg’s once upon a time. I get up and carry on down the street, noticing a fishing store, going inside to look at all the tiny flies, the brownie really hitting me now, standing there staring at all the tiny detail in each fly—the individual strands of cloth and sponge and tassel, the infinitesimally tiny knots that keep it together, the end of the shiny pointing hook, the wild colours and shapes, the bulges made to look like abdomens and heads from underneath the water’s surface, and the spindly edges of wings and legs—such deception for the fish—each fly designed to mimic the exact insect or bug or nymph the fish eat in whatever area and whatever time of day they are fished for. They say there are many arts to flyfishing—the making of the fly is the first, then comes the cast, the presentation of it for the fish, the hookup, the pulling it in.
i’m lost. i have no idea what i’m staring at any more. the detail. the flies. i feel a little deceived myself. i imagine you as a fly, as all these flies—different colours for different places, different times. i’m hooked. i want you to pull me up to something else, something higher, out of all this. i want you to bring me in.

but the bell of the shop rings when someone else enters, waking me from my thoughts. and when i step out onto the street i have absolutely no idea what road i’m on, in what city, in what country, or for what reasons. i hardly know who or what i am.

i choose a direction and walk on, turning a corner somewhere, and see a 7-eleven. i go inside the fluoro orange and green of the place and am amazed at the colour and size of the donuts on display. whole round chocolate ones, others with holes in the middle, ones covered in sugar, some long like fingers and filled with custard, others with crushed nuts on top. i buy one covered in white icing sugar and take it outside and can’t help eating all of it in the parking lot. my mouth explodes when i bite into it and everything starts melting away—the donut, the 7-eleven, boulder, me, you, the world—so that eventually i have to lean up against the store to steady myself before i can go on.

and i’m not exactly sure how, but i’ve managed to make it back to anton’s. he’s still at work i think. tomorrow he goes to mexico to look at a possible investment
venture with his friend brendan. clair will arrive soon after. and again i wonder, what now and why?

**april 9**

i sit with anton eating a breakfast of burrito and juice downtown before we head out to the airport. “so the brownie was okay?” he asks as he loads one end of the bacon, egg and bean burrito into his mouth. “yeah, i think it had the desired effect.” “not too strong?” he asks between chews, “after i left i was a bit worried about your throat.” “nah, it seems to be okay right now.” “that’s good, because it sounded pretty messed up for a while there.” “felt that way sometimes.” he lifts up his burrito again. “your throat is probably grateful to come down from the mountains, huh?—like it’s starting to defrost with spring.”

anton—the tall body and taller presence of him, even bigger than michael, blonde hair sticking up today. i’m thinking about the day we went fishing together just out of taos, new mexico, a couple of years back. i’d said i wouldn’t mind trying fly fishing sometime, so he went and hired two rods with flies and wading boots from a store in santa fe, and the next morning we headed out into the dawn of new mexico all pink and blue and pure, the moon still hanging there, the blood of christ mountains glowing red two days after christmas. we drove all the way to taos then took some backroads to where the warm hot springs of the red river met the rushing
coldwater currents of the mighty rio grande, washing all the snow and dreams of rocky mountain america way off into the gulf of mexico somewhere below.

we zigzagged down the sheer cliff face from the carpark and hiked our way to the meeting point of the two rivers—the rio grande sweeping over rocks and boulders in a loud rumble of foam and freezing blue water—the red river smaller and slower, flowing gently to where it met the grande. we walked over to the red, put on our waders, and tied on some flies. “this spot looks as good as any,” anton said, flicking a fly onto the other side of an upstream rock. maybe he saw a trout waiting on the lower side for a bit of breakfast to go floating by. and so the day fanned out, each of us slowly making our way up the river, flicking down the flies here and there, careful not to get our lines tangled up in nearby trees on either side of the bank, the sun working its way across the valley. every now and then anton would pull in a small trout—cut-throat, brown, rainbow—and release it again.

we fished almost without saying a word, too caught up in the rhythm of the casting, and the music of the river and the day. gradually though, the light moved from the floor of the valley and crept up the walls. “we should probably head back before it gets too cold,” anton said. so we hiked back up to the car and made it just in time to watch the sun disappear behind the peaks towards nevada and california, while the mountains of northern new mexico glowed fluorescent pink in the evening light behind us. “not bad, huh?” he said, probably noticing my complete awe at this immensity. “so you like the mountains, sea-level boy?”
on the way home we got out to look at the stars—the sky overflowing, almost too much. “this is more stars than i’ve seen anywhere,” i said. “but no southern cross, huh?” anton said, as we stood there in the cold, our heads tilted back to watch the slow and deliberate spinnings of the milky way.

as we drove on i asked him to tell me more about himself, realising i hardly knew my own cousin. “o-kay,” he said as we drove along the interstate back towards santa fe, “long story in some ways, simple story in other ways. i grew up in new jersey with mom, dad and jen, went to college at santa clara not far outside san francisco, majored in philosophy and psychology, was all set to play some nba ball, but i kept injuring my wrists. then i did some work at a restaurant in san francisco by night, and rode as a bicycle courier by day. a friend and i had a van that we slept in, parking it in different spots each night to save money so we could travel around the world. we did that, came home again, then didn’t really know what to do. a while later i turned down a big modeling contract at the last minute …” i glanced over at him. “why?” i asked, as he kept looking down the interstate. “well, i think it just didn’t feel right for who i was then—or now for that matter—despite the big dollars. it was a tough call. they had a huge launch organised and everything—it was worth millions … anyway, then i heard about a place in colorado called telluride that was supposed to be a-ma-zing. so i went out there and managed a ski shop for about six years, living in the mountains each summer learning different musical instruments, hunting animals, but not to kill them, just to learn how, you know? then mom came into some money through the stock market and offered to
pay for a massage course in Santa Fe, which I did, and now I’m up in Boulder studying a masters in massage therapy. I guess there’s more to it, but that’s the short version anyway.” I sat there amazed, listening to him talk, feeling the road pass underneath us, staring out the window at all the new mountains and new stars of the New Mexico night.

But now we go back to his basement studio after breakfast, catching up while he packs. “I’m still studying,” he says, “but I’m working more now, actually getting paid to do bodywork … it’s such a privilege.” He asks about my trip, so I tell him a bit about Crested Butte, about Vegas, about Los Angeles. “Man, I wish I could have been at a few of those parties with you guys,” he says. And I can picture him there, probably looking more like a celebrity than any of us, though probably the furthest from it—tall and noble and somehow contentedly detached. “I can’t wait to hear more,” he says, “can’t wait to hit the road again myself. I think when I get back from Mexico you, Campbell and I should head on over to Utah, Arizona and Nevada.” I picture it for a brief instant—the three of us on the road together. “Definitely,” I say, “even California and up into Washington!” “Right!” he says, “let’s just keep going all the way to Alaska!”

But for now we only go as far as Denver International Airport, sliding out along the freeways of prairie morning, going past the walled housing estates that he points to and says, “Look, it’s hell.” “Hell?” I ask. “Uh-huh. Suburban hell—a sea of houses that are exactly the same, built around some big-box stores, a school and a gas
station. no-one ever has to leave … and it’s getting closer to boulder every day.” i listen to him talk as the highway weaves this way and that, and try to remember which turns to make on the way back again.

“so clair is coming out here, right?” “yeah, she’s got a stopover on the way from new york to san francisco.” “the timing’s pretty good then, with me going to mexico for a few days.” “i guess so.” he looks over at me while he drives. “i remember you two together at campbell’s wedding in bali—seemed very much in love back then.” “yeah, i guess we were—it was pretty early on in the whole thing, though. a lot happened after that.” he nods, “i know what you mean—but what i’ve found out above love though,” he says, changing lanes, “is that it doesn’t always pay attention to things like time, or even events.”

we come into the departures drop-off point, airport police telling us where to pull in. “look after the old girl,” he says, grabbing his bag as we get out, handing me the keys to the 4runner and giving me another bearhug. “you do know how to drive a standard don’t you?” “a what?” “you know, a stickshift?” “ah, a manual—yeah mate, i know.” and with that he smiles and turns, almost having to duck as he walks through the automatic doors, bound for san francisco to meet his friend brendan, and then on to mexico. i watch him for a while, then pull out onto the freeways of america trying to follow the breadcrumbs i left back to his house, happy i have the mountains there to guide me.
april 9, afternoon

back at the airport. i sit at baggage claim number three listening to a group of airport staff in blue uniforms leaning over their carts and trolleys, eating late lunch of hamburgers and hot dogs, talking about their weekend of backyard beers and basketball.

i think about clair as i wait for the american airlines flight from new york, wondering what she looks like these days, wondering what sort of person she might have grown into, or out of. i wonder if she’s still blonde, still pretty, still as headstrong and stubborn and fearful and lost as i am.

other people start appearing around the conveyor belt of the baggage claim, no bags yet, no passengers from the flight, other conveyors further off. long rows of chairs lean with their backs to the glass and the bright prairies and melting snow of the peaks outside, light falling onto the grey carpet of arrivals. i sit as more and more people walk in through the automatic sliding doors, every one of them waiting for their own particular person or people amongst all the boarding and departing of humanity through the doors of airports anywhere in the world. we wait together.

i wonder if she is enjoying her life now, whatever she is doing. she must have put her acting course on hold when her grandma died, flying to san francisco with her mum to sort everything out. i wonder if she left a boyfriend in perth, or if she has one now in san francisco. i wonder what she was doing in new york, and i wonder
what she thinks of me now, out here, doing whatever the hell it is i’m doing. i wonder if she’s happy.

a guy in black leather jacket puts his foot on the turnstile edge, leaning his big frame down onto one knee. a couple of teenage boys throw a denver broncos football to each other not too far apart, moms wait with their daughters, fathers wait with their sons, plenty of people stand waiting on their own. over the loud speakers comes the sound of another security warning about leaving bags unattended—that if found, “they will be removed and destroyed.” military walk by with machine guns under their arms like they’re in a movie, cleaners push trolleys around, baggage handlers remove unclaimed backpacks from a turnstile nearby, people disappear into the guts of the airport, come back with coffees, others walk outside and hail cabs, disappearing.

waiting for clair. and i see now that the past can come to life right in front of our faces if we let it, and sometimes even if we don’t. it’s right there isn’t it—right there—closer than these words are to our lips, closer than this world is to our tired feet. i stroll through flashing perth memories of club bay view, claremont, in early morning departures after another fight, the sound of my boots on the footpath as i walk away from her and into the night, alone. the sound of her heels on the road near her house as she walks away from me. flashes of good times too—moving in together, another cheap brown-brick cottesloe apartment rented, no furniture on the first night, sitting there on the floor eating pizza with nothing to do but be together.
later, in bali for campbell’s wedding, swimming in the midnight pool, the look of
her blue bathers under the water, the touch of her wet skin. i shift in my seat—what
is she doing coming here, now? the scent of her perfume ‘happy’ so long ago, so
close by.

passengers start to arrive from the plane, placing down their carry-bags next to the
conveyor belt, embracing the people who’ve waited for them, wearing their new
york coats and trims, waiting for their bags. the area starts to fill up, but i can’t see
her. bags begin coming out of the holes in the middle of the turnstile and people
rush to pick them up and go. i stand and walk through the crowd, narrowly missing
a suitcase that someone slings off the conveyor. and there she is. as pretty as ever.
long blonde hair, smooth skin, delicate chin, full lips, brown leather coat to her
knees, jeans, boots, looking slightly expectant, slightly guarded. she doesn’t see me
at first, then turns. i walk slowly around a couple of people. “heeeey,” she says,
smiling. we hug. “good to see you,” she says, filling out something in the air
already there. “you too.”

and so we drive back to boulder in the sun as she talks. “mum was really sad, so i
decided to come to san francisco with her and help out with the funeral and the
house and everything else, but it’s all taken longer than we thought. it’s just hard.”
she looks out the window at the mountains, though doesn’t say anything about
them. “what were you doing in new york?” i ask. “just went for the week,” she
replies, “caught up with a friend. but she was too busy working to really hang out.
it was weird.” i tell her a bit about crested butte, about campbell coming soon, about how i’m not sure what’s going to happen with anything. “i know how you feel,” she says, “i still don’t know what i’m going to do when i get back to san francisco. i’ve got the rest of this year before i can start studying again in perth, if i even go back.” “you don’t think you will?” “anything’s possible,” she replies, and i guess she’s right—her being here is proof enough of that.

**april 9, evening**

i take clair to a rooftop bar by the flatirons to watch the sunset. “this is pretty nice,” she says, the side of her face lit up by the sun, “i’ll give you that.” and we cheers our beers to the glowing sky and fading light, and to this unlikely encounter on the plains.

later we go to the upstairs restaurant of the same microbrewery i went to with jay and jody. we sit opposite each other with a candle in the middle of the table like we’re just another regular couple on a date, other couples sitting around us eating their food and talking, clair and i looking at our menus, a river flowing under the shaky bridge between us.

“think i’ll have a salad,” she says, “though you probably knew i was going to say that.” i did. we order a bottle of red wine from napa valley. “napa’s just up the road from where i am in san francisco, you’ll have to check it out.” i nod, and order one
of the biggest steaks i’ve ever seen. “do you think you’ll go back to perth?” she asks, breaking up some garlic bread. “i don’t know,” i reply, “all roads lead home eventually, don’t they?—seems like everyone else i know is leaning in that direction.” “doesn’t mean you have to.” “i know. think i’m still looking for something.” “what?” she asks. i look at her, then at the wine. “i dunno.” she picks up her glass and swirls the wine around, the ‘legs’ of it running red down the side. “any girlfriends in crested butte?” i roll my fingers on the table. “no girlfriends.” she leans her elbows on the table, “i think the last time i saw you, you were going to have dinner with that girl you were seeing back in perth—anna wasn’t it?” i look at her. “clair?” i ask gently. “yes?” “what are you doing here?” “what do you mean?” she smiles. “in boulder, with me, here, now?” she tops up her glass and takes a drink, her smile fading a little. “i had a stopover on the way back to san francisco, and thought maybe you’d like to catch up—you said you wanted to, remember?” “yeah, i remember. but that’s it?” “and, well … i guess i’ve been in san francisco so long without hanging out with anyone i can really relate to … i dunno, it’s just nice to see someone from perth again—nice to see you.”

it’s a strange evening. the steak tastes funny and i can’t drink all my wine. later we go across the mall to an underground bar. i order a couple of beers. the place is empty except for a few locals playing pool at the other end of the room. “mind if i have a cigarette?” she asks as she lights it, the smoke drifting up through the cracks in the timber ceiling, the two guys staring over at her between shots, then the
bartender staring too. and suddenly i’m filled with the feeling that everything inside this place is already dead. “let’s go,” i say, getting up. “but we just got here!”

later she insists on getting out her favourite movie, moulin rouge. and so we sit in anton’s apartment, together with all our history, staring at the video as the characters sing and moan for love, and live and die for it as well. we end up making love too. there is a familiarity to it, but also something hollow, something defeated, something sad, something already gone.

**april 10**

today we both drive back out to the airport again, this time to pick up a tired and weary campbell. he’s flown all the way from newman to perth, to sydney, to los angeles, to denver. from a slight distance i can see his tall, lean frame, his short and straight brown hair, his long nose and rounded chin, as well as some prickly-looking stubble on his usually clean-shaven firm jaw. he’s dressed in light blue jeans and dark blue and black jacket, knowing it’d be cool when he got here, small black bag over his shoulder, bigger one at his feet, brown hiking shoes ready to go, packet of smokes in jacket pocket no doubt, polaroid fishing glasses on the top of his head. and even though he’ll be tired, he looks somehow younger than last time i saw him, which was probably after work one day, covered in red dirt and frustration, leaning back on an outdoor chair having a beer. even from a slight distance i notice a visible excitement in him now, in his eyes, in the way he holds
his tall body, in his looking around, in the way he keeps glancing out over the top
of everyone to the windows and the prairies and mountains outside. he turns and
sees us both. “hey there,” clair says as we approach. he looks a little surprised to
see her at first, but gives her a kiss on the cheek all the same. “how ya going,
mate?” i say, shaking his hand. “buggered,” he replies in his deep voice. “looks like
you could do with a nap.” “yeah,” he replies, picking up his bag, “but i wouldn’t
mind some water first.” “ah well then, you’re in luck,” i say, handing over the
bottle i brought for him.

we all pile into the 4runner and make the same hour-long journey back to boulder,
me steering, campbell hardly saying anything in the back seat, drinking his water.
“feeling any better mate?” i ask. “a little bit, but i’ve got a pretty bad headache,” he
replies, rubbing his temple. i guide us onto the interstate. “did you have it the whole
flight?” i ask. “not the whole flight,” he replies, “just the last sixteen hours or so.”
campbell closes his eyes in the back, looking like he wants to rest. so i ask clair
more about san francisco, about her grandma’s house. “well, it’s huge,” she says,
“there’s even a separate house for the maid and another for the gardeners. but the
situation is shit because the government gets about half of it all … some kind of
death tax or something.” clair’s grandfather made it big in the mining industry, then
clair, her mum and dad moved to perth when the business extended into the rich
mineral areas of western australia. and so campbell arrives today from the same
mines that brought clair to australia and into my life in the first place. i smile a little
at this, at the fine interconnecting lines and threads of it all as the three of us go shooting along the highways of colorado into the broad light of today.

but then i feel the need to wind the window down a bit, just to let some air in, or out, or both.

**april 10, afternoon**

“those panadols hit the spot,” campbell says as we stand in the small front yard of anton’s place looking over all the maple trees with their newborn springtime green leaves towards the flatirons in the distance, clair inside making tea. “good to hear, mate,” i reply. he’s changed his clothes after a shower and a shave—his wet brown hair now spiking up over his forehead, while the skin on his cheeks, neck, big adam’s apple and solid jaw shines through fresh and pink from the razor’s blade. “i’m stoked you came all this way too. i hope you don’t mind her being here now,” i add, quietly. “not at all,” he says, “it’s actually good to see you both getting along.” i smile and notice the sun pushing through some light clouds at the top of the front range. “not a bad view, hey?” i say. “mmm, i love these mountains. it’s such a nice change from the pilbara. on the flight from los angeles i got a window seat—it was unreal to look down on las vegas and the hoover dam and all the rockies.” “you might have flown over crested butte.” he nods and lights up a cigarette, wrapping his long index finger over the top of the filter the way he does, squinting his eyes, sucking it all the way into his tall wiry body—as tall as michael,
though thinner—then breathes the smoke out into the afternoon air. “i’ve been looking forward to coming to the states for a long time,” he says, “can’t wait to hire this pickup and hit the road—just like the movies! angela will be spewing she missed out on this!” he laughs, and the slight frown in the middle of his brow loosens and dissolves, while lines around his mouth and on the edges of his eyes spring to vibrant life as if they had been sitting there, waiting for a smile. it’s good to see him so happy.

later the three of us go to a busy rum bar on pearl street—one long bar with a few tables inside and out, waiters rushing around. we find a spot near the door and notice the huge collection of bottles behind the busy bartenders. “the menu reckons they have over a hundred different types of rum!” campbell’s deep, loud voice booms over the noise of the place. “you’d be right at home then, wouldn’t you?” clair says to me with a half smile, not really a question. “there’s one for fifty-five bucks a glass!—you have to get it,” campbell smiles, his eyes wide, but i say no. “go on, i’ll shout.” “nah mate, you could buy three bottles for that much.” “not of 1955 french martinique rum!” “i can’t justify that. another time maybe.” “okay, but i’m going to buy it for you before i leave this country.” “right-o,” i reply, “but tonight i don’t care—any cheap drink’ll do.” clair crosses her arms, shakes her head slightly and stares into some far corner of the bar, with a ‘told-you-so’ smile on her face. “some things never change, do they?” she says, as campbell leans over the bar to order the drinks—the whole room rushing around us.
and later, while campbell snores loudly on the floor after his long flight and a few drinks, clair and i make love again, quietly, slowly, though something still not there, something that will probably never be there again. and as i lie awake, the light of a full, spectral moon coming in the window from outside, i realise that whatever we end up *missing* in our lives is made all the more painful because once upon a time it was actually there—within reach. though i also realise that things move on, like the moon across the sky outside, like the shadows it casts along the floors and walls of this small room—the shadows i watch throughout the night.

**april 11**

i take clair out to the airport this morning. the drive is quiet as the sun rises higher above the plains, clearer light flooding in. “thanks for coming out here,” i say as we drive up towards the departures terminal, “i did enjoy it.” she smiles as we pull up. “yeah—and thank you too, it was really good to see you.” i hug her when we get out to grab her bags. “who knows?—maybe i’ll see you in san francisco,” i say. “you know you’re always welcome,” she replies, “and good luck with whatever it is you are searching for.” i look down, not really knowing what to say … “you too.” i raise my eyes again. she looks at me and smiles her soft, gentle smile with her head tilted slightly to one side. then she kisses me on the cheek, turns and walks towards the automatic sliding doors, before turning back and lifting her hand slowly, waving as she steps through. i lift my hand to wave too, but by the time i do so she has already turned again and walked on. so i get in the car as she disappears
inside, feeling the need all of a sudden to get back to boulder, back to the
mountains, back to campbell, and back to the road.

**april 12**

and so the road it is, with more of america coming at me and campbell as we take
another turn to see where it goes and why. it feels good to be moving again with no
real goal or plan in mind—so nice to have all that bitumen rushing by underneath
us. new things, new places, new parts of the world and ourselves that we haven’t
experienced before and maybe never will again. such music in names like
cheyenne, wyoming, jackson, idaho, montana, south dakota, nebraska and more.
the sounds of america that have floated or fallen in through my open window or
television or radio or books or dreams in the night of western australia my whole
life. road novels, road movies, road music and more—so much art infused with the
place names and content of all this america. the delicate small printing of the names
on our maps so precise and careful, each name with its place, each with its own
purpose and treasures found and unfound, driving towards the music of them now.

with my brother, loving the pure going, the leaning forward, the head-of-the-comet
continuous birth into the moment known only as ‘now,’ and into the place, though
it changes its name and music constantly, that can only be spoken of as ‘here.’ no
jobs to consider, no money to make, no money to lose, no assignment to hand in,
no form to fill out, no rent to pay, no alarm clock to rise to, no application to
submit, no queue to stand in, no phonecall to make, no text message to compose, no news to watch, no fashion to buy, no organisation to join, no appointment to keep, no bill to deal with, no list to make, no planning to do, no nothing. just moving and just driving. just me and campbell and you maybe. disappearing into a horizon of here and nows.

we drive through the winding boulder canyon of dark, rocky ledges and cliff faces that look perfect for climbing or abseiling, while on our left a small stream splashes and tumbles over rocks as it meanders its way back down through the canyon towards boulder. the road curves this way and that as we snake up through the mountains in the f-150 pickup that campbell has hired, dual cab and gold. “not a bad rig, hey?” he asks, his long fingers wrapped around the steering wheel, “think it’ll get us to where we’re goin?” i listen to the engine thumping under the bonnet. “i’ve got no doubt,” i reply. “and where are we going?” he asks. “dunno, should we just drive for a while?” he smiles, the frown on his brow fading even more as he floors it. we gradually rise higher and further away from boulder, up into the mountains, as the road levels out at a wide, grey lake that’s been formed by a dam near the small, rustic town of nederland. there are log cabins as well as larger houses scattered in the mountains around the lake, the town itself on the lake’s western side, the ski resort of eldora way over the back, the snow melting from the lift lines and ski runs, the clouds rolling in thick bellowing masses from the white peaks of the continental divide in the high distance. we turn right just before we enter nederland, and keep going into the pines of the mountains along the peak to
peak highway as the clouds build up, tumbling over each other to reach the flatlands of the plains.

i think again of clair. she is probably sitting back in her house in san francisco right now, with coffee maybe, thinking perhaps about her time in boulder, thinking maybe about what comes next, about all that land behind. part of me wishes there was something more i could have said, something more i could have done, something more i could have thought or felt. maybe i just wish there was something more between us than what there actually is.

“ya know,” campbell says, his eyes darting around excitedly as the clouds keep building, “i’ve never seen snow actually falling. on that contiki tour around europe i remember seeing it on the alps, but i never saw it actually fall from the sky.” “i remember the day you got back from that trip,” i say, “i must have been in year eight or nine.” he’d surprised me by picking me up from school—gave me a black swiss army pocket-knife with my name engraved on it. “you can only get those in switzerland,” he’d said. i still carry it with me now. on the way home he’d told me about all the women he’d met on the trip, about strange cities, strange moments. “yeah, waking up naked on the front lawn of a monastery was a little weird,” i remember him telling me, “swimming naked in icy waters in germany, everyone drunk.” the world changed a little for me that day. “there was one girl who wanted me to marry her. but i was too smart for that—i got the hell outta there.” and it’s strange to remember him talking that way back then, because today he’s so busy
videotaping things and taking photographs so that angela can “see what i’m spending all our money on.”

we pass pine after pine along the side of the thin road. “is this the only tree they have in america?” he asks in his comically dry way. and then he suddenly pulls over onto the edge of the road, grabs his camera and gets out. “back in a sec,” he says. i know how cold it is out there so i’m reluctant to follow, but i do look out through the back windows and see him walking over to photograph a tiny little church of cream and grey stone and rock hidden way back in the trees—a wonder he was able to see it from the road. i watch as he stands there, back to me, raising the camera to his eye and then down again, staring a little while longer, then turning, coming back to the car, breathing small clouds of smoke as if sucking on a cigarette. and then he stops suddenly and looks up at the sky, head tilted back, adam’s apple sticking out, hands upturned—it’s started to snow. and he stands like that, not moving at all, letting the flakes fall onto his shoulders, his hair, his face, his closed eyes, and his smile. i’ve never seen him quite like this.

“i’ve been waiting a long time for this,” he says when he finally gets back in. and i’m not exactly sure if he means the falling snow or coming to america or being with me now or what. but i smile anyway, not wanting to ask him in case the question should somehow dim the light that seems to be shining all around him.
as we drive on i start thinking about all the after work phone calls we’ve shared over the years. it never mattered what i was doing—didn’t even matter if i had a house full of people—i always took the time to talk with him. he usually rang after he’d finished a shift—another day or night done at the beneficiation plant in newman—sorting all the high-grade ore from the rest—red dirt, water and the noise of machinery all around—having to wear hardhat, glasses and earmuffs each time he steps outside. years and years of this. two days on, two nights on, four days off. sorting and shipping. during the phonecalls he’d tell me about management or, rather, mismanagement. “those fuckers have no idea what’s happening on the floor.” i could listen to his frustrations for hours if it meant i got to speak with him, and share that time—time i never really got as a kid.

and so i listened as things went up and down for him in newman. “the land here is really nice,” he would say on occasions, “all the waterholes and creeks. but there’s just no culture at all—nothing. mate, i’d kill to go see a band with ya.” then, on another day, “found out we’re the most productive shift again this year. and saw the most amazing sunrise this morning—it lit up the whole sky.” but gradually, running underneath all of it, i could hear the place wearing him down. same slow way the machinery wears down the red-earth and rock of mt. whaleback, no longer a mountain but a hole in the ground—one of the biggest holes man has ever made for himself.
so i’m glad to see him here now, able to talk with him at any moment about anything, living all this, thirsty for it, completely in love with angela and life as he goes.

we come down out of the mountains through small farms of cleared land with fences and emerald green dams, a few horses with rugs on their backs eating the first grasses of spring by dark wooden stables. then the fences grow gradually closer together, the size of the properties smaller, the houses almost back to back as we descend into the college town of fort collins, its grid streets lining up among typical suburban scenery of lawns and letterboxes, traffic moving in the postwork flow as we look for a particular microbrewery, unable to find it. “says in this guidebook that it should be right here,” he says, “some of the best beers in colorado,’ it reckons.” we can’t find it, but campbell still wants a beer so we go into a dark and empty afternoon bar of flashing coors and budweiser signs, polished glass and stainless steel trims, stools of leather cushions waiting for patrons. a young bartender cleans a glass with tea towel and nods at us when we walk in, while a guy in flannel shirt takes a drink of his pint and introduces himself as hank, the owner of the bar, shaking our hands. “so where you boys headed?” he asks, brown eyes, balding head, moustache, his black leather boots resting on the legs of the stool. “dunno mate,” we both reply. he looks puzzled, as if he didn’t quite hear us right. “you mean you’re just driving around?” he asks, his eyes lighting up. “i guess so,” campbell says, “maybe we’ll end up in montana.” “montana!” he replies,
“that’s my home state!” he pulls his stool a little closer. “let me buy you boys some beers—jimmy!”

later he gets jimmy to bring out a few maps from the office, spreading them out so they cover the bar like colourful paper table cloths. “now this here is madison valley—blue ribbon trout fishing,” he says, “and this here is bozeman—real nice college town.” we take a drink of our pints and follow his stained-yellow finger as it crosses the state. “damn you aussie boys sure do have the life,” he says, shaking his head, “say, why don’t you just go ahead and take these maps? hell, i never look at em anyways.” “nah mate, what if you need them sometime?” “go on,” he says, “i won’t be using em any time soon. better that they’re on the road with someone than stuck here gathering dust like me. hell, if i didn’t have to look after this damn bar i’d be doing the same thing—just floating around, like you two, wherever the wind blows.” he stares off into the distant dark corners of the bar like he’s contemplating a treasure he buried for himself lifetimes ago. then he buys us another beer and sends us on our way. “gawd damn,” he says as we head towards the door with maps in hand. he follows after us, shaking his head, rubbing his chin, looking teary, “gawd damn.”

“i think he was pretty excited by what we’re doing,” i say as we get onto the main road out of the small college town. “i think he wanted to come with us,” campbell replies, driving out to the prairies and onto the i-25, heading straight north, the day edging closer to night as we push on. mighty billowing grey clouds on the flat
horizon to our right, the sun streaming down in golden fingers through lighter clouds above the rockies to our left, all of it lining up so that our shadow moves silently along the gold of the plains next to us, rising closer as we drive by a little hill, then falling away as the land dips down again. “bloody nice, hey,” campbell says, his eyes darting around to take it all in.

“so angela couldn’t come?” i ask as we push on towards colorado’s northern border. “nah, she couldn’t get the time off work. but she didn’t want me to miss out on this opportunity.” and by that i guess he means to be here with me, and with anton down the line. “and how’s everything in newman going at the moment?” i ask, wanting to give him the chance to air anything if he wants to. “you know how it is, just hanging to get out for a while, i spose.” about ten years he’s lived there now. “how much longer do you reckon you’ll be there?” “who knows?” he says, looking off with the line of the lights towards the northern horizon. then he says again, a touch quieter than before, not really a question, “who knows …”

we approach wyoming. “where do you reckon we should stop for the night?” he asks, the sun now set behind the mountains as the first stars and planets of night appear. “wadda you reckon?” i reply. “maybe cheyenne.” “sounds good, i’ve always wanted to go to cheyenne, wyoming,” i say, wanting to visit the place because to me they are two of the most beautiful words i have ever heard, indian and english all at once, but sounding like they’re from another place altogether, some other planet—cheyenne, wyoming. the rhythmic lick of the music of the
words filling me as they float from the front of the mouth to the rear, then back to the front again. something impossibly delicate, yet rounded, in their coming together and rolling out.

but of course it’s hard for the actual place to live up to the visions i have of it, as it is for any place. we cross over the state line towards the tacky saloons of quiet middle-week cheyenne, which seems to shout for the cowboy tourist and his dollar. “kinda sad,” campbell says, looking around, driving past one bar with faded white paint peeling off the outside walls, wooden saloon door stuck open on one side, chunks of wall missing from bullet holes and rotting time. another bar where the neon lights of coors, millers, bud, michelob, jack daniels and jim beam flash wearily through the dirty windows from the empty bar inside. “weird.” a lonely wind blows on the streets, almost bored as it blows, the whole ‘city’ seemingly empty, deserted. i look further along the wide mainstreet and see stores with names like ‘the wild west outlaw’ selling cowboy clothing and guns. “should we keep going?” campbell asks. i look around again. “definitely.” and so we head out of wyoming via the faded white state-capital buildings, with little idea of where we’re really headed. “how about laramie?” i suggest. “okay, but let’s not take the interstate again today.” so i look at a map and lead campbell west out of town and the flatlands and onto a small road that winds nicely up through pillow-shaped hills and the early night, more and more stars shining out from the heavens, and maybe you along with them.
april 12, night

we come down into the flickering yellow streetlight glow of laramie, a small town on the edge of the interstate winking quietly to itself in the darkness. “how bout this joint?” campbell asks, pulling up under the blue and red neon of the motel 6 sign, tired. “as good as any.” we get a room and campbell asks the young guy behind the desk if there are any bars open in town. he thinks for quite a while, turning a pencil over and over in his mouth, a chemistry textbook open in front of him on the counter. “maybe there is one you could try,” he says, with a slight sparkle in his eye.

we follow his directions down the big wide mainstreet and find the bar—a small place with a few busted ford and chevy pickups, rusted and dented, parked outside. we look over at the glowing windows. “waddya reckon?” i ask. “bugger it,” campbell says, pulling out a smoke, “let’s check it out.” we go in and there’s maybe a couple of dozen people inside, all drunk, all standing, each of them with a beer and cigarette in their hands, smoke all through the room. the guys are in cowboy boots and patterned cowboy shirts, buckles and hats, the women all in dresses and boots. everyone looks at us when we walk in. even the band of banjos and harmonicas, drums and guitar seems to quieten down. behind the bottles behind the bar is a huge mirror, cracked in places from all the bulletholes. on the wall are mounted animal heads—deer mostly, though i do notice one rabbit head with antlers. there’s a hat-stand covered in wide-brims on one side of the room, and timber panelling everywhere. we make slowly for the bar, nodding at people as we
“g’day mate,” campbell says to the bartender, “two beers thanks.” the bartender just stands there staring at us. “where you boys from?” asks a guy with black hair and blacker moustache sitting on a stool next to me, cigarette hanging from his mouth, sizing me up. “western australia,” i say over the music. “where?” he asks again. “western australia,” i repeat a little louder, and he seems to loosen up a bit when he hears it. “damn,” he says, stroking his moustache, “you boys sure have come a long way for a drink,” then turning to the bartender, smiling, “tom, get these boys a coupla beers on me. they must be thirsty as hell.” tom obliges, his face covered in red stubble under tired, patient eyes. the fella with the moustache introduces himself but i don’t catch his name because the band gets into full swing again, everybody else rising with them. “what brings you all the way to laramie?” “just driving around,” campbell replies. “driving around?” he replies, “what faw?” “to see what it’s like out here.” “uh, huh,” the fella says, and looks at us like we’re both mad.

later a toothless drunk woman in black dress asks campbell to dance. he politely declines. i have a five-minute conversation with a guy even though he’s drunk and slurring, and my accent becomes thicker with the beers. neither of us can understand a word the other is saying, so we just nod here and there, an upward inflection at the end of a question, a grunt in response to an answer. reminds me, come to think of it, of many a long night at the ocean beach hotel back bar in perth, looking over the indian ocean, all those miles from here.
“What’s that up there?” Campbell asks the guy with the moustache, pointing up at the rabbit with antlers. “Well now, that there is a jackelope—a jackrabbit crossed with an antelope. Some say it’s a myth, but others swear they’re real.” “They are real goddamn!” Chips in the woman with no teeth, full of passion all of a sudden. “Pipe down Betsy,” says Tom from behind the bar, the only half-sober person in the place. She turns her back on us and stumbles off towards the small dancefloor. “C’mon Billy, you know how she gets.” “I was just telling our friends from Australia about the jackelope, thassall.” “What do you think?” I ask him, “Are they real?” He takes a drink and stares up at the head on the wall. “Same as anything like that, I s’pose—as real as you want em, or believe em, to be,” he replies. I nod, but I can’t help thinking—maybe things can still be real, whether we believe in them or not.

After a couple more drinks we decide to head back to the motel. “Leaving already?” Our friend with the moustache asks. “Yeah, been a long day … more drivin tomorrow.” He shakes our hands. “Well, have fun travellin round now, ya hear,” he says, “And maybe one day I’ll see you both down unda … ha!” And with that Campbell and I head out onto the quiet and cold street, the sound of the banjo and smoke of the bar slipping out through the door as we leave.

“Well,” Campbell says, starting up the truck, “That was an experience.”
april 13

i’m lying in my motel bed listening to the sound of trucks and cars passing on the i-80 somewhere outside in the cool morning. campbell’s empty bed is next to me, a tv against the opposite wall under windows of floral curtains closed, a bathroom over to the side. and then i sit up and suddenly see a strange, almost holy vision of my brother standing in the open doorway at the foot of my bed. he’s infused with light, his back to me, the morning sun rising way off over hills behind, sunshine pouring in all around him and into the room so that i have to raise my hand to shield my eyes from the glow of it. he’s silhouetted, wearing jeans, jacket and shoes, leaning against the doorframe, looking out into the morning, raising a cigarette and smoke up to his mouth now and then, sucking on it forcefully, then slowly letting the hand move in opposite arc back down to his side again, blowing the smoke gradually out through his mouth and nose so that it hangs there a while before drifting slowly out into the day.

campbell standing here now, his past with him—parts of which i know and other parts i don’t. campbell my brother who used to make me big football-shaped cakes when he was an apprentice chef, who also once made me a school bus out of chipboard on rolling study-desk wheels when i was small enough to fit inside, who camped with me at eagle falls near newman staring into burning coals and stars. “ha,” he says, turning around, then turning back to look again at the morning, “a yellow school bus just like in the movies,” taking another drag on his smoke, “this
all feels like the movies. you see so much of it on tv and films your whole life and to come over here and be surrounded by the reality of it is strange.”

the reality of it, i ponder, as he stands there, showered in light and smoke.

april 13, late morning

“been writin a story or somethin?” campbell asks. “sort of,” i reply, “just trying to get things down i spose.”

today the road is taking us through the nutmeg-coloured dirt and faded-green and yellow grass of central wyoming. we drive by wide, shallow rivers tumbling over countless rounded rocks, through barren indian reservations of hopelessness and (as we drive by a small store that looks like a simple tin-shed) old, tanned and forlorn faces with wise eyes forgotten by most of us. “reminds me of the aboriginal camp near newman,” i say as campbell steers us through more empty hills and grass. “yeah, silver city … it’s pretty bloody terrible,” he replies. the aboriginal camp is called silver city because of all the silver wine bags scattered amongst the dirt. last time i drove past it i saw that the council had put haulpak tyres around the houses to stop drunk people who were driving home at night from running other people over.

“so much like australia,” i say, thinking of the terrible conditions handed out to the indigenous people of both lands. “yep,” campbell replies, “we come all this bloody
way, and it’s just like home …” and he smiles a bit as he says it, trying to lighten things up the way he does—the laugh lines of his cheeks and eyes springing to life again under his brown hair. and somehow his smile is enough to transform things, if only briefly.

we pull over around lunchtime on the banks of a wide shallow river—perhaps the same one we’ve criss-crossed all morning—still inside the reservation. the road is quiet so we’re able to hear the soft slow tumblings of the water going deedelup didelup dooloop deloop as it works its way over the rocks and further on.

“sandwich?” i ask, as campbell walks over to a bush near the river to have a piss. “bloody oath,” he yells back, “cheese, tomato and mayo i reckon.” so i get out our little eskie, plus choppingboard and knife, and on the flat-back hardcover of the truck’s tray i chop a couple of juicy tomatoes, some orange american cheese, lather some creamy mayo over four slices of white bread, throw it all together and leave them there while i go to the river and rinse the knife and board. “any trout in there?” i ask. “haven’t seen any,” he replies, “probably a bit shallow right here.” “might have to try further on.”

we take our sandwiches and go stand by the edge of the river eating them, hypnotised by the flow of the water and the sound of it—the subtle skips and sloppy hops of it, the splashing, the slippery leanings forward. and then the sun leaves a couple of passing clouds and it’s suddenly warm enough to take off our jackets and stand there watching all the shining pieces of water floating off down
the river, carrying all the sunlight and rocky mountain snow with it, wherever and
whyever it goes.

“thanks for coming all this way, mate,” i say, as we stand there staring at the river.
“wouldn’t a missed it,” he replies, and right then i spot a little brown leaf bobbing
down through the rapids, carried on with all the sunlight and secrets of just another
melting winter. “and thanks too for all those days you came to visit me in the hills
when i was just a kid, too young to really know what it all meant or to thank you
for it at the time.” i can sense he’s looking at me now, but i just keep watching the
up and down bobbing of the leaf, twisting and spinning as it goes, caught on a rock
for a second, then going again. “thanks too for letting me come visit you on those
weekends, even when you were having a party or whatever. i didn’t tell you at the
time, but they were some of the best weekends of my life. then for everything when
i came up to newman … the rest of it … you know.” and suddenly the leaf is gone
around a bend in the river and it feels like it’s time to start rolling again. “c’mon,” i
say, before he has a chance to reply, not really wanting him to, “i’ll drive.”

and so i get in behind the wheel and take us further towards the eastern horizon and
the snow-covered rocky mountains of wyoming, same mountain chain that includes
crested butte way down there, santa fe too for that matter. and almost immediately
campbell falls asleep—probably a lot of jet lag still to catch up on. and so i’m left
to my thoughts and the rounded hills of wyoming, which rise gradually up into the
mountains again. and i find myself thinking about one particular weekend all those
years ago when i was just a kid, mum and dad letting me stay with campbell on a saturday night after their horses had finally run—the races over for another week. they drove me to campbell and his housemates on curtin avenue in cottesloe, sitting on the front lawn of their rented house behind a little date palm, throwing a tennis ball to their blue-heeler jack. i took my bag inside while mum spoke with campbell and eventually left. beers appeared, though not for me, music got louder (the new guns n’ roses album ‘appetite for destruction’). other people arrived once the sun went down, filling the house. beer bottles and music and talk. people inside on the couches listening to the music, talking with their feet up on coffee tables, others playing darts by the front door so everyone had to duck if they wanted to go in or out, other people standing on the paved patio drinking, talking, throwing the ball to jack. every now and then campbell would ask if i was okay, and of course i was, happy just to be there—even though i couldn’t have my brother to myself, this was definitely the next best thing. later he asked if i wanted something to eat, so we crossed over the train line near the mosman park stop, and ordered a burger and chips each from speedy’s late-night burger joint, going back to the house to eat everything on the front lawn with sauce and mayo and beetroot dripping everywhere, soggy chips going cold, the last trains rattling to and from fremantle. i went to sleep in the living-room and in the morning woke up next to a few people snoring, the place stinking of beer and cigarettes, bottles and cans everywhere, the record player still turning though nothing on it, slight static coming out of the speakers. it was wonderful—i’d never had weekends like that in my life. suddenly there was a whole new world i’d discovered, and a whole new brother too. but
when i told mum and dad about it, they weren’t so impressed. in fact, i hardly got
to stay with campbell any weekend after that, until i was old enough to make the
choice for myself. that night about eighteen years ago now.

i eventually found campbell and my other brother james when i was old enough to
understand them and their reasons—the way they hadn’t gotten along with my old
man, the way they left home when they were both sixteen, me the same, though in
circumstances completely different. the helplessness of it, the death of their dad in
south africa years earlier, our mum’s emptiness and everything else. i don’t know
what part you’ve played in all of this. but i do like to think that something will
come of it in time. please make it so, if you can make anything happen at all.

i drop back a couple of gears and start the climb up towards the continental divide
in earnest, as campbell keeps snoring.

**april 13, afternoon**

more and more snow appears on the ground among the pine trees as i wind us
further up into the mountains on a quiet back road, the f-150 using all eight
cylinders to keep us going higher. i notice tall orange marker poles placed on each
side of the road in case it starts snowing heavily and people can’t see where the
edge is. campbell keeps sleeping. and just when it feels like we might be running
out of mountain or momentum or daylight, there appears a tiny little sign saying
'continental divide’—something so lonely and perfect about the sign there, simple and peaceful by the side of the road. we slide right by it and all of a sudden the scene opens up onto an amazingly empty, white and open meadow of snow—no trees, no nothing, except in the middle of it one tiny little wooden cabin with curling rings of smoke floating up out of the chimney—perhaps a solitary bearded mystic inside, forgotten by the world and forgetting it as he goes, opening up doors onto other places, maybe finding things there—answers, questions, you perhaps. though in the end i bet he would shiver under the cold of it all, just the same.

and then as easy as that the meadow is swallowed up by more pines and we’re on a downhill run towards jackson—clouds building up grey and heavy on this side of the divide, ready to let it all go.

**april 13, late afternoon**

it starts snowing shortly after the grand tetons appear all ragged and dangerous up ahead like giant shark teeth—no trees up there, only rocks, snow, clouds and wind—the road coming down to a flat intersection where i have to wait for a couple of loud semis to pass by, snow already turning to slush and spray on the bitumen beneath their many tyres. i take a left turn as campbell wakes to see the snow and the tetons towering over us. he doesn’t say anything, but i imagine that the tetons do, though more in feeling than in words, something like, “hey now, down there. and where do you think you’re going and for why? bit far from home aren’t you?
bit far from anything at all? do you really think this will save you? do you really think this will be enough? do you really think you can keep this up, or find anything at all?” more snow falls and i back off a bit from the truck ahead, as the tetons keep talking. “you’re going to try though aren’t you? you’re going to try to keep all this moving, as if it somehow relied on you?—very well then, go if you must, groan if you lust, search if you trust it will get you there in the end, which is no end at all, friend.”

“pretty amazing spot, hey,” campbell says, “amazing mountains.” i look over at them, all snowy and rocky and barren at their peaks—they are silent now. “it’s definitely different being surrounded by mountains than it is by ocean,” i say. “or desert,” he adds, “almost like you’re closer to something cos you’re so high.” we drive on.

“mate,” i find myself saying, “do you still keep up your spiritual stuff, or whatever you want to call it … does angela?” he looks over and smiles. “well,” he says, “when we came back from bali last time—after we went on that silent retreat—we were both getting up at four in the morning every day and meditating. but you know how it goes. after a while things start getting in the way, or you lose the drive or the spark, or whatever. we still read stuff, angela does her healings with a group of friends in town, and we still go to perth every now and then for a course. but i don’t think healing is really for me … and i think i’ve almost had enough of courses for now. angela can go and do them if she wants. i think i’m more about
relaxing into things these days, and not letting anything stick … ya know?—none o’ the shit that work or whatever throws at you … just letting it flow through, or wash right off, or whatever … know what i mean?” jackson appears ahead of us around the next bend in the road. “i think so,” i reply, “but it ain’t always easy.” he laughs, “ya got that right.”

jackson is a town of log cabins and houses and stores—clothing shops selling long fur coats, others selling cowboy boots or ski gear, shining hotels, restaurants and cafés, jewellery stores, art galleries, more—everything made of pine. “surprised they have any pine trees left in america,” campbell says. we drive through the wide streets amongst other pickup trucks and american flags, the town not so busy this afternoon, the first blades of spring grass coming up on lawns behind lines of white fences. eventually we find a small non-chain motel at a place just to the side of town by the foot of some small hills, with the sound of a little stream running nearby.

later we ‘cheers’ with our last two cans of coors. “to weeks of this,” i say. “to a lifetime of it!” campbell adds and we both take a long drink. “ah,” he sighs, “now then … better have a shower—i can smell myself.” so i sit back on the bed, opening the colourful floral curtains that match the two quilts, tv at opposite end of the room, bathroom off to the side, green carpet under our shoes, gas heater on campbell’s side of the room warming all the horizontal pine logs. i sit with beer in hand, back up against the wall behind my thin soft bed, backpack spread out on the
floor next to me, watching the snow falling through the window outside and onto
the gold of the f-150, covering all of it except for a big circle on the bonnet where
the engine is still warm. i look at my wallet on the bedside table and the telephone
next to it, listening to the sound of the water falling in the shower. “bugger it,” i say
to myself, and decide to call clair. i dial the number, feeling strange about it, my
head not really wanting to, though still some part of me is keen to tell her about our
day, to share things. no answer straight away, and i hang up before it has a chance
to ring.

i get up, put on my thick blue snowboarding jacket, open the door and step outside.
the snow is still falling, though it looks to be easing up—the clouds are growing
lighter above the mountains near the motel grounds, small bushes shivering out
there. i unlock the tray of the truck and for some reason feel like getting out one of
anton’s fly rods and practicing a few casts, remembering a fishing show i saw once
in which the two hosts went to wyoming in summer, walking up through the richest
green grass, standing in their wading boots on top of home-made timber fences that
creaked and bent slightly under their weight, crossing over a beaver dam into
another field of green grass and perfectly clear spring-fed streams full of brook
tROUT, cut-throat and brown. “wyoming,” they kept saying, the word floating out of
their mouths like the streams that floated down through the meadows between the
mountains, all of it not far from here, though summer still a few months off. at one
point they stood in a big field of grass just practicing their casting. so i get out the
fly-rod, tie a little fly onto the end of the tippet and unwind a few casts in the
parking lot, unsure why, feeling now a little buzz from the beer as it works its way to my empty stomach and tired head—all that road. the snow falling down white and clean, then turning brown, my boots landing on it with a crunch, nobody else around, letting out more of the heavy line back and forward, stripping more and more from the reel with each cast—back and forward, feeling the weight and flicking whip of each end, before bringing it back the other way, and the same again and again and again—mesmerising myself as the snow keeps falling, landing on my hair and jacket, landing on my hand and the reel. the fly on the end glides through the air and the snowflakes from one end of the grey gravel parking lot to the other with nowhere to float, no purpose to it, nothing to receive or be rid of. back and forward, more snow piling up on my head and shoulders, the line and fly slicing through the snow, me feeling nothing now—not the cold, not my hands turning blue, not my breath steaming, not the ridiculousness of it—instead giving over to the flick of elbow and wrist, the rod and line just an extension now of my arm and hand and all my pointlessness, as the snow keeps falling.

“any bites?” i hear campbell ask from the open doorway, buttoning up the sleeves on one of his shirts with a smile. “not yet,” i answer, feeling a little embarrassed. “ah well,” he says, “you might just be using the wrong fly.”

i bring the line forward again and this time let it fall to the ground—the end closest to me landing first, then rolling slowly out to the leader, tippet and fly at the end, all of it gradually settling in the dirt and snow. and funny to see it finally settled
and done like that, no more to unfurl, no more left, enough said. so i reel it in quickly, the line and little fly at the end dragging across the snow and gravel of the parking lot, roped in, done, hooked onto its little loop at the base of the rod.

how am i supposed to really find you?

**april 13, night**

“how bout we go get somethin to eat?” campbell asks. “righty-o,” i reply, “maybe some fish … seeing as we might never catch any.” campbell gets in and starts up the car, “speak for yourself.”

so we drive off, listening to a cd that angela’s brother has made for our trip—all australian eighties rock classics—cold chisel, the screaming jets, midnight oil, the angels, hunters and collectors—the world they sing about completely different to the one outside now. still snowing, driving through town looking for the snake river brewery. “maybe we should just drive from microbrewery to microbrewery around the whole of america,” campbell suggests. “why not? maybe we’ll even see some of the country along the way.” “ah well, now that’d just be a bonus.”

we arrive at the brewery restaurant and walk through the pine doors. everything’s the straw-colour of pine, some dark oak too, a big open space in the middle of the large room, and nearly all tables full. “hey there,” the waitress says—a short blonde
woman with full, warm smile, middle-aged, a genuine shine in her eyes. “table for two?” she asks. “sounds romantic,” campbell replies, “any candles and violins?” she laughs, “i’ll have to check with the boss, but i’ll see what we can do … right this way.” we follow her to a table near the middle of the room where we sit as she tells us the specials, then takes our order. “let me guess,” she says, “new zealand?” we both smile. “australia.” she snaps her fingers, “close.” “now let me guess,” campbell says, looking at her, “canada?” “no,” she laughs, “jackson, wyoming.” “ah well, close.” she laughs again, “point taken. i’ll be right back with your drinks, gentlemen.” we look at the menu. “not a bad guess she made, though,” i say to campbell, “so far i’ve been asked if i’m from england, ireland, scotland, south africa, and oaklahoma.” “oaklahoma?” “yeah, it was in crested butte. the guy said, ‘hey man, that’s a cool accent. what part of oaklahoma ya from?’” “what did you say?” “the panhandle.”

soon our meals come out—a rainbow trout for me, and a steak for campbell. the steak is huge—a whole cow almost, far too much for one person to eat. “should’ve ordered jackelope,” he says.

**april 14**

we leave town mid-morning and drive slowly up into more mountains where, amongst a whole lot of dark-green small trees, we find a little stream running by the side of the road. campbell pulls over. “have to throw a line in at least once
while we’re still in wyoming,” he says as we get out, grabbing a rod each, before cutting down through patches of snow and bright green grass towards the cold-water stream under the trees. the water is so clear i can see tiny grey pebbles, sparkling sand and long thin whisker-like dark reeds flapping along the bottom of the bank. i flick the shining little spinner in a few times, careful of the branches of the small trees around us, then reel it back, not really expecting anything, the water flowing full and thin and deep in spots, hardly any rapids, the most transparent water i’ve ever seen—like a flowing stream of pure air.

“this is incredible,” campbell says, making another cast, “even if we don’t catch anything—it’s the kind of place i sometimes imagine in my meditations.” i smile. “and what happens there,” i ask, “in your meditations?” he reels his line in a bit. “not that much more than what we’re doing now,” he says, “but something does come from being there—being filled by it—same as now.” i wonder about this—wonder if we can, in a subtle way, push through to a greater perception perhaps—create a space in which this place can really reveal itself to us—where we can be filled by it, and then take this meeting back into the rest of our lives somehow. almost as if this stream would like to flow from the world into us, flooding our souls, then back out into the world again and be made more complete precisely because of its passing through us. might i find you in such ways?

i put my rod down to cup my hand and dip it in the water, achingly cold, right there, taking a drink of it, crisp and fresh, drops falling through my fingers. then i
dip my hand in again, splashing my face with it, feeling the wonderful cold on my cheeks. I close my eyes and notice my ears are suddenly filled with its trickling, its flowing, gradually building into a roar. And then when I open my eyes again I see that, further upstream, Campbell has put out his smoke, placed down his rod, and is kneeling down on the damp bank too, the tips of his blue flannel jumper almost touching the water, rolling up a sleeve, his arm still brown from Newman summer, his specially-bought hiking shoes spread out behind him, hand reaching out, going in, taking a drink. “Wow,” he says, then takes off his black beanie and puts it on the grass beside him, cupping both his hands and pulling out enough water to splash his whole face, “Wow.”

And we both kneel there splashing water over ourselves—some kind of weird baptism in the cold morning of Saturday Wyoming. “It can be so easy, can’t it mate … really,” I say. “But we make it difficult,” Campbell says, standing up now. “True … but look at this,” I continue, “what else is there to do in the world?” I feel drunk on this mountain water, on living, on you, maybe. “Well for starters,” he replies, “we could try the rivers of Montana and Idaho.” I shake my head in amazement. “More rivers.”

And so we gather ourselves and all our gear together, get back in the truck and drive down the backside of the mountains towards the cleared flatlands—towards the rich earth and tractor-ploughed rolling potato fields of farmland Idaho.
as we cross another border i’m thinking about one weekend back when james and campbell were both visiting me in the hills when i was just a kid—a rare weekend at the time, even rarer when i look back on it, comprehending now the small amount of time we would actually get to spend together.

i was about five and they were building me a giant treehouse—james’ idea, saying to me one saturday sometime earlier, “how bout i build you a treehouse?” he was excited. i said yes, though i wasn’t really concerned either way, just happy to have him there with me, changing the subject and asking him instead if he thought i could wrap both my hands around his arm—his biceps big and strong. “nope,” he replied, then bent down to let me try, his blue eyes watching as my fingers didn’t even make it half way around. “wow!” i said, in genuine awe, before he reached down and wrapped one hand around my arm with room to spare. i was so amazed at this i could hardly speak. james big with fine blonde hair—looking back now i see he had a similar build to lachlan, though he will always be a giant in my memories. james almost a fully-trained mechanic at the time, full of knowledge, powerful. he visited me most weekends. i spent my whole week waiting for his arrival, before he gradually came less and less when he got married, and then finally went to newman—the first of our family to go.

anyway, by this time he’d been working on the treehouse for a few weeks, buying all the materials with his own money from hardware stores in mundaring. campbell
came up on this particular day to help on the building too, looking tired from night shift as a chef. the treehouse was almost an actual house—bigger than my bedroom, bigger than all my friends’ bedrooms, thick support struts of iron bolted into the fork of the huge jarrah, crossbeams everywhere, a massive ladder on the side made of wood, big spots for windows to go later, a corrugated iron roof to keep out the rain and honkeynuts, views across the whole valley from up there. i could hear them hammering and sawing even as i went inside to get them water, coming back out with a full bottle, giving it to them as they both kept working. “thanks mate,” they both said, and rubbed my head.

and i’m not sure why i asked—maybe i’d seen something on tv, noticed the pile of books on the table by dad’s chair, overheard a conversation somewhere. or perhaps it happened some other way, coming from some other place, maybe some place i had created, maybe some place inside me, maybe some place that had been there my whole life, longer even. or maybe it came from you. whatever it was i suddenly heard myself asking both of them “do you believe in god?” they didn’t even pause from their work or look over when i asked. i think james might have grinned a little on one side of his mouth, the way he does, but in no time at all they answered, james first, then campbell, “nup.” “no.” both of them slammed a nail into their separate crossbeams to emphasise the point. at the time i think i almost considered the matter closed, if it wasn’t for the way they answered—almost as if not believing in something so easily and so certainly was pretty close to actually believing in it—to not believe in something one must first believe the idea into existence right?—
some kind of existence anyway. but back then i put my faith in my brothers because they were the authority on all matters for me—they were in some way my own private gods, and if they said god didn’t exist, then god didn’t exist.

april 14, afternoon

“idaho looks quiet,” campbell says when we pull over next to the shores of a muddy lake about the size of a football field to make some late lunch. there are one or two houses nearby, another house in the early stages of being built, and a red dodge pickup truck parked in one of the driveways, but we can’t see any people. i watch as two ducks come into land on the lake with their feet stretched out like skis, skimming across the surface of the water. “do you reckon you could live here?” campbell asks as he puts the sandwiches together and gives me one. “maybe,” i reply, looking around at the flat farmland beyond the small lake, the road winding further north, and the jagged broken teeth of the tetons back towards wyoming, “i’d have to see what the rest of it was like.” “yeah, that’s the thing isn’t it—there’s just so much more to see, wherever you go.” i take a bite of the sandwich and realise he’s right—that this wandering could go on forever, could become its own goal. reminds me of something i read once about the jews wandering in the desert for forty years looking for their promised land. makes me think it’s not just the jews who had to do that, but that it’s maybe something we all have to do in some way at some time.
campbell turns to me smiling, and i wonder for half a second if he might have
overheard my thoughts. “jesus christ,” he says to me, laughing, “this yankee cheese
is fucken terrible.”

we get back onto the road soon after, driving north through more of the early
springtime farmland of green crops that push out of rich, chocolate earth in parallel
rows. but before long we’re approaching the mountains again. ‘welcome to
montana,’ a sign says, campbell pulling a cd out of the case while i drive us further
along a road that takes us winding through the snow and pines. “i’ve been wanting
to play this for ages,” he says, excited, putting it in the player. “frank zappa’s
‘montana.’ do you know it?” “nup.” “well, you will soon.” the guitars and drums
start up all slow and rolling, then campbell comes in with the lyrics, picking it up a
few decibels when the chorus kicks in. “moving to montana soon,” he sings,
“gonna be a dental floss tycoon.”

he eventually pauses from his singing to look at some of the maps we were given
by hank back in the bar at fort collins. “should be close to the madison valley
soon,” he says, “blue ribbon trout fishing, he said … remember?” i smile, “yeah, i
remember. we should probably throw a line in for him.” and soon enough we come
around a bend of road cut through the mountains and see a huge, grey lake, still
frozen, cold and a little desolate in the cloudy day. it seems to roll out forever—
spreading like a giant metallic disc, offering no reflections today. “no-one ice
fishing here,” i say, and continue driving along its winding edges, keeping an eye
out for any sign of anglers. A little further along the winding road we see the thick concrete of a dam holding in all the cold water—water that’s solid on top, liquid underneath, and probably filled with trout shivering in the depths.

“there’s a few guys there,” Campbell says as the valley drops down from the road in sharp jagged rocks to the base of the dam below, a river flowing from where the dam wall ends. “where?” I look down trying to spot somebody. “down there, about a couple of hundred metres past the dam.” And sure enough, standing in the freezing grey-green water in waders and slight rapids, are about half a dozen guys unwinding their fly rods back and forth, their lines dancing around above the water like the long, thin smoky threads of an extinguished candle flame, swaying in the breeze. “bit crowded,” I say. “and we don’t have any waders—let’s try further on.” So we keep going with the windows open past rapids roaring and sloshing over big, shining rocks. The road gradually leads us down to the same level as the river, just to the side of us now, wider than I had thought, and faster, though the rapids begin to level off gradually. “how bout here?” I pull into a gravel parking area—no cars—and drive right up to the snow-covered edge of the water. “not too bad,” Campbell says, “shall we have a crack at it?” His question reminds me of something Lachlan said to a lady in Crested Butte. She was trying to get on the lift with her son, asking if she was doing it right. Lachlan, indifferent, replied, “yeah, have a crack at it.” The lady got on the chair, turning around in her seat as it carried them both up the mountain, yelling back, “hey! Did you just call my son a crack addict?” Lachlan laughed, then shouted out to her as she went up the lift, “yes mam … yes I did.”
“you seem happy to be here?” campbell says as we get out a couple of rods from the tray, noticing my smile. i glance around at the river shooting past, hearing all the endless movement of it, the mighty rushing. “who wouldn’t be?” i say as we walk over to the bank. campbell smiles, saying “this place is like a different meditation—a stronger one or something. one where the river is wild.” and it is wild—gushing. probably a waste of time to even try fishing here. but catching fish may not be the point anymore.

campbell takes a spot a little further up than me amongst some leafless skeletal bushes, lights a smoke, and casts out a spinner, aiming close to some rocks near the middle of the river—somewhere where the water is not so fast, where the trout might have a chance of grabbing it—before winding it in again. i decide to try the fly rod, stripping the line as i start to unwind it, laying the fly down near another rock in the centre of the river. i send it out a couple of times, pick it up and send it out again, further, closer to the mark, even trying for rocks upstream near the other bank. but it seems like it’s all flowing way too fast for a trout to even notice there’s a fly passing overhead, let alone try to eat one.

april 14, night

we find ourselves (without any fish) in saturday night bozeman montana. we go to another brewery—busy, noisy, the square bar floating like an island in the middle of the room, families and couples out for their weekend night. we order some
burgers the size of footballs and try to eat them in a booth off to the side of the bar, a waitress making sure we’re never without beer. She’s about thirty, friendly, looks happy to be serving. “Where do the locals hang out on a Saturday night in Bozeman?” I ask her as she tucks a pencil into the bun of her dark hair. “Well,” she replies, smiling, “you could try the bar on the corner a couple of blocks down—they usually have shows downstairs in the basement on Saturday nights.” “What kind of shows?” “It’s different every week I think.” I notice all her fingernails are bright red, except for gold-painted thumbs. “Are you going?” I ask. “No, unfortunately I have to work late.” “That’s too bad,” I say. “Well, not if I get to meet more nice folks like yourselves.” “But that’s where you’d be if you didn’t have to work?” “Oh definitely,” she replies, grinning. “No worries then, thanks for your help,” Campbell says as she tucks away her order book and takes our menus. “You boys from Australia?” she asks. “Nah,” Campbell answers, taking a drink, “Oklahoma.”

campbell decides to tip her big because he says he’s sick of figuring out the right percentage. “It’s only money,” he says, “and she was a good waitress.” But then later, as we walk outside, “Angela’s gonna kill me … said she’s been tracking where we are through my online credit-card statements.” “Ah well,” I laugh, “It’s like she’s here with us then,” slapping him on the shoulder as we go, both of us loosened by the night already.
we walk down the sidewalk of the main road in bozeman, the streetlights orange, headlights white, steam pouring out of exhausts and our nostrils, cars shooting by, motels and bars and gas stations and closed fishing and hunting stores lining the road on either side. “wooooo!” campbell yells, “montana!”—all the cowboy movies i used to watch as a kid that were set out here. it’s so weird to find that it’s a real place and that you can actually walk right through the middle of it!” and right now the two of us are walking, staggering a little, through the middle of this small college town, prairies and mountains just beyond, stars above, something inside both of us so excited and amazed by the world right now—that same thing just itching and straining to burst out of our chests and heads and unite with everything—i can feel it, even in this drunken hazy exclamation of the joy of life.

to be wandering the rocky mountains with my older brother far from home in the freezing april night, realising that despite all my hangups, despite all my uncertainties and at-times desperate reachings out for you, despite the silliness of all this drinking, despite everything, i am amazed to find your hand outstretched still.

we walk to the place the waitress recommended and go down a side door into the basement, and bam—the entire joint is bouncing under the low ceiling of exposed wooden beams and clouds of smoke. there’s maybe a hundred people jammed in against the stage watching a couple of mc’s and a dj, everyone raising their hands and swaying to the beat of it. “whoa,” campbell says, his mouth as open and wide as his eyes. we go over to the bar where there’s a bit more space and order a couple
of beers. “funny to see rappers out here in montana,” campbell yells over the lyrics and base, “was expecting maybe a banjo and accordion.” but of course hip-hop is almost everywhere in america now, and so the night rolls on—more and more beers, the whole room rising and falling in time, everybody reaching out for each other, stage to crowd, crowd to stage, everyone part of this great pulling in and giving away.

and then things begin to get a little blurry, a little scratchy and lost in the hazy smoke and swirl of the room, the bass, the rhyme. i think i kiss a girl, or she kisses me, then is gone (i try not to think of clair). campbell is talking to a guy by the bar—everything is moving. i blend into the crowd, completely given over and lost, rising up and down, sliding out of it again, then i look around and see that i’m standing next to campbell at the bar, maybe never having left his side in the first place.

in the end we tumble out onto the street together in a puff of smoke, leaning on each other as we try to stay on the sidewalk all the way back up to our hotel. “bozed in bozeman!” campbell keeps yelling onto the now-empty mainstreet of streetlights and cold wind. “mate,” i say, “do you think we’re closer to something now?” “yep,” he says, “definitely closer to our hotel—and to our hangovers.” i smile, and grimace a little at the truth of it as he starts singing frank zappa again. and i can’t help thinking that if i am any closer to you right now then it’s because i’ve snuck in the back door or something—can’t say i’ve really worked for it. but there sure is
something easier this way—definitely less stressful, less complicated, more fun …

till tomorrow that is. i hold campbell up a little as we walk, him doing the same for me.

campbell utters something incomprehensible to the poor doorman when we finally arrive—“gonna be a fental toss dycoon!”—crawling up the stairs, me making two ham and cheese sandwiches from the eskie while campbell passes out, fully clothed on top of his bed before i can give him his food. and so i eat mine, crumbs falling all over the blankets, slurping some water out of the bathroom sink, but knowing it’ll never be enough. finally i crawl into bed, cracks already beginning to appear in my too-tight skull.

and just before sleep descends on me heavy and dark i look out through a gap in the curtains and see a single star shimmering outside in the distant sky, so pure—and how heartbreaking it is to have things come so close, only to watch them ebb away once more, remembering forever the painfully perfect vision they sometimes leave us with.

**april 15**

the morning passes by like the white lines running alongside the wheels of the truck. we move through the tired yellow-green hungover planes of montana west to east, leaning away from the mountains and back towards the brown centre of the
country, dry dirt and dust surrounding us, hopelessly bleak, saying little to each other. we eat a subway roll above the dusty grime of billings—a town that would probably seem so much nicer on any other day—looking down on all the ashen rooftops and sunday mind-bending boredom.

“what exactly are we looking for?” i ask campbell as we drive the empty outskirts of town. “what do you mean?” he asks. i watch as the silver side-rail of the freeway speeds along, endless sand and faded grass tumbling away on the other side. “i dunno,” i say, “out here.” he doesn’t reply. “but not just out here—not just us—i mean everywhere—everyone.” the sound of the road is deafening now. there are signs all over the place—green with big white arrows pointing off in every direction, except here. “i dunno, mate,” he says, “but i think we’ll know when we find it.” i look out the windscreen which is covered in dirt and bugs—it’s harder than ever to see where we’re going. campbell follows the red, white and blue signs towards the interstate. “but what if we don’t?—what if we run out of time?—what if we have to do all the work?—what if …” but i can’t finish what i’m saying. i’m too tired, spent, hungover, lost.

april 15, early afternoon

we eventually get back onto the many-lane interstate and speed forward, campbell doing all the driving. and through the dirt on one of the side mirrors i notice for the first time a huge cloud emerging on the western horizon behind us dark and angry,
crashing towards us like a pack of brooding wild horses on the charge, breathing
smoke, smelling something in the air maybe, smelling us—is it you coming,
chasing, having had enough of all this selfishness?

“i was thinking about what you were saying before,” campbell says. i lift my head
up from the seat. “and sometimes i think that we just have to keep on going,” he
continues, “even if we have no idea where we’re going or why—and that maybe
there is no place that we’re headed—maybe we just have to keep going, always.” i
sit and listen to his words, to the sound of the road arriving from some future place
i can only imagine. “but will it ever stop, will it ever end?” i ask. he looks over at
me as he drives. “depends what you mean by end,” he says, “and what you mean by
beginning too, for that matter.” it feels like we’re all alone on the interstate now—
the whole eight lanes in both directions empty except for us. “i mean will there ever
be anyone there to greet us, to welcome us? will we ever find ourselves a pair of
arms to fall into and know in that moment finally that yes, this is home?” “well,” he
replies, then pauses, pushing the cruise control to a higher speed, adjusting his
position, a slight smile appearing on the side of his face, “there’s only one way to
find out.”

i’m reminded suddenly of something jay and i talked about—the need to trust our
own experiences, our own observations. so much road behind, so much to come.
more than just us. more than just this trip. maybe those arms are this going, maybe
this road is that home. other cars start appearing on the interstate all around us now.
and when i look out the side mirror again i see the big grey cloud is still following
as we drive and drive, as we travel all the way to the little bighorn national
monument where custer had his last stand after killing a group of indians who were
sitting eating lunch by the river and their tipis, enjoying talk, a peace pipe perhaps.
men, women, children—killed by the white man’s advance. and the horrors of the
place still exist and are real enough.

we drive up through the entrance, pay eleven dollars, then pass a huge cemetery
with perfectly-maintained white crucifixes. we drive around the actual battlefield—
the endless rolling hills and yellow grass of the prairies—reading in silence the
battle signs when we get out and walk around. we see the spot where the soldiers
rode in and shot the indians—their blood still in the land, whether or not we choose
to notice it there. all of it now a national monument you pay to look at and drive
around before you head on to wherever the hell it is you’re going out here in all this
emptiness.

“here comes the storm that’s been following us,” campbell says as i read a little
placard describing the bravery of the cavalry. the storm announces itself in a strong
wind, the clouds overcoming the sun, the scene growing darker, shadow-like—the
grass, the hills, the signposts, the road, the gravesites, the river below where the
indians camped. “should we head back to the car mate?” i shout, squinting my eyes,
the wind loud now, “looks like it’s about to piss down.” we both lean into the wind
as we walk to the car, zipping up our jackets, shielding our faces. then foolishly we
open both doors at once, sending maps flying so that i have to run through the grass collecting them, reaching down to grab them as they go skipping and rolling along (pulling up chunks of grass as i do so), noticing when i pick them up all the names of towns and cities and states and roads scattered—helena montana, boise idaho, salt lake city utah, lander wyoming, rapid city south dakota, the i-70, i-80. i scrunch the maps together in my fists and run back to the car where we wait for the storm to hit. and then it does, though not in a wave of rain as we expect, but in a grating slice of sand. “a sandstorm,” campbell says as it scratches up against the paint of the ford, against the glass windows, the sand creeping into the seals, getting stuck under the windscreen wipers, blowing down into the vents, getting in behind the side mirrors and probably our teeth if we were out there in it. “bloody hell,” campbell says, “bigger than any sandstorm i’ve seen around newman.” i don’t think i’ve ever seen one. the world outside turns dark, visibility only a few metres, the sound of it swooshing through in a crunch, the pickup swaying under the gusts of wind, rocking. and for a moment i’m filled with the idea that the storm is made up of all the dirt and madness we’ve left behind us over the last few days, longer. “it caught us,” i say to campbell. “yeah, it did.” i stare out through the dark wind. “we just can’t outrun it can we?” he looks over at me. “we can try.”

he starts up the car. something eerie and apocalyptic to the storm. the roaring anger of it overtaking the entire plains as i imagine it—the air picking up pieces of earth to give itself form—a massive black front overtaking the whole of america and ultimately the world. “something fitting about it happening here,” i say as campbell
slips it in gear. he nods. “let’s try driving back to the entrance area, hey?” he asks. “okay, but take it slow.” he turns the lights on and we drive slowly back, not seeing any other cars, the wind still strong, the grinding darkness all around as we creep along the road trying not to drive off into the plains and disappear forever. we edge through it slowly and finally arrive at the cemetery and entrance area where we can make out a toilet block, as the wind and sand dies down a little. “bugger it,” he says, “i’m busting to go to the dunny.” “are you sure?” i ask. he looks at me. “of course i’m bloody sure.” i shrug my shoulders, and he pulls up as close as he can to the public toilets. “keep your mouth closed,” i say. he laughs nervously and opens the door—the sound of the wind is still there, the sand crashing against the door and finding its way into the cab. i sit there staring through the windscreen, watching the sand pile up on the wipers, looking at all the crosses, and seeing as yet no official memorial for all the indians who died here.

campbell comes back with sand in his hair, his ears and the creases of his jacket. “bloody hell,” he gasps, brushing himself off and shaking his hair. “hey … did you notice that indian guy standing over there on the front of his car in the sandstorm smoking a cigarette?” he asks, “must have been really keen for a smoke to stand out in this storm.” i look over but don’t see anything. “what car?” i ask. he looks over. looks around some more. “that’s weird,” he says, “he was right there a second ago. i swear to god—saw him through the storm as i was walking back.” he looks around again, “he was staring right at me.”
april 15, evening

we drive and drive the empty interstate and the empty, white-wine coloured plains all afternoon, the storm dying down and eventually passing over altogether, leaving a fine layer of dust on the road like light snow. we push on, scattering the dust as we pass, finding nowhere to rest or even stop. then finally, after the light of the day has left and the stars and neon advertising of america have come out, we slide back down into wyoming and the flashing motel chains of buffalo—the same outskirt motels of anytown america—the best westerns, the super 8s, the motel 6s, the comfort inns—and with them all the fast food burger kings, mcdonald’s, kfcs, pizza huts, dennys, dairy queens and arbys of the neon-lit new world. we drive up and down the main road, the headlights of a few other cars passing by, and eventually settle on another independent log-cabin motel, this one across from the sheriff’s office. then, mad with hunger, we try to find a food joint still open, finally and reluctantly pulling up at the only place that hasn’t closed. “are you sure about this?” i ask campbell. “nope. but there’s no other choice, is there?” “we could just not eat,” i suggest. “but i’m starvin.” and so we roll into the drivethrough—going through just before they close their window and turn off their giant neon sign for another night. campbell orders us two super-sized combo things which come out as two buckets of soft drink, two shovel loads of fries and two sorrowful-looking burgers of soggy meltings. we both wince, force them down and sit there watching television in our log-cabin room afterwards, feeling sick and spent.
and with the sound of rain coming down outside—riding on the back of all that dust
maybe—i dream again that i’m running down a hill, sprinting with my arms out,
except this time it’s not where i grew up near perth. this time it’s the place of
custer’s last stand. i’m running from something—i don’t know what—running
towards something too. and then i look around and see, speckled on the tips of
prairie grass, what can only be blood. i run faster and faster, and finally manage to
take off—gliding slowly away from the plains and the blood and into the sky. but
once more, for some reason, like in all the other dreams, i look down again. and as i
do, i start to gradually, slowly, reluctantly come back to the bloodied earth—the
dream ending just after i touch the ground.

april 16

feeling a bit better today. the ground outside is wet and the smell of fresh, sweet
rain drifts in through the open door. “good not to be hungover, hey?” i say. “yeah,
hungover on fast food instead,” campbell replies, hands on his stomach. we pack
our bags and throw them in the backseat of the truck which is starting to look pretty
ratty now—clothes and shoes and foodwrappers everywhere, cds, guidebooks and
maps, the eskie and our sleeping bags, plus a little silver gas burner we bought in
boulder and haven’t even used. we start up the truck to get her warm in the brisk
morning—pine needles in the motel parking lot, each room a separate little studio
on its own, the sun coming down through tree branches and passing clouds.
soon we’re on the road again—the same rolling prairies of wyoming rippling out like a lumpy, giant, yellow blanket ahead of us—brighter today, pushing further east through gillette towards sundance, then turning off in search of devil’s tower. “or at least that’s the whitefella name for it,” i say to campbell, reading from our guidebook, “one sioux leader has a better name.” “what’s that?” campbell asks, driving. “he describes it as ‘the heart of everything that is.’” campbell looks over—“that’s a much better name.” and if the sioux leader is right then i’d be hopeful of maybe finding you in a place like that.

when we finally arrive we pay the park-entrance fee then drive along a little road up towards the dark, looming tower. “what the hell are they?” campbell suddenly asks in excitement, stopping the truck and pointing at the small hill on the side of the road. “where?” i ask. “there!” he points again, then points ahead, “there too! … everywhere!” i look to where he’s pointing and see a lot of little animals sitting up on their furry hind legs next to mounds of sand and dirt. “prairie dogs,” i smile. “they’re all over the place!” campbell exclaims, looking around at all the mounds stretching off over the grass and dirt as far as we can see—the little animals with their cream and brown fur and fast-moving tails rocking back with tiny front paws hanging, noses twitching, sniffing the breeze, sniffing us. every now and then one of them runs down into its hole, or lets out a little yap, a little bark. “hence the name,” campbell says to himself as he starts driving towards the tower, the prairie dogs pausing to watch us as we go. “wow!” he says, and i smile at his wonder, “prairie dogs!—american wild-life!”
for the next hour we walk around the tower, which looks down on us like a giant thimble rising from the ground—a 1,267-foot high volcanic mass of rock, silent, steady, daunting, a million years come and gone—still a sacred place for many american indians. “what do you think?” i ask campbell. “yeah,” he replies, “it’s interesting.” “feel anything?” i ask. “what do ya mean?” “you know,” i say, “anything different?” he looks at me. “not really, other than the huge volcanic rock in front of us.” i glance up at the long striations of the tower streaming down from the peak to the base, and running back up the other way. it seems to want to pull out all my breath or something, like when i stare at the colour blue for too long—everything seems to be pouring away. maybe devil’s tower is not such a bad name after all. “you right mate?” campbell asks. “yeah,” i reply, looking back into the green pines around us, taking a more even breath, “was just wondering.”

april 16, afternoon

we drive east all the way through the gently swaying prairie grass of wyoming and into the black hills of south dakota—the prairies completely, suddenly, giving way to hills and the dark colour of ponderosa once again. we roll up and down the hills, passing through gold mining towns now turned into drab, out-of-place looking casinos and poker joints. “guess they’re still mining gold,” campbell says, “except now they dig it out of people’s pockets.”
“shall we go all the way to rapid city?” i ask as we drive on, billboards streaming by one after another—‘ron’s fishing store 20 miles ahead, 10 miles, 5 miles, 2 miles, 1 mile—turn around you missed it,’ other signs saying similar things. “well,” campbell replies, “i like the sound of the name—rapid city—sounds like things are happening there.” but when we arrive we soon figure out there’s nothing too rapid about it, at least not any more—the light after-work traffic stopping only for the odd train to pass through. and for some reason campbell and i find ourselves at a sports bar with walls and bathrooms full of televisions, and almost no human beings.

we sit down and the middle-aged, balding bartender asks us “what’ll it be?” “coupla burgers thanks.” he nods and goes straight away into the kitchen, staying in there, not wanting to talk, and not returning until he comes back later with our meals. “here ya go,” he says, placing our burgers on the bar. “jeeesus,” campbell says. the burgers are so big they don’t even fit properly on the plate. again the bartender heads back to the kitchen, leaving campbell and i to sit there eating our meals alone in silence, except for the fifty televisions that stare back at us from the other side of the bar. campbell grimaces as he watches high speed chases on ‘world’s wildest police videos,’ while i get lost in the drama of an evangelical preacher laying his hands on people’s foreheads, as a bed of arms waits for the fall.
we stay the night in a cigarette-smelling motel room on the edge of town and decide to leave first thing in the morning, driving straight through more winding hills to Mount Rushmore. But the huge parking lot and entrance fee, with tacky souvenir places lining the entranceway, make it all so hard and unreal—the presidential faces almost alien in the grey-white mountain. Something incredibly bold and incredibly arrogant about it at the same time.

we drive out of Rushmore and see a little further up the road the massive rock carving of the Indian chief Crazy Horse—the Indian answer to the presidents of Rushmore—this monument running out of funding of course, but still amazing in size and vision—the head and hair bigger than all the Rushmore faces put together, the horse he rides on from out of the rock adding to the immensity. The chief’s arm and finger extend out ahead, pointing to “where my dead lie buried.” And there is nowhere he doesn’t point. “Now that’s more like it,” Campbell says as we stand there looking up at the fearsome honesty and terrible truth of it. “Now there is a statue, there is a monument.” And there is a warrior, for sure.

we keep going down through the ever-flattening prairies and into Nebraska. But nothing changes once we cross the border of course. “Still haven’t seen any bears … or buffalo … or mountain lions,” Campbell says. The Nebraskan plains instead full of a golden emptiness—a flat-calm sea of grass—punctuated here and there by little weatherboard houses with porch doors and flyscreens hanging broken and
rusted off their hinges, busted swings and prams in front yards, white paint cracked and peeling off the walls. it’s hard to imagine people living out here under all this sky, all this space.

we eventually line up with the i-80 again on our way back to cheyenne, pushing west (against the lean of all the prairie grass) into a strong wind. “seems like this wind is trying to keep us back,” i say, “from going further on.” “or returning to where we’ve already been,” campbell adds. we use twice as much fuel as usual. somewhere outside cheyenne we turn left onto the i-25 and straightline it back down to boulder, the rockies there with us again on our right, arriving in the late afternoon as the sun starts to stream down through clouds above the continental divide in the distance. “that’d be right,” campbell says, red-eyed and bleary as we drive into town, “rush hour.” but before long we’re parking the truck at anton’s place. back again. and what gained?

forgive me. i find it so hard to measure if i am actually progressing here—if i am growing closer to you, moving further away, or staying in exactly the same place.

april 17, evening

the last time anton and campbell crossed paths was at campbell and angela’s wedding in bali. they hug now, the two tall towers of them leaning into each other, smiling, patting each other on the back. “good to see you man, i was wondering
how long it’d take you to get over here.” “yeah, it’s been a long time coming, mate.” “how was your trip up through the northern states?” “good,” campbell replies, “almost ready to go see some more of this country.” “i hear ya,” anton says, “we’ll hit the road soon enough … but for now, shall we go have a drink?”

and so we go down to mountain sun microbrewery on pearl and take one of the booths along the wall. other people sit in chairs and tables in the centre, or lean up against the shining bar at the end opposite the big glass doors and windows of the street. waiters and bartenders run this way and that, the place full of young, midweek afterworkers unwinding with all kinds of ales—from fruit flavoured wheat beers, to nutty chocolate stouts, and all the pales, ambers, and everything between. tables are stacked with mushroom burgers, crumbed chilies stuffed with cream cheese, pizzas, more. everybody is wearing bright clothes, and bright in themselves—in fact the whole place seems yellow.

“what can i getchya?” asks our waiter, a confident and busy young guy, hair spiked up with gel. campbell asks for the same ale as me, and the waiter replies, “would you like a pitcher of that?” campbell looks puzzled, a slight grin on the side of his mouth, looking at both anton and me. “nah mate,” he replies, “i don’t want a picture of it, i want the real thing.” now it’s the waiter who seems puzzled, campbell looking at us again for clarification. i smile. the waiter says again, “but would you like a pitcher of it?” “nah mate,” campbell replies, leaning towards the waiter, “like i said, i don’t want a bloody picture of it, i want the real thing.” now
anton is laughing, but before it gets any worse i say “campbell,” trying not to laugh, “he’s asking if you want a jug—a pitcher—not a picture.” “oh,” he says, turning slightly red, as close as i’ve ever seen him to embarrassed, “yeah, yeah, we’ll have a pitcher.” anton is rocking himself with laughter now, and the waiter still looks a bit confused as he walks off with our order. “i thought you were about to slap the guy,” anton says, still laughing—big teeth, blue eyes full like moons or mountain lakes. “i thought he was taking the piss,” campbell says, smiling finally, drinking some water. “nah mate,” anton says in his best aussie accent, “i don’t want a blawdy picture of it, i want the real blawdy thang!”

we eat our meal, and anton says, “so … i finish work in a couple more days, then we can hit the road if you like, maybe go over to utah, arizona, possibly nevada.” “mexico!” i say, riding whatever wave i seem to be sharing with my brother and cousin at the moment. “california!” shouts campbell, a few people turning to look. “shit, why don’t we just keep driving?” anton says. “and what do you think we’re gonna find out there?” i ask, “on all that road?” anton looks at me. “everything man!” he says, excited, “damn it’s good to have you both here.” “damn good to be here, mate,” campbell replies and we cheers. and right then i feel everything coming together within the walls of my skin and the circle the three of us make—the whole night in fact brought together in this meeting place of my cousin, my brother and i—some kind of mad and unholy trinity for sure.
we spend a few days hanging out in boulder, anton going off to give people massages at different times throughout the day. “they’re all such beautiful women!” he says. “don’t give us that,” campbell answers in his dry voice again, a wry smile on his lips, hardly looking up from the newspaper he’s reading, “they’re all wrinkled old men, aren’t they?” anton looks at him puzzled, trying to register what he’s heard, before finally smiling, “sheet … you crazy arzees … i can see we’re going to have some fun on the road.” at other times the three of us go for a burrito at illegal pete’s, or some stuffed chillies at another microbrewery on the mall, as the mountain range looks down, careless.

one afternoon we load up the truck with fishing rods and gear, and anton drives us up through the canyon to the top of the flatirons, getting out to look down on the city of boulder—the trees and grid-system roads, the red rooftiles of the university, all the houses, the flatland of america on the other side disappearing into a dull and faded glow all the way to the east coast, a few small lakes in places, buildings of industry, the road to denver snaking south and ending in distant buildings and haze. “nice, huh?” anton says, “except denver is getting closer and closer by the day.” then he takes us higher, further up into the mountains on small backroads, before pulling onto a gravel track and bringing us winding down towards a parking area at the head of a walking trail. “this trail goes down to a stream,” anton says, “and in that stream there’s trout … but first things first—who wants a brownie?” he pulls out a little jar of them and has one, and i think “hell, why not?” and so eat one too,
but campbell declines. “nah mate, makes me paranoid.” “even eating it?” anton asks, “i find it more of a body thing.” “especially eating it,” campbell replies, “even my toes get paranoid.”

we walk down through the gravel and swaying light of the afternoon, the trail zigzagging further down to the base of a valley of ponderosa and sage, the shadows spreading wider the further we go. soon we come to a little picnic area of benches and logs and next to it the most peaceful little stream flowing in shining clear water around rocks and fallen trees. “bloody oath,” campbell says quietly and almost to himself, his hands full of fishing rods, me with small tacklebox, anton with water. i grab a rod and reel with spinner and throw a few casts into the water right in front of the picnic table where we dump all our gear—and immediately i see trout. “here you go,” campbell whispers. they come right out from underneath rocks and logs on the other side of the bank, lured out by the shine and movement of the spinner into deeper water. but they must not be completely convinced by the little metal lure, only following it so far before they dart back into the cover of the rocks again—the first trout i have seen this entire trip. “close man … close,” says anton, watching somewhere behind me as campbell ties a spinner onto another line. maybe the trout see me, or all of us. or maybe they are just not ready to be caught.

i give the fly rod a go, landing a short cast right next to the rocks on the other side of the creek, and again they come out and have a look, but again they’re not interested. “they’re just toying with you,” campbell says, smiling. i try over and
over, and eventually they don’t seem to even notice. “there’s lessons in that, man,” anton says laughing. “yeah,” says campbell, “they’re waiting for me.” and so he has a couple of casts with a different spinner. but the same thing happens again—out they come, then they retreat, until they’re not interested at all. “keep trying arzees,” anton says smiling, and walks upstream a bit, stretching out his long white winter-time body onto a warm spring rock to soak up the sun from above, and the heat of the rock from below. i cast a spinner right down next to him, and it lands near his head with a plop. “good luck cuz,” he shouts, “wake me if you catch something.” he pulls his green visor down over his eyes, stretches out his limbs like a long cat, and disappears from the world.

“c’mon,” campbell says, and together we walk further upstream on a narrow trail, stepping quietly from rock to rock, gently pushing aside branches and twigs, moving slowly so as to not spook the fish, all the while listening to the soft swoosh and trickle of the stream, the sun reflecting off little rapids here and there so that the river almost looks like flowing light. the two of us keep moving upstream until we see a nice big rock where trout might want to take shelter. i unflick the spool, bend the rod back, and cast just upstream of the rock so that the spinner floats down past it, too attractive to ignore. “nice cast,” whispers campbell as i wind it in with slight jerking movements, holding the rod low, horizontally, so that the spinner swims better, sending little ripples through the water as it goes along shining. and again we see one or two fish, but they all-too-quickly retreat once more. campbell tries even further upstream, but with no luck.
after a while i start moving back to the picnic area, casting here and there, pulling the line in again, empty. and just as i come around one little bend in the stream i spot anton, still on the same big flat rock, though now leaning out over the edge of it, his face about a foot above the surface of the water, leaning down like an animal about to take a drink, like a mountain lion. he stays there like that, and i can’t tell if he has his eyes open or not, the long limbs of him trailing out behind—something strangely special about seeing him like this, something uncovered and real. i find myself thinking about him in the mountains around telluride where he spent all those summer months for all those years, living in tents and mountain cabins, remote and cut-off from the world of modern man, eating wild food, learning how to hunt, how to be in the raw nature of the earth again, rediscovering something there, himself maybe, something like you perhaps. and suddenly i have nothing but respect and love for the man, for what he has found, and is still uncovering, staring down into that moving flow of water with eyes open or closed—nothing but love and respect for campbell too, still upstream, still casting, moving through this land with me for a short while, moving through an entire life with me thanks to the discoveries he has made for himself and shares with me not so much in the actual discussion of his learnings, but in the way he is with me, with the world. and it might just be the brownie, but i seem to have nothing but love and respect for everyone—for lachlan, michael, deano, zac, anna, even clair—for everybody in the world going about the living of life in their own ways, at their own speed, for their own reasons and beliefs.
and i watch as anton reaches a slow hand down towards the water, balancing his weight on his other hand and knees behind him, extending his long fingers—maybe he’s seen a fish—maybe that’s it. but he moves his hand so slowly into the water that any fish would notice him and be gone. instead he makes a cup out of his hand and slowly lifts the water he has gathered, the rest of it sliding over the edges of his palm or through the gaps in his fingers—the whole scene passing in slow motion, the water dropping incredibly slowly like peace or dark night back to the stream in tiny drops as he moves his hand up to his mouth and takes a long cold drink, splashing the rest of it over his face in what looks like one of the most natural and normal acts that any human being could undertake, and at the same time, the most strange.

**April 21, afternoon**

we drive back into town without any fish, buy a couple of six packs of blue-moon and drive to another spot that anton knows a little further south, not so far into the mountains. the water here is a little wider, a dam of logs lying across the stream. “try in there where the water’s deeper,” anton says, and i send the spinner flying way over to the other side and pull it back along the high-side edge of the little dam, beer at my feet, campbell casting parallel to me further up, both beer and cigarette in hand—no easy thing while reeling in a spinner—but still no luck for either of us. i cast a couple more times, then lean my rod against a nearby rock so i can sip on my beer. “looks like these fish don’t actually eat anything,” i say.
“yeah,” campbell adds, “weird american mutant trout that don’t need food.” anton smiles then places down his beer and picks up his fly rod. “okay, i’ll show you how it’s done … just so you know they can be caught.” and he casts out to the exact same spot i’ve been landing in, and straight away hooks up—nothing too big—just a little brown trout, but a trout none-the-less. “yeww!” campbell exclaims—anton pulling it in before it has a chance to run back to the rocks or into the dam, wetting his hand before he picks up the fish, gently raising it up out of the water, the flesh on it shiny brown and green, dots in spots, tail flapping, mouth opening and closing, the hook touching his tiny white teeth, his wide eyes black and moving, afraid. anton wastes no time working the barb-less hook out of its mouth and then holding the trout back in the water with open hand until it is ready to swim off on its own. “nice work,” campbell says, “they are real fish … well done mate.” but i look at anton and he almost seems sorry for the trout, like he feels guilty for having pulled him in at all. and something in me feels the same—almost sad to have finally seen one caught.

but i decide to pick up my rod anyway and land a couple of casts in the same spot, and still no bites—and just when i think i’ll never land a north american trout, one must accidentally catch himself on my hook—the line suddenly jerking, springing to life. straight away i pull him in. “nice one,” campbell says. anton smiles, “your first rocky mountain trout.” it’s almost identical to the one he caught—a little smaller, a little more afraid. i decide let him go as well—not because it’s what i
usually do, or because i don’t like eating trout, but because in this instant, it seems like the right thing to do.

“okay,” campbell says, putting down his beer and stubbing out his smoke, “time for a decent-sized one.” soon after, he surprises us all—himself mostly—by catching exactly that. he too lets it go, even though i’ve never seen him do so before—remembering a time when both of us would watch a fishing show and see the hosts catch and release their fish—the two of us would grimace as the huge trout or whatever would go swimming off again, watching dinner and the result of all that hard work disappear. but now, perhaps, i am beginning to see it a little differently—that maybe the reward isn’t so much in the fish landing on the shore next to me, or in the frying pan later on, but in the actual casting out for it, in the actual fly-tying, location choice, casting—in the process of the fishing, of the search itself.

and so maybe in this simple way i am already with you—and this day at least, as i stand fishing with my brother and cousin, the sight and sound of the water sliding past, the sun disappearing over the rockies and the edge of the world—maybe this day at least, stoned or unstoned, drunk or sober, you have hooked me well enough and true.
the sound of the wheels once more rolling over the road beneath us. anton is up
front driving, campbell in the passenger seat. i’m tired from all the running around
today—all the stopping at supermarkets to buy bananas and cereal, baked beans
and bread, the detours to sports stores to get shoes i can walk in instead of these
boots. we also buy some blue self-inflating camping mattresses to go with
everything else—all of it thrown together in the back of the truck with our bags,
more fishing gear, tarpaulins, camping chairs, eskie with ice and beer, sleeping
bags and some of anton’s musical instruments for good measure—bongo drums,
guitars, didgeridoos, other percussion stuff. “the gypsies take to the road!” anton
laughs as we look at it all.
i don’t think i’ve been so tired this whole trip—something in me completely giving over to fatigue as we move through the mountains towards the i-70 in the late afternoon. i must fall asleep in the midst of it, rocked unconscious by all this going—by the need to move again.

and perhaps this is just a wheel i’m running here, perhaps this is just the same old ground. but at the same time i can’t shake the feeling that there is something else coming to life inside me, something else growing there. it’s strange. makes me wonder if the only way i’m going to find a lasting you is if i let you grow in the muddy depths of who i am—in my heart, or soul, or whatever, until you actually appear. i guess i’ll have to wait and see. maybe i’m just tried.

meanwhile, the road keeps coming, keeps going too in the same breath.

april 25, night

we eventually make it to moab, utah, meeting up with anton’s friends fred and andrew in the tired parking lot of another brightly-lit shopping centre, going in to grab a few more supplies before driving further out into the desert and the night. we find a national park with designated camping areas, but all of them are full. “how bout this little trail here?” anton suggests through the window to fred and andrew, our headlights stretching out into the darkness. “yeah, hell … why not. we have to sleep somewhere.” so anton drives the truck out along the little track through low-
lying scrub, leading us deeper into the thick night. Eventually we find a spot on a
flat rocky outcropping where we park and organise our sleeping gear.

Fred and Andrew have a tent which they struggle with in the dark, the two of them
talking to each other in short little bursts. “This pole through here.” “I thought it was
this one.” “No, there … now that peg over here.” All Campbell, Anton and I have is a
plastic blue tarp which we throw on the ground, then our self-inflating mattresses,
opening up the valve to let the air pour in before closing it off once it’s full, then
our sleeping bags with jackets for pillows. “Too easy,” Campbell says, tired,
everyone exhausted after all our driving. And suddenly the only thing left to do is
is pulled up tight on the tent. There are a few lights from other campers scattered
here and there, the sound of a twig snapping, the clank of a saucepan against its lid,
but other than that it feels like we’re miles into the middle of black-night America,
the earth flooded in darkness, no moon, with only the twinkling shine of stars
overhead—stars that I seem to feel strangely closer to than at any other time in my
life, in any other sky—something unfolding for me while I lie on my back staring at
them, not knowing the constellations or the planets, but understanding something
else perhaps—like maybe my fate and indeed the very makeup of who I am might
actually be tied to the flowing course of them through the sky.

Later the wind comes howling in under the truck. And for the first time on the trip I
have to use the hood of the sleeping bag to cover up my head. But I still lie freezing,
unable to get warm, hearing campbell rolling over next to me, shivering too. “shit mate,” i hear him say, “turn up the bloody heater would ya?”

in the middle of the night i get up to put on a beanie, tracksuit pants and shirt, looking up at the sky again, seeing that it’s all changed now—gradually the cycle of the night pushing on, though just another cycle in the middle of an even bigger one—the month, the year, our lives, the life of the moon and stars themselves. and i wonder, just before i finally sleep, what will happen to us—to the real us—when this cycle is over, when there is no more of this road to go?

surely a different kind of road must appear from out of the darkness, leading on to some other place? surely another beginning?—surely?

**april 26**

i wake inside the darkness of my sleeping bag, sweating—a cocoon in the warm morning, the sun back again.

i unzip the bag and take a look out at the new world in this new morning, surprised to see that the night has taken up all this form—red earth all around, fine red sand, the red rocky outcrop where we parked the cars, the tents of other campers here and there, rising buttes and mesas on the horizon, everything red like we’ve woken up
on mars—earthy red like the rich ochre of cave paintings—cinnamon coloured dust—all of it softening to the come-on of the morning light.

i look over and see campbell still snoring in his bag, anton’s stuff rolled up and ready to be packed away, fred and andrew’s tent still there, no movement. so i put my head back down and stare up at the now-blue sky stretching out forever.

then the sound of a guitar comes to life out of the blue and the red, a gentle strum at first, tuned strangely, for some reason giving me the feeling of indians out here, seeing their faces and souls written in the land somehow, hearing them. a bird circles way up over our heads, listening i’m sure as he soars—the strum and individual plucking of notes—it must be anton. i look out from my sleeping bag but can’t see him. he must be on the other side of the truck, probably sitting on the bonnet—the hood. the music delicately eerie in the morning, the notes sliding into each other and the earth before floating off with the slight wind. strum storoom strollom streetum stree-le-lom—the guitar talking for him, for me, for this amazing place we’ve all woken to today. and then from out of nowhere a car goes driving by. “bloody hell,” campbell says, sitting up, “there’s a road right there?—it felt like we were in the middle of nowhere.”

april 26, late morning

we’re walking down a trailhead into the unknown red distance, brownies eaten,
trucks left back at the parking area, andrew staying there too. “you guys go on ahead,” he said, “think i’ll catch up on some more shut-eye … play a bit of guitar maybe.” i haven’t really spoken a word to andrew yet—something deeply sad in the way he carries himself, in the way he floats inside his own body and this utah land, the way he talks to anton with respect and lazy scorn at the same time, the way he doesn’t want to come hiking with us now. instead he stays and plays the guitar in the parking lot for anyone who’ll show up, for himself, for no-one at all—he strums a ‘d’ chord as we walk off.

so now just campbell, anton, fred and me walking slowly along, our arms swinging down next to us, our legs extending, feet moving over crumbling rocks, the sun and heat sucked into the red ground to radiate out and spread up through our feet, bones and spines to our brains. my new shoes are working alright, a little high on the arch maybe, but fine enough for this morning.

“so fred,” campbell asks, “what do you do with yourself?” fred is short, strong, with fine, blonde hair and blue eyes. he seems completely relaxed and at ease with everything. “well,” he replies, softly, adjusting his prescription glasses, “by day i’m a graphic designer, and by night i play music … lately i’ve been playing a lot of bass guitar with anton.” we keep walking as the sun continues to rise. “fred’s an awesome musician,” anton says, “he even makes me sound good.” fred smiles, “and you guys haven’t seen each other for like … years?” he asks. “yeah, that’s about right,” campbell replies. “so your moms are sisters, right?” fred continues,
turning to anton, “but how did you end up in america?” “my mom got on a plane and left perth the day she turned twenty one,” anton replies, “then married my dad.” “on her twenty-first birthday?” fred asks, surprised. “uh-huh. as soon as she was old enough to get out of there … one a.m. on her twenty-first birthday.”

pushing uphill now, jogging in places, feeling the movement all the way down to our toenails. guys on mountain bikes appear in bright lycra colours, some of them sitting down on rocks in the shade, eating a protein bar or sucking on a fluorescent blue drink. “hey,” they say in acknowledgement, though looking at us a little strangely, maybe because we’re the only ones here without bikes. “g’day,” i reply, and it sounds strange—my voice coming from so far away—from the other side of the universe, struggling to arrive in this moment with the rest of me. “check this out,” anton says from up front as we approach the end of the trail. we all follow him through little sage bushes, going even further up the track before the ground levels out. and then, amazingly, spread out below us is something straight out of a cowboy movie—the four of us standing on a pitching lip, the ground disappearing just in front of us and dropping down to a mighty valley floor below like a wave, three or four buttes standing like massive chimney spouts in the centre of the valley floor (green in places), with another wall and ledge on the other side of the valley. “better get some of this,” campbell says, lifting the video camera up to his eye, fred taking some photos.
anton stands next to me with a crazed tint to his blue eyes. “if i was a giant i’d drop down into this wall like i was surfing,” he says to me, “man, what a place.” i immediately imagine myself a giant too, paddling into the ledge we’re standing on, cutting way down across the surface of it, a bottom turn maybe, then riding it hard back up the face, a cutback off the lip, before dropping way back down into the valley again. “yeah man, that’s it,” anton says, “yeah man, go!” these imaginings intermixing with the brownie as i feel part of me descend down into it—into the world—in complete joy, as if i’ve finally and once and for all made the decision to launch into life, whatever the consequences and whatever the result. completely worth it.

“is this what it’s about?” i ask anton as i stand there with my eyes closed, “is this what we’re looking for?” he places his hand on my shoulder. “maybe,” i hear him say, “maybe it’s also a way of looking.” i feel like i’m rising above it all suddenly, circling, soaring, then swooping down.

but as we start to head back, i find myself thinking about these brownies. i can see that they are definitely giving me something, but like too much alcohol i also wonder what they might be taking away. and then my thoughts become too slippery—too hard to form—and i decide to just concentrate on walking instead.

“maybe we should find somewhere to camp a bit earlier this time,” fred says. “and maybe somewhere not so cold,” campbell adds. so in the afternoon we drive back
through moab and into the heart of the red desert. we look for places in the
designated camping areas, but they’re all full. after a while we turn off the road and
end up driving out to one of the chimney-spout buttes and park at its base. “we’re
on the valley floor now, aren’t we?” i say as we get out of the truck, “the valley we
looked down on when we went hiking earlier.” “certainly are,” anton replies, the
sidewalls looming way off.

the butte we camp under is amazing. i stand there looking up its sharp-edged face
of long square blocks reaching up and up like a giant red finger pointing to the sky
while crumbling away. part of it speaks to my bones, says to them that they too
come from this earth, and to this earth they will soon enough return. but it also
speaks to something else in me—something that wants to follow its pointing,
higher and higher.

**april 26, night**

the fire rages. “check out the shadows it makes,” campbell says, and we turn and
look at them dancing up the spine of the butte behind us, more stars overhead now,
the entire band of the milky way stretching across the sky. in front of us is the dark
valley floor with one or two lights in the distance—a far-off town. anton is heavily
strumming the chords and notes of his indian guitar, as fred starts weaving a gentle
and low running river on acoustic base underneath anton’s playing. andrew taps
and booms a big bongo. i just to try to keep up with some clapping sticks, and campbell plays some smaller tabla drums, pausing at times to light another smoke.

and we all go along with the wave of the music, growing in volume, getting swept up in it, letting out the song, hearing it bounce and boom off the butte behind us and out into the heart of the valley, anton even adding his voice to the mix here and there. fred breaks into a bass solo at one point, then andrew goes shooting off on the bongo before anton takes a run up through the high strings and gently works his way back down again. i do a quick stick roll solo and campbell moves into a double tap on the tablas before we settle back down into the groove of it again, feeling it rise and rise to something loud and high at times, then down on the backside once more, the beat softer but still there, the harmony filling things out, something in each of us coming together to drive the whole thing on. anton even pulls out a didgeridoo and lets a deep throaty warble out into the land—the sound of australia. i close my eyes for a while and hear nothing but the music we are making, feeling it run up my arms and all through me, rattling inside my body, and passing out again, replaced by the next wave that comes rolling, sculpting something in the spaces between us as it goes. and so this is how we spend the night, making conversation without words, where we all get to speak and be heard at the same time, as the stars spin in silent applause above.

you must surely hear us, for i think i hear you in this playing.
how is it i feel you come so close, then ebb away again, then closer still, before moving off once more? a conversation in itself maybe—a dance, a song.

“what’s this place called?” campbell asks as we hike up along the well-worn path, tourists and families all around. “arches national monument,” anton replies as we step over smooth red rocks and arrive finally at the end of the trail—a delicate arch window where wind blows howling and funneling through a giant hole worn into the crumbling sandstone, the sound of it roaring in my ears like a river as a storm comes in from the west. “c’mon, let’s take a closer look,” anton says, walking right out into the centre of the arch where he puts his arms out and actually leans right into the wind, which keeps him up and stops him tumbling through. so campbell and i walk right up to it as well, closing our eyes and feeling the wind keeping us up, saying nothing, the sound of it too great, a little crowd behind us watching, everyone else coming gradually out to lean into the wind when we’re done.

“mate, i really need to have a piss,” i say to anton on our way down the hike, but there’s way too many people walking and watching. “that’s a bummer,” he replies, smiling. and then it starts raining too. “great,” i think at first. but then i realise that it really doesn’t matter. it rains. we get wet. i really need to piss—but so what? feels to me in this instant like the whole world needs to piss. so i hold it in as the rain keeps coming down, hitting the dry red dirt around us, melting it as it goes, turning it even darker, little creeks starting to form, mud, the rocks getting slippery.
but i don’t care about getting wet—none of us do—instead just feeling our feet flop out ahead of us landing wherever they will, other people running down around us to get to their cars, but we just walk along, our shoes dragging over the wet rocks, hair wet, jackets too, the wind at our backs pushing us on.

i find a timber toilet-block at the carpark. and it might sound crass, but it suddenly feels like everything is tumbling out—not just in the physical act itself, but as if something is streaming out my chest too, a huge release of another kind, as if to finally comprehend that there’s nothing to worry about, nothing to really run towards, nothing to slip over rocks in the name of, nothing to shoulder others for, nothing to fear, nothing to pursue for my own ends, nothing but to merely love the world and everyone in it. and so i smile at the sound of the rain on the tin roof above, the sound of cars driving off on the wet road, the feeling of everything pouring through.

**april 27, midday**

“how’s the writing goin?” campbell asks as we start driving again. “yeah,” anton adds, “is it a journal or something?” i look out at the dark clouds and rain. “well,” i reply, “just my thoughts i suppose. maybe others’ thoughts too.” anton looks over at campbell, “so we have to watch what we say, huh?—and what we think?” i smile, “not exactly. guess i’m just observing, or looking, or something.” “oh yeah?” anton says, “feel like saying what for?” outside the earth has turned the colour of
rich, beautiful, blood—whose blood, i can’t say. “i don’t know,” i reply, “me, or someone or something else, or the future, or truth, or home. i dunno.” anton smiles, nodding, looking out through the rain on the windows. “well … let us know if you find anything, or if we can help,” he says, glancing over at campbell, “and we’ll keep an eye out too.” i smile, not only at what he says, but also at how ridiculous such a search sounds. “thanks mate … you too.”

fred and andrew have already headed back to boulder with some fair-size hangovers while campbell, anton and i push on. “so where do you guys want to go?” anton asks, as we approach the main road. “wherever, mate,” i say. “maybe the grand canyon at some stage,” campbell says, hopeful. “okay, how about we keep driving and see where we end up?” campbell smiles, “it’s worked so far.”

so we pull out onto another highway and take it down the face of the map, crossing another imaginary border line as we enter arizona, finding ourselves in the middle of one of the most recognisable of all american scenes—the bitumen unfolding dead straight in front of us, red desert all around, no rain here, the road peeling off towards the horizon where three huge red buttes stand towering. “i’m sure i’ve seen this place in a million different movies,” campbell says as we pull over and rest for a minute. “seems so familiar doesn’t it,” anton says, “like we know it somehow already … like we’ve been here before.”
we go past a road-sign that says we’re driving through an indian reservation, but there’s nothing but highway, dirt and blinding light, with a little handpainted blue sign saying ‘jewellery for sale—authentic indian silver.’ there are small tables set up in the middle of nowhere with a few bits of jewellery on them, maybe someone inside a little nearby hut of corrugated iron and rust, maybe not, no other houses or anything around, just the rolling away of desert and clouds and sky. and so we drive on through—such gloom—the signs shaking with the force of our passing.

“not much for them out here,” campbell says to anton, “like the black fellas back home.” anton nods, “the government assigns them this piece of nothing, but will just as easily take it away if they find something like oil … which has happened. so about the only way for the indians to make any money is by building casinos … which is why you’ll see casinos on indian land. but what that mostly does is take the money from the pockets of indians themselves … and mess things up even more.”

outside i watch a tumbleweed rolling along, picking up pace, until it rolls right into a fence that someone has put up in the middle of nowhere. please forgive us.

**april 27, afternoon**

there are still plenty of other things i’d like to know too—like why i have been so lucky—born into the most powerful group on earth—the white middle-class male
of the new world who can come and go anywhere he pleases. why this for me? what should i really be doing with this gift of open doors and open roads? it seems i exploit it more than use it for any kind of good. but how can this really be changed? how can i really change?

and what is my role as this lucky white male? to help people? to do all this travelling? to give and take things as i go? and for who and what? or should i stop and live the perfect dream of family and house and home, complete with lawn and garden and white picket fence to look over and brood? what right do i even have to build a house on land taken from the aborigines of australia, or america, or anyplace? does this mean then that i will never be at home in australia, or america for that matter? if so, where is my home? ireland and england? where six generations ago my ancestors were kicked out for stealing the lead from cricket pavilion roofs to sell and feed poor and hungry families, and sent to the other side of the world to starve some more. if i went to the united kingdom, what kind of home would i find? can home be this open road?

seems the only time i have even felt like i might be getting close to some kind of home is when i have felt close to you—those moments rare, but real enough. that fox in those mountains, those mountains themselves, that young kid with mittens waiting patiently for his mum, the glowing morning dawn from my shack in crested butte, our music in the desert night, the shine of the side of that trout, the space left by clair’s letting go, more. many moments after all, which make me think that
home is not dependant upon where we build a house, or where we lay our head in the long night, or how far along a lonely road we are. rather, it seems home really can exist inside us—inside all of us—as simple and as difficult as that may be.

so perhaps my home is as much america as it is australia, as much the open road as the cul-de-sac, as much a house as a mountaintop—wherever i find myself close to you.

so why do you run? why do i?

**april 27, late afternoon**

campbell driving, arizona. and suddenly i feel as if we are approaching something big. i take a look through the windows but everything seems much the same as it has for the last hour—the red dirt and earth, the small green shrubs that cover it in places, and pale sky the colour of forgotten sunday afternoons.

we drive on, the sky seeming to drop down a bit, growing closer to us and the deep, red earth. and then i see it—a little crack in the land off to our right, a thin straight slicing of it, a hairline dropping away, falling through. it keeps opening up as we drive along, gradually growing wider and wider until it’s a canyon, where the base is so far down i can’t even see it from the car.
“check it out,” i say and they both look over. “awesome,” campbell replies. “yep, but that ain’t nothin yet,” anton says, turning back to look at me with a wink.

the canyon keeps pushing out as we drive along, then the road takes us on a sweeping left turn and we move further away from it, more trees springing up here and there, the sun slipping towards the horizon ahead.

the grand canyon—we have all seen photos, video footage, posters—just saying the name will bring up a picture in our minds. and so i have a vision of it in my head already, about the size of a postcard with a big wide canyon, and a river somewhere below.

we drive in (another national park entrance, with another national park entrance fee) and park up near the main lookout on the south rim—some tourist shops and a café, but nothing too crazy. we grab our cameras and walk over to the lookout and i’m completely blown away by it—the size, the depth, the patterns and repeating rhythms in the shape of the rocks—the colorado river weaving way down below like a thin piece of faded green string. the colours—incredible shades of red and orange and yellow and brown blending and falling away. “jeees-us,” campbell says to himself, an old lady walking past him, frowning, but he doesn’t notice. we walk right to the edge of a little lookout and its railing, trying to take it all in, but it’s useless—the scope of it is just too big. i stand there next to campbell and anton in silent awe and reverence, staring as it goes on forever. “here,” campbell says,
hanging me a quarter and pointing to a telescope machine, “take a closer look.” i take the coin, walk up to the machine, slowly put the coin in the slot, raise my eyes to the lens and look out into one particular spot where the layers of red earth fall gradually lower and lower into the canyon to the colorado river below. i lift my eyes briefly to find where i’m looking, but i can’t tell which part of the whole pattern it is—it’s all too much—i could be anywhere.

“here mate,” i say to campbell, almost overwhelmed by it all, “you try.” he steps up to the telescope, shaking his head a little in disbelief and wonder, video in hand, recording it for angela. “it’s huge,” he keeps saying, “huge.” there are plenty of other tourists around, most of them grey-haired with cameras. “excuse me mate,” i ask one older fella, “can you please take a photo of the three of us?” he replies, “shar-thang.” i hand him the camera, he steps slowly back, pauses, takes the photo and returns the camera with a smile, “i think it’s great y’all came out here … it really is something, huh?” he pauses for effect and looks out over the canyon so that we too follow his gaze—endless earth tumbling away. “now y’all have a safe trip back to england, ya hear,” he adds, turning and walking back to the parking lot.

we decide to drive further along the rim of the canyon to see if we can find a quieter spot, anton slowly taking the winding bends that bring us closer, then further away from the rim. “makes you believe in the beauty of natural landscapes, doesn’t it?” anton says, “real beauty … nothing to hide.” i nod, “there is so much everywhere around here.” anton agrees, “right … so much beauty … so much truth
… but so much ugliness built on top of it too, in places.” “like big roman mansions, or fast food stores?” i ask. “uh-huh,” anton replies, “or big-box stores or walled-up communities … there’s no beauty there because the form has lost touch with what it really is, and lost touch with the land it’s built on.” campbell sighs, “yeah. instead, we build boxes and dig up the earth for all it’s worth.” i look out at the canyon as it slides slowly by. “do you think we find something else in all this beauty?” i ask, “touch on something else?” anton smiles, “i guess that’s a question for each of us.”

“how bout here?” campbell asks as we slow down. “looks good,” anton replies, “and no-one else around.” we pull over and walk down a little trail with rocks scrunching under our shoes, to a few boulders that overlook the canyon—all ideas i had about it before we got here now blown completely apart. “all this fresh air,” campbell says, “i just gotta have a smoke.” so anton and i leave him at the rocks and keep going down a little path further into the canyon, brushing through some trees, then crossing a narrow neck of rock and dirt and stepping out onto a flat red butte, about the size of a tennis court, that drops away on all sides to the deep edges of the canyon below. “be nice to have wings right now,” anton says.

and just as he says it we both look up and see a giant brown eagle soaring in perfect circles above us. “check it out!” anton says, excited, “so powerful! look how easily he glides on that wind … not even moving his wings.” the eagle sweeps across on the updraft in long turns, then dives down into the canyon out of view, picking up a
rodent for dinner in its sharp claws maybe. “man … if i could be any animal …”
anton says, his eyes closed, arms out, leaning forwards again towards the edge of
the butte and the canyon below, feeling the movements of that eagle somewhere in
his own canyons no doubt—gliding, soaring, free and unburdened.

the shadows lean and climb further out of the deepening base and up the walls
towards the horizon, the sun levels off, and the rich ochre reds of the canyon fade
to darkness. the sky glows red and orange on the western horizon as the sun finally
sets, while over to the east the indigo shadow of the earth rises across the sky.

and here it all is, i feel, spread out ahead of us—it just depends on the way we look
at it, doesn’t it?—a canyon as deep and wide and tumbling and rhythmically
beautiful as the universe, as a song, as our own souls. and not just here, but any
place of broad-open vista, any place of wide-open space. we are staring at our
selves reflected, aren’t we?

**april 27, night**

at the end of this long day of grand canyons and grand visions we have a steak at an
almost-empty restaurant in flagstaff—wood and leather of tables and booths all
around. campbell is calling angela on the payphone outside. there is something so
moving about the time he spends telling her everything, about the care with which
he wants to film and capture all the important things for her. i can only imagine
what is said into the telephone and the reply from a world away. it fills me with such joy and hope, but sadness too. i wonder if clair is still in san francisco. i wonder if we’ll make it that far. i think of anna as well, living out her life as it is now in karratha. in the end i try to shake it all and let the beauty of the day fill me instead, but these thoughts stick like splinters.

“i might make a call too,” anton says. he walks to a corner of the restaurant with his cellphone and speaks to his girl back in boulder, keeping it brief. he doesn’t say too much about her—i think they might only have been seeing each other for a short time. “it’s all open … but we have definitely had some intimate moments,” he says in his slow rolling and deliberate speech when he comes back to the booth.

back at the motel i sleep on the floor to save money on a two-bed room. we’re right on the edge of route 66. anton is snoring on the bed nearby, maybe soaring again on eagles’ wings. campbell sleeps on the other bed, maybe back with angela, if only for a brief moment. and i hope that if i have my flying dream sometime again, i’ll be able to try harder not to look down, not to look back, but to keep going up into that sky, towards whatever i will find there—you, maybe. the feeling of that flight, no matter how short, is one of the most amazing feelings i’ve had. like being that eagle, like being a stream full of trout, a sky full of stars, a mountain in beautiful solitude and repose. like love, or the idea that ‘yes, i have somebody to call and share all my experiences with.’
campbell’s deep meaty snore strikes up a tune with anton’s. up and down they go in steady rhythm, as a single line of light comes in through the creamy floral curtains with the hum of the black, red and gold fluoro neon super 8 sign outside, one or two cars going by on the road—route 66—the most famous road in america. i think about those people driving out there, tired probably at this late hour—truckies, sales people passing through, locals going home from a bar. all of them travelling more than just a road that goes from the atlantic to the pacific, or from the past to now, but a road that goes towards the possibilities of something better and something new. perhaps they all travel towards someone, something like you.

i close my eyes and feel myself start to drift off, and the last sound i hear is a dozen truck wheels rolling along the bitumen outside, going, straining, rushing again.

april 28

“well now … where to next my australian cousins?” campbell and i both rub our chins in thought as we get in the truck, the two of us up front, me behind the wheel now, anton in the back. i warm the engine up. “good question,” campbell replies looking down route 66 to the west, then back to the east. “it’s a hard choice,” i admit, looking both ways, a couple of cars shooting by as we sit and think. “maybe,” i say, “we should just head south.” i’m not sure why. there is silence for a while as the engine ticks over under the rounded gold bonnet, and the temp gauge
gradually rises fahrenheit degree by fahrenheit degree. “bugger it,” campbell replies, “it’s as good a direction as any.” anton laughs, “i like your thinking.”

so we head off, crossing route 66 and later the i-40 with no real idea where we are going or why, only that it feels right. “i do know a spot that might be nice,” anton says as i look out on the pine trees and the small, gently-rounded hills of northern arizona. “where’s that?” campbell asks, “mexico?” “not quite … it’s a place called sedona … there’s supposed to be a few energy vortexes there … which of course has attracted a lot of new-agers from around the world who want to come and feel it for themselves.” “what’s an energy vortex?” i ask. “it’s supposed to be a place of increased ‘spiritual energy’ … or so the story goes.” “angela would love it,” campbell says. “what about you?” anton asks campbell. “yeah, i wouldn’t mind having a look,” campbell replies, “can’t say i’ve ever ‘seen’ an energy vortex before.” i notice anton smiling in the rearview mirror, like he had this place in mind all along, but somehow managed to leave it up to us to make the final decision. “okay my hippy cousins,” he says, slapping us both on the shoulders, “let’s check it out.”

i overtake a truck that roars gradually along in the slow lane, heavy with its load of oranges or coathangers or television sets. “it’s funny though,” campbell continues, talking mostly to anton, “during the last couple of years angela and i have explored things like yoga and meditating, as well as new-age stuff … definitely more open to a lot of things than i used to be.” “that’s always a good thing,” anton says. “yeah,”
campbell replies, “as long as it’s not too weird.” feels kind of strange hearing them talk to each other about such things. “more open minded,” anton says, “but like you said … within reason.” “yeah,” campbell continues, “open minded, but not crazy.” “right,” anton replies, “while at the same time … i think the craziest thing is to be completely closed-minded and set in your own ways.” we drive on through the hills and pine.

it’s funny. i’m sure if i just mentioned to campbell and anton that i was writing all this, they would understand—be ‘open minded’ themselves. though part of me also thinks that telling them is not so important. they know enough. i might as well keep it private—just between you and me—at least for now. at least until i find a few more answers, or clarify the questions.

april 28, midday

we follow a little stream out of the hills and pine trees down into sedona—a small town nestled between the red-rock outcrops of the arizona desert. we drive around a bit—crystal shops, tarot readings, past-life regressions, yoga. “yep, angela would have some fun in this place,” campbell says. we drive by a mcdonald’s. “look,” anton says, “the golden arches aren’t gold.” and sure enough the giant ‘m’ of the logo is a gentle turquoise colour, and rests quietly on the side of the building rather than towering over the entire street.
we fill up at a gas station and i go to the toilet, noticing myself tired in the mirror, stubble on my face, hair getting longer now—most of it is blonde, but the ends are still black from when i dyed it that saturday night in crested butte. i wonder if michael still has his copper curls, if lachlan has more black hair than i do, if deano still looks like dennis lillee with a mullet. on the way back to the truck i glance over at the small stores on the main street, the red rocks around, and close my eyes for just a second, trying to soak in a certain something that sedona might have to offer. but no feeling in particular washes over me.

april 28, afternoon

we leave sedona and drive out through some hills before entering a flatter valley of light reddish sand, small trees and scrub, arriving in prescott around rush-hour so that we get caught in traffic heading north on the 89. “imagine living in this town,” campbell says. something deliriously mind-numbing about it, at least as it is right now—the flat dry desolation maybe, the slow-moving post-work heat where everyone is just trying to make it home again, no beach to get to, the lonely desperation of cars cutting each other off, jumping from one lane to another, then back again, and for what? plenty of pickup trucks and handlebars under cowboy hats with more american flags flying from backseat windows.

we finally get out of the traffic and i sit right on the limit all the way up to the i-40, passing a few cops staring from black cruisers, probably looking at our colorado
number plates. but things open right up as we slide along the interstate, the cruise control on, widespread panic on the stereo, visors folded down on the windscreen to keep out the falling sun, nobody saying anything, just happy to be leaning into it again.

we take a right at kingman on the 93, the road narrowing as we go. “check out the joshua trees,” anton says, pointing at trees that stand like sentries, like lonely thoughts in prickly repose. beyond them lies a row of hills on the western horizon—otherwise there’s just flatbrown land all around, having lost the redness of utah and northern arizona. and i wonder if the earth fades gradually like this all the way to the white sands of california’s beaches.

april 28, evening
anton pours us a couple of rums and we sip them as we drive on towards hoover dam and the nevada border, the first stars beginning to come out. “what’s that say?” campbell asks from the back, pointing down the road towards a flashing yellow sign. we drive closer. ‘all vehicles to stop at checkpoint ahead for inspection.’ “they must be looking for bombs before people cross the dam,” anton says, “which means we should probably finish these drinks.” so we all grab our plastic red cups and scull the rest of our rums, anton then getting out some chewing gum and handing it around. “i think opened bottles also count as street drinking,” anton adds, “so you might want to find a spot for that one.”
we start chewing on the gum and gradually draw closer to the end of a line of vehicles, their red tail-lights glowing. Up ahead police are inspecting some cars, letting others go. We move gradually closer, chewing faster as we get there. Strangely, I feel guilty—feel like maybe we do in fact have a bomb in the back that we’ve forgotten all about. “What can they do about the rum?” Campbell asks Anton. “Arrest us,” he answers.

We move closer and closer until it’s our turn. I’m sweating and chewing vigorously. I slide the window down as an officer with cream brimmed hat comes up to us—his shirt well ironed, face clean shaven, smelling of old spice and ambition. The first thing he must surely notice is all of us madly chewing gum. Then he looks at the plastic ‘keg’ cups in the holders, the scent of rum more than likely in the air. “G’day mate,” I say, “Looks like it’s gonna be a chilly night, hey?” He stares at me. “Please open the tray.” So I get out and open up the cover on the tray. He and another officer take a quick look, noticing all our bags and musical instruments. “Okay,” they say, “Return to your vehicle.” I shut the cover and walk back to the driver’s seat. I close the door and do up my seatbelt and am almost putting it in drive when he comes back to the window. “Oh, one more thing,” he says, “Have you folks been drinking this evening?” We all stop chewing, then there’s a slight pause, before we all answer at the same time, “Na mate … no … no way.” He looks at us. “Then you won’t mind if I take a quick look inside your seated area?” “Of course,” I reply. But Anton for some reason says, “Actually … sorry … we would mind.” I can’t believe it. Campbell is silent in the back, and the officer just stands there staring across at
anton in surprise. “we’re already late for an appointment in vegas,” anton adds. the officer keeps staring, trying to register what he’s heard.

meanwhile, a huge line of traffic has banked up behind us so the officer-in-charge comes over—older guy, tanned, wrinkles all over his face from years of las vegas sun, trimmed moustache, plump belly underneath his tucked-in shirt. “is there a problem here?” he asks, the first officer says something to him i can’t quite hear, before the officer-in-charge takes a look in the window, notices the cups, notices our chewing, smells the rum probably. “you boys headed to vegas?” he asks. “yes mate,” i reply, wanting for the first time to look like a dumb tourist, “just a couple of aussies come all this way to see what the fuss is about.” he smiles slightly under his moustache. “would you mind lifting up that case there, sir?” he says to me, pointing at one of our big black cd cases. i look down at it on the floor between anton’s feet and mine, thinking maybe there is in fact something under it that i don’t even know about, that the cop might have a better idea than i do—a bomb, or a bottle of bundaberg rum, or both. i reach down and lift it up, slowly, uncertain of what i might find—but there’s nothing there. the officer-in-charge then steps back with the first cop, says something, points back at the long line, then puts his hand on my windowsill. “okay boys,” he says, “you’re free to go … have a good time in vegas.”

i can hardly believe it. but this time i put it in drive and take off before they can change their minds. “what the hell?” campbell asks. i accelerate right up to the
limit, the flashing lights and long line of cars fading in the mirror behind us. “why did you say he could search the car?” anton asks me. “what are you talking about?” i reply, “they can do whatever they want.” “not if you tell them they can’t do it.” i keep driving, the hoover dam appearing ahead. “what, so if you say they can’t search your car they can’t search it?” “uh-huh … at least that’s how i think it is in this state … but they can always make things a lot more difficult for you … take you downtown and shit … but i figured they wouldn’t bother all the way out here when they’re looking for bombs.” “well,” i say, “it would have been nice if you’d told me that!” “bloody hell,” campbell laughs to himself in the back, “they’re looking for bombs and they almost found themselves some street-drinking aussies, ha!” “right,” anton replies, “i guess we should’ve gotten rid of the cups.” “ah well,” campbell says, “we got away with it—and i think that deserves another drink.”

we cross over the huge grey wall of the hoover dam into nevada, all that water held back, with anton sitting next to me busily pouring a second round.

**april 28, early night**

sometime after the dam i pull over and let anton take the wheel. the air is cool in the desert night, stars scattered across the sky, glowing, the road wider now, bigger, joining with the 95 to take us on to vegas still unseen ahead. “this place is gonna blow your mind,” anton says to campbell, smiling, “for better or worse.” campbell
rubs his head, “as long as it doesn’t blow the budget.” anton smiles, “there’s a budget?”

strange to be heading back to vegas now. seems like just yesterday i was rolling into it from the other direction, all the boys with me, zac driving, my tonsils infected and raw, los angeles behind us and all of america to come. now the snow has almost gone from the nearby mountaintops, the night air is not so cold, my throat is clearer, more road has passed underneath my tyres and feet, and something else is stirring within me. maybe i am somehow closer to you after all.

“this place is mad,” anton says as he steers us down towards the city, “the biggest house of hedonism on the planet.” funny to hear anton talk like this—to see a man of nature at home with the idea of vegas. but i guess there are many sides to a human being, multitudes of contradictions. “do you think there’s beauty here?” i ask him. he pauses slightly. “i think this place, in essence, caters for the lowest desires of humanity … but it really doesn’t try to hide that—doesn’t try to hide it in its form, in its decadent and crazy casinos … it knows that it’s ridiculous and shows it—so maybe there is a kind of beauty here … but in terms of being in harmony with the surrounding environment … well … that’s another question.”

he puts a crystal method cd in the stereo and takes the truck to five miles over the limit before turning on the cruise control. “having said all that,” anton says, looking over at us, smiling his mad grin, “you still better hold onto your hats my young
australian cousins!” and with that, vegas appears almost on cue around the next bend, flickering like a giant chandelier dropped and smashed onto the cold hard desert floor. “far out,” says campbell from the back, taking the lens cap off the camera, “that’s the last thing you’d expect to see out here in the desert … if you didn’t know it was here.” he holds his camera to his eye. i recognise most of the buildings this time, though everything reversed as we come in from the east—the light spearing out of the pyramid, the slime green glow of the mgm, the gilded gold of mandalay bay and the foundation room hanging from the roof, the regality of the bellagio—trying to spot our old rooms hidden there—caesar’s roman palace, the miniature new york city, the eiffel tower and caricatured paris, all the streetlights and glowing signs for cirque-de-soleil, siegfried and roy and manpower australia, with the hard rock guitar over the back, and the lonely stratosphere down the end pointing to something higher than this. “jesus christ,” campbell says.

it’s an amazing thing to come down on a city from above, to see where the ends of it peter off, where the heart of it lies—the scope and size of what we’re getting into. something comforting about seeing an entire place like that … and yet, something confronting too.

april 28, night

we park at the paris hotel and go in through the clothing stores and jewellery shops, past a dark bar with a single forlorn performer in glittering gold dress singing to an
empty room. I notice her through the window and smile at her. She sees me and smilies back, then closes her eyes and disappears into the music once more.

We arrive in the casino proper—the gaming floor spread out in front of us in a maze of tables, people and croupiers—the flashing red and white numbers of the roulette boards, the blackjack players hunched over their cards, the people clapping around the craps roller with the snake-eyes dice in hand, the quick fingers of the dealers and their expressionless faces, the trained eyes of the supervisors and managers, the slow movement of cameras hanging from walls, the other watchers watching all the watchers.

Over the back are the jingles and rings of the pokies and slots, where even the jackpots won are slipped willingly back into the flashing machines. Waitresses walk around with drinks trays covered with full or empty glasses and an ashtray of tips—the only charge for drinkers who gamble. My ears are full of the sound of dice falling, roulette balls dancing on the walls to winning numbers, slot machines paying out, cards sliding across tables and turned over with a violent flick, the hum of talk around the room—drunks louder—the shout of a win, back slapping and high fives, the silent brooding and acceptance of yet another loss, the air thick and charged with the heavy dull hope that maybe the next hand, the next spin, the next roll, will bring it all home.
people are dressed in all states—casual jeans and t-shirts, suits, tuxedos, dresses, baseball caps, ten-gallon hats. we have on campfire-smelling t-shirts and jeans with dirty boots and shoes—shoes that slide with everyone else’s across the silent hypnotising carpet of patterns repeating over and over so that the room seems to expand forever and any table will do. no sign of exits, no windows, no clocks anywhere, the air cool, pumped full of oxygen to keep us awake, the ceiling painted an eerie sky blue with passing clouds so that it always seems like daytime, as the hours and the money go dancing off together.

“i dunno if i can handle this ceiling or this place for too long,” i say. “yeah, it’s like they’ve created another world in here,” campbell adds. “but we might as well get a drink while we’re here,” anton says. so we go up to a bar on the edge of the floor. the bar is probably oak, polished, so that we can almost see our faces in it, and in the shining gold trims and edges. “two double rums and a double whiskey,” anton tells the young, blonde-haired barman in white shirt and black bow tie. he listens without lifting his eyes, instead pointing his ear at us to hear the order over the jingle and noise of the room. campbell and i stand there with our hands in our pockets, no real desire to be laying any money down. “this is pretty full-on,” campbell says. “yeah,” i reply, “we didn’t do any gambling at all last time i was in vegas.” “that’ll be twenty-seven dollars,” the barman says, placing the drinks down, still not looking at us, glancing at his watch, just wanting to be somewhere else. “what?” anton replies in disbelief, but the barman just stands there shuffling the ice in the tray. “twenty-seven dollars.” we have to scrounge together all our change just
to pay the bill with tip. “the most expensive drinks i’ve ever bought,” anton says, handing them out, “i think we’re going to have to gamble just so we can afford to drink.” “i’m sure we’re not the first to say that.” “and won’t be the last.” but we cheers to it anyway, having arrived somewhere at least, no matter how twisted it may seem—there are lessons to be learned anyplace, i guess.

we finish our drinks and take a walk through the floor, looking over people’s shoulders onto the flat-green carpet of the tables, the greenbacks falling onto them in silent landing like leaves, the chips pulled away with a roundhouse arm or wooden stick, then made into towering coloured cities in front of the dealer, occasionally a player building a little town of his own close to his chest, protecting it with the walls his arms make for it—the sight of which is maybe enough incentive for someone else to throw their money down too, or to keep playing long after the tide has turned. we walk on, most faces tired, glum, only one or two happy expressions to keep the dream alive for others. we walk around in a big circle a few times before i have to ask a waitress where the door is. she reluctantly tells me and we step outside into the cool, fresh night.

**april 28, late night**

the flamingo floor is slower, quieter, plainer, muted. the place is bathed in pink and off white. “let’s find ourselves a table,” anton says, and leads us over to a quiet corner of low minimum-bet blackjack tables. “perfect,” he says, pulling up a stool,
only three other people sitting. “bugger it,” i say to campbell and pull up a seat. “keen mate?” i ask, but he shakes his head. “nah, i’ll just watch for a bit.” the other players are sizing us up, listening to our accents. the guy in the far corner has grey hair, yellow collared shirt, shifty eyes, but seems nice enough. anton sits between him and a middle aged woman of brunette curls and red dress, hunched over her cards, keeping to herself. i sit between her and a young girl with smooth tired eyes, skin like polished porcelain, stand-offish and stern—couldn’t be much more than twenty-one. the dealer waits for anton and me to throw down a twenty each and take some chips, placing the lowest possible bet of five dollars on the next hand. nobody says anything. the dealer gives out face cards to himself, anton and me, then i get a two and anton gets a four. everyone else sits in the high teens. anton and i both ask for hits, giving the sign clearly enough. eighteen for me, nineteen for anton—we sit. the dealer then turns over another face card for himself and clears the chips from the table. i turn to campbell behind me—“see mate … it’s easy.”

a waitress comes around as everyone slides out another chip or two, and straight away anton gets her attention. “a triple whiskey and two triple rums, please,” he says. the dealer almost smiles, but the rest of the table looks at us a little unsure—like playing with us might be a gamble in itself. “been a long day,” anton smiles, trying to assure them, “lots of driving.”

the dealer distributes another hand, and this time gives himself twenty-one. “see, mate,” i say, turning to campbell behind me, “it couldn’t get any easier.” our drinks
arrive and we keep the tips to a bare minimum. “pretty slow going at this stage,” i say to the waitress and feign a smile. she is bored, tired, just wants to collect her pay, go home, get out of her white starched uniform and let her red hair down. “australians?” the young girl next to me asks as the dealer fans out another hand. “yeah,” i answer, sipping on my super-strong rum, coughing a little, grimacing, “that’s a good guess.” “it’s no guess,” she replies, looking down at her card, “i work at an arzee bar back home in nashville.” “no shit,” campbell says, surprised. “excuse me sir,” the dealer interrupts, “i’m going to have to ask you to watch your language.” “yeah, yeah, of course. sorry mate.” “uh-huh,” she says, “typical arzees.” “i’ll take that as a complement,” campbell says. “mmm,” she replies, looking down at her second card. i bust and anton sits on nineteen—the dealer gives himself twenty again. “better order another round before we lose all our money,” i say to anton, as he finishes the last of his drink. “yep,” campbell adds, as dry as whisky, “you guys are real high-rollers.” at this everyone at the table smiles finally, warming to us just a little.

but high-rollers or not, we put down our last five on the next hand. i sit on nineteen and anton on seventeen, and this time the dealer busts. “right on!” anton yells, and calls the waitress over, “drinks all round!” he shouts, and buys the guy a beer, the lady between us a wine and the girl next to me a bourbon. “steady mate,” campbell says, “you only won five bucks!” “but the drinks are free,” i say, “except for the tip.” on the next hand we win again, then start betting tens. we start winning these hands too, as drinks come and go, and the table loosens up even more. i ask the girl
next to me what nashville is like, and she replies, “well, if you’re into music, country especially, it’s great. but i needed a change.” she and i both get twenty-one, and i’m starting to build quite a tower in front of me, betting twenties now, giving half of the winnings to campbell who pockets them, hoping we might be able to stay in a room somewhere later. “and what are you doing in vegas?” i ask her. “travellin’ round with my pa,” she says, nodding to the old fella in yellow shirt across the table. he looks at me with a grin. “he’s you’re dad?” i ask. “uh-huh,” he says to me in a gravelly voice, with a wink, “so no funny business.” anton and campbell both laugh, another round arriving as things start to get a little blurry. we’re giving the waitress bigger tips now, but her expression stays the same. and why wouldn’t it?

later anton starts losing a few larger bets, putting down fifties. the girl next to me isn’t saying anything any more, which is okay because i can hardly talk. her old man keeps his eyes firmly on me, a wry smile on the side of his face. “i’m keen to find a room somewhere,” campbell says to me, “think i’ll ask about prices here. they might do a discount cos it’s so late.” “it’s late?”

campbell walks off and gradually everything starts slowing right down—the flick of the dealer’s fingers and wrist, the cards landing on the bright green table, the sliding of chips, the swirling of drinks and everyone’s blinking eyes. i look up at the cameras, at the other tables almost empty, at the management walking and watching with their hands behind their backs, security guards with their thumbs
tucked into their black belts. it all feels like it’s narrowing down, and everything seems somehow quieter. i can hear each coloured chip hit the table with a soft knock, each cube of ice clink up against the glass, each slice and flap of a card turned. and suddenly i start to feel terribly alone in all this slow quietness—even though there are others at this table, even though anton is only a couple of seats over, even though campbell is somewhere closeby. i realise in a horrible moment that i feel a long way from anyone—from my brother and cousin, from my friends, from clair, from anna, you. i seem to be trapped inside myself—inside these walls of skin and hair and bone and feeling.

“got us a room,” campbell says, coming back, pulling me out of myself a little, “just going to call angela quickly. here’s the key.” he gives it to anton who gets up straight away, rubs his eyes, collects his chips, says “thank you” to the dealer, “goodbye” to everyone at the table, bows, and stumbles off. i gather together my chips, stand up slowly, tip the dealer, think i mouth the word “cheers” to everyone and walk off behind anton, two hundred dollars worth of chips in my pocket and a hotel room to sleep in … but what gained really?

perhaps, most importantly, a better understanding of what i don’t have—that is, somebody to really share the deepest of all my thoughts with—someone who’d want me to call from a vegas casino payphone at four in the morning.
April 29

I wake on the floor of our hotel room with a throbbing head, dry mouth and itchy eyes. Last night comes back to me in a short burst of hazy pictures. I groan and notice Campbell still asleep on his bed. Anton must be out. I get up and drink from the bathroom tap, then slowly get into the shower and try to wash it all away.

“We gotta get the hell out of here,” Campbell says when I come out and put on my last-night clothes. “Where’s Anton?” I ask. “Said he wanted to eat some brownie and play a few quick hands before we left.”

After Campbell showers we walk slowly through the flamingo and out into the stinging light of the city, squinting, before going back through the always-day of the Paris hotel and into the carpark where we find Anton sitting on the back of the truck. “Man,” he laughs, “you guys sure do look like shit.” I get in the back and put a pillow up against the window, falling asleep before we even get off the strip.

Then, in what feels like only a second or two later, I wake to find us surrounded by cream-coloured rocky cliff walls on one side and a desolate flat white plain on the other, nothing but bright blue sky above and Beck on the radio singing “I think I’m going crazy.” Campbell is driving and Anton is staring out at the plain on our left. “Where are we now?” I ask, groggy, my head fogged over, though a little lighter than it was back in the hotel room. Anton turns around and smiles, “Death Valley.” I groan again and put my head back down, closing my eyes once more, “Of course.”
when i wake later it seems like we haven’t even moved. “still in death valley?” i ask. “yep,” campbell answers, looking at me in the rearview mirror, sunglasses on, “it’s been the same scenery and the same road for the past hour—a long sweeping right, followed by a short left, then another long sweeping right—over and over and over again.” “i bet the engineers found it pretty funny,” anton says, “but it’s sending us a little in-sane.” then he puts on the same beck song as before, singing along, “i think i’m going crazy, miracles amaze me, you’re left eye is lazy, i think i’m going crazy ...” or something like that, while the road keeps up its pattern.

a little further on we pull over at a sign that reads ‘the lowest point in north america.’ “that sounds bout right,” campbell says, wearily. we get out and campbell lights up a smoke and grabs the video camera. anton does some stretching and i walk over to the information sign and read that we’re 282 feet below sea level. there are a couple of other cars parked, and a few people are walking out onto a little salt plain ahead of us. the valley floor is flat, hot and white, the hills around it are sharp and angry. a warm wind blows across the valley and over us, drying out my nostrils. this is easily the hottest i’ve been since i left perth, and the desolation is terrible.

i walk out with campbell onto the salt flat and stand and watch as he films a few insects buzzing around the surface of a small, tepid pool of water, drowning maybe, dying of thirst perhaps. “death valley is a good name,” i say, as one of the insects stops moving and floats slowly across the surface of the pool with the wind.
we get back in the car, everyone else gone now, and keep driving. anton is behind the wheel. i decide to stay in the back. “maybe not the smartest move to come through death valley with a hangover,” campbell says, turning down the stereo. “ah well,” anton adds, “you know what they say … we all need to die before we die.”
west

april 29, afternoon

we drive on and on, the sun gradually getting lower, the white of the land losing its harshness just a little. again i find myself thinking about anna, about clair. i have no idea what’s going to happen. again i try to shake the thoughts, but this place seems to have a way of bringing them up.

and then finally, thankfully, the rhythms of the road and my thoughts break as we find a little town with palm trees where we have to make a left turn across the middle of the valley. “looks deserted,” campbell says, “everyone must be inside, out of the sun.” we drive on, keeping an eye on the fuel, heading south-west now, aiming to get out of the valley somehow. i fall asleep again.
when i wake this time it’s almost dark and we’ve passed through the valley and come out the other side. i look up and see green pine trees all around us. “colour,” i say. “and from the lowest point in north america,” anton says, looking ahead, “to some of the highest peaks in north america … the sierra nevada.” i look up at them, high and stern, greener than the rockies, softer, something not so imposing about them. it’s nice to have some height and colour again—to have risen from that place behind us to all these deep greens and earthy blacks.

we fill up at a little town called lone pine, one or two hardware stores on the main road, a couple of houses either side, hardly any people around except the guy in the gas station. we drive on, the sierra nevada lining up next to us. “it’s almost like they’re holding something back,” i say, unsure of what. the sun moves to the other side of the mountains, the greens growing darker in the fading light.

**april 29, night**

bishop california—the stars are out, and the mountains are silhouettes against the sky. i look at them running north and south, like a wall between us and the rest of california.

“where do ya wanna eat?” “that diner there looks like it’s about the only spot.” “are ya sure? maybe we could keep goin to the next town?” “there aren’t any more towns … it’s getting late.”
we pull up and go into the diner and the place is almost empty except for a couple of truckers bent over their meals—the brim of their greasy caps almost resting on the food in front of them. we take a seat in one of the many hard plastic booths with tables covered in plastic cloths of red and white squares, fluoro lights buzzing overhead, a slice of lonely pumpkin pie drying out in the fridge by the counter, a fly crawling up the inside of the dirty windows that look out on night-time america, one or two cars passing by.

“i can’t wait to eat something from this kitchen,” campbell says quietly, grimacing. “uh-huh,” anton murmurs, “maybe old carl out the back will knock us up one of his specialties … i can see him now, all two hundred and fifty pounds of him huddled over the grill, five day growth on his face, balding, sweating huge salty beads down onto the food.” campbell and i laugh painfully. i even look towards the kitchen, but can’t see anyone there. “oh, he’s out there alright,” anton says, noticing my look, “big carl, sweating and cooking his special dish, the sweaty-sac salad, just waiting for you to order it.” “but like you said—nowhere else to eat,” i say. “right … maybe it all just depends on how hungry you really are,” anton replies with another mad smile born of a long hungover day with too much tiredness and driving.

the blankness of the diner seems to be balanced by the fact we made it through death valley. “at least we’re moving towards something else now,” i say. campbell nods, “i’m glad vegas is behind us too.” anton smiles, then pulls out a serviette from the metal dispenser and wipes his face.
and it does feel to me like this diner is a place of transition that we need to be visiting, having died a little bit back there in all that white and all that valley, and before that in all the flashing numbers of vegas. “this is some kind of purgatory maybe,” i say. anton nods, “yeah—purgatory is a diner in bishop, california,” he proclaims, “with carl sweating over the grill out the back.” campbell and i smile wearily. “but what comes after purgatory?” i ask. anton lays his hands flat on the table, spreading his fingers, looking both me and campbell in the eyes, “that’s what we’re gonna find out!”

i glance over at the waitress. she mustn’t have noticed us walk in, or maybe she did and doesn’t care. she wears a white shirt and white apron, white sneakers. slowly she pours a lonely trucker another coffee from stained jug, something achingly painful about the way she pours it—like she’s done it a million times before and even while she’s pouring it now she knows she’ll have to do it a million times more. i imagine her coming into work each day, clocking on, saying hello to the cook out the back—her boss, carl perhaps—then pouring coffee and water into a jug, letting it sit on a hotplate to burn, drying some dishes with an old greasy tea-towel, waiting for the customers, taking orders each night when they arrive, helping out in the kitchen when it gets busy, running up people’s orders on the till, cleaning, then closing the place when it’s done. going home finally to trailer with tv, or boyfriend, or dog, or child that a neighbour has watched all afternoon and evening, thinking about all the things in her life that have led her here, thinking of all she has fallen into, hearing the sound every now and then of another car leaving
this place on the only road in or out—the idea she might herself one day leave
growing dimmer with her dreams.

“what can i getchya?” she asks, her voice crackly, as if it’s travelled a long way to
get here. she leans on a shaven leg, her eyes fixed on the notepad, blonde hair
falling down over her tired, smooth face and pale lips—she lets it hang. “three
steaks … medium to well … and a salad please,” anton replies, ordering for all of
us. she writes it down without looking up, her hand on the underside of the pad,
two nails painted a light pink, the sound of the pen scratching as she writes.
“drinks?” her skin is the colour of the faded cream rocks of death valley. “uh …
two orange juices and a water.” she tucks the pen in behind her ear, “comin right
up.” she takes the menus and as she does so i catch sight of her eyes—the colour of
a midday nevada sky—just as far-reaching, just as unfathomable. she finishes the
whole sad routine, turns and walks back to the kitchen without looking at any of us
once.

my heart seems to close in on itself for her, for the way she slips her order book
into her apron, the way she moves so slowly from the kitchen to a table and back
again—to get a salt shaker, to fill a water pitcher—expressionless and bored in all
this. at one point i notice her staring out through the window, maybe having a
moment of looking down the road, both ways. but then she must catch her own
reflection in the dark glass, fixing her hair for just an instant. and in that moment
she notices me staring too, and i receive the full force of her eyes. it’s too much. i
look away, overcome with sudden despair for her, for me, for campbell and anton, for clair, for you even—for the tortured every soul of purgatory anywhere. please help her find a way out of this.

**April 29, late night**

we leave the diner with our hands in our pockets, all jokes done. “the saddest diner in the world,” anton says, serious now, as we take the one road north out of town. and i still have no real idea where it is we’re going, but i am hopeful there are better things there, brighter things coming. you.

we keep driving, the long day of many landscapes trailing out behind and inside us. we’re totally exhausted and spent from all the passing through we’ve done—bishop growing dimmer in our memories, death valley, las vegas, more. “wadda bout just ere?” campbell says. so anton takes a right turn off the road and onto a narrow gravel track that leads up a hill into the dark pines, the road moving up and up until we reach the crest and a small circular clearing in the trees. “perfect,” anton says as we get out, throw down our tarpaulin, mattresses and sleeping bags in the car’s headlights. “i am totally spent,” anton says, taking a drink of water. campbell stubs out a cigarette on a rock then puts the butt into an empty can in the car, turning the lights off before we all get into our sleeping bags. “night y’all,” anton says. “night.” “more things tomorrow,” he adds. i hope so.
and just before i close my eyes i look over at the wall of the sierra nevada—dark outlines reaching up to a sky overwhelmed with stars—a glittering crescent-moon sky that reaches down to us—a sky passing right through our bodies with each breath, and into the soft pine-needle-covered earth below our backs. and in that split second just before sleep i am able to imagine the california on the other side of these mountains, waiting, you there too, and am filled with the hope that yes, we are going somewhere with all this.

april 30

i wake in the morning to the sound of anton strumming his indian guitar again, the soft blue sky above, a magenta horizon, branches of pine trees, the mountains slowly taking form with the light of the new day. campbell is still asleep, lying calmly on his back in sleeping bag with hands on chest, angelic. anton is sitting on a little outcropping of rocks at the edge of the circular clearing, humming gently to the music he is making, looking at the sierras, sun at his back. there are ponderosas all around us, bishop to the south, everything behind that moving further into memory.

“hey,” anton says to me quietly, continuing to play the guitar, “amazing morning.” i nod, not wanting to disturb too much the peace i’ve woken to. “you know,” he says, with a pause in time with the music, “i’m sure glad there weren’t any bears around last night.” “bears?” i hadn’t even considered the possibility, i was so worn out
after the long day. “what?” campbell says, waking. “nothing mate, we’re just
talking—glad there weren’t any bears around last night.” “bears?” he says, sitting
up, “there are bears around here?” “probably,” anton says, “but we don’t really
have much food, so chances are they’d just leave us alone anyway.” he keeps
playing the guitar, the sound of it drifting on the breeze out into the pines.

“there’s an awesome little trail over there if you guys want to check it out,” anton
says as we pack up, but campbell looks a bit hesitant now that the idea of bears is
with us, and the other side of the mountains is calling.

**April 30, morning**

driving under the sun of a new day, refreshed, though still the mountains lining up
to screen the rest of california to our left. “when are we going to get through?” i
ask. “whenever we can, man,” anton replies. so we move further along the spine of
eastern california. and i’m thinking how it must surely have been a heartbreaking
thing for the early western explorers and white pioneers of this country to have
already crossed the rocky mountains looking for that fabled other sea, only to
eventually find themselves up against the wall of the sierra nevada. though i bet
their heartbreak was nothing compared to that of the native american indian who
saw their coming.
about an hour later we pass the turnoff to a small town called mammoth lakes, not stopping, leaning north with these final mountains on one side and a flat green-greyness on our right. the sun moves higher. after another half an hour we see a road up ahead going off to the left. “a way through?” campbell asks. “maybe.” but as we get closer we see a barricade across the turn-off saying that the road is still closed following winter. “looks like we’ll have to keep going,” anton says. “hang on,” campbell replies, “maybe we should just drive round the sign. i mean, we got a four-wheel drive that we haven’t even really taken off the road yet … we’ll find a way through.” anton pulls over. “there’ll be some big fines if we’re caught,” he says. “well how far is the next road?” campbell asks. anton looks at one of our maps. “fifty miles or more,” he replies, “but then we’ll have to do a huge circle if we want to go back to yosemite … whereas this road will take us straight in there … but that also means a bigger chance of rangers.” “mmm,” campbell grunts, “probably not worth it.” i look at the map. “we’ll find another way, let’s not force it,” i suggest. anton agrees, “uh-huh, it’ll open up when it’s ready … or when we’re ready.”

and so we start moving again, speeding by mono lake, blue and rippling as we pass. we drive by clusters of faded green and yellow shrubs with small trees here and there, pines in places, but soon everything starts looking pretty similar, even on this side of death valley. i really hope we can find a way through to california—the final state of no more land, ending in ocean, back to my beginnings in america. “here comes another road.” anton slows down, almost wanting to delay its arrival in
case it’s closed too. we hold our breaths and creep along, still unable to see, and then … “closed!” “bloody hell.”

so on and on we move north up highway 395 on the forgotten otherside of california, and i doubt too many tourists or anybody for that matter would find themselves on this road, midweek, late april, trying to enter the rest of california. “maybe we’re just not supposed to,” i say. “maybe not,” campbell replies, “but we’re sure as hell gonna try.” anton smiles, “and we don’t have much choice … unless we’d like to go back through death valley.”

we drive on in silence, the dark green sierras silent too, flatlands to our right extending over to nevada near the horizon. “okay,” campbell says, sitting up as we approach a fork in the road, “this one better be bloody open.” “i hope it is,” says anton, “otherwise we’re going to end up in canada.” we slow down as we approach the road—no sign, nothing holding us back, a path finally opening up through the sierra nevada and into western california. “right on!” says anton. “well thank fuck for that,” campbell says, laughing. and in an instant we’re winding up through the mountains, a fast-running grey and frothy stream moving close by.

up and up we wind, the landscape changing now, coming into the most startling open meadow of bright green—the colour of grass in heaven i suppose, or the colour of spring fields in bavarian dreams. “that’s the brightest colour i’ve seen this whole trip,” campbell says, the sight surprising all of us, the green of the grass
glowing as if something was lighting each single blade from within—like every individual blade has been slumbering in the earth all winter, gathering its forces and colour there and finally pushing up now towards the sun. “man,” says anton, the meadow replaced again with more pines, “my chest feels different after all that green.” “yeah,” campbell adds, “it’s like i can really breathe all of a sudden.”

we continue our long circle towards yosemite national park, bobbing up and down on the twisting road through the mountains. “mark twain’s cabin?” campbell says, pointing to a sign not long after we pass through the small town of angels camp. “wanna check it out?” he asks me. it’s right near the side of the road so we take the turnoff up a steep track which opens out onto a little cleared area of land in the pines, a small log cabin of dark wooden ruins about the size of a small bedroom. “not much to it, hey?” campbell says. anton paraphrases a small sign as we sit in the car, driving slowly around it—“where mark twain would come home to write after spending the night in nearby angels camp. here he wrote a number of pieces, including the short story ‘the notorious jumping frog of calaveras county.’” i remember reading it years ago—strange to see now this place of pure isolation that he rested in so that story and others could come out. something beautiful and something lonesome about the cabin, and about the other place he must have continually gone to inside himself for his art and his life—though maybe something or someone like you was there with him in the otherwise lonely night.
April 30, afternoon

We twist and turn through the middle of the sierras, pushing south then east in an almost full loop back towards Yosemite. There are tall pines and foreign-to-me emerald green trees all around, light-green grasses pushing up from the moist, dark earth and dozens of small birds shooting by. The curving road leads us through it all, up and down, then suddenly winding, with the smallest glimpses here and there of more trees and flatter lands to the west.

We drive and drive, the sun pushing towards the Pacific somewhere behind us now, Yosemite unfolding ahead, eventually coming down into the dark pines and redwoods of it, before passing through the front entrance into a huge area of pines where Anton takes a left turn into even deeper and darker corners of the park. “We don’t have much daylight left,” he says, “but I think it’s worth checking out a few redwoods before we set up camp.” Soon after, we pull over in a little car park with signs warning about the bears, and others describing how to use the food lockers. “What are food lockers for?” Campbell asks. “Metal boxes you put your food in so that bears won’t rip the doors off your car,” Anton replies, plainly. “Right.” “But don’t worry … we won’t be here long,” Anton adds with a cheeky grin as we start off down the dark and overgrown trail. “No worries,” Campbell says, “as long as the bears know that.” Anton turns back to Campbell and smiles. “Ah, c’mon arzee,” he says, skipping backwards with his long legs as we sink deeper into the dark woods, “I thought you guys were tough … thought you were from the wide brown land, the sunburnt country … wrestling crocodiles and sharks and all that.” Campbell laughs,
“we are mate, we are. but we’ve never had to worry about bears—about an animal that can run faster than you, swim faster than you and climb faster than you.”

the trail takes us past some big redwood trees, tall, strong, old and proud—thousands of years proud, thousands of years silent in these woods, except for the sound of their branches sweeping through with the wind. we stand and look up the long thick trunks, tracing their lines all the way up into the growing-darker sky. “pretty awesome, huh?” anton says, and campbell nods. “makes me think of how few tall trees there are around newman.” makes me think how few tall trees there are in all of western australia.

something sobering and quietly soothing about being down here in the shadows of all these giants. something like the feeling of a bird flying out of my chest. something like walking into the biggest, most elaborate, most awe-inspiring cathedral, mosque, synagogue, temple, church, place of worship in the whole world.

we walk around the floor of the forest underneath the huge redwoods, straining our necks to look up as the day keeps fading—sticks, branches, peeled-off chunks of bark lying here and there on the trail and in the scrub, ready to melt back to the earth from where they came.
“hey … guys,” anton says to us, as i stand, head tilted back in contemplation, looking up the long straight trunk of another redwood, its branches way up near the canopy, “i think it’s time to go … you know, before the bears come out.” “what?” campbell exclaims. “nothing man, nothing,” anton says, smiling to himself, “just kidding around.” but as we walk back campbell and i start looking into the shadows of the thick scrub to the side of the trail, thinking maybe we can in fact see something moving in there, with paws, with claws. “did you see something over there?” campbell asks me. “where?” “there, in the shadows.” “no.” “you know what guys,” anton says, “i think i might jog on ahead.” campbell and i look at each other. “are you serious?” campbell asks as anton starts off, shadows starting to move behind us. “okay, we might join you.” so we all go bounding along the trail, the shadows in the woods running along with us on all sides, nothing but the sound of birds singing in the branches and our feet hitting the ground below.

we drive through the valley floor of central yosemite in the early night—a slight wind blowing across a big open meadow of dark grasses surrounded by the upright lines of pines that go spiraling up to mini peaks, a river running through the centre of it like a vein, while huge grey granite rock formations cup and cradle the valley on every side, the occasional waterfall tumbling in short and long hops over dark rocky ledges. above, the very first and faint stars appear in the violet sky of newborn night. it all seems so simple, cradled in soft light, untouched and enclosed. “amazing,” campbell says. “nice huh,” anton agrees, nodding, “like some kind of divine postcard.”
i put my window down and let it all blow in as we drive across the valley floor—the rich smells of pine and raw earth, of open nature and green fields uncleared, unploughed, the twilight sight of even light, the sound of the road whishing gently by. and i am completely filled with the feeling that all this journeying—not just these months in america now, but always—my whole life, everybody’s lives—all of this moving forward and on and out and through has suddenly been worth it. maybe i could die right now and it might all be justified, even this writing to you. maybe it is simply enough for me to know that there exists a place such as this.

april 30, evening
“how bout this spot?” anton asks. we pull the truck into a designated camping area of pine logs and benches, barbecues and food lockers, precisely-outlined camping sites and roads. half a dozen massive winnebagos the size of tourist buses carry spare cars on the back, plus bikes and kayaks and gas bottles. there are some blue and orange and green dome tents, and signs pointing to various facilities in the area. but with the appearance of all this, some of my earlier feelings fade just a little.

“mmm,” campbell says, looking around when we get out, “looks like we’re the only ones sleeping on the ground again.” “uh-huh,” anton says, grinning a bit through his blonde goatee, “and there sure are an awful lot of food lockers here … i wonder what that could mean.” “yeah,” replies campbell, getting the tarp and
mattresses out the back of the truck, “it must mean the bears know they won’t find any food here.”

we step gently across the fallen pine needles towards a nearby store. “we’ll have clocked up some k’s by the end of all this,” campbell says as we cross slowly over a little bridge—a river moving steadily below, reflecting some of the stars overhead. “and think how much there is still left to see,” anton replies, and we all nod solemnly to this—not just in this country, not just this world, but in the changing landscape of time too—the way a place can change if ever you go back to it, and the way you can too. nothing’s certain, nothing’s fixed, i slowly realise as the stars bob on the surface of the river below us like floating diamonds.

there are a few cars parked around the store when we arrive, other campers buying dinner or filling up on supplies. the place is part tourist shop, part general store. we go right past the fridge magnets, the key chains, the tea towels, and grab some milk, water, ice, bread, nutbars, some fruit and vegetables. “what beer do you want?” anton asks, looking at the fridge, campbell coming up next to us. “spose we should get the sierra nevada pale ale, seeing as we made it this far.” so we take it all through the checkout and outside again, the night creeping deeper into the pines.

and while the dozen or so other campers in tents and winnebegos cook on their barbies, or throw together a pasta while watching the news or listening to music, we stand huddled over a picnic table slicing up the ingredients for six
sandwiches—tomatoes, cucumber, cheese, ham. we smear mayonnaise on the bread, then add salt and pepper, all the while sipping slowly on the beers. “this ain’t so bad,” campbell says, biting into his first sandwich as the smell of a frying steak goes floating by.

later, dinner done, we walk our last three beers over to the bridge and stand there chatting as the river flows underneath our feet. i get up on the stone wall and lie down on my back, knees up, looking at the sky, looking down at the river sometimes, the distance between water and sky not so far. campbell and anton lean up against the wall near my feet, campbell having his final smoke for the night, our beers resting on top of the wall. “tell me more about your work,” campbell says to anton, sipping from his drink. “well, i gotta tell ya … bodywork is a pretty powerful thing. most people think i’m talking about panel-beating when i say bodywork …” campbell smiles, i lie there listening, hearing the sound of their words joining together with the spit and spray of the river below. “see … many people go to bodyworkers or other therapists, and the result they’re after is to be happy all the time, but what they find out after a few sessions is that yeah, when they’re happy they’ll feel it a lot more. but when they’re low they’ll feel that too—they’re more open to everything, so that when they’re at the store or someplace and a little kid looks up at them and smiles, that is enough for a really moving experience for them.” “yep,” campbell nods, finishing the rest of his beer, deep in thought. “and for me,” anton continues, “it’s just a real honour to be able to be part of that growth with them … and to get paid for it, well that’s just a bonus on top of
a bonus.” i look over and see campbell smiling. and then their conversation gets completely lost for me in the sound of the rapids underneath us, washing away with all the melting snow from the mountains higher up, with all the pine needles and sticks and fish far below, and with all the stars too—the whole sky gradually melting into the river, carried off galaxy by galaxy with my thoughts downstream.

**april 30, night**

after we’ve packed all our food away in the metal locker, i lie on my back in my sleeping bag staring up along the trunks of the pine trees towards the clouds floating across the stars. “you know,” anton says, getting into his bag, “we used to get bears all the time up in telluride.” “yeah?” campbell replies. “oh, yeah … i’d be up in the mountains sometimes and i’d come back to my camp and there’d be a mother with her cub sniffing around my fireplace … or there’d be bears that’d come into town sometimes, jump a fence and take the family dog tied up in the backyard … but that’s just getting lazy.” “no shit,” campbell says, zipping up his bag a little tighter. “no shit … and one time a friend of mine was camping in the mountains and he felt something licking his face. he dreamed that it was his dog, but when he opened his eyes he saw it was a bear, his snout right in front of him. he said he didn’t remember getting out of his bag, but the next time he looked around he was in the middle of the woods, far from his camp … figured he’d left some food on the side of his face or something.” “is that right?” campbell asks, moving a little closer. “that’s right … and then one other time i was out hiking with a friend
and we heard this low growl back behind us.” “what was it?” campbell asks. “well … chances are it was a mountain lion.” “a mountain lion?” “yeah, all through the rockies … and probably the sierras too … anyway, we decided to keep moving along, not running, but picking up pace, then we heard another growl … closer this time. so we ran for a while and stopped once we felt safe again. then another growl … this time closer than ever. so we ran as fast as we could and didn’t stop until we made it back to the trailhead. figure it was just marking out its territory.” “interesting,” campbell says, rolling over and over, trying to get comfortable.

“damn it,” anton says suddenly. “what, what, what is it?” campbell asks, sitting up, looking quickly around. “ah nothing … i just put some beeswax in my hair this morning.” “you did what?” “yeah … but i’m sure it’ll be fine. anyway … night boys.” “yeah, it’ll be fine alright,” campbell says, lying back down again, “as long as you stay over there with that bloody honey on your head—maybe it’ll keep the bears away from me.” and as campbell keeps turning over and over, and anton starts snoring, the veil of sleep floats over me once again, while more and more clouds drift across the stars at the far end of the pines.

april 30, middle night

i’m lying on my side in the dark night. a loud crack like a crushed water bottle has woken me. i lie perfectly still, filled with a sudden feeling of dread, like there’s a presence somewhere nearby that maybe i should be avoiding. but i can’t move—
rooted like a pine or giant redwood to the forest floor—unsure of what it is i’m feeling, knowing that something is approaching. i look out into the dark shadows in between the pines, seeing if i can notice anything, hearing the sound of campbell and anton snoring—nothing there, but the feeling remains. and then, rising up out of the shadows just as i imagined back near the redwoods, i see the night take on the form of a huge head, rolling shoulders, body, legs and rump—a bear, moonwalking in reverse along the road maybe five metres away, deadly silent. my blood is pumping, but i can’t move. so i just lie still, willing it to keep walking further up the road. “go on friend,” i say to him silently, “nothing for you of any value here—push on.” i close my eyes to will him harder. but then he must wheel back around between us and the truck two metres away, whacking the food locker with a loud thwump! i lie still, my back to him, just hoping now that he keeps going. and then another whack, further away—the next food locker along—moving further and further on. i sit up now, trying to spot him, seeing only his big black rump disappearing back into the shadows.

“did you see him?” anton asks quietly, rolling over. “yeah, i saw him,” my blood pumping in overdrive, heart trying to beat right out of my chest. “just an adolescent by the look of things,” anton says, “pretty tame too if he’s just going from locker to locker.” well tame or not, adolescent or not, that was a bloody bear alright. “what? what?” campbell asks, hearing us talking, sitting up. “did you guys see a bear or something?” i look at anton, then back at campbell. “nah mate, nah, just talking.” “oh,” he says and lies back down, foggy with sleep. and even in the dark i can see
the glow of anton’s grin before he whispers, “well man … have a good sleep,” then rolls over and soon after is snoring again. but i lie there on my back, unable to even close my eyes, let alone fall asleep—feeling the raw power of adrenaline running through my blood, imagining every shadow a bear.

i lie still, eyes open, the surprise of it all gradually dying down, and i begin thinking—what an amazing thing to have actually seen such a beautifully powerful animal, to have been that close, to be given that gift. was it you who woke me up to see?

slowly my heart starts to pump a little lighter as my eyes follow the long trunks of trees up to their needle blooms and on to the clouds above—watching as a raindrop travels all that distance back down from the clouds, down the trees again and into my open eye, wiping it off with the back of my hand, smiling as two more drops land on my face, gently, slowly, before i am finally able to close my eyes again and return to sleep.

may 1

“you did see a bear last night, didn’t ya?” campbell asks as the three of us start hiking through the early-morning mist and onto the trail towards the granite outcropping of ‘half dome.’ “yeah,” i tell him, crossing over the river and moving up along the steps through the rocky bank, “but i didn’t want you to be kept up by
the thought of it. he was already on his way when you woke up.” “ah, i would have

loved to have seen him. feel like i’ve come all this way and about the only thing
i’ve seen are prairie dogs.” “yeah well … you can say that now but trust me, it took

a while to get back to sleep.” we stop to take off our jackets in the warm sun, tying

them around our waists. “but i promise, if i see another one i’ll let you know.” “and

besides,” anton adds as he steps into the lead, slapping me on the shoulder on his

way past, “he was just a little guy.” i smile and say, quietly, “big enough for me.”

we push on and up the well-maintained trail, the sound of the river roaring down to
our right, mountains rising up ahead of us, the granite ‘half dome’ outcrop looming
above us to our left. the trail changes from rocky steps to rich moist earth amongst
the pines as we cross the river over to the other bank. then we’re moving in zigzag
lines further up the mountain in the dark shade of the trees.

we soon come across a team of workers busily chipping away at rocks with chisels,
hammering stones into the gaps of the trail wall where a wash-out has flooded
through, sawing down branches or entire trees that have fallen across the path,
shoveling the ground to build up the trail where it has fallen away. “hey,” anton
says. “g’day,” campbell and i add. “hi,” a few of them say, about a dozen of them
all up, guys and girls in their twenties or so, wearing shorts and t-shirts mostly,
their backpacks spread out either side of the trail amongst the trees, red and blue
thermoses and mugs lying shining on their sides, lunch boxes closed, water bottles
nearby. someone is mixing up slurry to keep the stones in place, someone else is
collecting stones and piling them up. another guy—older, with beard—seems to be overseeing everything, walking from place to place, talking to the others. he nods at us silently—all of them silent in fact, intent on their work under the trees. “you can feel them working together, can’t you?” anton says after we’ve passed them. “yeah,” campbell replies, “like each individual is supporting the group, and the group is supporting each individual.” it all seems so noble and simple, out here, miles from anywhere, maintaining the track for all those to come through spring and summer—perfectly selfish and selfless at the same time. “be nice if all work in groups was like that,” i say. “and in this kind of setting,” campbell adds, “reckon i wouldn’t mind working out here like that for a while.” “yeah?” anton asks. “yeah,” campbell replies, “beats mining the earth all day.”

we move further upriver, the trail finally giving way to an open meadow of green grass—a lime green, even brighter than the meadow of yosemite below. the water of the river is like a sheet of glass, so clear we can make out every log and rock on the bottom, so clear it looks like it’s not even there. “what a spot,” campbell says, placing his bottle into the river so that little bubbles of air rise to the surface as the water goes pouring in. i look around at the clear meadow, the river, the sun overhead moving towards the end of the trail—‘half dome’—a huge boulder which now hovers just above us, like it could roll down the mountain at any moment.

we take a while to lie on the grass and let the sun stream down onto us, drinking from our water bottles then filling them up again, breathing this place in, breathing
you in as i think about it. “so the next part of the trail is up onto the rock face there,” anton says, “we’ll have to hold onto a rope that’s nailed into the rock as we go along.” campbell and i look up at the rounded edges of half dome. “but it is getting kinda late,” anton adds. “so the options probably are,” campbell continues, “keep goin and stay another night here, or turn back now and maybe drive to some other town … maybe san francisco.”

san francisco—clair. i hadn’t realised we were so close. i wonder if she is still there. “yeah, we could make it,” anton says, looking at his watch, “but we won’t be seeing any bears there.” “ah, that doesn’t really matter,” campbell replies, taking a drink. “well … what if we all say what we want to do, and then we’ll decide?” “okay,” i say, “san francisco,” not even sure why—hoping it’s more to do with wanting to see the place, than it is to do with clair. campbell and anton nod, looking at me, probably remembering that i had long ago told them she was there. “good with that?” anton asks campbell. “yeah,” campbell replies, looking around at the meadow and river, “i think this is a pretty good place to turn around.”

may 1, afternoon

“you used to live in san francisco, didn’t you?” campbell asks anton, who overtakes another truck on the san joaquin interstate, yosemite and the mountains rolling away behind us. “uh-huh,” he replies, “seems like a lifetime ago now … lived there after i finished studying at santa clara … waited tables, rode as a courier, lived in a
van,” he smiles. “that must have been before you were offered that modeling contract, hey?” i ask, “after you realised you wouldn’t be playing in the nba cos of your wrists?” he nods. “something like that.”

something terribly liberating in his story, something sad too. what a thing to come so close to your dreams, of playing professional basketball or whatever, before having to find new things and ask bigger questions. what a thing to turn your back on financial security because you just don’t think it’s the right thing to do. amazing the unfolding of events in any human life. “must be strange for you to come back here now,” campbell asks, friday night in the city rapidly approaching. anton nods, “there are friends i’m definitely looking forward to seeing.” and i can tell he doesn’t want to say much more. campbell looks out at the road, perhaps thinking about his life too—about all the things that took him to newman, the things that brought him here, and everything that will take him back again.

up ahead are the hills of outer san francisco, with huge power-generating windmills turning slowly in the wind and emptiness—white, lonely and haunting. i think of clair again—about our years together, about our years apart, about that silent invisible thing that forever connects people in one way or another after they break up, wherever they are in the world.

what is love? what really? i know that it can take us from one side of the world to the other, that it can take any form, that it can take us our whole lives. i also know i
aspire to find you, to be with you. surely this must be love too? or are you beyond all these wonderings?—buried too deep, flying too high to get caught up in this clumsy self-made net of questions and longing.

may 1, late afternoon

but now frisco—coming in on the 580 towards oakland, anton talking to his friend brennan on the phone. “yeah man, we’re almost at your front door!” anton takes us off the freeway up towards oakland’s hills, winding the f-150 back and forth up the snaking roads, the rear tyres squealing on the corners. “woo!” anton yells, leaning his whole body around a corner, suddenly mad with excitement to be here, shifting into another gear with thoughts of seeing his friend again. “brendan and i went to college together,” he says, “he’s mad!” “that’s a big thing for you to say,” campbell replies. “oh, yeah … he’s way more twisted than i am … you boys are in for a treat at casa brennan!”

up and up. the roads are narrow and surrounded by green hedges and vines and trees of the hills. “hey,” campbell says, suddenly, “there’s more than just pines here!” and so i take a good look out the window and am surprised to see something which immediately takes me back to australia, and back to the place i grew up in, so that it seems for a flashing instant that we’re not driving through oakland’s hills, but perth’s. “eucalyptus trees!” i exclaim. “no way, that’s weird,” campbell adds. the wind blows through their long thin leaves, grey trunks swaying ghostly and
smooth in the california breeze. “what the hell are eucalyptus trees doin here?” campbell asks. “introduced from australia during the gold rush i think,” anton replies, “they’re all through these hills.” i stare out at them, still not completely sure if we’re in perth or san francisco. “strange,” i say. “yeah,” anton replies, smiling, “they’re a real pest apparently … like most australians overseas.”

we continue up through the hills. “so brendan said he was still at work but he’ll be home soon … we can just hang out in his front yard till he shows up. i think this is it.” anton slows down out the front of a brown brick wall, then drives along a little laneway. and at the end of the laneway is brendan’s place—front door dead ahead, little lawn, garage, the house looking out onto the valley on the other side. we park, get out slowly, muscles sore from the long hike this morning, the afternoon light coming in sideways through the hills and eucalypts. “nice place, huh?” anton says, “wait till you see inside.” campbell lights up a smoke and throws a couple of our bags down near the front door, “so what does brendan do with himself?” “well,” anton replies, “at college he studied management … when he went to classes, that is. and now he’s managing one of the biggest telecommunications companies on the west coast.”

anton strums his guitar while we wait. campbell takes the lids off some beers. i think about clair. “can i use your cell phone?” i ask anton. “sure man,” he says, “go for it.” so i walk back down the laneway and dial the number with no real idea of what i want to be saying, the phone ringing, still no idea. “hello?” she answers.
“how’s it goin?’” i say, and straight away she knows who it is. “where are you?” she asks. “oakland hills.” “in San Francisco?” she sounds surprised. “yep.” “wow, you finally made it to my city!” “took a while, but yeah, we’re here … just wondering if you still wanted to catch up at some stage—maybe come round and have a drink?” “well,” she says, then pauses. “or not,” i continue, “either way is fine.” “no i’d love to,” she replies, “but i don’t really know the freeways too well, especially over to oakland. but it’d be nice if you wanted to come over here and have a pizza or something … hang out, catch up.”

brendan shows up in his beamer just as i’m putting a six pack in the car and flicking through the maps to find one for san rafael. “brendan!” anton says when he pulls up. “a-man,” brendan replies calmly, wearing a suit and a cheeky grin, brown hair, shorter than anton and campbell, more like my height. they hug and anton gives him a beer. “that’s what i’m talking about,” he says quietly, loosening his tie, putting down his briefcase and taking a drink. “my cousins,” anton says, introducing us. “thanks for letting us crash,” we say. “ah, no problem … you’ve earned it hanging out with this maniac.” brendan opens the front door, leading us inside. “throw your stuff wherever you like,” he says as we walk into the kitchen area, “probably best if you take the two rooms at the end of the hall.” we walk out of the kitchen area, down past a laundry, bathroom, then drop our bags in the two bedrooms at the end. “come and i’ll show you downstairs,” brendan says. “thanks,” i reply, “but i should probably be going before it gets too late. i’ll catch up with you guys later.” “got a date?” brendan asks, “well that was quick. you guys have been
in town all of what, *two minutes?*” “no problem man,” anton says, “we’ll catch up tomorrow and i’ll show you the town.” “yeah mate,” campbell adds, “have a good one.”

and as i head out the door i feel like campbell and anton understand this is something i have to do, whatever it is i’m going to do—not sure myself—driving down onto the freeway, but straight away missing the turn i should take and ending up on oakland’s lonely flat backstreets of dim lights and grey weatherboard and nobody on the sidewalks. the place seems haunted somehow, lawns unmowed, cracks all over the road and sidewalk, graffiti, parked cars banged up and rusting. so i drive slowly along, no other cars on the road, suddenly feeling like i’m nowhere i should be, pulling over at an intersection to turn on the light and look closely at my map, not wanting to be doing either but having to find a way out. i look at the map long enough to get a rough idea of where i am, then turn off the light and drive down towards a freeway overpass i see in the dark distance, hoping there might be an on-ramp somewhere nearby, either direction will do. i drive underneath the dusty, caged overpass and come out the other side to see a freeway entrance. i take it north, or what feels like north, relieved to be going again, though still unsure of where i’m headed, with clair and everything else.

and then up around the next corner, expecting or hoping to see the richmond san-rafael bridge, i see instead the bay bridge leaning towards downtown san francisco itself. for a second i’m disappointed that i’m heading the wrong way, but then the
beauty of the place hits me. i am actually here—san francisco—the bay, the lights, the tall buildings shining and reflecting back across the water, the bridges connecting it all. i’ve finally come to the coast and its gilded city, finding it almost accidentally like a lost treasure, like gold buried at the end of all this american land. san francisco where beats and words and jazz hang in the air like incense lingering—san francisco of wharfs and fish-and-chips and back-alley drinking sessions of tokay and gin, of city lights bookstore and poets reading and rioting at the vesuvio, of the hells angels and hipsters and revolution, of a million minds open and pouring towards the pacific and freedom itself. and san francisco finally of all clair’s stories, of clair herself, growing up here, her grandparents, her mum, her dad and two brothers.

i end up paying the toll and crossing half the bay bridge because there’s nowhere i can turn around, driving all the way to treasure island blinded by the beauty and my ideas of the place, before i’m able to exit and do a u-turn, downtown receding in my mirrors again as i swing the truck around, veering left on the way back to oakland, taking the 80 north this time, leaning left again just before richmond and finally crossing the right bridge over to san rafael, houses twinkling in the hills around, the water an oily skin in the darkness below—clair somewhere on the other side of this bridge, waiting for me in a mcdonald’s carpark to take me the final distance home. but maybe she has gone already, and i wouldn’t blame her—forty minutes late, an hour, a lifetime. i would understand if she was no longer there—if you were no longer there either.
may 1, early night

but when i arrive there she is, sitting and waiting in her grandparents’ old brown mercedes, sliding the window down when i pull up next to her. “hey,” she says, blonde hair falling straight down as she looks out at me with her full eyes. “sorry i’m late,” i say, “did a bit of sightseeing in oakland, and then the bay bridge.” “ah, no problem at all … thanks for making the effort.” and we stay there just a little while, staring at each other, taking in what we see now in this new moment—this san rafael yellow glow mcdonald’s parking lot moment. “so then,” she says finally, “do you want to follow me?”

she turns out onto the street and i follow after again, this time past a hundred mansions built back from the road and green shrubbery of verges, the bay to our right, everything manicured and fine—clair leading me towards her house and into all her histories and memories of this place, and of us too, perhaps.

she turns up a driveway, an automatic garage door opening, and parks the mercedes next to another one inside. i park behind and she walks out underneath the garage door just before it closes, her skin soft in the outside light. “it’s good to see you again,” she says, kissing my cheek, “thanks for coming.” she looks at me for a brief second, something still sad in her eyes—something i recognise because maybe i helped put it there. but also around that sadness a wall that maybe i will never again be able to scale, and maybe just as well for both of us, who knows. “so … you’ve been travelling since i saw you in boulder?” she asks, leading me through a side
gate and into a backyard with swimming pool, lights coming from the kitchen and sitting room of the house to our left, tennis court over the back—all well maintained, but there’s a bleakness here too. “maid’s house over there,” she says, pointing, “gardener’s house too—crazy, hey?”

we walk over to the kitchen door, and i see through the window her mum inside pouring from a bottle near the sink, glass in the other hand, wearing an ‘i love ny’ t-shirt, dark hair tumbling down with the wine. “hey there,” she says with her thick american accent when we walk in, smiling, coming around to the other side of the kitchen bench to hug me. “hey mary-anne,” i say, glad to be seeing her again—the same tanned, brown skin, the same full lips and smile, the same warm cheeks and glow, the same mary-anne. “good to see you,” she says, standing back a little to take me in—maybe the me i am now, or the me i once was, or both. she smiles again, “it seems like years.” i look quickly around at the brown and orange 1970’s of the kitchen. it’s like stepping way too deep in the direction of the past, all our pasts. “you know, i think it has been years.” she nods, “but here you are now in america! i knew you would love it here.” i scratch my head and look back at clair, “well, i guess you do know me pretty well.” mary-anne nods again, her smile dimming just a little when she notices the six pack clair has carried in for me.

mary-anne and i talk for a while about the last few weeks—wyoming, montana, idaho, south dakota, nebraska, colorado, utah, arizona, nevada, and now california. “and you came from yosemite today?” she asks. “yeah, i guess it was this morning
we were there.” “wow,” she says, “have you had time to stop and see anything on the way?” i think about that for a second. “good question … i think so, i hope so.” i think of you—the moments i have felt close to you so far, and all that remains as yet unfound, unlived, undone.

“and where are you staying in san francisco?” mary-anne asks. “oakland,” i reply. “oh,” she says, surprised. “actually, oakland hills.” “ah, okay,” she says, looking a little relieved. clair puts the beer in the fridge for me and mary-anne picks up her wine. “well … i’ll let you two catch up … it’s great to see you again.” she kisses me on the cheek once more and takes her wine and book and disappears through a door on the other side of the kitchen into another part of the house. could almost be like we were in mosman park again the way she exited like that. clair says little, goes and sits on the black couch in the lounge area to the side of the kitchen, the tv on in front of her though she doesn’t watch, looking at her hands instead, feet up on a little coffee table. “well then,” she says, “have you eaten?”

may 1, night

we order pizza and talk of little things—catching up over what’s been happening since we saw each other in boulder. i tell her some more about the trip—vegas, death valley, the bear last night. she tells me she’s been thinking lots about perth, about the acting course she put on hold to come out here, taking the time to consider the possible directions of things from the distance of san francisco. “it
sounds like you’ll be heading back eventually though?” i ask her, and she nods.
“yeah, i think it’s the right thing to do. but it looks like i’ll be here for most of this
year though … helping mum, trying to sell the house.”

i have a sudden vision of her sitting in this same house over a year ago, talking to
me on the telephone when i called from santa fe—the week i spent with mum, her
sisters, anton and jen for christmas. clair was in america with family too. i called to
wish her a merry christmas while it snowed outside, to say i was actually there, in
america, only a few states away, one time zone. after all her stories about the place,
after all my indifference about ever coming here, after all my jokes about america
and americans to her and her mum, after all these years. i’d wanted to share the
excitement and surprise i had at this actually happening at all, the joy i had in
finding a magical place, a place unlike anywhere i had imagined, or unlike
television or the movies or the news had ever shown. instead an america of
amazement, of snow, of skies free and high, of mountains, and so many open
people. i’d wanted to say to her yes, now i believe, i am open too, i can see all this
the way she had spoken of it—as if my words could show her i finally understood
what she had always wanted to point out to me, not just about america, but the
whole world, my life, hers, and the possibility of us together in all this. “it’s
amazing,” i said to her. “i know,” she said down the phone line, “i’ve been trying to
tell you for years.”
and now, a year or more later, we sit watching a johnny depp video because we seem unable to really talk, pizza crusts turning cold and drying on the kitchen bench, two beer bottles empty on the coffee table, both mine. at first she lies with her head on my lap, then we lie down together with her in front of me as we have done so many times before. remembering the first time ever—after another long and drunken night at club bay view, going back to a friend’s place together, my brother-in-law with me, lying down with her on a living-room couch, other people asleep all around us, feeling the warmth of her next to me under my arm. waking up in the early morning, my brother-in-law shaking me awake. “c’mon mate … i gotta get goin,” he said, clair no longer there, a dream maybe, though surely not. i looked around the room and couldn’t find her. later i asked where she went that night. she replied, smiling, “i couldn’t stand your drunken snoring, so i went into my friend’s room.” “oh,” i said, “i thought you had disappeared forever.”

when the video ends she gets up and turns off the tv. “c’mon,” she says and leads me upstairs, the house dark with oak and shadows, carpet over the steps, a railing, a bathroom, the place smelling of tiredness and stories. she goes into a spare room and i follow, a single bed inside, towel there, a window looking out onto the san francisco night. “is this okay?” she asks. “of course.” i walk over to the bed and lie down, she sits next to me. i suddenly feel completely spent, like i’ve just walked the entire surface of the earth to return home and confront myself unchanged, asking so, what now? i look up at her. “what’s going to happen?” i ask. she looks at me, puzzled. “what do you mean?” she asks softly, “with what?” i look out through
the window on the blinking lights of the city far-away, and sigh with tiredness, realising that all my roads have led me here. “with you … or with me … or with us … with everything.” she doesn’t say anything, and i don’t expect her to. instead we sit there next to each other, galaxies apart.

“do you want to lie down?” i ask. she says nothing for a short while. “i’ll let you get some sleep,” she replies, getting up to kiss me on the forehead. “my room is just down the end of the hall,” she adds, “if you need anything.” she walks to the door and begins closing it, slowly, deliberately, turning eventually and saying, “sweet dreams. thank you for coming all this way … finally,” before she pulls it shut.

and so i lie on the bed, fully clothed, my boots still on, staring out at the city of san francisco in the aching night, the lights blurring slightly as i blink, something heavy in my chest and throat, my heart pounding painfully to the beat of her footsteps disappearing off down the long hallway.

and so is this the pain of birth i feel? am i being born into something else, something better, something new after all this? did you lead me here tonight? could it have unfolded any other way? is this my chance to pull out some kind of last barb and after all this time finally and really move? it hurts though—like my insides have decided to peel away like so many long strips of faded paint … but to reveal what exactly?
and yet, when i look out the window, san francisco continues to shine—the bridge and the building peaks, the houses by the bays and hills, the streetlights going on forever, the cars going with them, the ships and boats in the bay, the water reflecting the lights, as well as a star or two above. all of it orange and gold and red and blue and white and mirroring back upon itself and onto me so that i no longer know where the reflections start or end, as everything goes on shining just as it should—you there in and with and behind it all. so colourful, so bright, so beautiful—unbearably so.

may 2

i wake after dreams of slipping down the long hall towards clair’s room but finding her door growing further and further away, no matter how close i tried to get.

i roll over and look out through the window and see the day has begun on california, the light soft and weary, the buildings of downtown taking form out of the even light, the legs and wires of bridges hung across the bay.

i get up and walk out into the hallway—clair’s door still closed, the sound of someone downstairs. i shower quickly in the nearby bathroom and head down, eager to get going. “morning … did you sleep okay?” mary-anne asks when i step into the kitchen. “yeah, thanks mary-anne, i slept fine. that’s quite a view of the city through the window in that room.” “oh yeah, i love it … especially at night,” she
says, as the maid comes into the kitchen from another part of the house. “now this
is maria … she can make you some breakfast if you like.” i smile and say hello. she
is dark haired, short, radiates a kind of warm pride. “so what would you like?” she
asks with a smile. “ah, just some toast would be great … thank you.” “toast coming
right up, and tea or coffee?” “tea please.”

mary-anne goes off to wake clair, and maria soon goes outside. i sit there in the
kitchen quickly eating my toast and drinking the hot tea, so that by the time clair
comes down in pink dressing gown, glazed with sleep, hair a mess, i am almost
ready to leave. “are you going already?” she asks, pouring herself a coffee from the
plunger. “yeah, i said i’d be back early cos i’ve got the car.” she nods, but can
probably tell i’m not being completely honest—probably also knows why i can’t
seem to really speak to her—that i understand it would be incredibly hard if she and
i were to ever walk the same road again, that some things are supposed to fade
eventually, that i want her to be happy—things she already knows. “did you sleep
alright?” she asks. “yeah. some weird dreams.” she nods again and takes a sip from
her steaming coffee, both hands wrapped around the mug, the pink gown too big,
her chest showing through in a ‘v’ from the neck. i look away, and she notices. “i
should go,” i say, “thank your mum for letting me stay … it was nice to see her
again.”

then something is leading me through the door and outside towards the car, though
i’m not sure what exactly—you? whatever it is, it comes with a sadness made
clearer by the perfect, simple beauty of the morning and of her. She walks slowly out after me past the pool, towards the side gate and the garage, under the blue sky and eucalyptus trees, and over to the F-150 which looks kind of lonely parked here by itself.

“How long are you going to be in town for?” she asks as I open the driver’s door. “I don’t know,” I reply. “Well … you’ve got my number.” I look at her and find her looking back at me with her bottomless eyes, though there are things that come between our looking now. “See ya,” I say, something sharp in my throat. We hug, and she rubs me on the back, “I gotta go.”

And so with that I jump in the truck, start it up, and reverse out the driveway with her waving in bathrobe as I turn and drive off into the new day—Friday—overcome with the desire to get back to Campbell and Anton, trying to find the freeway as quickly as I can, turning the stereo way up to drown out my thinking, though I can’t help this thing cramping in my chest, even as I go past McDonald’s and find the freeway soon after, the bridge back towards Oakland, the water crisp and blue, slippery and calm, the city certain in its workings, my insides twisting again, like so many of the last times I have seen her. I’m annoyed with myself for creating this once again—how many times is enough? I wonder what you think of it all when you look at it with your eyes. True—it may well be nothing but a simple moving forwards in the mighty grand scheme of everything, a new opportunity perhaps—but this hollowness is alive and real enough.
and suddenly i feel like a pale and ghostly eucalyptus tree planted a long way from home, swaying sadly to the unavoidable wind that blows all around and all through me.

**May 2, Early Morning**

i manage to arrive back at brendan’s place without getting lost, following the right twists and turns on the freeway before spotting my exit and taking the winding road up into oakland’s hills.

“Hey man,” anton says, buttering some toast in the big open kitchen when i walk in, “what happened?” “Ah,” i say, pulling up a stool by the kitchen bench, “probably went the only way it could have.” “Like that huh,” he says, pouring me a cup of tea. “Yeah,” i reply, as words start falling out, “things grow, and then things fade i guess … but it’s hard when you can remember so clearly the way it was when it blossomed, and all you want is to be in that moment of blossoming and share in it again.” anton goes over to the stove and turns some scrambled eggs. “Well,” he says, “perhaps in some way we’re set up as human beings so that we can call to mind those good times—that blossoming—whenever we want to … and can appreciate it in that moment … but it can become difficult i guess, painful even, when we want to hold onto that blossoming so much, even as it whithers.” i look down into the swirling creamy fog of my tea. i agree, though my chest doesn’t feel any lighter. “we can talk about it some more if you like,” he says, his big blue eyes
open to me. “nah mate, that’s fine,” i reply. “any time though.” “thanks mate,” i say. “any time,” he says, and serves up the scrambled eggs.

“where are campbell and brendan?” i ask. “well brendan’s already gone to work, and i think campbell is in the shower.” i take a sip of my tea, feeling a little tired all of a sudden. “how d’ya go last night?” i ask. “how did we go?” he asks quizzically. “yeah, you know, what did you do?” “oh,” he says, laughing, “we just hung out, talked, drank a few beers … nothing crazy.” and as he’s talking campbell walks out in clean white shirt and jeans, hair wet. “morning mate,” he says, looking pretty chirpy, face and neck smooth after a shave, “that’s a bloody good bed in there, as nice as it’s been sleeping on a two-inch thick mattress in the dirt … and a bloody nice shower too.” he pats me on the back, “so how is she?” “good mate,” i reply, “she said to say g’day.” “everything go alright?” “i dunno,” i reply, “guess so. kinda tired of thinking about it.” he sits down on the stool next to me, runs his palm and fingers over his jaw and nods, “i hear ya.” anton dishes up some more eggs for campbell. “anyway,” i say, “here we are in san francisco together, with plenty of things we can do.”

“okay then,” anton says, as we start on the eggs, “what are you guys interested in seeing?” “whatever mate,” campbell replies, “maybe that winding street, and the bridge … otherwise i’m not too fussed.” “so downtown yeah?” anton says, “okay … how about you?” “maybe a look around the city,” i reply, “and how far away is big sur?” “big sur?—not too far, but i don’t know how the traffic will be today
coming back, especially if we want to see the city too. why big sur?” “ah doesn’t matter then, let’s just roll into town.” “okay,” anton says, “tour de san fran coming up.”

i try again to forget about clair long enough to slide into the excitement of new adventures unfolding, though the image of her lingers in me like the aftersight of a camera flash, or the sun when you look too long. but then i’m suddenly caught up in the whirlwind that is us descending on another city, driving into a place i seem to have always known the name of and wondered from where the music of it came. a whole bright friday to flop and roll through, a whole bright new city of imagined happenings to fall into, anton at the wheel, campbell up front, me straining forward with seatbelt to get a better look at things, to move forward with them into the expectation of it—and to get on with things, which is all we have to do, isn’t it?

because this may well be my one and only time here, in this place, with these two, on a day in the universe that shimmers blue on blue—because this might be my last day altogether, my last chance. and so no room now for looking into the car’s mirrors, but instead forward to the freeway that flows towards us like a long grey tongue unfurled as we come down into the open-mouth of the new world in the new day. san francisco.
may 2, late morning

anton takes us over the bay bridge, going past treasure island where i u-turned last night. something softer about the city today—the way it is coming into a place at night sometimes, filling it out with imaginings, to discover the next morning something else, something daylight and solid, though not necessarily more real.

“is that office building supposed to be a pyramid or something?” campbell asks, “looks like a giant tipi.” “yeah, the transamerica pyramid,” anton says, “except there’s no pharaohs buried in this one … just the slaves of corporate america.”

there are other buildings leaning, shining. the city seems to have a spread-out and watery feel similar to perth’s, though more alive in the centre—the hills around closer, fuller, more rolling. people everywhere. curbside stores selling books and antiques, cafés full of people reading newspapers, cars and yellow cabs going this way and that up the steep streets, a cable car rattling and screeching between lanes then turning around on a giant rotating disc at the end of its line, people waiting to catch a ride, jumping off with coat-tails flapping, briefcases in hand. friday morning in frisco with people going about their friday morning lives. “i could get the hang of this place,” campbell says, “what a town!”

so this is the city clair tried to tell me about for so long.

we pull up at a spot on a little street just off columbus. “first stop on the tour,” anton says, “city lights bookstore.” we get out and walk across columbus and into
city lights—lawrence ferlinghetti’s bookstore of a million beats, of city lights publishing, of poetry readings overflowing with wine and fistfights, of ginsberg’s long howl, of kerouac’s prowling through the crowd collecting money for bottles of tokay, of bukowski growling and swearing at the audience. and something still singing through the cracks in the floor and the walls as we walk in, something singing from the pages of books all across the shelves as we look. a few other people move through the crammed-in store, early morning, a young woman busy behind the counter, her spectacles resting on the furthest tip of her nose, looking like they might fall off at any moment. big glass windows overlook the street, with a little passage leading downstairs to more books.

“check it out,” anton says, putting on his round reading glasses and tilting his head to read the titles better, “a whole bookcase of bukowski … man i used to tear around the bars of this city with friends pretending to be tough like him,” he laughs, “man … what a beautiful asshole he was.” “and look,” campbell says, “a shelf of tim winton.” “who’s that?” anton asks. “he’s a perth writer.” just about all his books are there on a shelf next to bukowski, including dirt music—boab tree on cover—remembering those long afternoons in crested butte reading it after mum and dad sent it over, taking me out of that snow and shack on the top of my lift to the kimberley and back to perth, the line between here and there still taut and strong, for all of us. i wonder if jay has read it yet.
i also see *cloudstreet*, and for some reason think of the copy that sits on the top level of my dusty bookshelf back in perth. i remember that it has a drawing of a house on the front, and clair’s name written in blue pen and capital letters on the inside cover.

i take a bit more of a look around, campbell and anton going to their own corners of the store. i notice *the first third*—neal cassady’s opening and only part to his planned three-part life novel, written just the way he spoke—cassady, the hero of some of kerouac’s novels talking in his own voice, dying on the road—on a train line—before he could punch out the rest of his story. he’s still alive though, in all this writing. everyone else there with him—ginsberg, corso, whalen, snyder, burroughs, more.

i go downstairs and look around—non-fiction, darker down here, a few other people turning pages in the dusty shadows, looking at me, looking back at their books. there’s almost too much—too much to contain within all these walls—like the collected works are searching for a way back out onto the street, to seep like steam, to play like music, to weave their way alive across the city and the world. eventually i feel like i need to go back outside too.

the sun’s bright when we step out the door, crossing jack kerouac street and walking straight into the vesuvio café. and here too are all the poets and artists of san francisco still living, still breathing, still creating, lined up along the wooden
bar, sweating in the dark booths, scribbling upstairs in the smoky musty cloud of excitement and noise, speaking loud to be heard over the top of it, every one of them *straining* to be heard, to be listened to, to say what has to be said from deep within or deep without, in whatever way they can. the café bar is full of their living and their art in the early morning, even though their physical bodies are no longer here—just their stories—just the pictures of them on the walls to go with words of poems and prose, with newspaper articles and other things left by customers.

“wow,” campbell says, “you can really *feel* it in here.”

campbell takes a seat at a window table while anton goes to the bar, the waiter ignoring (or not seeing) the other souls, going straight up to anton to take his order. “what do you guys want?” anton calls over. “whatever mate,” campbell replies. “you choose,” i add, looking at the words plastered all over the walls, going upstairs to see all the dark tables up there, the roar of it almost deafening—the history, the stories woven into the woodwork through time. i come back down and campbell is reading some of the articles on the walls, looking at a photo of ginsberg with ferlinghetti. “i could see you living in this city, mate,” he says to me, “in this country.” i smile and try to imagine it—maybe i could live in this country, but it might be hard in this city—at least right now.

“what are these?” campbell asks, as anton brings over two tall glasses of what looks like coffee and cream. “coffee?” i ask. “not just any old coffee,” anton replies, coming back with his own drink, sitting down, the waiter going back to cleaning
glasses, “irish coffees,” he says with a wink, “thought we’d celebrate some family heritage.” campbell shakes his head, and closes his eyes briefly, “whiskey?” “i know … it is only ten in the morning,” anton agrees, “but it’s afternoon in new york city … and besides, this is the vesuvio!” and with that he raises his glass, prompting or daring us to do the same, “to frisco!” he says with a sense of homecoming and joy, “to us!”

the drinks are so easy we end up staying for another round, letting the noise of the room sweep over us, getting picked up by it—all the words from the fifties to the present rising up in one steady wave.

“so what now then?” anton says, half asking us, half asking himself, maybe even asking the city for its own recommendations as we cross columbus again, climbing uphill slightly, everything taking on the light blue colour of the morning sky. we’re buzzing a little from the whiskey and the light. “weird,” anton says, “my body is rushing on the caffeine … but it’s also slowing down on the alcohol, so i almost feel kind of normal, though not.” “just like every other morning, hey mate?” campbell says, smiling. “sheeet.” “want me to drive?” i ask. “i’m fine,” anton replies, getting into the driver’s seat, “though you might want to put on your seatbelts.”

and thanks to the coffee or the whiskey, or maybe to anton, campbell, the morning and the city, i feel a bit better—like this is exactly the way my day needs to be
unfolding, the way everything needs to be unfolding—with the road, with clair, with you. i’m merging back into the world now. no need to fight, no need to even worry, instead letting the easy glow of the city come rushing in all around us with the water of the bay. “so,” anton says, taking us away from city lights, down towards the golden gate bridge, “here is lombard street … or the winding street.” he turns down onto it, green hedges holding back flower beds and trees, the street zigzagging like an old mountain trail down the short hill, pastel coloured apartment buildings and terrace houses on either side, windows open or curtains drawn, the bay glistening below. “power steering’s a blessing hey?” campbell says as anton makes his way slowly down the street, rolling the steering wheel hard right to hard left then back again, before we finally come out down the bottom and look at all its slow switch-back turns doubling up on each other, though always advancing, either up or down. “strange.”

anton takes us onto the golden gate bridge—the thick red steel of its two main supports, the side-wires hanging like giant ropes across the bay, other wires running from the ropes down to the bridge’s arcing road. all of it strung up across the water, joining the city to the rolling green of frisco’s hilly parkland, lost completely to the fog sometimes i am sure, but not today—today a beautiful blue with slight wind that goes rippling across the water underneath us like a fan. driving north across it, not much traffic, downtown behind us to our right—looking back to see the up-and-down roll of the shining mirrorglass buildings and a-frame rooftop townhouses, the roads that roll with them, the big pyramid building, other
shining rectangular ones, more bridges far off, the houses on the green hills, but mostly all this water—the great heaving pacific funneling in on our left, winding in around downtown in flooding currents, lapping at the footfalls and foundations of this rising, rolling city and these rising rolling hills. ahead of us, the green of golden gate national recreation area. “man,” anton says, “how is it in the middle of a big city like this that all you have to do is cross a bridge and bam … you’ve got hiking, camping, biking, the works … some awesome trails in there.” we all stare off at the hills, while the pacific joins with the bay below our wheels. “such a nice city,” campbell says, “i’ve got no idea how the hell i’m going to go back to newman.” and truth be told, as we approach the other side of the bridge, i don’t know how he will either. i just hope that whatever happens, going home is not too hard for him, or any of us.

we come to the other side, as always, whether it be the golden gate bridge or the bay bridge, whether it be sydney harbour or the narrows, or some other bridge we are hastily building for ourselves. perhaps that is what i have been trying to do this whole trip—building a bridge, though i don’t even know how far away the other side actually is, and whether i’ll find you there, or myself, or love, or happiness, or something else. and in one sense maybe it doesn’t even matter—all i can do is keep on building, keep on going, keep on trying, keep on doing, and hope and believe that it’s for a reason.
we pull up at a viewing spot with all of san francisco’s blinding beauty in front of us, and i am suddenly filled with the warm, willful idea that maybe it’s not so much about looking for anything any more—that maybe it’s more about uniting myself with this incredible world—that it’s more about serving this world because i love it—my brother and cousin and ex-girlfriends and friends and every other human being included. maybe that is the bridge i need to be building now.

“an amazing view, huh?” anton says, the water sparkling blue and gold below, the green of the hills rolling off in rounded peaks towards the horizon, all the houses, all the cars, all the people, with the sun shining on the glass windows of downtown’s buildings.

may 4

our final day on the road together. some drinking sessions over the last couple of days and nights that i won’t bother to talk about, other than they unfolded in madness and smoke like most sessions do.

we’re on the interstate again, all set to leave the city—leave this final state of california, and finish our shared journey. i call clair to say one final goodbye, and i’m surprised to hear she wants us to swing by on our way out. “c’mon,” she says, “i’ll make some coffee.” but i’m not sure—too tired to really know what to do. “are you guys keen?” i ask. “sure, mate,” campbell replies. “a coffee would probably
us good,” anton adds. so at the last minute we end up swinging across the shining bay towards san rafael again, finding the exit, and following the same road back to her house.

we pull up at the garage, and clair comes out to meet us wearing jeans and a tight yellow t-shirt. i introduce anton. “hi,” she says, smiling as they shake hands, before she kisses campbell on the cheek. “this is some place you’ve got here,” anton says as we walk through to the pool area where clair has set up a plunger and some mugs on an outdoor table. “it’s for sale if you want it,” she says, pouring out the coffee. “that’s cool,” anton replies, “but i think i was looking for something a little …” “smaller?” campbell suggests. “ah … less expensive.”

all of us sit and drink the coffee she’s made, her mum out shopping, no-one else around, fallen leaves on the concrete by the pool, some landing in the water, floating, others sodden and sinking. “so … ya ready for the long drive?” she asks. we look at each other. “nope,” campbell answers, “but it’s the only way we’ll ever get back … we’re out of time.” i take another drink, and the coffee is bitter. i want more sugar but i can’t figure out the words to ask for it. and so i look down and drink it anyway, noticing the grass creeping up between the cracks in the pavers. “have you had a good time together?” she asks. “yeah, it’s been bloody good,” campbell replies. “mad,” anton adds. “i can imagine,” she says, a half-smile on her lips as she takes another drink, looking at me briefly, looking away. we sit for a while longer, talking small talk, until there’s nothing left to say. something else
wants to happen, something else is calling, waiting to unfold. i look over at clair—
she is far too beautiful—all of this is. and then the call gets louder—becomes a
roar—like the winter creek of my home in the perth hills, like every river i have
ever heard, except the river has now become a road of bitumen and paint and signs
and rails and potholes, and it will never end.

“i think it’s time to go,” anton says finally, looking at his watch, looking at me,
estimating how long it’ll take, thinking of the work he’ll have to do tomorrow when
we arrive. and so we all get up and move slowly back to the truck, clair walking us
out. then by the f-150 she says goodbye to campbell and anton so that it’s just me
and her left standing there in front of the garage. i hug her and kiss her on the
cheek. “goodbye,” i say finally, sucking in a deep breath, mustering up the strength
to say what i know i have to—words i’m sure she has already given to me long ago.
“i do love you … but i hope it is no longer a love that holds you back, or holds me
back. i only want what is best now—for you, for me, for us, for everything …”
there is nothing more. everything is quiet. waiting. she looks teary, but there is a
slight smile on her lips as well. “i know,” she says, “and i love you too … you know
that. things are just different now.” i nod and she hugs me again, both of us
knowing it’ll be our last. and then, in the same breath, in the same movement, we
let each other go, pulling back into our individual selves with a step. her eyes big
and moist, her head tilted to one side, a few strands of fine blonde hair resting
behind her ear, her lips pressed together and her chin tucked up into itself the way it
does sometimes. then suddenly i’m getting in behind the wheel, starting it up,
reversing out and watching as she stands there waving—clair—until i put it in gear, and we’re gone.

in silence the three of us drive back across to richmond, the bridge seemingly contracting with us as we go. i’ll never travel it again this whole life i realise, leaning forward on the 80 now, all cylinders firing, the road rushing underneath us, open and ready for whatever will come of it now.
may 4, afternoon

somewhere near sacramento i must fall asleep. this time dreaming that dream again—somehow knowing i would—running down through the gold grass at the top of the hill at home, summer, wombles running out of the strawberry patch, red grin and barking, same colour as the grass, same colour as my hair—running with my feet on the ground until they don’t touch it, floating up, higher, above the jarrah and other eucalyptus trees, nothing but the sound of wombles barking in complete joy below. i’m not looking down at the valley, not needing to, and so not worrying about falling any more, prepared to go even higher, to welcome new things, people, ideas, places, feelings, life. already there, already in it, already becoming it—this endless blue sky day, this full sky at night, this painfully beautiful world of all our histories, futures, loves, losses, hopes, dreams … and you.
“What’s your road, man?”:¹

My experiences with the life and work of Jack Kerouac in relation to the development of “the lonely and the road”

INTRODUCTION

“Beginning at the city”

Long and varied are the roads of artists already running through the landscape—there are many to follow or learn from. And yet at the same time, the world (inside and outside the artist), the future, and indeed the landscape itself, seem to constantly call the artist out towards their own individual road.

Still, the road must begin somewhere. And chances are, the starting point for an emerging artist on their road is more like a busy downtown Manhattan or Tokyo intersection full of roads already laid, than it is a machete-in-hand, path-clearing, lonely expedition through the jungle. This lonely-going tends to come later, when our own road has already been found. Exceptions there always are, but in the modern world, at least, the point of departure for the artist frequently seems to be the bustling city of influence.

What is the correct route then for any artist in training? For an artist wishing to find their own path in a world of roads already laid? How to answer the call from the future, from the world of ideas, from the landscape itself, and so begin the first steps? For at this early stage—at this crowded cross-street—it seems as if almost any direction will do. Almost.

We do, of course, have our artistic (as well as other) compasses to help show us the way. Perhaps my compass has been my heart, perhaps it has been my head, perhaps it has been both or neither. For the sake of this discussion, let us call it my nose. And so then, I have been following my nose—following the scent towards
some kind of invisible, fragrant, future—towards what I hoped would be the outskirts of town, towards the place where there may exist more room to find my own road. In so doing I have happened to find myself travelling many paths already paved—some more well trodden than others. One of these paths we’ll call Jack Kerouac Street, though it is hardly a street in the usual sense of the word, and is unlike the one in San Francisco that shares the same name. It is more of a ramshackle, hastily-laid, meandering road interspersed with many long, straight stretches begging for speed—stretches calling out to be travelled in a roaring car at pace. Then just as quickly it becomes a gravel track, then a muddy path, then a trail wide enough for two feet only. Suddenly it’s a river, then a train line, then a mountain high and desolate with no other roads nearby, with the city hazy in the distance though still visible, so that there also exists a strange longing to return to the ‘known’ from where we’ve come—that it’s not too late to turn back after all. Here the road seems to fork—part of it goes snaking down and back towards the city (though not the same way that brought us here), while the other seems to go even further up the mountain. In any case, Jack Kerouac Street it remains, and not yet my own.

In order, then, for me to hear more clearly the call towards my own road, perhaps it is worth revisiting those earlier steps—the steps that have brought me to wherever it is I may stand now—to my adventures travelling alongside that one street in particular (Kerouac’s) and how these experiences have shaped my own journey, my own quest as a writer.
In doing so, however, I believe it will be more fruitful if I show you, dear reader, these experiences, these adventures, these places where our roads have overlapped, rather than simply tell you about it, or what it all might ‘mean.’ In so doing I am hopeful we will together be able to travel along with these roads, with these experiences—think with them (or from them) rather than about them.\(^2\)

Consequently, we may well be able to avoid overlaying our own presuppositions (or even theories) onto these experiences—that is, colouring the phenomena with

\(^2\) For example, thinking about Kerouac’s work will give us each a separate (subjective) understanding of the ideas within his writing. Only by thinking with (or from) his work will we be able to grasp these ideas and move beyond our own separate understanding to the place where the formative, creative, working principles of his work actually dwell—in the ideas found within his writing. In such a way, we go beyond a mere organising, arranging and ordering of works of art (and their many aspects), to penetrating into the essential ideas found within them. For we will come to understand Kerouac’s work when we know the ideas found within it. Essentially, the goal here is for the subject (ourselves) to selflessly merge with the object (in this case, Kerouac’s work), in order that the object may reveal of itself what it will. For a closer look at the application and results of this process as a scientific methodology, see any of the scientific writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, including, for example, *Scientific Studies*, ed. and trans, Douglas Miller (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988). For a thorough overview of Goethe’s scientific method (and theory of knowledge implicit therein), see Rudolf Steiner, *Goethean Science* (New York: Mercury Press, 1998), including 178: “When Goethe says that ‘everything of which we become aware and about which we are able to speak is only a manifestation of the idea’ (*Aphorisms in Prose*), and when he states that the human being must develop within himself a capacity for knowledge of such a kind that the idea becomes just as observable to him as an outer perception is to his senses, then he stands upon that ground where the idea is not merely a phenomenon of consciousness but is an objective world principle; thinking is the flashing up in consciousness of that which objectively constitutes the world. The essential thing about the idea, therefore, is not what it is for us, for our consciousness, but rather what it is in itself. For, through its own … being it underlies the world as principle.” And to clarify this use of the term *idea*, see Steiner, *Goethean Science*, 171-172: “Up to the time of that first famous conversation with [Friedrich] Schiller, Goethe had practised a certain way of viewing the world. He had observed plants, found an archetypal plant underlies them, and derived the individual forms from it. This archetypal plant (and also a corresponding archetypal animal) had taken shape in his spirit, was useful to him in explaining the relevant phenomena. But he had never reflected upon what this archetypal plant was in its essential nature. Schiller opened his eyes by saying to him: It is an idea … But we must bear in mind here that Schiller did not provide Goethe with something foreign to him, but rather Schiller, by observing the Goethean spirit, struggled through for the first time to a knowledge of *objective idealism*. He only found the right term for the way of viewing things that he recognized and marveled at in Goethe.” As we shall see, this way of viewing the world is also to be found in Kerouac’s writing. See, for example, Kerouac, “Center of Interest” excerpt from “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” *Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania), http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/kerouac-spontaneous.html (last accessed June 28 2008). (Article originally published in *Evergreen Review* [Summer 1958]: 72-73; all subsequent references from above-mentioned website.) This process is also something I have striven for within my own writing, which will become clearer as the exegesis unfolds.
our own pre-existing thoughts or assumptions—but instead hold back on thinking about them for as long as possible so that the phenomena under observation—my experiences as they intersect with Kerouac’s road—may reveal whatever lessons, whatever secrets, whatever ideas, whatever universal laws (perhaps) they will about the artist’s journey, about influence and inspiration, about finding our own road.³

Let us seek, then, not to start with a preordained framework and arrange the phenomena to suit it, but rather, allow the phenomena to reveal what they will about these lessons, these secrets, these ideas, these laws. In so doing, may we allow this exegesis (a road in itself and, as we shall also see, a quest) to be an experiential, phenomenological account of the overlapping of two or more roads, and the search (in this case, my own) for a new road that is truly an individual one.⁴

By using such an approach, my hope is we will be able to draw our own conclusions in relation to the artist’s journey, in freedom.

As we shall see, there are many aspects to Kerouac’s road, and to my own, that will quickly become apparent through any thinking with the ideas in our writing. Some of the most significant of these aspects require, perhaps, at least a brief mention in this introduction in order to make clearer what it is we will be discussing. Importantly, a certain quest predominates in both Kerouac’s work and in mine. In one sense this quest is what is written about (for the sake of this discussion, let us call this ‘what’ the story, theme or content) and also the way in which it is written (let us call this ‘way’ the style, form or technique).

³ This method of “holding back on thinking” is, again, employed in Goethe’s scientific method, Kerouac’s writing technique and, as well shall also see, in John Keats’s notion of “Negative Capability” (to be explored later in the exegesis).
⁴ In order for this approach to prove effective I will, of course, need to make significant reference to my own work, as well as Kerouac’s.
Any reading of, and, again, thinking with Kerouac’s work will uncover the thematic quest at the heart of many of his novels—a quest for “IT”\(^5\) or “the father we never found”\(^6\) or “God”\(^7\) or simply knowledge and meaning. In many cases Kerouac’s quest unfolds as a road-novel, with the content of most of Kerouac’s work drawn from his own experiences, giving it the title of ‘autobiographical fiction’ or some other such label. The formal quest—Kerouac’s stylistic quest—is also apparent in any reading of his works, and can be supplemented (with caution, as we shall see later) by what he had to say about his writing process, what he called ‘spontaneous prose.’ In introducing what Kerouac himself had to say about his method, Ann Douglas notes:

When his [Kerouac’s] two closest Beat collaborators, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, read *The Subterraneans* in manuscript, they asked him to write a brief how-to manual of his method for their use … Ginsberg and Burroughs wrote their own breakthrough works, *Howl* (1956) and *Naked Lunch* (1959), consciously adapting Kerouac’s suggestions to their own needs.\(^8\)

What Kerouac provided to Ginsberg and Burroughs was later published as “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”:

**SET-UP** The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object.

\(^5\) Kerouac, *On the Road*, 206. Also, in order to avoid unnecessary and unwanted overuse of the term “[sic],” I have, throughout this exegesis, quoted Kerouac’s passages as they are published.

\(^6\) Kerouac, *On the Road*, 310.

\(^7\) Kerouac, *On the Road*, 182.

PROCEDURE Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image.

METHOD No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)—“measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech”—“divisions of the sounds we hear”—“time and how to note it down.” (William Carlos Williams)

SCOPING Not “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash)—Blow as deep as you want—write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.

LAG IN PROCEDURE No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought and be in accordance with Great Law of timing.

TIMING Nothing is muddy that runs in time and to laws of time—Shakespearian stress of dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue—no revisions (except obvious rational mistakes, such as names or calculated insertions in act of not writing but inserting).

CENTER OF INTEREST Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion—Do not afterthink except for poetic or P. S. reasons. Never afterthink to “improve” or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind-tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow!—now!—your way is your only way—“good”—or “bad”—always honest (“ludi-crous”), spontaneous, “confessionals” interesting, because not “crafted.” Craft is craft.

STRUCTURE OF WORK Modern bizarre structures (science fiction, etc.) arise from language being dead, “different” themes give illusion of “new” life. Follow roughly outlines in outfanning movement over
subject, as river rock, so mindflow over jewel-center need (run your
mind over it, once) arriving at pivot, where what was dim-formed
“beginning” becomes sharp-necessitating “ending” and language
shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep
Form, to conclusion, last words, last trickle—Night is The End.

MENTAL STATE If possible write “without consciousness” in semi-
trance (as Yeats’ later “trance writing”) allowing subconscious to admit
in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so “modern” language what
conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-
typing-cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of
orgasm, Reich’s “beclouding of consciousness.” Come from within,
out—to relaxed and said.⁹

Another list of ‘essentials’ for spontaneous prose was set out in Kerouac’s

“Belief and Technique for Modern Prose.” In a 1958 letter to his publisher,
Kerouac wrote (apparently in response to a request) the following note:

Dear Don. Will visit you soon with Allen [Ginsberg]. Latter sorted
through my papers and found a piece I wrote before “Essentials [of
Spontaneous Prose]” which is wilder and stranger, and short. Enclosed
underneath. You can use that. I’d be sick & tired of making further big
explanations. This can really suffice …¹⁰

It should be noted, at this point, how Kerouac felt about making such “big
explanations” about his writing technique. The piece he wrote—later published as

“Belief”—reads as follows:

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside your own house
4. Be in love with your life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form

⁹ Kerouac, “Essentials.”
¹⁰ Kerouac, letter to Don Allen in Heaven and Other Poems (San Francisco: City Lights, 1977).
Available from Daniel Fleig, “Jack Kerouac: Heaven and Other Poems,” (Freiburg, Germany:
6. Be crazy dumbssaint of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yrself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. Accept loss forever
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Don’t think of words when you stop but to see picture better
23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You’re a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

It should also be stressed that these two pieces (“Essentials” and “Belief”) came about not through any kind of desire by Kerouac to develop a theory of writing, a manifesto or a set of rules, but rather because people requested explanations of how he wrote the way he did. The fact that many critics have turned these two pieces into kinds of checklists or measuring sticks by which to judge Kerouac’s own work says more about the mindsets of the critics than Kerouac, his work or his technique. “Essentials” and “Belief” should only be read,

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therefore, as a *supplement* to the ideas that are already expressed within Kerouac’s novels, and not as the sole means for understanding or evaluating his works.

Again, spontaneous prose (as well as criticism related to it) will be explored in greater detail as this exegesis unfolds. I feel it is best to let commentary arise, like all things in this exegesis, organically—that is to say, I shall discuss spontaneous prose further at the points at which I encountered it (and explored it in depth) along my own road. (Again, the above thematic and formal aspects of Kerouac’s work, and my own, are mentioned in this introduction only to give a clearer picture of what it is we will be observing). I shall also discuss further the way in which I began to gain a greater understanding of how my work is positioned within the development of the quest motif or archetypal journey myth as a whole—where, as Jay Panini writes, “in the traditional myth, a hero … abandons his safe haven and pushes forward into the wilderness (or depths) in order to test himself against the odds.”\(^{12}\) Needless to say, I have seen in Kerouac’s work, and explored within my own, the way in which these “odds” can be tested, not only in terms of the story’s theme, but also the form that it takes. As we shall also see, the more the thematic and formal quests become interwoven, the more harmonious, the more ‘beautiful’ the art can become. As Janis P. Stout puts it, in the best writing “form and content are or ought to be inseparable.”\(^{13}\)

At this stage, then, perhaps it is worth briefly visiting the first busy street corner that Kerouac himself once stood at early in his career—that street at the

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centre of the artistic city. Indeed, it should be remembered that Kerouac himself faced his own bustling intersection at one time, as all artists must:

That’s how writers begin, by imitating the masters (without suffering like said masters), till they larn their own style, and by the time they larn their own style there’s no more fun in it, because you cant imitate any other master’s suffering but your own.14

Kerouac’s early road seemed to steer fairly closely to that of novelist Thomas Wolfe, amongst others. Kerouac’s first work, The Town and the City (1950), shared similarities to the themes and lyricism of Wolfe’s writing, in particular Look Homeward Angel.

Indeed, finding our own road is a journey for every artist, and every human being. Perhaps it can also be likened to the distinction between the various stages of the guilds of old—first comes the apprenticeship to a master, then comes the period of being a journeyman or journeywoman in which we learn from many different masters, as well as others, until finally, we are able to become masters ourselves.

This exegesis, then, can be seen as a phenomenological account of my own apprenticeship and period as a journeyman as I aspire towards some kind of mastery of my art. That is to say, it is an account of how my own work has developed in relation to Kerouac’s writing and his life, and how this relationship has led me towards the possibility of finding my own artistic road.

Through exploring this process I hope that the reader may come to a better understanding of whatever road they might find themselves on, in much the same way as I hoped to do in “the lonely and the road,” and as Kerouac hoped for in his

writing: “Blow as deep as you want—write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own mind.”15 Indeed, the telling of our own searching has the potential to help others when they read it or hear it. My story—my quest—has the potential, at least, to open up onto the universality of the experience of the quest itself.

15 Kerouac, “Essentials.”
PART ONE

“Go thou across the ground”

I first met Kerouac in an undergraduate documentary writing course when I was eighteen, though I was absent for the actual class when a documentary was shown about his time as a fire-lookout in the Cascade Ranges. The next week, however, I remember the tutor, Ross Bennett, giving me a copy of the documentary to take home and watch. I wasn’t that interested in writing documentaries, and had never heard of Kerouac, but I decided to slide the tape into the VCR and give it a try. It’s fair to say it changed my life. For better or worse. I especially remember one of the scenes in which Kerouac read from *Visions of Cody* (1960) while Steve Allen played the blues on piano:

> At the junction of the state line of Colorado, its arid western one, and the state line of poor Utah I saw in the clouds huge and massed above the fiery golden desert of eveningfall the great image of God with forefinger pointed straight at me through halos and rolls and gold folds that were like the existence of the gleaming spear in His right hand, and sayeth, Go thou across the ground; go moan for man, go groan, go groan alone, go roll your bones, alone; go thou and be little beneath my sight; go thou, and be minute and as seed in the pod … go thou, go thou, die hence; and … [of this world] report you well and truly.

I’d never come across writing like that before. And the language he used and the way in which he read it—it was like water flowing over the rocks of some far-off

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17 He was, apparently, reading from *On the Road*. But my own research later discovered he was in fact reading from *Visions of Cody* (London: Flamingo, 2001), the less edited of these two published road novels, and the one Kerouac often said he wished had been published at the time.
18 Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 342 (text in square brackets was included in the reading on the show).
French-Canadian river, rising and falling, slowing-down and speeding-up with Allen’s piano. He then moved into the last passages of *On the Road* (1957):

so in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars’ll be out, and don’t you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be dropping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in and nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.\(^{19}\)

The documentary ended soon after and I went to the closest library and looked for a copy of *On the Road*. And that was it—I was away. My marks for the documentary writing class didn’t improve, nor did my attendance, but something else was coming to life in me. Not only in terms of the possibilities of the road, but also the possibilities of the word.

Soon after, I showed the book to my girlfriend at the time, as well as her mum. They were both from San Francisco, and had both heard of Kerouac. In fact they had probably spent time in many of the places written about in the novel. I think they even enjoyed for a while my sudden, unexpected interest in their native land. “Have you been to Montana?” I would ask them over dinner. “What about the poolhalls of Denver?” “Ever jumped a boxcar?” But I can’t remember either of them actually saying too many positive things about Kerouac or the book. (In fact, I think they steered me in the direction of American novelists John Steinbeck and

\(^{19}\) Kerouac, *On the Road*, 310.
Ernest Hemingway.) Nor can I remember the book helping my already rocky relationship with my girlfriend. But I pressed on, because I also knew there was something in Kerouac’s writing that was speaking to me, and something in me that was speaking back. I felt there was a profound striving unfolding in those pages—something to do with a genuine search for meaning, for the Word, for, perhaps, the spiritual within the universe, and within the human being:

and I shambled after them as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!” What did they call such young people in Goethe’s Germany?20

At the time, my own writing was still following fairly conventional forms. For my final third-year writing class I wrote a story about a man revisiting his childhood and his childhood home, remembering time spent building a treehouse with his older brother, now dead:

The aching in his chest seems to fade. It spreads itself throughout his body and disperses into the afternoon light. He closes his eyes and sucks on the day’s air. He feels as if he could fall, carefree, into the arms of the trees below. But he does not. He descends the ladder, one solid step at a time. And he walks. Walks to the edge of the clearing. And a gentle wind sweeps across the surrounding grass in a sweet and clear whisper.

He turns for one final look at the tree-house. At that weekend. At his brother. At his youth. Looks hard and decides that it will be something that he’ll carry with him forever. All of it. For all of his days. And finally he smiles and turns and disappears into the bushes and the waiting world beyond.21

20 Kerouac, On the Road, 8.
My writing tutor at the time, Australian novelist Elizabeth Jolley, simply gave the story a tick with her pencil and wrote “9/10”. Partly encouraged by this (and partly unsure what a mark out of ten really meant—though I knew she was required to do this by the university) I sent it to the literary journal LiNQ. A few months later they published it. This was my first ‘real’ published piece—and, perhaps, I should have continued to write in a similar form, about similar themes. But something else Elizabeth Jolley said during class seemed to ring true for me: “You know, to become a good writer you don’t have to go to university. You just have to write lots, and read lots.” Then she added with a slight grin, “but don’t tell anybody—I really like working here.” I didn’t tell anybody, but the wisdom in her words did tell me something. Namely, that the experiences I encountered during my own reading were important, and that what I was reading of Kerouac was showing me something else, something new. Yes, the writing was about forty years old, but the things it was unlocking for me and my writing seemed to come from some other place that wasn’t too concerned with time at all. In a strange way, I felt it coming from a future waiting to emerge.

I kept reading other writers, of course, but before long I found myself at a bookstore in Claremont handing over my rent assistance money for Lonesome Traveler (1960) and The Dharma Bums (1958). Later, I would read (and study) these two books sitting on buses to and from university and work, marking with my pencil some of the paragraphs that seemed to really touch on something for me. And even though I had no real idea of what these passages were actually touching on, I was acutely aware of a certain intangible, subtle experience I had whilst
reading them—as if my whole life of feeling, of soul, seemed to open up and extend to edges that kept on expanding:

At the coffin the littler boy (3 years old) touches the glass and goes around to the foot of the dead and touches the glass and I think ‘They understand death, they stand there in the church under the skies that have a beginningless past and go into the never-ending future, waiting themselves for death, at the foot of the dead, in a holy temple.’—I get a vision of myself and the two little boys hung up in a great endless universe with nothing overhead and nothing under but the Infinite Nothingness, the Enormousness of it, the dead without number in all directions of existence whether inward into the atom-worlds of your own body or outward to the universe which may only be one atom in an infinity of atom-worlds and each atom world only a figure of speech— inward, outward, up and down, nothing but emptiness and divine majesty and silence for the two little boys and me.22

Looking back now, I feel that maybe what was being touched upon during these moments was a kind of *spiritual imagination* (beyond Kerouac’s Buddhism or Catholicism or religion in general) that seemed to shine through his writing, and meet me somewhere as I read it:

The world ain’t so bad, when you got Japhies, I thought, and felt glad. All the aching muscles and the hunger in my belly were bad enough, and the surrounding dark rocks, the fact there is nothing there to soothe you with kisses or soft words, but just to be sitting here meditating and praying for the world with another earnest young man.—‘twere good enough to have been born just to die, as we all are. Something will come of it in the Milky Ways of eternity stretching in front of all our phantom unjaundiced eyes, friends. I felt like telling Japhy everything I thought but I knew it didn’t matter and moreover he knew it anyway and silence is the golden mountain.23

Writing like this seemed, for me, to begin with a focus upon a particularly powerful observation (or experience), and then employ a style of writing that seeks to merge

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with the content of the observed phenomenon. In so doing, the content (or essence) of the phenomenon under observation is then able to emerge through the words, and through the great space that follows a passage such as this—the space where real poetry (or prose) can begin. That is, in the silence that follows—the silence of the “golden mountain.”

In truth, there were many parts of *Lonesome Traveler*, in particular, that I felt I had to just push on through. But when I did come across those certain special passages, then it was well worth the journey. Here is another such passage where, I would argue, observation of a particular perceptible reality (as encountered, in this case, on a train journey) can lead to an experience in tune with the universal essence or even spirit of the experience—where the external phenomenon can act like a doorway into a deeper, more complete, experience—all represented by a poetic, fast-paced writing style that unites with the content:

… and the first night the finest night, the blood, ‘railroading gets in yr blood’ the old hoghead is yelling at me as he bounces up and down in his seat and the wind blows his striped cap visor back and the engine like a huge beast is lurching side to side 70 miles per hour breaking all rulebook rules, zomm, zomm, were crashing through the night and out there Carmelity is coming, Jose is making her electricities mix and interrun with his and the whole earth charged with juices turns up the organo to the flower, the unfoldment, the stars bend to it, the whole world’s coming as the big engine booms and balls by with the madmen of the white cap California …

Particularly I felt the *movement*, the *activity* and the *rhythm* of the quest through this style of writing. I experienced the search for a kind of spiritual experience and, at times, the journey purely for the sake of journeying. I experienced the

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momentum, the going, even the *longing* of the quest through the unbuttoned language and unbuttoned grammatical forms in passages such as this. It became increasingly obvious to me that conventional linguistic, syntactical and grammatical styles would simply not have been the right form to merge with the essence of the experience of the quest that Kerouac was representing in passages like these, and in most of his writing. 25

For me, Kerouac seemed to have found a form to combine with the subject matter of his writing. The form was new because he was prepared to let go of old forms in order that new impulses might arrive—making space for the stories and the striving of his life to meet with new form. And this quest for form or style or language (his spontaneous prose, which, as mentioned, will be explored as the exegesis unfolds) was, I was beginning to understand, as important as any quest unfolding in the content of his writing. I read on, as the road spread out ahead.

25 To supplement this observation see Kerouac, “Belief,” point 13: “Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition.”
I finished university broke, of course, and soon found myself working as a writer for a charity that raised money for a children’s hospital. Journalism, editing, press releases, advertising, mail-out marketing campaigns, technical and annual reports—I did it all. At the same time, however, I was hungry to write more fiction, to explore further Kerouac’s work, and, especially, to do some travelling—some questing—of my own.

Then, as it happens, not long into the job I was surprised to get a call from my mum offering me a spare ticket for a week-long trip to America over Christmas. “Train from Los Angeles to Santa Fe,” she said, “then we’ll fly out through Denver.” Denver! The Santa Fe line! I had sudden visions of boxcars pulling out of Los Angeles, and immediately re-read some of Kerouac’s passages:

… now I was three miles into the industrial jungle of L.A. in mad sick sniffing smog night and had to sleep all that night by a wire fence in a ditch by the tracks being waked up all night by rackets of Southern Pacific and Santa Fe switchers bellyaching around, till fog and clear of midnight when I breathed better (thinking and praying in my sack) but then more fog and smog again and horrible damp white cloud of dawn and my bag too hot to sleep in and outside too raw to stand, nothing but horror all night long, except at dawn a little bird blessed me.26

I began to think that I too could go and sleep in a ditch by the tracks with all-night horrors! I too could breathe the smoke and fog! I too could feel the “horrible damp white cloud of dawn!” I guess I also thought that in doing so I would at least have

26 Kerouac, The Dharma Bums, 101-102
something to write about—some experiences to share. Either way, this was it—a genuine road trip—even if it was one with (and financed by) my mum. I looked at Kerouac’s writing some more, and smiled at the fact that he lived, and often travelled, with his own mother.

The day of the trip arrived and I spent the whole flight up the back of the plane talking and drinking with a girl from Philadelphia while my travelling companion slept. I stood there and enjoyed listening to her American accent—the language—the rolls and twangs and pauses, the speed and slowing down, the inflections and all. There was something in her words that Kerouac had been able to represent, even if the language itself had changed slightly in the last forty years.

After touching down, we drove quickly through the soft winter light of Los Angeles, walked the Christmas Spanish markets near Union Station, then took the overnight train out into the Mojave Desert, through Flagstaff, Albuquerque and finally Santa Fe. The next week I spent talking with my American cousins and aunt, flyfishing the Rio Grande, snowboarding at 12,000 feet, and generally breathing in that part of America. On Christmas day I watched Indians stamp their feet to a ceremonial dance in a nearby Pueblo, and was telling the chief I had never seen snow before, when I suddenly looked up and a single flake landed in my open right eye. “Like a child!” he laughed, “never seen snow!”

It was all pretty strange. I felt America was nothing like I had seen it on the news, nothing like it was portrayed through endless TV shows and movies, and was even a little different from Kerouac’s own pictures. I was also surprised to realise that I had never felt as much at home anywhere in my life.
We flew out of Santa Fe on New Year’s Eve and headed towards Denver as the Rockies and nearby clouds glowed a bright pink in the early morning. I looked down at the ever-changing mountainous scene and marveled at this country below—this America, this Colorado, and recalled again how Kerouac saw and experienced it for the first time:

How the truck disposed of the Nebraska nub—the nub that sticks out over Colorado! And soon I realised I was actually at last over Colorado, though not officially in it, but looking southwest toward Denver itself a few hundred miles away. I yelled for joy. We passed the bottle. The great blazing stars came out, the far-receding sand hills got dim. I felt like an arrow that could shoot out all the way.27

I felt the same excitement during my trip—felt like I was starting to do some ‘shooting out’ of my own—even if there was no hitchhiking, no truck, no ditches, no bottle, no real Denver even, other than the corridors of the white-top circus-tent airport on the planes.

In any case, I flew back to Perth and would have to wait for another chance to return to America, but that didn’t mean my quest (in my writing or in my life—the distinctions between the two gradually becoming less and less) had come to a stand-still. On the contrary, I think staying in one place fuelled my quest even more.

Over the next year or so I kept up my job as writer, studied some more (I found myself preparing for an Honours thesis in travel writing, but eventually took up an offer to study another course) and kept reading. And in my reading I discovered that more and more it was the representation of the quest itself that I

27 Kerouac, On the Road, 27.
was most interested in—particularly American literature (road novels especially), but in other fields as well. And so I even followed my now ex-girlfriend’s advice and looked at Steinbeck and Hemingway, along with novelists Jack London, Hunter S. Thompson, William Burroughs, Robert M. Pirsig as well as popular contemporary writers such as Tim Winton, Douglas Coupland, Sean Condon, Paulo Coelho and Bill Bryson. I flicked through short stories, classics, myths, poetry, drama, even journalism. And in all of these I continued to search, not for the merely intellectually stimulating—it was no cold pursuit of the solely intellectual—but for that certain something that I couldn’t quite put my finger on at the time—that certain elusive something that expresses itself in the hair-on-end, tingle-up-the-spine moment you get watching the right film, or viewing the right painting, or listening to the right music, or travelling the right road, or yes, reading the right book. I was looking for that certain something that I had already found in Kerouac’s work (and, at times, in that of others before him)—that certain moment when the intellect and the life of feelings are able to come together in complete harmony with a definite and knowable experience. Put another way, I may simply have been searching for Kerouac’s “IT”:

Now, man, that alto man last night had IT—he held it once he found it; I’ve never seen a guy who could hold so long.” I wanted to know what “IT” meant. “Ah well”—Dean laughed—“now you’re asking me imponderables—ahem! Here’s a guy and everybody’s there right? Up to him to put down what’s on everybody’s mind. He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he gets it—everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across
bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune the counts but IT”—Dean could go no further; he was sweating telling about it.28

I realised the search for IT was becoming, more and more, a search for these “ideas,” for “blow[ing] across bridges” that linked, perhaps, the spiritual within the human being to the spiritual within the world, and then to the representation of this same search (to “come back and do it”) in writing. And so I read—and searched—on.

One area I looked at in detail was the travel journalism found in newspapers, magazines and even guidebooks. It soon became apparent to me, however, that this kind of travel writing was too cold, too much the mere relaying of information without a heart, and in many cases without a narrative; I found no real IT here.

From travel journalism I began to look at writers like Sean Condon29 and Bill Bryson, writers who wanted to share with readers their autobiographical, journalistic, and whimsical tales of their time on the road, intermixed with historical research:

Wyoming is the most fiercely Western of all Western states. It’s still a land of cowboys and horses and wide open spaces, a place where a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do, which on the face of it primarily consists of driving around in a pickup truck and being kind of slow … Only a couple of weeks before, the state legislators in Cheyenne had introduced a rule that all legislators would henceforth have to check their handguns at the front desk before being allowed inside the Statehouse. That’s the sort of place Wyoming is.30

29 See, for example, Sean Condon, *Sean and Dave’s Long Drive* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 1996).
As in travel journalism, however, there is still a high degree of ‘telling’ rather than ‘showing’ in these pieces. In reading them, I got the sense that this is what these writers do for a living: they travel around, make notes, and then write books, before going on and writing some more. Information about a place is recorded, ‘told’ and sold, interspersed with a few interesting little narratives about the process of the journey itself. While entertaining and often amusing, this kind of approach, for the most part, lacked that elusive something I was looking for. That is, it lacked any significant spiritual dimension. There was no genuine spiritual quest here—no significant search for greater meaning or truth. The particular did not, generally, open up into the universal, the ideal, the spiritual. The quest, in these works, was mostly material, mostly physical—this, one may argue, is no quest at all—simply a travelogue, a journey retold.

Steinbeck’s *Travels With Charley* (not one of his typical works of fiction per se) is for me similar to Bryson’s work in terms of content, though permeated with a heightened sense for the poetic—a greater command of language that he uses in the descriptions of his observations of experience:

As often as I could I chose the small wood roads, and they are not conducive to speed. The temperature lifted and it rained endlessly and the forests wept … The sky was the colour of wet grey aluminum and there was no indication on the translucent shield where the sun might be, so I couldn’t tell direction.31

Steinbeck is, of course, an accomplished writer. This book, however, while containing more of a quest for meaning or knowledge than found in conventional

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travel journalism or in Bryson’s work, for example, still rests mostly in the sphere of the material, the physical. There is still more ‘telling,’ than ‘showing.’

Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* presented a different kind of quest again: a drug-induced journalistic-type quest into the interior (of America and his own soul) that seemed to roar alongside a quest for the heart of the American dream somewhere between the drug-soaked cities of Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Within the novel I found moments of great writing and insight:

And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Good and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave ….

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.  

Thompson’s ability to produce beautiful and poetic metaphors, such as the wave and its “high-water mark,” struck me in passages such as this. At times, Thompson provided the kind of writing that captures the essence of a whole period (the ’60s) by touching on the forces that flow through it as a whole in the experience of a particular moment. But at the same time, much of his writing seemed to swim in a sea of his own subjectivity, with little of the objective world to keep the quest afloat:

We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like “I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive ….” And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge

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bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: “Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?” Then it was quiet again.\textsuperscript{33}

There seemed to be something \textit{subsensible} (that is, diving down below the sense-perceptible into illusory personal subjectivities) rather than \textit{supersensible} (that is, moving from the \textit{sense perceptible} [the objective percept, the particular] to the \textit{spiritual} [the objective idea, the universal])\textsuperscript{34} in the way Thompson approached the quest. It was as if the universal or the idea or the spiritual or heaven or whatever it might be called could be sneaked into by tunneling under a wall or, specifically, by taking a prodigious volume of narcotics. I saw Thompson’s work not so much as a journeying out into the world (with love) towards some kind of (objective) spiritual reality, but as a self-centred and reckless tunneling into his own (subjective) soul-life through the help of drugs. No doubt, this could be seen as an accurate representation of one part of the ’60s era, and no doubt there were elements of this in Kerouac’s writing also (as well as in mine), but \textit{for the most part}, I believed Kerouac took the supersensible road. We can briefly enhance our exploration here with what Kerouac had to say about objectivity in relation to the writing process: “The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a

\textsuperscript{33} Thompson, \textit{Fear and Loathing}, 3.

\textsuperscript{34} For a phenomenological, epistemological exploration of how human beings are able to penetrate (through thinking) into the objective realm of what might be called the idea or the universal (leading to an objective idealism), see, for example, as I did at the time, Rudolf Steiner, \textit{A Philosophy of Freedom: Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path} (Massachusetts: Anthroposophic Press, 1995), including 171: “For those who understand how ideas are intuitively \textit{experienced} as a kind of self-sufficient essence, it is clear that, \textit{when we cognize} in the world of ideas, we live our way into something that is the same for all human beings.” See also, again, Steiner, \textit{Goethean Science}. 

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landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a *definite image-object.*”35

I too was more interested in this mostly supersensible path—not a path that overlays the personal subjectivities of our own soul life (i.e. our thinking, our feeling and even our acting—with or without the help of drugs) onto the world, but a path whose aim is to accurately observe the phenomena of the world and (as we are also attempting to do in this exegesis), by thinking *with* or *from* these phenomena (rather than about them), in order to see what they reveal of their corresponding objective thoughts, concepts, ideas or essential being (what might be called their spiritual aspects).36 Again, Kerouac partly expressed this path in relation to his writing technique when he wrote: “Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion …”37 As well as: “No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought …”38 I will return to this theme again below.

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35 Kerouac, “Essentials;” italics added.
36 The fact that the narrator of “the lonely and the road” consumes a considerable amount of alcohol (and partakes in some drug use) during the course of his quest does not detract from what is being said here. On the contrary, the experiences he undergoes with alcohol and with drugs constantly push him in the direction of ultimately being able to leave drugs and alcohol behind him. In fact, his attachment to this subsensible activity is just another relationship he strives to relinquish in order that better, more supersensible perhaps, relationships may arrive.
37 Kerouac, “Essentials;” italics added.
38 Kerouac, “Essentials;” italics added.
Then came the deliberately bare-bone writing of Hemingway and his character’s quest for his fish.\textsuperscript{39} The heartbreaking longing of the never-quite-arriving quest of Winton’s \textit{The Riders}. The almost ‘how-to-hobo’ handbook of London’s \textit{The Road}. The beautiful adult-fable of the quest presented in Coelho’s \textit{The Alchemist}. The wonderful spiraling madness of Robert M. Pirsig’s quest for a philosophical foundation for everything, alongside his motorbike travels across America with his son.\textsuperscript{40} Douglas Coupland’s \textit{Generation X} multi-media quest for meaning in the desert retirement town of Palm Springs, as well as his series of short confessions and observations about (ultimately) needing (and striving towards) some kind of God.\textsuperscript{41}

I noticed at the time that some journalists referred to Coupland as a “post-Cold War Kerouac.”\textsuperscript{42} I saw this mostly in his close observation of what may be called mundane phenomena—the small things in life—or even more ‘meaningful’ events, coupled with his character’s (often heartbreaking) search for ‘real’ experience, truth, the spiritual, in a predominantly material North American world.

For example:

My mind then wandered. I thought of this: I thought of how every day each of us experiences a few little moments that have just a bit more resonance than other moments—we hear a word that sticks in our mind—or maybe we have a small experience that pulls us out of ourselves, if only briefly—we share a hotel elevator with a bride in her veils, say, or a stranger gives us a piece of bread to feed to the mallard ducks in the lagoon; a small child starts a conversation with us in a

\textsuperscript{39} Ernest Hemingway, \textit{The Old Man and the Sea} (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969).
\textsuperscript{40} Robert M. Pirsig, \textit{Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance} (London: Corgi, 1976).
\textsuperscript{41} Douglas Coupland, \textit{Life After God} (London: Scribner, 2002).
Dairy Queen—or we have an episode like the one I had with the M & M cars back at the Husky station.

And if we were to collect these small moments in a notebook and save them over a period of months we would see certain trends emerge from our collection—certain voices would emerge that have been trying to speak through us. We would realize that we have been having another life altogether, one we didn’t even know was going on inside us. And maybe this other life is more important than the one we think of as being real—this clunky day-to-day world of furniture and noise and metal. So just MAYBE it is these small moments which are the true story-making events of our lives.43

(After reading this passage I bought my first-ever breastpocket notebooks and started recording some of these “small moments.”) Although I felt that many of these writers were deeply concerned with the spiritual quest, and that I learned a lot from their works (and from those of others), I could not find another contemporary writer who really united the essence of the experience of the quest with an appropriate form in the same way that Kerouac was able to do. Perhaps this is another reason why he is still popular today. Indeed, it began to seem that it was going to be through an appropriate coming together of a liberated, spontaneous writing style with an unfettered, spontaneous thematic quest, that the essence of my own longing for spiritual experience would be able to find an appropriate reflection or representation.

Briefly, I also looked at Burroughs’ take on spontaneous writing. Burroughs, a close friend of Kerouac, seemed to use the technique primarily to give voice to the depths of despair, and all the darkness of the shadowy side of his own soul:

throat gristle sex words on two halves of the body—vibrating the spinal column—shared meals contract of rectum flight—metal hairs falling like

dry leaves—crystal body music vibrating the two recorders—screaming neon in the throat—worn amber body music.44

Here, again, the expression of one’s own subjective imagery seemed to rule over the representation of objective reality. In Burroughs, not only was the content of his writing, like Thompson’s, heavily subjective and subsensible, but this was also mirrored in its form. Indeed, the form and content became interwoven, but to what ends? For me, no higher truths, no spiritual essence, no inner lawfulness was revealed. Kerouac, however, it should be noted, praised Burroughs’ writing, typed up some of his work, and suggested the title of his well known Naked Lunch. But for me, Burroughs’ quest, like Thompson’s, was going in a different direction to that I was interested in following. Again, I was not so much concerned with a freefall dive into the depths of the unconscious, but of consciously trying to climb towards something ‘higher.’45 That is, I wasn’t looking solely for a cathartic experience of getting-it-all-out, as Burroughs’ writing entails, but of rising to a higher experience through the representation (in a form that uses more musical or rhythmical language than that of Burroughs) of a spiritual quest out into the world and not only into my own soul life.

And so in this way my own ‘creative’ writing took a back seat while I continued reading and working and studying. Until, however, my whole routine

45 The fact that Kerouac refers, in “Essentials,” to “writing ‘without consciousness’ in semi-trance,” in no way contradicts the idea that he too sought to consciously raise himself to the spiritual, for he strove to understand the world around him (as opposed to merely writing in pictures about his own subconscious), and needed “consciousness” in order to do so. As a writing process, writing “without consciousness” refers more to what is mentioned throughout the rest of “Essentials,” namely that one needn’t stop to “think of proper word,” nor “after-think” nor “revise”—that the intellect is not solely in control, but is interwoven with feeling and doing in the act of writing. Writing “without consciousness,” as it appears in “Essentials,” can perhaps be better be understood, therefore, as writing without abstract intellectualism.
was interrupted one Sunday afternoon by an email from The Jack Kerouac Project of Orlando Florida, saying they enjoyed the story I’d sent them and wondered if I’d like to come and live in Kerouac’s old house in Florida for three months over summer—the same house in which he wrote *The Dharma Bums*, and where he was living when *On the Road* made him famous.

It didn’t take long to sell my car and buy a year-long around-the-world ticket. This was it—my first real chance to step out, with notepads galore (but with no real plan) in the direction of my own, individual road.
PART THREE

“Mad raging sunsets”

The first few months of my trip would later provide the foundation for “the lonely and the road.”

In Los Angeles and Las Vegas I realised that the road would, once again, unfold in ways I hadn’t really expected. Instead of sleeping in a ditch by the railyards, or hitch-hiking on the back of speeding trucks, I found myself (thanks to my old school friend) staying briefly in the Hollywood hills and attending parties with the celebrity A-list. It was mad, and I got very sick. I will, of course, be forever thankful to my friend for what he shared with us during this time—for his complete and unconditional love and friendship—for offering us a brief taste of the world he lived in—a world that, for all its ups and downs, most of us will not get to experience first-hand. I saw this world and the human beings who inhabit it a little differently afterwards. For this too, as well as for the million other things he brought to my life, I will be forever grateful.

Los Angeles and Las Vegas were followed by days upon days of sitting in an isolated ski-lift shack in the resort town of Mt. Crested Butte, Colorado. In this tiny 11,000-foot shack, I not only slept off a hundred ‘nights-before’ while earning the princely sum of US$6.50 an hour, but I was also able to read, write in my journal, and plan ahead for what I might actually work on once I got to Florida. On those freezing, dark mornings after I rode the T-bar lift to the top, lit the little propane heater, put out all the signs, adjusted the counterweight, shoveled snow around the
unloading area, and checked the lift’s stop buttons, I would come back into the shack, take off my gloves, warm them on the heater a while, unpack my journal, my pens, my books and sit down in front of them as the ice melted off the glass, as the sun slowly came up over the peak, and as the surrounding mountains came into full view in all their red-glow snow-covered majesty. At times like this I was reminded of the following passage:

Lo, in the morning I woke up and it was beautiful blue sunshine sky and I went out in my alpine yard and there it was, everything Japhy said it was, hundreds of miles of pure snow-covered rocks and virgin lakes and high timber, and below, instead of the world, I saw a sea of marshmallow clouds flat as a roof and extending miles in every direction, creaming all the valleys, what they call low-level clouds, on my 6600-foot pinnacle it was all far below me.46

Here, I felt Kerouac’s writing style was used not in order to highlight movement, action or musicality as such, but to bring about an adequate representation of the experience of standing on a mountaintop where everything confronts the observer more or less at the same time. There is still a kind of space in his writing where the separate aspects of the view are described—the sky, the yard, the rocks, the lakes, the trees, the valleys and clouds—but they are all rapidly and seamlessly woven together into a wholeness through the inner fluidity of his prose style. In this way, Kerouac is able to represent the whole cognitive process in such a scene: first comes the observation of the various parts in quick succession, then comes the rapid unifying of these parts into a wholeness through thinking (and then writing). Kerouac then also uses feeling, in direct relation to the scene observed, as a kind of cognitive tool, infusing these cognitive feelings into the writing. This is different

46 Kerouac, The Dharma Bums, 198.
from overlaying his own feelings onto the scene, as mentioned earlier (which involves a kind of feeling about the scene), but rather it requires a striving to feel with the scene so that his feelings are brought into line with the objective scene itself:

Mad raging sunsets poured in sea-foams of clouds through unimaginable crags, with every rose tint of hope beyond, brilliant and bleak beyond words. Everywhere awful ice fields and snow straws; one blade of grass jiggling in the winds of infinity, anchored to a rock.47

We can really feel (as well as see) a stormy mountaintop experience beyond Kerouac’s own feelings about it. Granted, Kerouac does not always manage to hold back his own feelings, but overall he does seem to strive for objectivity in the representation of the feelings associated with a certain experience. When this objectivity of feeling is achieved, I had the distinct impression of feeling more free as a reader (in that I was free to formulate my own feelings in direct relation to the objective experience), and this excited me—both as reader and writer.

I was also excited at having my own chance at high desolation, at Rilke’s solitude,48 at fine loneliness (at least during my working hours), at being open to whatever experiences and writing opportunities that would come. But, as it was for Kerouac in his Cascade Range fire-lookout hut, this top-of-the-world experience wasn’t always easy:

To the east it was gray; to the north, awful; to the west, raging mad, hard iron fools wrestling in the groomian gloom; to the south, my father’s mist … my oil lamp burned in infinity. ‘Poor gentle flesh,’ I realized,

47 Kerouac, The Dharma Bums, 201.
48 See Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1993).
‘there is no answer.’ I didn’t know anything any more, I didn’t care, and it didn’t matter, and suddenly I felt really free.49

I also felt this gloom, this confusion, and at times this freedom. And the more of Kerouac I read in my open-view lonely mountaintop shack, the more I gained a clearer, living sense for his picture of a beautiful yet vulnerable humankind—a humankind which, in one form or another, goes on constantly searching. In particular I turned to two of Kerouac’s works that I’d brought with me from Perth: 


*The Subterraneans* is Kerouac’s spontaneous recounting of one of his (so-called) failed relationships. I remember scanning the introduction one freezing morning: “Jack Kerouac wrote his novel *The Subterraneans*, an account of his interracial love affair with Alene Lee (‘Mardou Fox’), in a three day-and-night-long burst of creative energy in the fall of 1953.”50 Three days? I wondered, and read on about the love-affair. I too had just left a relationship—a good relationship—and did so in order to follow whatever road I thought I was on. And so, through this book, in my shack, I would remember with Kerouac:

I remember, I’d put my face close to hers to talk about books, she’d turned her face to me close, it was an ocean of melting things and drowning, I could have swum in it, I was afraid of all that richness and looked away.51

The theme of failed relationships is one I have subsequently explored in “the lonely and the road”:

49 Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 201.
51 Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, 44.
Reading *The Subterraneans* was like a preparation for my writing to come. It revealed to me how the writing of actual experiences, including ones as difficult as failed relationships, needed to be handled with a certain tenderness (including being conscious of the sensibilities of all parties involved) while still attempting to remain true to the essence of the experience. (Alene Lee wasn’t altogether happy with Kerouac’s treatment of their relationship. Yet perhaps the mere making public of such private material creates difficulties, whatever the relationship, whatever the experience and whoever the character, the author included):

Ah—I shouldn’t have done it, goofed, the long list of parties and drinkings and downcrashings and times I ran out on her, the final shocker being when in a cab together she’s insisting I take her home (to sleep) and I can go to see Sam alone (in bar) but I jump out of cab, madly (‘I never saw anything so maniacal’), and run into another cab and zoom off, leaving her in the night …

In my own relationships I was of course not immune from such failings. And so I also came to appreciate the need to be as honest as possible about my own flaws if I was going to write about autobiographical experiences. Reading *The

52 Stubley, “the lonely and the road,” 4-5.
53 See, for example, Douglas, “Introduction,” in *The Subterraneans*, xviii.
54 Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, 34.
Subterraneans was, therefore, an often-painful process of looking at my own shadow—but a process that I knew was necessary in order to understand myself better. And so I began to find in Kerouac, not only a picture of the necessary searching by the human character on their quest, but also a picture of all the difficulties such a quest entails—including the difficulties of human relationships (and the resulting recording of such relationships)—many of which I was living out, had lived out, or would live out again soon. Kerouac’s novel provided me, then, with a certain educative melancholy, though I can’t recall feeling too grateful for this education at the time:

‘Well baby we made it together,’—that hip word—at the sound of which even as I walked and my legs propelled under me and my feet felt firm, the lower part of my stomach sagged into my pants or loins and the body experienced a certain sensation of deep melting downgoing into some soft somewhere, nowhere—suddenly the streets were so bleak, the people passing so beastly, the lights so unnecessary just to illumine this … this cutting world.55

I dwelled in this 11,000-foot cloud for quite a while, uncertain of where my road would take me next, until I read again the opening part of the book, and began to recall the reasons why relationships are difficult, why they end, and what it is in them that makes us continue to search for more—for, perhaps, the spiritual in other human beings:

no girl had ever moved me with a story of spiritual suffering and so beautifully her soul showing out radiant as an angel wandering in hell and the hell the selfsame streets I’d roamed in watching, watching for someone just like her and never dreaming the darkness and the mystery and eventuality of our meeting in eternity, the hugeness of her face now like the sudden vast Tiger head on a poster on the back of a woodfence

in the smoky dumpyards Saturday no-school morning, direct, beautiful, insane, in the rain.—We hugged, we held close—it was like love now, I was amazed.56

In reading this book I was also amazed. First, by the three days taken to produce this novel, and second, again, by the honest autobiographical portrayal of the difficulties of being human. As I read in Ann Douglas’ introduction, “[Norman] Mailer never forgot (nor did Thomas Pynchon) that, in contrast to himself, Kerouac had lived all his books as well as written them.”57 This was the kind of open, fearless, autobiographical writing I was searching for as both reader and writer. In one sense I’d discovered something valuable and worthy in the day-to-day realities of experience. I didn’t need to invent a whole lot of scenarios, and characters, and scenes, and stories, plots and metaphors—life had done enough of that for me already, and would continue to do so. I didn’t need ‘fiction’—the characters and stories and experiences of my life (even the difficult ones) could serve, as they had done for Kerouac (as well as others, of course), as the reveal-all content of my own writing: “All the stories I wrote were true, cos I believed in what I saw.”58

But if The Subterraneans revealed something to me about the difficulties of human relationships and how they might be handled in literature, Big Sur would illustrate to me another kind of difficulty altogether:

All that night by lamplight we sing and yell songs which is okay but in the morning the bottle is gone and I wake up with the ‘final horrors’ again, precisely the way I woke up in Frisco skidrow room before escaping down here, it’s all caught up with me again, I can hear myself again whining ‘Why does God torture me?’ … the mental anguish is so

56 Kerouac, The Subterraneans, 32.
58 Kerouac on “The Steve Allen Show” in What Happened to Kerouac? VHS.
intense that you feel you have betrayed your very birth, the efforts nay the birth pangs of your mother when she bore you and delivered you to the world, you’ve betrayed every effort your father ever made to feed you and raise you and make you strong and my God even educate you for ‘life’, you feel a guilt so deep you identify yourself with the devil and God seems far away abandoning you to your silly sickness—You feel sick in the greatest sense of the word, breathing without believing in it, sick-sick-sick, your soul groans, you look at your helpless hands as tho they were on fire and you cant move to help, you look at the world with dead eyes, there’s on your face an expression of incalculable repining like a constipated angel on a cloud.59

I had experienced hangovers like this over the last few years, and even here, in my tranquil mountain shack, the “final horrors” had found me. For even though my days were spent in the pure white snow and sky, my nights were filled with drinks, parties, bars and whatever other trouble my friends and I chose to create. It was, after all, still a ski resort, and I was still an Australian travelling with a bunch of friends:

australia day—every australian on the mountain drunk (probably about thirty all up), everyone else too for that matter. flags come out, koala bears appear, there are house parties and kegs, then keg throwing competitions and cold chisel cd marathons. we hitch to one party and the guy driving gives us a cookie each. “baked them using my secret recipe,” he says, and before long we are the ones baked. we hitch home from the party in the back of a pickup—the only ride we can get. i have never been so cold. “the snot in my nose is turning to ice,” deano says, hugging himself, his beanie pulled down low over his mullet as we roar through the wind and the dark. “my teeth are about to rattle out of my mouth,” michael adds, his long body shaking, the wind coming in like shards, like icicles—each breath freezing before it’s completely out.60

In Big Sur I once again saw a mirror of my own experience, and the way in which another difficult autobiographical subject (substance abuse; alcohol,

60 Stubley, “the lonely and the road,” 65.
specifically) could be written about in such a way that aims at an objective, factual, quasi-journalistic representation of experience and still retain a powerful, emotional core. In aiming for objectivity even in the writing of his personal autobiographical experiences, I saw in Kerouac, again, how art could reach out beyond personal subjectivity towards the essence of experience—the spiritual in the world. This essence is revealed not by writing about the essence as such, but by writing objectively (again, with thoughts and feelings) about the way in which it is manifested in the world.61

Exploring Kerouac’s difficulties with alcohol was, of course, part of this quest I was on—as reader, writer and human being. My path had become bound up with the path Kerouac had already walked in his own way. Of course, the quest changes, evolves, develops, and in Big Sur Kerouac was at a different place than when he took off for the first time down that open road:

It’s the first trip I’ve taken away from home (my mother’s house) since the publication of ‘Road’ the book that ‘made me famous’ and in fact so much so I’ve been driven mad for three years by endless telegrams, phonecalls, requests, mail, visitors, reporters, snoopers … Drunken visitors puking in my study, stealing books and even pencils … Me drunk practically all the time to put on a jovial cap to keep up with all this but finally realizing I was surrounded and outnumbered and had to get away to solitude again or die. 62

Though I also found myself (often willingly) surrounded at night, sometimes I did find the solitude I needed in my shack with my books, my notepads and pens. But the difficult aspects of human existence, horrific hangovers included, have a way of

61 See also Goethe’s Aphorisms in Prose, as quoted in Steiner, Goethean Science, 164: “The true is like God; it does not appear directly; we must guess it from its manifestations.”
62 Kerouac, Big Sur, 2.
finding you even in moments of apparent solitude, as Kerouac found out in his Big Sur coastal retreat. Far from solitude, he found more people, more alcohol, more horrors:

I’m afraid to close my eyes for all the turmoiled universes I see tilting and expanding suddenly exploding suddenly clawing into my centre, faces, yelling mouths, long haired yellers, sudden evil confidences, sudden rat-tat-tats of cerebral committees arguing about ‘Jack’ and talking about him as if he wasn’t there … I’m crying ‘I’m not human any more and I’ll never be safe any more … 63

While Kerouac might not have felt “human any more” during this time, in reading this piece it still feels as though he felt while writing it, as I felt while reading it, free. That is, again, he doesn’t seem to get completely lost in his own feelings—doesn’t write solely about the feelings of his own soul life and overlay this onto the experience (and therefore onto the reader). Rather, he, again, describes his thoughts and feelings in relation to his experience with as much objectivity as possible, and in so doing leaves open a greater possibility of freedom for the reader. Even though it describes a kind of inner experience, Kerouac’s writing here still stands in a sure place, unlike some of Burrough’s work, or Thompson’s Fear and Loathing, for example.

In order to explore the way other writers handled similar experiences and similar writing processes I returned again to Burroughs—this time, Naked Lunch. As I have already mentioned, in Kerouac I saw objective, poetic writing that explored the spiritual as it is revealed or made manifest in the phenomena of the physical world, as well as objective forays into the kind of hellish depths to which

63 Kerouac, Big Sur, 178-179.
the human being is capable of descending. By contrast, in most of Burroughs’ work
I saw a mostly subjective representation of this hellish sub-physical realm, with no
real chance for the human being to attain any kind of spiritual development. So
even though both writers used a similar writing technique, I felt with Burroughs the
only place the quest could lead the human being was into a kind of subjective,
spiritless abyss. With Kerouac, however, I felt the difficulties that the human being
faced on their quest were there to enable them to have the opportunity, at least, to
achieve some kind of spiritual development. Because of this, even Kerouac’s crises
serve to open up towards some kind of growth, some kind of redemption,
resurrection, or spiritual experience:

Suddenly as clear as anything I ever saw in my life, I see the Cross … I
see the Cross, it’s silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my
whole body fades away to it, I hold out my arms to be taken away to it,
by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swooning out
to the Cross standing in a luminous area of darkness, I start to scream
because I know I’m dying but I don’t want to scare Billie or anybody
with my death scream so I swallow the scream and just let myself go
into death and the Cross: as soon as that happens I slowly sink back to
life … my eyes fill with tears—‘We’ll all be saved …’

Eventually Kerouac’s narrator emerges from his ‘dark night of the soul,’ and
carries on. And with this there also comes hope—hope that I was also keen to
portray in my own novel—a redemptive hope that can lead the human being out of
the abyss.

I too would eventually carry on, with my partying decreasing as all my
friends either returned home or continued down other roads, with the snow melting
underneath my feet and my shack, and with a clearer idea of what might unfold for

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me in the future and in my writing. I began to believe that I could try to portray all
the difficulties of the quest of my life as well as all the joys—that I could
spontaneously portray my life in all its gritty authenticity, with honesty—that all
my past and future experiences could serve as the subject matter of my own
writing.

And so I looked ahead along the road, and prepared to make my final descent
down the mountain towards Denver and Boulder, towards more reading, more
writing, more study, more characters and, like Kerouac’s narrator in *Big Sur*, all
else that would come:

I’ll get my ticket and say goodbye on a flower day … and it’ll all be like
it was in the beginning—Simple golden eternity blessing all—Nothing
ever happened—Not even this … something good will come out of all
things yet—And it will be golden and eternal just like that.65

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PART FOUR

“Looking for an angry fix”

Some of the travels and experiences that followed my time in Crested Butte are recounted in “the lonely and the road.”

On one bluesky day I would leave Crested Butte with a small group of friends and make the journey towards Denver and Boulder. On the one hand I had Kerouac’s words in my head:

Desolation, Desolation, I owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for guiding me … Now comes the sadness of coming back to cities and I’ve grown two months older and there’s all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upsidedown in the void God bless them …

On the other hand I was more than ready to get moving again, to fill up my life with more experiences. In Crested Butte I had had my time of reading, and writing, and contemplation and reflection. Now I was ready to encounter more of the world, to search for meaning where I could, and in every moment try to uncover the essence of whatever I was passing through.

Denver was, once again, a very short visit. We drove through it from the outer southern suburbs, along the freeway by the edge of downtown, to the airport, and then out the other side towards Boulder. And in some ways I was glad for this brief transit. For, unlike Kerouac, I knew nobody here:

... and before I knew it we were going over the wholesale fruitmarkets outside Denver; there were smokestacks, smoke, railyards, red-brick

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66 Kerouac, The Dharma Bums, 204.
buildings, and the distant downtown gray-stone buildings, and here I was in Denver … I stumbled along with the most wicked grin of joy in the world, among the old bums and beat cowboys of Larimer Street.67

Kerouac was travelling towards friends in Denver, but my “wicked grin of joy” would come later when we arrived in Boulder—when I got to spend time with my cousin, brother, and even my ex-girlfriend. These encounters all appear in “the lonely and the road.”

I would also find myself smiling, and a little stoned, one April afternoon, as I sat in an old dusty chair on the front porch of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. The school is part of Naropa University, and was founded by poets Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg. (Naropa has a strong Buddhist leaning, as do, of course, the work and lives of both Ginsberg and Kerouac.) I contemplated this as I sat smiling on the porch chair, and watched as my clouded thoughts drifted to the first lines of Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night … 68

What I had read of Ginsberg seemed to me to be a kind of variation of Kerouac’s spontaneous writing, though in poetic form. By contrast, when I read Kerouac I got a sense of the poetic in his prose style (formally, through unconventional language use, sentence structure, ungrammatical forms, and syntactical variations, and so on,

67 Kerouac, On the Road, 37.
but essentially through an enhanced, penetrating way of viewing the world). Kerouac thought of himself as the greatest American poet of his time (Ginsberg supported this claim), only he wrote (for the most part) in prose. Indeed, the ‘technical’ lines between poetry and prose here are fairly thin, and at the time didn’t concern me a great deal. I was more interested in how the writing strove to represent some kind of meaningful, spiritual experience (or longing for it) in a predominantly materialistic world—the “burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the / starry dynamo in the machinery of night.”

Sitting there, I was reminded that Ginsberg, while striving to represent the quest in his own way, also had a great respect for the poetic and spiritual currents flowing through Kerouac’s writing. After all, Ginsberg had named this school after him (the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, at a university where spirituality plays a key role), and had written about him many times:

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house hills and cry.
Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole, companion, we thought the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed, surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees and machinery.

I admired Ginsberg’s representation of the spiritual search—a search that went on amid “the gnarled steel roots of trees and machinery.” But the striving and longing for spiritual experience still seemed to me to find a fuller expression in Kerouac’s writing. How much of this came down to the writer’s abilities, I wondered, and

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69 Ginsberg, “Howl,” 1599.
how much did, in fact, come down to form? Is prose more suited to spontaneous writing? Is the novel better suited to the representation of the spiritual quest? I tried to hold these questions open, without grasping for an answer.

While I was at the university I decided to go to the admissions desk and ask if it might be possible for me to study at Naropa at some stage. I found out that yes, technically, it was possible. The only thing was that I was just short on the financial side—about AU$80,000 short.

Later that day I found myself, with a slightly clearer head, at a place that sold goods and services which I had some chance of affording: the Beat Book Shop on Pearl. I scanned the shelves of secondhand books and eventually walked out with Desolation Angels (1965) and Jack’s Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac. This was the first piece I had bought about Kerouac’s writing (excluding the brief introductions to some of his novels). I began to flick through it, ever mindful that any writer’s work should be able to stand on its own if it is going to stand at all—and seeing as Kerouac wrote autobiographically, the greatest biography of his life and work is already contained within his novels.71

This said, I read on, and in the ‘Prologue’ I found:

America makes odd demands of its fiction writers. Their art alone won’t do. We expect them to provide us with social stencils, an expectation so firm that we often judge their lives instead of their works. If they declare themselves a formal movement or stand up together as a generation, we are pleased, because this simplifies the use we plan to make of them. If

71 For some of the many biographies of Kerouac, see, for example, Ann Charters, Kerouac: A Biography (London: Picador, 1973); Dennis McNally, Desolate Angel, A Biography: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America (New York: Random House, 1979); Tom Clark, Jack Kerouac: A Biography (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1984).
they oblige us with a manifesto, it is enforced with the weight of contract.\textsuperscript{72}

I agreed with this sentiment even as, after stating that “their art alone won’t do,” that “we often judge their lives instead of their works,” the book went on to look at (through the oral stories of those who knew him) Kerouac’s \textit{life}. With this in mind I read on as the book explored the way in which Kerouac suffered under the full force of commercial success—“commercial success he had wanted”:\textsuperscript{73}

Kerouac, unwillingly, was set up as the avatar of a movement that he had no desire and little ability to advance. Suddenly, he found himself placed by the media at the centre of a stage dressed with props from French existentialism (black sweaters, berets), late romanticism (footloose hedonism) and the whole race-hoard of ideas about drugs …\textsuperscript{74}

Later in the book I read that when asked what fame was like, Kerouac replied, “It’s like old newspapers blowing down Bleecker Street.”\textsuperscript{75} The book does have some interesting and often touching accounts of Kerouac, many concerned with the way in which this fame impacted upon his life. The book closes with the following moving words by Kerouac’s close friend Lucien Carr (Damion in \textit{On The Road}, and Sam Vedder in \textit{The Subterraneans}, amongst other names in other novels):

\begin{quote}
Man, you don’t see a plant like that grow right in front of your face without \textit{loving} it. What Jack was—it was like you were glad to be a man, you were glad to be alive!

Could there have been some pure way that Jack could have lived? No, he had to have it just the way it came to him. How could he come out of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{73} Gifford and Lee, ix.
\textsuperscript{74} Gifford and Lee, ix-x.
\textsuperscript{75} Kerouac quoted by Irene May in Gifford and Lee, 230. Bleecker Street is a street amongst the skyscrapers of downtown Manhattan.
that house of his mother and father, of Leo and Mémère, when their only real feeling was for money, fame, glory, and for nothing, for nothing that meant anything.

Jack was so corrupted by the world. A man on the run, that’s what he was. The poor man! There was no way, no fucking way, no way to join Kerouac, no way to love Kerouac. He had to come down off a hill that was never built for him …

What can a man do for another. What can a man do for his brother? What can a man do for love? Nothing. Nothing …

I should have done better. I should have saved his fucking ass.

I would love to have gone to Ozone Park and say to his mother and father, “Ah, I am here, it’s so nice to be here—ah Mémère, oh Leo, oh yes, Leo—it’s very nice, I’ve brought you this present, it’s something to free Jack!” 76

The book contains other interesting and heartfelt accounts of various individuals’ relationships to Kerouac the man, and Kerouac the writer. Perhaps it was this heartfelt aspect that was the book’s shining light. Rather than applying the abstract intellect to his work, or looking at his life in the traditional revelatory approach of biographical writing, Gifford and Lee are more interested in painting a picture of Kerouac the man through the stories and experiences of those who had a feeling connection with him. Still, I couldn’t help returning to the prologue, which itself asks, “Why didn’t the journalists examine the books as well as the man?” 77 and then quotes Kerouac’s words in The Paris Review:

I am so busy interviewing myself in my novels, and I have been so busy writing down these self-interviews, that I don’t see why I should draw breath in pain every year of the last ten years to repeat and repeat to everybody who interviews me what I’ve already explained in the books themselves … it beggars sense. 78

76 Lucien Carr quoted in Gifford and Lee, 319.
77 Gifford and Lee, x.
78 Kerouac quoted in Gifford and Lee, x.
Indeed, I couldn’t help wondering: why ask biographical questions of somebody who writes autobiographically?\(^7^9\) In any case, I soon returned to the novels themselves—to the searching for spiritual experience, and the representation of that searching. I also returned to the road.

Over the next few weeks, as recounted in the “the lonely and the road,” I spent time with my ex-girlfriend, with my brother, and with my cousin. I drove north of Boulder into Wyoming, Idaho and Montana, then turned south and west to Utah, and Arizona. Somewhere near the border of these latter two states, my cousin pulled out a book of poetry and asked me to read whatever I wanted from it. It was the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi mystic, Rumi. I opened it to the first poem:

**WHO SAYS WORDS WITH MY MOUTH?**

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?
I have no idea.
My soul is from elsewhere, I’m sure of that,
and I intend to end up there.

This drunkenness began in some other tavern.
When I get back around to that place,
I’ll be completely sober. Meanwhile,
I’m like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.
The day is coming when I fly off,
but who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?
Who says words with my mouth?

Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?
I can’t stop asking.
If I could taste one sip of an answer,
I could break out of this prison for drunks.

\(^7^9\) The only answers to this would seem to be a kind of personal interest—i.e. the novels were enjoyed (if read), and then people wanted to ‘know more’ about Kerouac by going *beyond* the novels. Or, perhaps, they wanted to measure some kind of ‘factual accuracy’ in his representation. Do we concern ourselves, however, with testing the accuracy or truth of a Monet? Or a Picasso? Or a poem? Or a song?
I didn’t come here of my own accord, and I can’t leave that way.  
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.

This poetry. I never know what I’m going to say. 
I don’t plan it.  
When I’m outside the saying of it, 
I get very quiet and rarely speak at all.  

I found many things in Rumi, out there in that desert. First, that maybe form (or even genre), that is, whether the quest is presented in poetry or prose, is perhaps not important after all. Here was a poet whose strivings seemed as sincere and difficult as those presented by Kerouac. Rumi’s longing was just as heartfelt, just as true. I also noticed that what he searched for was perhaps more explicit than what Kerouac had named in his writing. Rumi was searching for ‘the friend,’ ‘the beloved,’ ‘you,’ ‘God,’ as the poet and Rumi translator Coleman Barks notes:

In Rumi’s poetry there is always the mystery of the pronouns. Who is the you he addresses? Shams? Saladin Zarkub? Husam? The inner, angelic counterpart? The divine Beloved? A God-Person alloyed of the longing of lover for Beloved? The Friend? All the above? Pronouns dissolve within the pressure of Rumi’s recognition of his true identity. The essential power of Rumi’s poetry is ecstasy, an ecstasy melting the confinement of the ego into a larger, elastic, cross-pollinating dance of Selves … Rumi is speaking of a fluctuating exchange between beings, and between beings and Being.

In this sense then, I believed Rumi was seeking for the union of his own self with ‘the other’ (and the knowledge that brought)—whatever or whoever that ‘other’ might be—and he did so primarily through love. Only through love could Rumi bring about such knowledge, such union.

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Rumi’s technique of not explicitly naming his addressee would, later, find its way into “the lonely and the road.” I felt that using this technique would also help to avoid the limiting factors that direct naming of the addressee might involve. By not naming the addressee as another human being, or God, or Allah, or Yahweh, or Brahman, or cosmic consciousness, or as an angelic or archangelic being, or aspect of our own higher selves, or whatever else, then my narrator is potentially able to move beyond the preconceived (religious or otherwise) boundaries that are set-up once the addressee is specifically named: “forgive me. i find it so hard to measure if i am actually progressing here—if i am growing closer to you, moving further away, or staying in exactly the same place.”82 By leaving the addressee as “you,” the reader may also feel they are being personally addressed—that perhaps they are the one the narrator is writing to, and searching for:

and i am completely filled with the feeling that all this journeying—not just these months in america now, but always—my whole life, everybody’s lives—all of this moving forward and on and out and through has suddenly been worth it. maybe i could die right now and it might all be justified, even this writing to you.83

Rumi also revealed to me the way in which his Sufi beliefs—his universal, spiritual ideas—are set out and supported by particular sense-perceptible phenomena. For example, in addition to the above:

THE SEED MARKET

Can you find another market like this?

82 Stubley, “the lonely and the road,” 156.
83 Stubley, “the lonely and the road,” 221.
Where,
with your one rose
you can buy hundreds of rose gardens?

Where,
for one seed
you get a whole wilderness?

For one weak breath,
the divine wind? …

For Rumi, the universal is confirmed by the particular (the idea by the percept); he seems to start with the spiritual and move to the physical. In Kerouac I also saw the universal supported by the particular, but for most of his writing he begins with the particular—the physical—and allows the universal or spiritual to reveal itself through his descriptions. For instance, in Desolation Angels, which I had just started reading:

Surly clouds blacken to make fire rims at that forge where the night’s being hammered, crazed mountains march to sunset like drunken cavaliers in Messina when Ursula was fair, I would swear that [Mt.] Hozomeen would move if we could induce him but he spends the night with me and soon when the stars rain down the snowfields he’ll be in the pink of pride all black and yaw-y to the north where (just above him every night) North Star flashes pastel orange, pastel green, iron orange, iron blue, azurite indicative constellative auguries of her makeup up there that you could weigh on the scales of the golden world—

Here the observation of Mt. Hozomeen moves from a given sense-perceptible one to a pictorial, characterised representation of the essential, universal or spiritual being, or idea of Hozomeen: “I would swear that [Mt.] Hozomeen would move if

85 Kerouac, Desolation Angels (Great Britain: Panther, 1975), 33.
we could induce him but he spends the night with me and soon when the stars rain down the snowfields he’ll be in the pink of pride …”86

In truth, I saw both ‘directions’ in Kerouac: this examination of the particular until it pushes through to a universal or spiritual experience (as in the quote above), but also the unfolding of ideas (often Christian or Zen Buddhist) which are at times supported by the particular in the world, as with Rumi. But it was also the way in which Kerouac seemed to fluctuate between these two directions that was striking for me, as if he could comfortably encompass both the universal and the particular at any moment:

Hold together, Jack, pass through everything, and everything is one dream, one appearance, one flash, one sad eye, one crystal lucid mystery, one word—Hold still, man, regain your love of life and go down from this mountain and simply be—be—the infinite fertilities of the one mind of infinity, make no comments, complaints, criticisms, appraisals, avowals, sayings, shooting stars of thought, just flow, flow, be you all, be you what it is, it is only what it always is—Hope is a word like a snow-drift—This is the Great knowing, this is the Awakening, this is Voidness—So shut up, live, travel, adventure, bless and don’t be sorry—prunes, prune, eat your prunes—And you have been forever, and will be forever, and all the worrisome smashings of your foot on innocent cupboard doors it was only the Void pretending to be a man pretending not to know the Void—87

Here the mountain and the “Void” seem to be both particular and universal, both percept and concept, both physical and spiritual. Kerouac penetrates, through his thinking / feeling observation and description, into the realm of ideas (the idea “this

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86 Kerouac, Desolation Angels, 33.
87 Kerouac, Desolation Angels, 31.
mountain,” which could be any mountain). This ideal or spiritual realm then also encompasses the idea’s manifestation (Mt. Hozomeen).88

I held Kerouac’s work in mind as I continued to read Rumi, and noticed again what Rumi said about the writing process through his poems: “This poetry. I never know what I’m going to say. / I don’t plan it.”89 To me, this sounded close to Kerouac’s views on spontaneous writing: “begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing …”90 For both poets, the quest itself (in content and form) required a stepping out into the unknown—of not knowing what was going to happen next: the formal technique—or the style, or the way it is written—would appear to need just as much courage, as much spontaneity, and possibly, just as little editing as the quest itself. The six books of Rumi’s Mathnawi, for example, were dictated by Rumi spontaneously while his scribe recorded.91 Kerouac, however, would have to perform the role of scribe as well as the role of author.

Through my readings at this time, therefore, I was beginning to get a greater feel for the importance of Kerouac’s spontaneous prose and how I might be able to work with it in my own writing—an issue I would look into in greater depth once I returned home (during my Honours degree).

But for now, the spontaneous quest of my life continued. We drove on, passing through Nevada, California, and eventually ending up in San Francisco. I filled my notebook with copious observations, and in some way knew (or rather,
hoped) that these observations and experiences would eventually become the material for a novel. I didn’t think the writing was anything groundbreaking, but I was trying to improve my powers of observation, and to write spontaneously. Above all, I hoped the universal or spiritual experiences that I sought might reveal themselves not only in my moments of observing them in the world and in thinking with them, but also in my moments of writing and, possibly, later, in reading too.
At City Lights bookstore in San Francisco I scanned the shelves and found all the Beats, as well as many other writers of course. My brother pointed out a whole bookcase of Western Australian novelist Tim Winton. I had read *Dirt Music* (2001) in my Crested Butte shack and, as always, enjoyed the way in which Winton painted his landscapes with words. But I had a different kind of experience reading *Dirt Music* than I did reading *Cloudstreet* (1991) in high school. Something had changed—the magic was different, or I was. I wondered if what I had first found in *Cloudstreet* would still be there if I read it now. And for the first time I wondered if my views on Kerouac would also change as I got older.

I thought about the journeys Winton portrayed. In *Cloudstreet* and *Dirt Music*, as well as in other novels, the quest seemed to be tempered with a certain brooding darkness (sinister at times) as well as an inward focus. Often the characters didn’t appear to move too far—physically they rarely left Western Australia, and morally or spiritually most of the characters didn’t seem to go too far either. For me, the style of Winton’s writing in these books (the lyrical nature of which I very much enjoyed) seemed also quite conventional.

*The Riders* (1994), which I had previously read, was also on the shelf. Here the journey expands further afield—to Ireland and Europe. At the same time, the characters’ moral or spiritual development also seems greater than in the stories set exclusively within Western Australia. The longing expressed by *The Riders’* main
character, Fred Scully, for his wife is a deep, painful, soulful longing that culminates in the abandonment of his search for her. That is, he comes to a place where he realises he does not want to continue with the quest he is on. This is a significant moment in any quest—knowing when to go on, and knowing when to stop.

I flicked through The Riders briefly in the store, and thought about my own possible representation of the quest. I think I wanted my representation to move faster somehow (maybe it was my age), and I wanted the writing style to speed along with it. I wanted sentences to be longer, more hastily written, uninhibited, immediate (just as spontaneous as the quest itself can be).92

My cousin then pointed out a shelf of the American poet Charles Bukowski, whose work I would eventually read years later, and told me about how he (my cousin) would go from bar to bar with a friend pretending to be tough like Charles. I then glanced at Neal Cassady’s (the hero of many of Kerouac’s novels) The First Third. Ginsberg was also there, of course. Burroughs. Plus many other poets (and friends of Kerouac), including Gregory Corso, Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder. I think I also saw the poet (and owner of City Lights), Lawrence Ferlinghetti,

92 We might be tempted to assume that to quest is to embark upon something planned or deliberate, and that the quest, therefore, contradicts spontaneity, wandering, or impulsive action. Nonetheless, as Kerouac’s work and my own, for example, clearly illustrate, we can indeed act spontaneously while on a quest (as well as quest while acting spontaneously, regardless of how conscious we are of the quest we’re actually on). This assumed contradiction can also be resolved by looking no further than the experiences of our own lives, especially while we are travelling: we may have a clear idea of something, someone, some place we are searching for, but this does not negate spontaneity. Rather, we find that the need for spontaneous action is enhanced on such a search. Indeed, to exclude spontaneity from a quest is perhaps the best possible way to ensure we never reach our goal. The quest actually requires spontaneity because, despite all our best planning and deliberations, unplanned, unexpected and previously unknown experiences meet us and require spontaneous action in response. This is clearly illustrated in any representation of the quest where the characters wander. For example, the wandering of Gilgamesh as he looks for Utapishtim, Odysseus as he searches for Ithaca, and Parzival as he seeks the grail (see Part Seven of this exegesis), not to mention the characters’ wandering in Kerouac’s work and my own.
punching the till at some point. They were all there. Most of them dead. But something was still alive—their striving perhaps—in the pages they had left.

We crossed Jack Kerouac Street to The Vesuvio Café and read all the articles on the walls about the Beats and their times spent there. The place was still full of their voices. Even at this stage I think I understood that my visit to City Lights and the Vesuvio (and maybe the whole trip itself) was a kind of ‘tipping of the hat’ to those who’d come before me so that I could continue in my own direction. In any case, we drank a couple of Irish coffees and, soon after, finished our trip.

“the lonely and the road” ends as the characters embark upon an all-night drive back to Boulder. Soon after we arrived, my brother returned to the Western Australian desert, my cousin went back to work, my ex-girlfriend went on with her life, and I, now alone, went, via Dallas, to Kerouac’s house in Orlando, Florida.

Kerouac lived in the small backporch apartment of this College Park home—1418½ Clouser Avenue—sweating out a long hot summer:

Mémère and me ride Greyhound bus all the way back to Florida the same wretched way, the furniture behind us, and find a backporch apartment for a low rent and move in—The late afternoon sun beats mercilessly on the tin porch roof as I take a dozen cold baths a day sweating and dying.  

I was told that during the day he slept underneath the giant oak tree out the front of the house, and at night all that the neighbours heard was the clacking of his typewriter drifting out into the street. I too lived here in summer, but for me there was airconditioning. In fact, it was no longer just a mere backporch apartment, but

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93 Kerouac, Desolation Angels, 58.
a whole house that had been renovated so as to re-imagine the 1950s, though with all the modern conveniences.

I sat in the room where Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums*, and flicked through the book again. It was definitely a strange experience to sit at a desk and stare out of the same window he looked through between the banging out of so many words:

‘Words, words, what’s in a word? Nirvana by any other name. Besides don’t you hear that big old gal calling you and telling you you’ve got a new field, a new Buddha-field boy?’ Japhy was so pleased he wrinkled his eyes and smiled. ‘Whole Buddha-fields in every direction for each one of us’ … 94

I read parts of *The Dharma Bums*, some basic books on Buddhism, Richard Bach’s wonderful adult fairy-tale of the spiritual quest, *Jonathon Livingston Seagull*, and even most of (the historian) Robert Hughes’ *The Fatal Shore* (for some reason I felt the need to view Australia from this distance). During the day I’d go and have lunch at a nearby café-bookstore called Chapters and read whatever was around. But, during those many long hours alone in the house, I seem to remember most vividly diving into the pages of Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels*. It showed me something even more unconventional—even freer in its theme and style.

The book involves a detailed account of Kerouac’s time as a mountaintop fire-lookout, and then his travels through the world again when he is done. It is made up of prose, poetry, haiku, mantras, journal entries, drawings, scribbles and other spontaneities throughout the 400 or so pages:

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94 Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 98.
In reading *Desolation Angels* I was also getting a better feel for the ‘musicality’ of Kerouac’s language—of its rhythms and cadences—as well as his overall search to find a style that could interweave with the content of his stories. One night I was reading the book and something Seymour Krim wrote in the introduction caught my eye:

> This style, as in that of any truly significant writer, was hardly a surface mannerism but rather the ultimate expression of a hard won point of view that had to incarnate itself in the language he used, the rhythm with which he used it, and the unbuttoned punctuation that freed the headlong drive of his expression.96

I believed this to be true because I saw it and experienced it in his writing. A year later I would also begin to investigate critically this “hard won point of view” and Kerouac’s “language” (I understood Krim’s use of the term “point of view,” as describing a way or place of ‘seeing the world’ more than as narrative technique, as in ‘first-person point of view’). For now, I stayed with Kerouac’s work itself, while the afternoon storms blew through and the midnight street-sweepers cleared the roads once more:

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95 Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 74.
96 Seymour Krim “Introduction,” in *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac, 16.
After that there never was
That’s all there is to what there’s not—
Boom

Up in the valley
   and down by the mountain,
The bird—
Wake up! wake up! Wake up! wake
Wake Wake Wake A W A K E N
   A W A K E N A W A K E N
   AWAKEN
   NOW

   This is the wisdom
   of the millenial rat
   —Theriomorphus, highest perfect
   Rat

   Black black black black bling bling bling bling bling
   bling black black black bling bling bling bling bling
   black black black black bling bling bling bling bling

(Alone on a mountaintop there is perhaps more possibility and more room for Kerouac’s subjectivity to enter into his writing process.) It may seem a little irresponsible to quote the above section out of context—without a sense of what led up to such a passage and what follows—but at least this passage provides (in the context of this exegesis) a brief example of some of the unconventional stylistic and thematic features found in *Desolation Angels.*

For me, in many ways, *Desolation Angels* also provided an expanded playing field for what could be done not only stylistically or formally, but what could be portrayed in the content or plot or story of a novel. And it became even clearer to me that, in terms of story or content, Kerouac was most concerned with the

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97 Kerouac, *Desolation Angels,* 75.
individual’s search for connection—be it connection with Nature, with other human beings, with himself, or with the divine:

I know better than that—God must be a personal God because I’ve known a lot of things that weren’t in texts. In fact when I went to Columbia all they were trying to teach us was Marx, as if I cared. I cut classes and stayed in my room and slept in the arms of God. (This is what dialectical materialists call “cherubim tendencies,” or the psychiatrists call “schizoid tendencies.”) Ask my brother and father in their graves about tendencies.

I see them tending towards the golden eternity, where all is restored forever, where actually whatever you loved is all compacted in One Essence—The Only One.98

Essentially then, the narrator of Desolation Angels, like Kerouac, wanders in search of the connection between the divine in himself and the divine as it is expressed in the world. And like many of Kerouac’s novels, Desolation Angels is a recounting of these moments of connection and separation in all their joyful, as well as their painful, aspects. From out of this wandering search, the style or form of the novel could emerge. For I do not believe we as humans go through the world in a formal, precisely thought-out, understood, predetermined fashion. We go (and often wander) from experience to experience with a certain freedom and spontaneity, attempting to gain, through our gathering of concepts, ideas and a great many mistakes, some kind of understanding and meaning for our lives. Could this wandering of experience, this spontaneity be represented not only in a novel’s theme, but also in the way it is written? I was developing a feel for the idea that we are as little able to edit our experiences in the moment of experiencing them as Kerouac felt he was able to edit his own writing.

98 Kerouac, Desolation Angels, 290.
I began to believe that if I was going to write about the experiences of my life (and surely there is no more important a story for each of us), then I must portray it in a way consistent with the living of it. I believed Kerouac came closer to this than any other writer I had read at the time. But still, I needed to be able to recount my own experiences—my own wandering and thirst for understanding—in a way that was truthful to its unfolding for me. And so I sat in the airconditioned loungeroom of Kerouac’s old home and started to write my first novel—or my first version of my first novel, at least: “we’re all just empty bedroom windows / reflecting long forgotten stars.”

In the morning I wrote. At lunchtime I took the laptop to Chapters, read and kept writing. In the afternoon I came home, worked some more on the novel, and sat on the front porch watching the afternoon thunderstorm as it roared through:

The porch seat sighs as I sink into it, whilst grasshopper glass beads bounce off the road and disperse into the Florida street afternoon. The lightning presses again and turns on a slab of grey sky to the left. Thunder booms soon after and I feel the giant breath of it rolling this way. The air has that sweet, musky, ice cream scent to it—heavy and waiting.

The rain picks up in a cacophony of splash slick slide—falling in sheets onto the steaming street. The wind sneaks in and onto the tired timber porch like a sleek thief, and builds and climbs and carries in the now-cool rain. Lightning glows the Thursday clouds clear bright and almost immediately the hungry thunder follows up—flash boom. And then more, and the rain grows strong and cold and windy splattered onto the porch, onto me. Rain doesn’t even seem to fall now, it just is, filling the air cold and harsh whilst the swinging sprinkler next door struggles to keep up.

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In the evening I’d ride the house bike around the lakes and homes of College Park millionaires made rich through Disney or Universal or NASA or Florida retirement homes or strip malls. It was a strange place, Orlando.

Throughout the day (and night) I tried to observe the world and my own thinking and dreams as closely as I could, especially little things, which would either make their way into my journal, or the novel, or both: “nextdoor sprinklers water the road—/ circular streams hitting the bitumen in a delicious, rhythmic, lick.”101 Everything was written down—everything—somewhere. I was trying to train myself not only to observe and pay attention to the phenomena around me, but to capture something in the moment in which experiences unfolded—for better or worse. Everything was worth writing about, and writing about things was worth everything. Observation fuelled more writing, and more writing fuelled more observation.

After about ten weeks, the whole 120,000-word novel was done. It was quite a process, but one that I tried to fulfil as rhythmically as possible, by employing the daily writing routine outlined above. I called the novel “Too Many Stars” because one night at a downtown bar a guy told me about his first trip to Colorado. He said he had grown up in east-coast cities his whole life, but on the first night on his first trip to Colorado he stayed in a log cabin in the mountains. He said at one point he went outside and looked up at the sky. “It was too much,” he said, “I couldn’t take it—I had to go back inside. It was far too beautiful—there were just too many stars.”

The novel I wrote was made up of poems, questions, quotes from songs and other novels, mnemonics, haikus, journal entries, dreams, observations, absurdities, memories, and a narrative that basically followed my American travels up to where I found myself. It was all intertwined. “Too Many Stars.” And probably too much altogether. Although I had written the narrative spontaneously, I did afterwards insert different passages (the dreams, songs, haikus, mnemonics etc. mentioned above) into different places within the novel. As a result of these inserts, the novel lost some of its spontaneous momentum. At the same time, the original narrative itself (which I did not edit beyond including the inserts mentioned) was probably a bit loose in places. But that, I discovered, was part of the risk of spontaneous, unedited prose. That is (if we were concerned with such judgments), we could say that sometimes the writing was what might be called publishable, but sometimes it wasn’t. The novel captured both extremes—what might be called ‘good’ and ‘bad’ writing.102

In any case, I read over the novel again before I left the house, and wasn’t sure how I felt about it. I doubted whether I’d be sending it to a publisher any time soon. But I did feel I had learnt something in the process of it all. And hell, I was only twenty-two—there was still plenty of road rolling out ahead.

102 Whether the writing was good or bad, however, was not my primary concern. I was more interested in trying to produce my best possible (and most interesting) writing, while remaining honest to the content (as well as to the form). Kerouac outlines this point in “Essentials”: “the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind-tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow!—now!—your way is your only way—‘good’—or ‘bad’—always honest (‘ludi-crous’), spontaneous, ‘confessionals’ interesting, because not ‘crafted.’”
Towards the end of my stay at the house in Orlando I was invited by Marty, the President of the Kerouac Project, to travel with him to a book launch in New York. He and I ended up driving fifteen mad hours with a boot full of wine up to Washington D.C., where we stayed with his friend, the deputy secretary of the Army. The next morning we drove the rest of the way to New York City. It was an incredible experience. I walked around downtown in the afternoon, saw the Trade Centre site and all the messages from around the world, ran into an old friend on Second Avenue, and later went to the book launch at the Arsenal Building in Central Park. There was a thunderstorm all that night, and I ended up going onto the roof with some other people to watch the lightning flash all around the city, leaving skyscraper after-images amongst the shadows.

The book was called *Offbeat: Collaborating with Kerouac*—a warm, (again) hearfelt account by David Amram of his long-time friendship with Kerouac, from their early encounters in New York City to Kerouac’s final days in St. Petersburg, Florida:

“God, you and Jack have such long conversations,” said Melanie, now awake for the day. “He must be terribly lonely, down there in Florida, away from all his old friends.”

“He is,” I said. “Any of us would be. He’s looking after his mother and trying to find peace in his life with Stella so that he can write more. He’s never gotten over the death of Neal [Cassady]. I can hear pain in his voice that was never there before. He has to stop drinking, but that’s the
only way he can stop the pain, and it’s killing him. I don’t know what to do.”

Amram read from his book, played piano and did some scat-singing, while others read Kerouac, gave theatrical performances and listened. They even asked me to say some words about my time in his house. I didn’t really know what to say. I thanked the Project for the chance to stay there, thanked Mr. Amram for sharing his stories, and gave a silent thanks to Kerouac as well.

I also met Stephen Edington from a town called Nashua in New Hampshire. He seemed to have spent considerable time researching, writing and publishing a book about Kerouac’s (and Kerouac’s family’s) connection with Nashua. He gave me a copy of the book and signed it. During this trip to New York I was experiencing more and more the way in which people were extremely interested in Kerouac ‘the man.’ (It did occur to me that perhaps this interest surpassed the interest in Kerouac ‘the writer,’ though, perhaps, the interest in the man simply arose because people were so interested in his work—and perhaps this was a good thing.)

Later that night as we left an Indian restaurant on Sixth Street, me carrying his French horn, someone else carrying his trumpet (he always carries some instruments in case of a need to burst into spontaneous song), David Amram, who hadn’t really spoken to me all night, pulled me aside and said, “You know, man, I used to walk down this here same street with Dizzy [Gillespie] and Jack and others,

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105 Even though my primary interest remained his work, it did not escape me that I myself, of course, was also developing, more and more, an interest in Kerouac the man.
and Dizzy would say ‘Whoa, man, dig those cats playing on the stoop, dig that woman by her window, dig the street!—ah life!—how are you ever supposed to be bored?—how does anyone ever get bored with life!’ Others soon came and wanted to talk to David, or wanted to listen to him rap about some exciting time or interesting experience. Shortly after, we all got in our cars and disappeared into different parts of the city. The next day Marty and I drove the nineteen long hours back to Florida. And I suddenly looked around to find myself back in Orlando wondering if the trip had really happened at all. But it had. And I had tasted something else in New York—perhaps the same vibrancy, community or possibility that artists or writers or anybody else has felt rolling into that town—the life of it maybe. I wanted to experience more.

But first I would drive with a friend down to Miami for a few days, then fly to New Orleans (New Orleans was one of many places I had picked out of a hat as part of my around-the-world ticket). I wandered the city lost, scribbling in my notebook, listening to outbursts of spontaneous music, jazz, drinking local beer, and crossing the swirling pistachio-coloured Mississippi to Algiers (where Burroughs had lived for a time) on a car-ferry for free. I even found myself at the Pirate’s Alley house where William Faulkner wrote his first novel *Soldiers’ Pay*. I had only read some of Faulkner’s short stories, and none of his novels at this stage, but it was, once again, quite an experience to stand in the place where another’s prolific writing career began. I realised I was starting to unveil some of America’s secrets, some of its history, some of its stories concerning *place*, stories totally different from those of Australia.
I then flew to Chicago, thought about staying, but ended up extending my flight all the way to New York. As we came into the city, the pilot brought us down the long spine of Manhattan north to south, while a kid in front of me looked out the window at all the skyscrapers and said to his mother—“look Mom, look, look at all those mountains!—trees, hills, mountains!—look Mom, the cars are driving up mountains!—look Mom, look—the whole world is a mountain!” I wrote down what I could.

For the next month or so I was lucky enough to crash at my cousin’s place in Brooklyn, spent time with her and her friend, and hung out with the character named ‘jay’ in “the lonely and the road.” I went all around the city, and tried my best to get everything down. I wrote and wrote. There was so much happening everywhere. “How could you ever be bored with life?” I heard Amram saying, and through him Dizzy Gillespie, as well as Kerouac.

I went to another Beat-type bookshop in Greenwich, and there was, of course, right in the centre of it all, a huge display of Winton’s work. “Oh, yeah, we love him,” said the guy behind the counter. “Yeah?” he said to me, “you’re from Perth too! Wow!” Later, jay and I drank at the bars where the Beats had drunk and performed their arts, where Jimi Hendrix had played, Bob Dylan, a thousand others. We went to the White Horse Tavern where Dylan Thomas apparently drank himself to death, and read “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” to each other. There were stories everywhere: the whole city was built on them. And jay and I added to them of course, going to other places—new places—nightclubs in the
meat-packing district for example, where we created our own madness, and our own spontaneous stories.

On other days I read Moksha: Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience (1931-1963) by Aldous Huxley in my cousin’s backyard, or went to Coney Island and flicked through Ferlingetti’s Coney Island of the Mind while eating a hotdog on the pier: “The poet’s eye obscenely seeing / Sees the surface of the round world …”106

Some mornings I would think out epic, carefully planned, non-autobiographical novels and film scripts, scribbling notes furiously in my journal. Maybe I was also having some kind of reaction to spontaneous, autobiographical writing, and wanted, instead, to return to something more formal, more structured, more rigid. But no matter how far I tried to go with it, something in the writing always seemed to be too self-conscious, too self-aware. It was trying too hard, and I couldn’t make it sing, couldn’t make it work.

So I decided to do some more sightseeing, and went up to Columbia University (and again found myself a few hundred thousand dollars short of a course), the same university Kerouac left to go be ‘a writer.’ A couple of days later I visited The New School for Social Research where Kerouac later attended classes, and even went down to Bleecker Street to watch some old newspapers blowing through. And on my last day in New York I passed close to his Ozone Park house—the house in which he wrote Visions of Cody, amongst other things—on the way to JFK airport.

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By the time I left New York, I realised I had begun to formulate my own understanding of Kerouac the man, in addition to Kerouac the writer. I had also filled up four notebooks from my wanderings around the city, looking for experience, looking for meaning, simply observing, entering into my observations, becoming these things observed, writing them down, sometimes from the perspective of the observed phenomena, sometimes from mine—trying earnestly to encounter the essence of all the observed world, and through these observed phenomena, the whole of the city itself, with all its past, present and future stories. It was the perfect chance to become more disciplined in my striving to be aware of experiences as they arose, to encounter these experiences, as far as possible, with no preconceptions, and to get them down:

- cement mixers driving through puddles in the trade centre building site—lights reflected in the rippling brown puddles as rain begins to fall—people looking and filming and recording some sort of cleanup …
- the trade centre was on church street—such a huge space to fill—flags and viewing areas, tributes on cemetery fences—flags, flowers, caps, signs, and always ‘i love new york’ t-shirts—the people’s memorial …

I had written in breast-pocket notebooks before, in Perth and on this trip, but being in the sensual overload of New York City made me want to work harder at writing everything down. I didn’t think I was writing publishable material necessarily, but I was trying to train myself further in observation, and in writing about my observations, which could only help all my writing in the long-term. Perhaps it was just another part of this quest I was on.

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107 Stubley, notebook entry, September, 2002.
I flew out of JFK on a cold Saturday morning, hungover, tired, almost out of money, and found myself heading to the state in which Kerouac was born: Massachusetts. I didn’t make it to Kerouac’s hometown, Lowell, the setting for a number of his novels. I stuck to Boston—Harvard mostly—and wandered around the town filling even more notebooks with my observations. I walked through the campus then into a bookstore and read the collection of short stories *Jesus’ Son* by Denis Johnson. I enjoyed the beautiful, open desperation in his representation of the search for connection. Later, I listened to buskers play Australian band Men at Work’s ‘We Come from a Land Down Under,’ smiled at the line about Vegemite sandwiches, then went down to the Charles and sat on a bridge, pausing long enough to watch the sun set on my last night in America.

I passed quickly through Toronto, then found myself at my sister’s place in London reading *Home and Away: Australian Stories of Belonging and Alienation*. The book is a collection of short stories by Western Australian writers such as Elizabeth Jolley, Tim Winton, T.A.G. Hungerford, Robert Drewe, Peter Cowan and Randolph Stow. And once again it was wonderful to look back on Australia from that distance—with those “kind of eyes,” as Hunter S. Thompson might have put it—and see aspects of Australia that I could probably only have seen because I had taken this trip. I looked forward to the Australia that awaited my return home, and the possibilities of writing in a landscape that was new for me because of my travels—because I had developed a new set of eyes with which to view it.

But first I travelled through Portugal, Spain, France and Italy, where in Rome I spent an entire afternoon at the apartment of poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe
Shelley by the Spanish Steps. I had studied the English Romantics at university, and once again it was quite a thing to visit a place in which much writing had occurred; the smell of this writing seemed to linger in the air like the scent of fine food. I tried to take in as much of the scent and the feeling of the apartment and the area as I could, and imagined how it must have been to live, write and die here, as Keats did at twenty-five, only a couple of years older than I was at the time, having already produced the poetry that he had. I recalled, on that autumn day, the final stanza of “To Autumn”:

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too—  
While barréd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.  

I enjoyed the Romantics, particularly the way in which they viewed and experienced the world. Their observations of and interaction with the natural world in order to find greater meaning behind the merely sense-perceptible, also rang true in Kerouac’s work. It also seemed that a certain connection existed between Keats’s negative capability (a state of intentionally dwelling in open-mindedness without grasping for hypotheses or answers) and the process which Kerouac used to produce his spontaneous prose. In encountering the world and the experiences

about which he was writing, Keats strove to exist in a condition of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any reaching after fact and reason.” Kerouac, I believed, also employed similar ideas in the process of his writing, in the style, technique and form of his work—in his ‘spontaneous prose.’ “Essentials” can, in this case, help us illustrate the point:

**CENTER OF INTEREST** Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion …

In both Keats and Kerouac exists a desire to exist in “uncertainties,” which, for Kerouac in the process of writing, meant beginning “not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing.” Keats’s philosophy also strives, inherently, to avoid any kind of “preconceived ideas,” but rather promotes the conscious “existing in uncertainties.” Keats’s negative capability necessitates, therefore, (like Kerouac’s ideas on spontaneous prose, like Goethe’s scientific methodology, and as we are attempting to do in this exegesis) a thinking with the phenomena of the world, rather than about them. To think about the phenomena of the world requires that we reach after “fact and reason,” and that we have “preconceived ideas.” In thinking with the phenomena of the world, we are inherently required to put aside all “preconceived ideas” and all “reaching after fact and reason,” so that, again, the phenomena under observation can reveal of their essence what they will.

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110 Kerouac, “Essentials.”
I then travelled quickly through Greece and Turkey, before flying back to London, on to Japan briefly, then Hong Kong, Bangkok, and before I knew it I was back in Perth, broke again, with a bag full of notebooks, and much work to do.
I returned to Perth and started work on a creative writing Masters thesis. I was going to try again to write a novel; this time it was going to be spontaneous with no ‘inserts’ and no editing. Soon, however, I got word that the university had bungled my application advice. I now had to do an Honours year, but wouldn’t be able to start until second semester.

And so I bided my time, and ended up writing another novel anyway (or another version of the novel):

Later, we were in morning traffic headed for Denver and I found myself reaching for my sunglasses, for a drink, for the end. I turned off the stereo and we all sat and listened to the sound of the engine with the windows down and the cool morning air blowing us awake. We turned and took the road to Boulder and eventually hobbled into town with fifteen minutes for Patrick to have a shower and go to work. And when we finally finally did pull up in front of his house delirious and shaking we were so shocked that we’d made it and that it was over, that we couldn’t get out. It didn’t feel right—the stopping, the resting, the silence. It felt like we should be going somewhere else, like we should be pushing on, like we needed to continue moving or die. It was amazing—that feeling, that need. It was real, and excited as well as scared me.111

I revisited much of the same narrative I had written in Florida, but went further in my travels, eventually following my whole journey back to Perth again. I also got rid of unnecessary inserts and tried to tell the story of my wanderings as it had unfolded, spontaneously.

In many ways the novel was more ‘conventional’ than what I had written in Florida. But I also felt the spontaneous style was stronger because it didn’t have so many sections inserted after the initial writing process had been completed. Because I was spending less time thinking about inserting quotes, poems, mnemonics, dreams and other observations, I was less self-conscious about what I was trying to achieve formally during the writing process. I wasn’t trying so hard to get everything in it, I just wrote, spontaneously and without edits.

Soon after, I used certain sections of this novel to form the creative component of my Honours dissertation. In using only parts of the novel, it could be said that the Honours thesis therefore wasn’t ‘spontaneous’ (that is, if somebody wanted to measure it against Kerouac’s list of “Essentials”). Editing was also insisted upon within this academic environment, while I did try to keep this to a minimum. So in one sense, the end result wasn’t in line with Kerouac’s “Essentials,” though in the initial process of writing it, the novel was indeed written spontaneously. I didn’t pause to go back or edit during the time that I wrote it, I just kept pressing on. This resulted in a free-flowing writing process and, consequently, a free-flowing piece of writing (like the free-flowing journey I was trying to represent), although edits did come later.112

As part of the dissertation, I started my first critical study of Kerouac. I began by reading a number of books that looked critically at travel writing in order to

112 I will leave it up to somebody else to measure or judge whether or not the Honours thesis is spontaneous prose. As I see it, the piece is what it is. Instead of assuming the work can be measured from the outside by consulting “Essentials” or anything else, I feel, rather, that the work is not determined by anything other than what is embodied within the work itself.
provide a context for the dissertation. I then investigated the beginnings of written literature, and in so doing found myself at the beginning of the quest motif in written form—the Babylonian story *The Epic of Gilgamesh*:

> Why have you called my only son away  
> and shaped his mind in so disturbed a way?  
> For now, he says, you invite him to begin a pilgrimage that ends where Humbaba directs a never ending battle,  
> along a foreign, lonely road.  
> (Tablet III, Column ii, Lines 28-33)

Gilgamesh journeys along a “foreign, lonely road,” for a time, with his friend Enkidu. When Enkidu dies however, Gilgamesh, as Danny P. Jackson puts it, is “altered permanently. As a result, he wanders and wonders.” In his quest for immortality, Gilgamesh journeys to the man who had been made into a God: Utnapishtim. On his travels, Gilgamesh has to tell his own story on three separate occasions. Importantly, this telling of his own story eventually helps him to reach Utnapishtim. But after making it to Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh fails at two tasks, before finally returning to his home town of Uruk where he writes his own story down on twelve clay tablets.

I also looked at the way in which the quest appears later, in classical literature, in Homer’s *The Odyssey*:


Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven far journeys, after he had sacked Troy’s sacred citadel. Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of, many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea.\footnote{Homer, \textit{The Odyssey of Homer}, trans. Richard Lattimore (New York, Evanston, London: Harper and Row, 1965), 27.}

Odysseus travels far and wide for years looking for his home on Ithaca. But it is not until he tells his own story on the Island of the Phaecians that he is able to return home. Later, in the medieval, epic quest \textit{Parzival}, I read how the young knight travels for many years in search of the grail, though it is only once he tells and ‘owns’ his own story in the presence of the hermit Trevrizent, that he is able to finally rediscover the castle Munsalvaesche, ask the ailing grail king Anfortas the redeeming question “what ails thee?”\footnote{Appears as “what is it that troubles you?” in Wolfram von Eschenbach, \textit{Parzival}, trans. Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 415.} and take up the throne of the grail king.

Needless to say, there are many other quests represented throughout written literature, and many other examples of characters needing to either hear, or tell their own, tales in order to complete their journeys (in the Buddhist scriptures, Biblical parables, Shakespeare’s plays and beyond).\footnote{For a phenomenological look at “the tale in the tale” see Horst Kornberger, \textit{Story Medicine and How to Make It: A Manual for Soul Ecology} (Fremantle: Integral Arts Press, 2006), 3-13.} The way in which these quests are represented is, of course, related to the time and place in which they are produced. A great number of oral stories of indigenous peoples are about gods.\footnote{See, for example, David Tacey, \textit{Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia} (Victoria: Harper Collins, 1995), 148.} By the time we come to written literature—\textit{Gilgamesh}—the hero of the story is part god, part human. In \textit{The Odyssey}, while gods and humans intermingle on the world stage, the hero is now a fully-mortal human. In \textit{Parzival}, the hero is not only a human, but there are also no longer any gods represented, only (with great
certainty), 

believed in. In the majority of Western novels written in contemporary
times, gods, or the spiritual, do not appear at all (or are not even mentioned)—
humans have the whole stage, so to speak. What we see in Kerouac’s work,
however, breaks this trend. In Kerouac’s writing, the heroes are definitely fallible,
mortal humans, but God, or the spiritual, does exist, and exists as a knowable,
experiential reality (and is not simply believed in). In Kerouac’s work, God, or the
spiritual, is represented at times as both the road and the goal—a goal that is
sometimes attained.120

In looking over this general trend in literature, then, we could also say that as
the representation of the spiritual has decreased, the representation of what could be
called the physical or the material has increased. At the same time, however,
Kerouac’s work could be seen as offering a new element in this overall trend—a
striving beyond the materialism of contemporary Western literature (and, we could
therefore say, of the Western world). Nonetheless, Kerouac does not attempt to
return to previous modes of mere belief in the spiritual, but searches for something
which can be experienced and known. In this way, then, I would argue that
Kerouac’s work contains a kind of future impulse.

In any case, I explored the above representations of the quest motif only to
get a sense of how the quest itself has developed over time, and to get a feel for

120 It should be noted that other writers have, of course, shared similar aims. The seventeenth-
century Metaphysical poets (such as John Donne and George Herbert), the Romantic poets (such as
William Wordsworth and John Keats), the American transcendentalists (such as Ralph Waldo
Emerson and Henry David Thoreau), Walt Whitman, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Rudolf
Steiner, for example, have all sought to realise the spiritual through reflection on and apprehension
of the material world. While acknowledging this, their work is not, however, usually concerned with
what might be called the archetypal quest motif (and they are not, for the most part, novelists). The
broad overview above seeks (in relation to contemporary novel writing) to trace only very general
trends in the development of the quest motif through literature as a whole.
what tasks the artist of today faces. Obviously we no longer live in Babylonian,  
Greek, or Medieval times. We live in an age in which the representation of the  
material and the physical predominates in Western literature. At the same time,  
however, the river of the future flows rapidly towards us. I saw in Kerouac’s work  
a kind of boat that dared sail this river. A boat that was not afraid to go beyond the  
shores of physical and material norms, but was also not interested in returning to  
old, past representations of belief in the spiritual. I felt the content of Kerouac’s  
quest—his spontaneous quest—as well as its form, therefore, was not only ahead of  
itstime for the ’50s; I felt that it was still ahead of its time today.

During my Honours year I also read, of course, a great deal of additional  
critical (including biographical) material on Kerouac and his work. It was quite a  
journey. I filled my head with knowledge and arguments, and filled my notebooks  
with writing—but little of it filled my heart. In reading Kerouac’s own work I  
experienced the great interplay of luminous thinking, warmth of feeling and an  
itching desire to be active: to get out and do. In reading the piles of critical  
material, however, I experienced, for the most part, what can only be called the  
cold thinking of abstract intellectualism. Whilst I recognised the importance of this  
criticism, the very life or essence that had originally enlivened me in the reading of  
Kerouac’s work was absent in the majority of these books, articles and essays. I  
had no enlivened, or even what might be called spiritual, experience whilst reading  
these works. Was it possible, I therefore wondered, that some of this criticism,
while focusing on one aspect of Kerouac’s work, inevitably lost sight of his writing as a whole?\textsuperscript{121}

In any case, I did what I had to do. I kept reading, organised a premise and an outline, and then wrote the essay itself. I focused on thematic and formal quests as represented in \textit{On the Road}. (This is, obviously, an area that has continued to capture my interest over the years—in one sense, it has become a quest of my own—expanding now to encompass all of Kerouac’s work and the rest of my writing.) At the time, of course, I looked further into Kerouac’s spontaneous writing style. That is, I looked closely at “Essentials,” as well as criticism related to his spontaneous prose. I explored, in the Honours thesis, how spontaneous writing, as with most things, had its precursors.\textsuperscript{122} As Steve L. Adams points out, automatic writing was practised by W. B. Yeats and his wife,\textsuperscript{123} and, as Regina Weinreich and John Tytell discuss, by William James and Gertrude Stein.\textsuperscript{124} We can also find in Modernism a kind of spontaneous writing in the stream of consciousness pieces of, in particular, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.\textsuperscript{125} The lyric poets of Greece and Rome, the Romantic poets, and Marcel Proust had also practised a kind of writing


\textsuperscript{122} Stubley, “Too Many Stars” (Honours), 40-41.


by free association. Differences exist, of course, between Kerouac’s work and those who came before him, however. In terms of what is written down in “Essentials,” perhaps the most notable difference is that there should be “no revisions.”

No revisions: that is a pretty lofty goal for any writer, and a goal that some believed Kerouac himself wasn’t always able to fulfil. In any case, I explored further the criticism on spontaneous prose. Perhaps the most famous comment regarding Kerouac’s fast-paced writing technique came after Norman Mailer had defended Kerouac’s style, when Truman Capote responded: “Writing! That’s not writing, it’s just … typing.” Capote, it would seem, equated writing with a slower pace and with rewriting, while Kerouac would not have called Capote’s process writing, nor art, but, rather, “craft.”

Weinreich, on the other hand, argues that through the writing of different versions of his work, Kerouac maintained a kind of control (as opposed to being completely spontaneous), and that “repetition in fact becomes Kerouac’s control.” This presupposes, however, that we cannot write spontaneously if we write different versions of an experience or have control during the writing process. Can we not often break into a spontaneous recounting of an experience (and maintain control over the process) even though we have told somebody else about this same experience before, from another point of view, in a different way? James

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127 Kerouac, “Essentials.”
129 Kerouac, “Essentials.”
130 Weinreich, 5.
T. Jones suggests that the whole idea of spontaneous prose (and of measuring it) is full of problems: “The fundamental difficulty in applying the concept of spontaneity to aesthetics is that, unlike other mental processes such as memory, it cannot be measured.”\(^{131}\) In one sense I agreed with this, but then I also couldn’t help wondering why we should apply spontaneity as a concept to aesthetics anyway. Why, I also wondered, would we even want to “measure” spontaneity? Should not the proof be in the pudding—in the writing—itself, and not in the recipe? Why this constant need to measure and justify? The answer to this, I thought, lay in Jones’s words themselves. That is, the idea that we need to “apply” spontaneity as a concept to aesthetics, arises out of an intellectual need to overlay our own concepts and presuppositions onto objects under observation (in order to pigeonhole, measure and test their integrity) instead of letting what we are thoroughly observing (such as Kerouac’s spontaneous prose) reveal its own essence and ideas. I felt that many critics were coming at the riddle from the wrong angle—that is, not from the angle of spontaneous prose, but from themselves. Jones also claims that: “Kerouac’s spontaneous method was far from absolute, and while he clearly valorized the immediate, unpremeditated response in writing, he did not write out of thin air. He wrote from memory.”\(^{132}\) Needless to say, this statement also carries the presupposition that writing from memory negates spontaneity. We can, in my experience, write spontaneously while observing an actual, present, phenomenon (landscape, situation, person), as much as we can write spontaneously


\(^{132}\) Jones, p. 151.
from a mental picture (memory).\textsuperscript{133} To presuppose that spontaneity and writing from a mental picture are incompatible comes not from a thorough understanding of the practice or results of spontaneous prose, but from a desire to superimpose our own theories and presuppositions onto the process.

John Clellon Holmes, a friend of Kerouac’s and also a writer, says: “Typing to Jack—in Jack’s career—meant rewriting. That’s how he rewrote.”\textsuperscript{134} Again, I would ask whether or not rewriting (as in writing different \textit{versions} of a novel) negates spontaneity. In any case, it began to seem to me that so much of the criticism surrounding spontaneous prose is concerned with measuring it against preconceived concepts of what spontaneity is (particularly in relation to writing), even though spontaneous prose (as Kerouac expressed it) had never even been practised before.

Now, following on from these thoughts, we must also consider the nature of Kerouac’s “Essentials” and “Belief” themselves. It seems that Kerouac’s own writings on the subject have been used by critics and others to try, once again, to measure the degree of spontaneity in his own works. In one sense, he provided a kind of recipe for his pudding, which, for some individuals, has led not to a better tasting dish, but the slow, painful pulling apart of the pudding in order to check that all the ingredients listed by \textit{the chef himself} are contained therein. We might also be tempted to question the need for a set of “Essentials” (some might equate these as rules), for writing that is supposed to be spontaneous. It needs to be remembered, however, that Kerouac provided these writings on spontaneous prose not in order to

\textsuperscript{133} Kerouac himself notes this in “Essentials,” under ‘Set-up.’
\textsuperscript{134} John Clellon Holmes quoted in Gifford and Lee, 157.
publish any kind of manifesto, nor to set up any kind of theory or rules for writing or measuring his own or other’s spontaneous prose. They were written at the request of his friends, and fellow writers, Burroughs and Ginsberg (as well as Kerouac’s publisher), who wanted to know more about the technique Kerouac had used to produce his work (in order that they [Ginsberg and Burroughs] could use spontaneous prose as a technique in their own writing). If Ginsberg and Burroughs were able, as we are today, to survey all of Kerouac’s work, then, I argue, they needn’t have bothered asking Kerouac for this information. The best information on spontaneous prose, like the proof of the pudding, is to be found in Kerouac’s work itself. “Essentials” can be used to support his work and help give us a clearer view of the way in which Kerouac approached spontaneous prose, but the document should not be used as a kind of checklist that Kerouac, all his work, and all of spontaneous prose (mine included) should be measured against. Indeed, the general nature of the pigeonholing abstract intellect prefers to look upon “Essentials” as a kind of checklist, as a kind of measuring stick, because it enables us, so the intellect thinks, to ‘understand’ spontaneous prose. Spontaneous prose is not a merely intellectual process, however; knowledge of it can be achieved only through feeling it and doing it, as well as thinking it. This goes for both the reading and the writing of spontaneous prose. Jones’s assumption that “Kerouac’s theory varied from his practice,” is, therefore, misguided. His assumption searches to comprehend the idea of spontaneous prose outside of Kerouac’s novels. Kerouac’s theory, however, was not “Essentials”—Kerouac’s theory was his practice.

Kerouac’s spontaneous prose is not “Essentials” nor “Belief”—Kerouac’s theory of spontaneous prose is Kerouac’s novels themselves.

I also knew that it was extremely important to remember that, like the quest for IT or God or whatever else, spontaneous prose was not just the goal, aim or ideal, but the process itself. In this way, the process, the striving, the quest itself becomes the goal as well. In one sense then, spontaneous prose, rather than being measured against any checklist to see if it attains any preconceived goals, is actually a goal that is reached in every moment during the striving to write spontaneously.

Some of Kerouac’s critics also acknowledge the great potential of spontaneous prose, however, even while pointing to what they perceive to be problematic elements in Kerouac’s method. For example, Jones, despite his previous remarks, concedes that:

Of all the potential rewards of spontaneity—both in Kerouac’s writing and in life—the most important is the conviction it gives a person that originality is possible, that with constant awareness each passing moment becomes rich beyond measure, and that, far from signaling loss of control, spontaneity is perhaps the most meaningful way of asserting one’s volition.136

Roanna C. Johnson illustrates the importance of Kerouac’s writing within the overall development of twentieth-century Western literature: in particular, from modernism to post-modernism:

I see Kerouac as a seminal figure in post-war literary advances, a pre-postmodernist whose work evinces the turn from modes and ideologies of late high modernism to those of the nascent postmodern.\textsuperscript{137}

By extension, Weinreich looks closely at Kerouac’s language in her book, \textit{The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac: A Study of the Fiction}, noting in her introduction:

I have written this book out of my belief in Jack Kerouac’s artistry. However anyone may judge it, his writing contributed to a change in the American Consciousness. If the immediate impact of \textit{On the Road} could be attributed merely to a superficial fascination with hipsters, wanderlust, sex and drugs—the usual trappings of Beat literature—that fascination would not sufficiently explain the continued interest in Kerouac today … Only the power of Kerouac’s language could sustain this interest.\textsuperscript{138}

Importantly, John Clellon Holmes, for one, was able to come to realise that:

What differentiated the characters in \textit{On the Road} from the slum-bred petty criminals and icon-smashing Bohemians … in much modern American fiction—what made them \textit{beat}—was something which seemed to irritate the critics most of all. It was Kerouac’s insistence that actually they were on a quest, and that the specific object of their quest was spiritual. Though they rushed back and forth across the country on the slightest pretext, gathering kicks along the way, their real journey was inward.\textsuperscript{139}

In any case, I read and drew from a great deal more criticism.\textsuperscript{140} Still, this study did not make as significant an impression upon me or my writing as

\textsuperscript{138} Weinreich, xi
\textsuperscript{140} For some of the criticism that has (to varying degrees) touched upon an understanding of the spiritual (as well as the intimately autobiographical) aspect of Kerouac’s quest, see, for example, Omar Schwartz, “Kerouac in Context,” in \textit{View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac} (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1999), 15-26; Clive Bush, “‘Why Do We Always
Kerouac’s work itself did. Indeed, perhaps the greatest value I got out of a critical exploration into spontaneous prose was uncovering more of what Kerouac himself had to say about it:

I got sick and tired of the conventional English sentences which seemed to me to be so ironbound in its rules, so inadmissible with reference to the actual format of my mind as I learned to probe it in the modern spirit of Freud or Jung, that I couldn’t express myself through that form any more. Shame seems to be the key to repression in writing as well as in psychological malady. If you don’t stick to what you first thought, and to the words the thought brought, what’s the sense of bothering with it anyway, what’s the sense of foisting your little lies on others? What I find to be really “stupefying in its unreadability” is this laborious and dreary lying called craft and revision by writers, and certainly recognized by sharpest psychologists as sheer blockage of the mental spontaneous process …”141

Being aware of then forgetting all “rules,” and sticking to “what you first thought” spoke to me because adopting this process in my work had enabled me to enter into a kind of conversation with thoughts while they were still fresh, still alive, still imbued with feeling and will, rather than applying to the work at a later date (through the editing process, through “craft and revision”) exclusively intellectual (predominantly abstract) thoughts that were no longer as lively, no longer as vibrant. The only other person I found who seemed to have the same level of living insights on the topic of spontaneous prose as Kerouac was Neal Cassady who, through his letters with Kerouac, helped the writer in developing the technique:

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141 Kerouac, “The Last Word (My Position Within the Current Literary Scene),” *Escapade*, June 1959, 72.
I have always held that when one writes, one should forget all rules, literary styles and other such pretensions as large words, lordly clauses and other phrases as such—rolling the words around in the mouth as one would wine, and, proper or not, putting them down because they sound so good. Rather, I think one should write, as nearly as possible, as if he were the first person on earth and was humbly and sincerely putting on paper that which he saw and experienced and loved and lost.142

It seemed to me that this “humble,” sincere and childlike (not childish) way of viewing the world was absolutely essential in any effort to move from the particular to the objective universal. Otherwise we can too soon jump to (adult) abstract concepts that sometimes have little or no foundation in reality of the world, and then our quest is based on, again, personal subjectivity. I also noticed in the way in which Cassady and Kerouac wrote about the process of spontaneous prose, that there was still an element of some kind of ‘spark.’ What they said was not given over to a solely intellectual study resting in the head alone, but was infused with feeling, as well as the experience of doing the writing. This, I felt, was also part of the essential process of spontaneous prose—one that resisted a solely intellectual activity or study. Rather, it required a writer to live into the immediacy of the moment of writing—the moment in which thoughts come together with feelings in the wilful activity of the doing. In the moment of writing, the whole, universal human being (where thinking, feeling and willing are combined) work together. In my experience, to apply the intellect (on its own) to a piece later on—to not “stick to what you first thought”143—has the potential to rob the piece of its universality.

Possibly this is part of the difference between ‘art’ and ‘craft’:

143 Kerouac, “The Last Word,” 72,
Never afterthink to “improve” or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind-tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow!—now!—your way is your only way—“good”—or “bad”—always honest (“ludicrous”), spontaneous, “confessionals” interesting, because not “crafted.” Craft is craft.144

Indeed, even what Kerouac said about spontaneous prose seemed infused with spontaneity.

The other real benefit I received from producing the Honours dissertation came from entering more fully into Kerouac’s other works, as well as other creative writing that my research led me to, such as the myths mentioned above, and parts of Joyce’s Ulysses. I also looked at Kerouac’s first novel The Town and the City, and noted its similarities to Thomas Wolfe’s work. Kerouac’s novel is not written in the same style of his later spontaneous prose pieces (indeed, this was at the beginning of his quest for form), but it does already contain a taste of his free-flowing, ‘unbuttoned’ language, as well as the themes of dislocation and searching that he would continue to work with throughout his life:

A family leaves the old house that it has always known, the plot of ground, the place of earth, the only place where it has ever known itself—and moves somewhere else: and this is a real and unnameable tragedy. For the children it is a catastrophe of their hearts.145

Kerouac’s second published novel was On the Road, but an earlier version of the work was (later published as) Visions of Cody. I also read this book during my Honours and marveled at its spontaneous prose. It was, arguably, ‘more’

144 Kerouac, “Essentials.”
spontaneous than *On the Road*¹⁴⁶ (which was later edited by publishers and editors, though it has now been published in its original, unedited form), and even more unconventional and experimental than *Desolation Angels*. The theme is similar to *On the Road*—namely Kerouac’s experiences of searching with Neal Cassady—but it is infused with longer, more detailed scenes in which Kerouac sketched everything that was happening, and entered fully into what he was writing about, including imaginative recollections of Cassady, here with the character name of Cody. The book contains many of these scenes, as well as letters, handwritten notes, poems, lists, passages in French with English translation, and at its centre a transcribed tape recording of Kerouac in conversation with Cassady over a number of nights, followed by an imitation of that same tape recording. Indeed, the whole book is Joycean in scope. But more than that, it contains, at times, a seamless intertwining of the spiritual quest (which includes a striving towards a knowledge and understanding of death) as represented in both content and form:

I’m writing this book because we’re all going to die—In the loneliness of my life, my father dead, my brother dead, my mother faraway, my sister and wife far away, nothing here but my own tragic hands that once were guarded by a world, a sweet attention, that are now left to guide and disappear their own way into the common dark of all our death, sleeping on me raw bed, alone and stupid: with just this one pride and consolation: my heart broke in the general despair and opened up inwards to the Lord, I made a supplication in this dream.¹⁴⁷

Here again, as represented in *Big Sur* and in much of Kerouac’s writing, a shattering realisation or experience can also lead to a significant moment—a kind of turning away from the transitory aspects of the world towards the spiritual—and

¹⁴⁶ If, again, we were interested in measuring such things.
therefore it can serve as, again, a redemptive event. In a moment such as this, the fruit of the spiritual quest can, in a sense, be tasted: “my heart broke in general despair and opened up inwards to the Lord.”

Granted, in *Visions of Cody* as well as Kerouac’s other works, there is also some trawling to be done through his ocean of words, as even Kerouac noted:

but I gotta go to those brown union halls of the gray West Coast and make my way, and find my work on the run. Jody and I had a long talk—perhaps she’d disapprove of these ideas of mine—I must write down *books* too, story-novels, and communicate to people instead of just appeasing my lone soul with a record of it—

Kerouac ultimately wrote both “story-novels” that would “communicate to people,” as well as other works that would appease his “lone soul with a record of it.” Often he did both at once. It should also be noted that the words which immediately follow the above passage are “but this record is my joy.” I sensed this in reading his words too: that this whole record keeping *was* his joy … but his pain as well. Perhaps I understood it better for the writing and note-taking I myself had done, particularly on my travels. However, Kerouac’s intertwining joys and despairs are obvious enough for anyone willing to read through *Visions of Cody* and his other works:

The thing I couldn’t get over then was the magnificence of the actual car trip, in a matter of hours, from one ocean to another across a country so interesting apart from horrors that exist in it from one point to another, from Tennessee to Dakota, from Massachusetts to Maine, from the shores of Kitchigoomi to Abacadabra, Florida, or what might not be horrors so much as just life and way it is in a necessary culture and roaring along just like the weather or the sound, the mighty seasound of

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For Kerouac, the car trip is both “magnificent” and full of “horrors.” And while he
concedes that these “might not be horrors so much as just life and way it is in
necessary culture,” this would seem to be an even more despairing idea than simply
naming them as horrors—that life in culture is by necessity full of horrors.

At the same time as I did my Honours, I also completed a year-long creative
writing course called ‘Working the Word’ with Horst Kornberger at Perth’s School
of Integral Art. As part of this course we examined the evolution of human
consciousness through the epochs by looking at the art, poetry, and spirituality of
specific cultures. We didn’t just examine these cultures intellectually, but also
entered into them with feeling through the use of story, through the beauty of their
art, and through imaginative creative writing exercises as if we were indeed part of
that culture. It was by far the most lively and stimulating creative writing course
I’ve ever done. In fact, if I hadn’t completed this course—a course that was able to
integrate thought, feeling and action—then I doubt I would have been able to get
through the predominantly intellectual process of the Honours year.

I was also happy with and grateful for what the writing course had provided
to my writing. One day, after both the Honours and the course were over, I sat
down for an hour or so and wrote a spontaneous, unedited, prose piece about Perth.
I placed objective mental images of Perth before me in my mind’s eye, meditated
on them briefly, and with “no pause to think of proper word” attempted to describe

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them as vividly as possible with objective thinking and feeling in free-flowing language from the inside out, expanding to an ever-widening picture of what the universal or spiritual essence of the city might be. I attempted, therefore, to work from objective percepts to objective concepts and ideas. These concepts and ideas were represented in pictorial form (as can be seen in the passage below). There were no “afterthoughts” and no “revisions.” Westerly later published it, thankfully without making any changes. It was my first piece of spontaneous prose to be published in a literary journal. It was called, simply, ‘perf.’ The following passage is from the latter part of the piece:

… [perth is] a secret wish, a child’s boast, an unforgettable, unmemorable place that makes and draws its own maps in solid buildings during the day and creeps out onto the streets at night to destroy the lines that it itself has drawn, especially the one that colours and cuts the constantly crumbling horizon … i see it in my dreams sometimes as a beautiful and sad poetic drunkard soul, immeasurably old and immeasurably young, wandering forgotten and out of control across the lanes of some massive midnight superhighway that can only belong to a future we ourselves are creating … it tumbles and lurches through occasional traffic not knowing exactly where it’s headed, only hoping that eventually a driver might respond to its up-turned thumb and slow down long enough for it to hitch a ride …

PART EIGHT

“You kill yourself to get to the grave”

When I finished Honours I was broke again, so I went up to Newman, Western Australia, and worked for my sister-in-law’s building company on the mine. By day I fixed fences and drilled holes for new pump stands in the beneficiation plant, and by night I read the poetry of Kerouac and Bukowski.

Kerouac’s formal poetry didn’t appeal to me as much as his prose—the free-flow wasn’t there, or wasn’t there enough. Still, the words did provide some relief from the work of my day:

HOW TO MEDITATE

—lights out—
fell, hands a-clasped, into instantaneous ecstasy like a shot of heroin or morphine, the gland inside of my brain discharging the good glad fluid (Holy Fluid) as I hap-down and hold all my body parts down to a deadstop trance—Healing all my sicknesses—erasing all …

By this time I had also been meditating for a couple of years, mostly in Eastern streams such as Buddhism, but now I had changed my emphasis to Western esoteric streams, together with relevant studies in this area (Kerouac too had both Eastern [Zen Buddhism] and Western [which for Kerouac was Catholicism] streams running through his life and work). I saw this meditation as a logical extension of whatever other searches I had been on (the physical search turned

more inward), as I guess Kerouac also did. He describes his meditative life throughout his works from *The Dharma Bums* onwards.

I also began to use more frequently certain meditative techniques as a preparation for entering into the writing process. This led to a certain change of consciousness, which allowed me to enter more imaginatively into (through thinking and feeling *with*) whatever I was writing about. I also began to realise that this meditative process was more conscious a process (and that I was a lot more free during it) than when, in the past, I had either taken alcohol or drugs of one kind of another either before or during my writing. While alcohol and drugs did loosen the grip of the intellect as a kind of ‘editing force,’ consciousness still became more subsensible than supersensible—consciousness took a ‘step down’ in one sense, rather than a ‘step up.’ In addition to meditation, Kerouac would continue to use alcohol and drugs for the rest of his life. Bukowski too drank heavily, but in the last five years of his life he reduced his intake, and began to work with transcendental meditation.¹⁵⁴

What I found in Bukowski’s writing was a little different again. On one level Kerouac was writing prose that was deeply poetic, while Bukowski was (like Ginsberg) writing poetry that read like prose:

**creative writing class**

I’m guilty, I did take one
in college
and the first thing I realized was that
I could beat the hell out of any
2 or 3 people in there
at once

¹⁵⁴ See *Born Like This*, DVD. Directed by John Dullaghan. Magnolia, 2002.
(physically
I mean)
and
of course
this was no way to measure
creativity.
also
I noticed that the professor’s advice
on what to do
and what not to do
to become a writer was
very pale and standard stuff
that would lead
nowhere.
some of the student’s work
was read in class
and I found it to be embarrassingly
inept.
I sat alone in the back row with
my scowl
further noting that
the men didn’t look like men and
the women didn’t look like women.
again
no way to judge creativity.
but what they produced
looked like
what they were.
well
at least the prof did give me
“A’s” on all the work
I turned in
but I got a “B” overall for
poor attendance.
I also knew that
every student in that class
except one
was
creatively doomed.
and even that one
would be 50 years old
before even minor notice
would be taken of
his work.

a bit longer
than even he
had
expected.\footnote{Charles Bukowski, “Creative Writing Class,” in \textit{The Last Night of the Earth Poems} (New York: ecco, 1992), 308-309.}

On another level, Bukowski was portraying the tough guy (as well as the tortured soul at times), while Kerouac was mostly interested in presenting the vulnerable human—for that, after all, was what he was (indeed, both were writing from autobiographical experiences). On the deepest level, though, I saw both writers searching for similar truths.

I very much enjoyed the observations and insight Bukowski brought to his writing, even the simplicity and coarseness of these observations, which often opened up onto profound understandings of experience. But at the same time this simplicity and coarseness were what sometimes pushed me away:

\textbf{8 count}

from my bed
I watch
3 birds
on a telephone
wire.

one flies
off.
then
another.
one is left,
then
it too
is gone.

my typewriter is
tombstone
still.

and I am
reduced to bird
watching.

just thought I’d
let you
know,
fucker.¹⁵⁶

Perhaps it was the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that I enjoyed in
Bukowski. From another point of view I felt like the holy part of Kerouac was
wanting to take the front door into heaven, while a lower part attempted to sneak in
the back. Bukowski, on the other hand, I saw at heaven’s back door pounding away
at it with both fists clenched, determined to smash the whole thing down. But
again, while taking different paths, both writers were searching for the same
place—this is more obvious at certain times, than at others:

the bluebird

there’s a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I’m too tough for him,
I say, stay in there, I’m not going
to let anybody see
you.

there’s a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out

¹⁵⁶ Bukowski, “8 Count,” in Last Night, 189.
but I pour whiskey on him and inhale
cigarette smoke
and the whores and the bartenders
and the grocery clerks
never know that
he’s
in there.

there’s a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I’m too tough for him,
I say,
stay down, do you want to mess
me up?
you want to screw up the
works?
you want to blow my book sales in
Europe?

there’s a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I’m too clever, I only let him out
at night sometimes
when everybody’s asleep.
I say, I know that you’re there,
so don’t be
sad.
then I put him back,
but he’s singing a little
in there, I haven’t quite let him
die
and we sleep together like
that
with our
secret pact
and it’s nice enough to
make a man
weep, but I don't
weep, do
you?157

Here Bukowski is aware of the, so to say, spiritual kernel within him—though the
lower aspects of his makeup, his tough-guy image and indeed the world itself force

him to subdue it. While Kerouac was more open in his efforts to unite this part of himself with the corresponding part in the world, I still found that both writers shared similar aims.

Reading Bukowski and Kerouac at the same time also gave me a better feeling of what I wanted to be saying about my own searching, and the way in which I wanted to write it. I still wanted to work autobiographically with spontaneous prose—even spontaneous poetry. And if I was going to write poetry, then I could even let it unfold through story. Despite these realisations, I wrote little in Newman other than journal entries, never really finding enough time or energy to embark upon anything else.

Soon after, I found myself in Kalgoorlie working as ground-crew with a friend who operated joyflights in his helicopter. Most of the day it was dead quiet, and I used this time to read as much Rumi as I could. Looking back, I think I was trying to explore those writers who, through poetic language, had consciously represented the quest as earnestly and sincerely as possible. Rumi was, obviously, a great mystic and, because of this, there is a certain timelessness to his search. He is the most widely read poet in America today.158 I saw something similar in Kerouac’s writing. He is more popular today than any of the other Beats—his writing endures. Perhaps he was right when he called himself a modern Catholic mystic, for there seems to be a timeless aspect in his writing also.

I contemplated all this in Kalgoorlie between flights, and then soon enough, once I had enough money, I planned a trip back to America. But before I went, I thought about another novel (or another version of the one I had written), checked my bank balance, met with university supervisors, and decided to send off PhD scholarship applications. I didn’t really know what would come of it all, but I felt it was worth pursuing; it was the same with America. But even as I sat down alone on the flight to Sydney, I knew this trip would be different than those I’d taken before. A kind of greyness began to hang over me, though I couldn’t really put my finger on what it was. I tried to ignore it by telling myself I should be excited, that I was still ‘searching.’ But that didn’t make it go away.

Soon I was back in Boulder, Colorado, at the Allen Ginsberg Library in the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. Boulder was preparing for winter, but something inside me was already there. I joined the library and immediately borrowed Kerouac’s *Book of Dreams* (1960), *Visions of Gerard* (1963), and *Vanity of Duluoz* (1968).

I sat with them on the lonely middle Colorado interstate grey-brown bus-trip through the desperateness of downtown Denver, and on to Santa Fe. America had changed since my last visit. Maybe it was because of the recent election, but maybe not. Perhaps it was something else—perhaps some of the magic had faded—or, at least, faded in me.

I played housesitter at my aunt’s house while she stayed in my apartment in Perth. In the mornings I meditated and walked through the mountain arroyo with Jake the dog. In the afternoons I sat down in front of my old friend, the laptop. And
I did write. I wrote a lot. A lot of first starts. I was looking for a new beginning—a new beginning to a new novel, or a new way into an old novel. I didn’t really know which, I just kept on writing:

I know I’ve never written to you before but I think I’ve been meaning to my whole life … and so I thought I might begin this right now which is no real beginning place nor ending but just some wandering middle place in the centre of all my wanderings … and I guess that’s what I want to talk about … some of the journeys I’ve taken inside this one long journey so that maybe I can come to a better understanding of all this … \(^{159}\)

And a million other beginnings like it. In Santa Fe I’d been reading a whole lot of Eastern and Western mystic poetry that depicted conversations (or monologues) where the addressee is God. From Mirabai to Hafiz, from St John of the Cross to Thomas Aquinas, from Tukarem to St Teresa of Avila.\(^{160}\) Reading these poems it became clearer than ever before that what I had been searching for all along was a kind of spiritual conversation. It also seemed that some kind of conversation was developing in my meditations at the time. Now I tried to see if I could develop a similar relationship in my prose. I was finding it difficult: perhaps there just wasn’t enough of a relationship there.

At the same time I began reading Kerouac’s *Vanity of Duluoz*. In it, I found a writer at the end of his career looking back over what had transpired in his life, and in his writing, with, at times, cynical and brooding eyes. I found many experiences in the novel that spoke to me:

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\(^{159}\) Stubley, unpublished writing, September, 2004.

That’s how writers begin, by imitating the masters (without suffering like said masters), till they larn their own style, and by the time they larn their own style there’s no more fun in it, because you can’t imitate any other master’s suffering but your own.\textsuperscript{161}

In a sense, this is possibly what I was going through (as Kerouac had done with Thomas Wolfe, Walt Whitman, Marcel Proust, James Joyce and others). Though I didn’t feel like I was imitating Kerouac as such, I was trying to study the spontaneous prose style he had developed, and use it in a way that was appropriate for my own writing at that stage of my life. I still felt that it was a style that was able to provide the foundation for writing that was relevant: it still opened up possibilities for writing that belonged to a future waiting to emerge. Simply put, I was seeing if I could continue to work with, and expand upon, spontaneous prose so that it could join with the content of my writing.

In \textit{Vanity of Duluoz} the search appeared to be gradually winding down, and because of this, the spontaneous prose seemed to be winding down as well:

\ldots you’ll understand that my particular form of anguish came from being too sensitive to all the lunkheads I had to deal with just so I could get to be a high school football star, a college student pouring coffee and washing dishes and scrimmaging till dark and reading Homer’s \textit{Iliad} in three days all at the same time, and God help me, a WRITER whose very ‘success’, far from being a happy triumph as of old, was the sign of doom Himself. (Insofar as nobody loves my dashes anyway, I’ll use regular punctuation for the new illiterate generation.)\textsuperscript{162}

The fact that Kerouac’s life (and quest) had become a lot more “regular” led to the writing in \textit{Vanity of Duluoz} being much more “regular” or conventional than in

\textsuperscript{161} Kerouac, \textit{Vanity of Duluoz}, 107.
\textsuperscript{162} Kerouac, \textit{Vanity of Duluoz}, 9.
many of his earlier works—full of “regular punctuation for the new illiterate
generation,” as he put it.

In *Vanity of Duluoz*, Kerouac also spells out in plain terms what success was
for him—no goal, not even close—more a kind of distraction on the road of his
larger quest:

You kill yourself to get to the grave. Especially you kill yourself to get
to the grave before you even die, and the name of that grave is ‘success’,
the name of that grave is hullaballoo boomboom horseshit.  

As an autobiographical writer, Kerouac’s “success” (and the way in which he felt
about it) would, of course, find its way into his writing. And once again, certain
aspects of my situation seemed to find an echo in Kerouac’s words. Minus the
fame, of course, I felt a certain cynicism and loneliness in America this time
around. I felt enclosed by red bricks and fluorescent lights—the red brick of walls,
and the buzzing hum of neon signs everywhere. And I couldn’t quite get it down in
words.

Later, in New York, I wandered the shivering Christmas streets lonely,
hungover and spent. I wasn’t in America, wasn’t even in Australia—I was in a
special kind of nowhere reserved especially for me. In Brooklyn I bought
Kerouac’s *Satori in Paris* (1985), and read the words “the greatest library in the
world, the New York public library,” and so I ended up taking shelter there for
quite some time. I looked up the entire Kerouac catalogue available to the public,
made a note of the books I hadn’t yet looked at, and then sat and read *Scripture of*

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the *Golden Eternity* (1960). I then sent a letter to myself in Manhattan (for proof of residential address), got a library card and started borrowing books. I got out *Old Angel Midnight* (1973)—a spontaneous unfolding of the sounds of the world that blew through Kerouac’s window at night—and *Tristessa* (1960), the account of another troubled, failed relationship, this time with a beautiful drug addict and prostitute in Mexico City. I found it to be a painful, beautiful read, which may have had something to do with my own relationship heading towards similar failure.

I also used my library card and postal address to apply for access to the library’s reserve collection. Once there I pulled out an old University of Western Australia library card and filled out a few more forms in order to look at the library’s special collections. And so one afternoon I found myself sitting in a small room in a quiet marbled corner of the library with oak panels and green cloth trims, waiting patiently for a man with white cotton gloves to bring out some of Kerouac’s notebooks, as well as a first printing of *On the Road*. The notebooks I requested were from *Lonesome Traveler* and *Satori in Paris*.

Looking at them, I was amazed by the similarity of Kerouac’s notebooks to the notebooks I had been using, and the handwriting which was strangely similar to mine—big, leaning, spread-out, paying little attention to line, and, often, illegible. I sat and looked at the notebooks and found much enjoyment in observing the eagerness displayed in Kerouac’s writing process, in his efforts and joy to get it all down, remembering in “Belief” what he called the need for “Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy.”

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165 Kerouac, “Belief,” 46.
line caught my eye: “the greatest library in the world, the New York public library.”

It was quite a thing to see the place where the words that brought me into this library in the first place—words that have now been read by thousands of people in many different languages—had first appeared in the world, through pencil on notebook. In fact the whole *Satori in Paris* novel seemed to exist there in three notebooks exactly as it was later published. I imagined him sitting and writing the whole thing down in these little breast-pocket notebooks, simply because he had to do it—for his “own joy.” I then turned a page and read: “I could clean out the world just by writing down my secret thoughts.” I read over these notebooks—what later appeared as the published novel I had just finished reading—with my own relationship troubles on my mind, when I came to some of the final lines: “We’ll have forgotten what all the parting was about, when God says ‘I am lived.’” I flicked through the other items (making notes about his notebooks in my notebook), and eventually left the library, after remembering that I needed to look for a place to sleep.

While life was okay inside the library, outside it wasn’t looking too good. I was also running out of money. In a strange decision I even went up to Montreal for a couple of days with friends to activate a Canadian visa, but found the same greyness up there. Then I got an email from Marty at the Kerouac Project saying nobody was staying at the house at the moment, and that I could come down to Orlando if I wanted—a stay of execution of sorts. So I got a US$75 ticket, grabbed

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166 Kerouac, “Satori in Paris notebook (S 1).”
167 Kerouac, “Satori in Paris notebook (S 1).”
168 Kerouac, “Satori in Paris notebook (S 3).”
my books and headed for the warmer weather as fast as I could. But it was still cold
down there in Florida, and for some reason I couldn’t get warm, even when my
girlfriend arrived from Perth.

I tried to write, but I kept getting bogged down. I didn’t know what I wanted
to say any more. Instead, I found myself reading from *Old Angel Midnight*:

Old Angel Midnight is only the beginning of a lifelong work in
multilingual sound, representing the haddalada-babra of babbling world
tongues coming in thru my window at midnight no matter where I live or
what I’m doing, in Mexico, Morocco, New York, India or Pakistan, in
Spanish, French, Aztec, Gaelic, Celtic, Kurd or Dravidian, the sounds of
people yakking and of myself yakking among, ending finally in great
intuitions of the sounds of tongues throughout the entire universe in all
directions in and out forever. And it is the only book I’ve ever written in
which I allow myself the right to say anything I want, absolutely and
positively anything, since that’s what you hear coming in that window …
God in his Infinity wouldn’t have had a world otherwise—Amen. 169

The words “it is the only book I’ve ever written in which I allow myself the right to
say anything I want, absolutely and positively anything, since that’s what you hear
coming in that window” struck me. *Old Angel Midnight* could be viewed, (again, if
we were concerned with measuring such things), as, arguably, the most uninhibited
and free-flowing (and, therefore, most spontaneous) of all of Kerouac’s works. Not
only was there no editing or revisions after the writing had been done, I also had
the experience whilst reading it that there was a kind of ‘enhanced reduction’ of
editing before and during the writing process. This possibly resulted in a wider
opening of the floodgates through which the words were allowed to pour onto the
page, and then continue, unhindered by editorial ‘damming,’ to the reader. (The
other side of this is, however, completely incomprehensible passages of writing.) In

any case, reading it helped me get the ball rolling with my own writing again, if only briefly.

Soon after, I watched as a personal version of *Tristessa* unfolded in my own life: that is, the painful falling apart of love, and of my relationship:

“Tristessa says “How is Jack?”—She always asks: “Why are you so sad?—‘Muy dolorosa’” and as though to mean “You are very full of pain,” for pain means dolor—“I am sad because all la vida es dolorosa,” I keep replying, hoping to teach her Number One of the Four Great Truths,—Besides, what could be truer?” 170

Again, Kerouac found understanding of his experiences (as well as his own melancholic temperament) through the ideas of Buddhism. “[L]a vida es dolorosa” was also true enough for me at that time, as I watched, from within, my relationship stumbling on.

Soon after, I went to England, partly to extend my visa for America, and partly because I just had to go somewhere—anywhere. But, of course, I found nothing there, except the need for more movement. So I went to France for a while, but couldn’t handle it for long. I went back to London, then New York, and finally on to Boulder again. Here I thought I could stop for a while and set myself up in my cousin’s basement and just write.

At first I stayed in his study which overlooked the Flatirons and the front range of the Rocky Mountains. It was, of course, beautiful, but to me at the time it was awful—there was too much awe in it—too beautiful maybe, like the sky too full of stars. I tried to keep writing, but it was like coughing out words.

Somewhere amongst all this I received offers to take up PhD scholarships. Everything seemed to be pointing me in this direction, so I accepted. But still nothing really came to my writing in Boulder. And then the Flatirons and the Rocky Mountains seemed to start looming down on me, like Hozomeen, like the Void:

but what a horror when I first saw that void the first night of my staying on Desolation Peak waking up from deep fogs of 20 hours to a starlit night suddenly loomed by Hozomeen with his two sharp points, right in my window black—the Void, every time I’d think of the Void I’d see Hozomeen and understand—Over 70 days I had to stare it.\textsuperscript{171}

While I felt I could, maybe, begin to wake from my own “deep fogs” soon—in my life and in my writing—I didn’t feel as though I had another seventy days in me. And so with my first scholarship payment I bought a plane ticket back to Perth.

\textsuperscript{171} Kerouac, \textit{Desolation Angels}, 30.
PART NINE

“Praised be man, he is existing in milk”

And so I came back to Perth and looked for a way into the novel, trying to tap into not how I wanted to write the novel, necessarily, but how the novel itself wanted to be written. I wrote many starts, trying to find a beginning that really was what the novel wanted to say, while trying to expand further on spontaneous prose in order to find a style that could mix indivisibly with what was wanting to emerge in the work. Then I started writing down all the, perhaps, ‘important’ scenes in my life and let them sit with no obvious thread running through them. In the end I think I just wrote a beginning one day and kept on going.

I found myself writing in email form (perfectly compatible, I felt, for spontaneous prose: how often it seems that emails—from travellers especially—are written in a way that is free-flowing, spontaneous, on-the-go, unedited, unhindered by the intellect, and uninhibited by grammatical, syntactical or other norms) to a God-type figure on the one hand, and to the character of my ex-girlfriend on the other. As a result, two narratives began to emerge, their scenes interweaving through a link that was more subtle than it was obvious. I ran with it.

At the time, I was also reading Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues (242 Choruses)* (1959), and *Visions of Gerard*. Of *Mexico City Blues* Kerouac notes at the start:

I want to be considered a jazz poet
blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam
session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses:
my ideas vary and sometimes roll from
chorus to chorus or from halfway through
a chorus to halfway into the next. 172

I guess I was trying out similar things at the time. I had forged connections between
scenes in each strand of the novel, but the two narratives interwove and
consequently broke up each scene. Because of this I hoped to create a kind of
conversation between the two narratives alongside the ones unfolding within the
narratives themselves. Maybe, again, it was just too clever—even though I saw in
Kerouac’s blues chorus poems a cleverness married to a certain emotional as well
as spiritual centre. As a result, the poems worked:

Praised be man, he is existing in milk
and living in lillies—
And his violin music takes place in milk
and creamy emptiness—
Praised be the unfolded inside petal
flesh of tend’rest thought—
(petrels on the follying
wave-valleys idly
sing themselves asleep)— 173

In this book the great rhythmic, musical nature of Kerouac’s writing is obvious, as
an excerpt from a *New York Herald Tribune* article notes on the back sleeve:
“There is no doubt about his great sensitivity to language. His sentences frequently
move into tempestuous sweeps and whorls and sometimes they have something of
the rich music of Gerard Manley Hopkins or Dylan Thomas.” 174

The same “rich music” of his language, and also the same sincerity and love
for humanity found in *Mexico City Blues*, exists in the more conventional narrative

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novel *Visions of Gerard*, perhaps more than in any of his other writing. This book is about Kerouac’s brother Gerard who died (age nine) when Jack was only four:

… and the nuns of St. Louis de France Parochial School were at his bedside to take down his dying words because they’d heard his astonishing revelations of heaven delivered in catechism class on no more encouragement than it was his turn to speak—Saintly Gerard, his pure and tranquil face, the mournful look of him, the piteousness of his little soft shroud of hair falling down his brow and swept aside by the hand over blue serious eyes—

Kerouac’s love for his dead brother is painfully and beautifully apparent in passages such as this, and throughout the work. It is a serious novel of great respect and reverence, and a questing for the appropriate memories and representation of Gerard: the sacred holiness, the spirit, of Gerard. And as with Kerouac’s other works, the content, the theme, merges with the form, the language. Because the content is more serious than in some of his other novels, the form has to also become, to an extent, more serious. He has to rise sincerely through his language to the level of the theme, to the level of his much-loved brother. The content requires, therefore, a certain holding back, whereas a book about Neal Cassady, for instance, could goof more, could play with language more, because that’s the way Cassady was. But for his deceased brother, Kerouac needed something more subdued, respectful, reverential. The work is still spontaneous, though in accordance with the theme:

I see bleak wooden fences in the rain and the little man with the mysterious hat and then my mind swirls and I see nothing but the swarm of angels in the church in the form of sudden myriad illuminated snowflakes of ecstasy—I scoff to think that anybody should cry—I let

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go a little yell, my mother grabs my face and taps me gently, “Non non non”—People gloomy at the funeral have heard the little child’s voice, they think: “He doesn’t understand.”

Here Kerouac imaginatively enters (again, through objective thinking and feeling) his own younger self and looks out upon the world and his brother with the childlike eyes he (Kerouac) had at that time—eyes he was able to retain, to an extent, throughout the rest of his writing. By looking through his younger eyes, his love for his brother is made all the more raw, all the more heartfelt, and all the more honest and real. Spontaneous prose also proves to be a useful tool for representing the (spontaneous) observations of a child—observations that don’t contain many of the thought structures and concepts of adults, and therefore observations that aren’t represented by the sentence structures of adults, including “sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas.”

Through all these readings, spontaneous prose was becoming richer for me, deeper. It was not simply a case of writing whatever I felt like writing—not just any word would do in the name of spontaneity. Content and form still need to interweave harmoniously, indivisibly, though must do so at the moment of writing. The best way to achieve this, as far as I could see, was to enter as completely, as imaginatively as possible into the theme that I was writing about.

In writing about a rather serious theme, then, I too tried to bring in the appropriate reverence and respect in the way in which I wrote about it and the language I used to do so:

176 Kerouac, Visions of Gerard, 127.
177 Kerouac, “Essentials.”
... you appear in my dreams for the first time—there’s not much to it, just a smile as you cross a doorway somewhere in the night, and then you’re gone ... I don’t go chasing after you, probably because I’m just so happy that you even bothered to look in my direction, in my dream ...  

Half way through the novel I decided to go France, where I spent two months in a house the size of a toolshed. I brought the novel to some kind of ending, travelled briefly to London, Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam, filled up some more notebooks, continued my studies of Western esoteric thought, and even crossed paths again with the real-life version of the ex-girlfriend character I was writing to in the novel. I watched as my life, like the novel, came to a kind of resolution that served to open up a whole series of other situations and events.

Things didn’t unfold in any kind of ‘happy-ending’—for the novel or for me. It was more like *Maggie Cassady* (1959), which I was also reading—Kerouac’s account of his first love (at times written imaginatively, again, through his younger eyes). I experienced the same longing and the same sadness detailed in *Maggie Cassady*, which I ultimately recognised and accepted, as did Kerouac:

... instead of having Maggie in my grip for the photo like laughing happy financees we sit across the table from little presents disposed thereon (radio, baseball glove, ties)—still I dont crack a smile, have a grave vain look inwardly musing on the camera to show that I have special honors reserved for me in the echoey hall and dark corridor of this infinity, this telepathic bleak, this mig ... Maggie, for her part, is a study of grave disrespect for the camera, wants nothing to do with it (like me) but has a stronger attitude, doubts while I pout, purses her lips while I stared wide-eyed at the world—for also my eyes shine in the paper and show definite interest in the camera which at first is unnoticeable, like surprise—in Maggie there’s disgust undisguised. She wears a crucifix and primly has no further word with world ...  

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178 Stubley, “emails to god” (earlier version of “the lonely and the road”), 2005, 12.
It was uncanny the way in which whatever I was reading of Kerouac’s continually seemed to find a reply in what was happening in my own life situation and in my writing at the time. I think what I read helped with both—my writing and my life—and also confirmed for me the importance of writing about my own experiences, not just for myself (and for my own understanding), but also for others. For if Kerouac’s work could help me pass through the difficult experiences of my life, then possibly in some small way my writing could also do the same for somebody else.

Once I’d finished the novel, my life and my writing continued into even more unfamiliar territory, where experiences became a little stranger, a little more uncertain. Once again I found in Kerouac an echo of this, in his coming-of-age novel *Doctor Sax—Faust Part Three* (1953).180

Off—up—up the bird rises farther, diminishes into the original Giant Bird Cloud, up into the sky I look and I look and can’t believe the feathers, can’t believe it, can’t believe the Snake—The sailing objects in that distant Up are peaceful and very far—they are leaving the earth—and going into the ethereal blue—aerial heavens wait for them—they specken and grow dotty—calm as iron, they seem to have an air of funniness the smaller they get—The sky is too bright, the sun is too mad, the eye can’t follow the grand ecstatic flight of Bird and Serpent into the Unknown—181

This highly symbolic novel was, as this passage illustrates, shadow-like, spooky, covered over in a kind of fog—a coming-of-age story (again written imaginatively through the eyes of his younger, in this case, adolescent, self) where uncertainties

180 See Kerouac, “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” *Playboy*, June 1959, 42: “… [I] went on writing because my hero was Goethe and I believed in art and hoped some day to write the third part of *Faust*, which I have done in *Doctor Sax.*”
about the world and self abound. As a result of this, large parts of the novel are incomprehensible (in both content and form), and here I found great comfort as I prepared to get on a plane and return to Perth with no idea what was going to happen, for my writing or my life. (I felt able to relate to Doctor Sax in that it is a coming-of-age story that’s not confined to any particular age; in one sense we are always ‘coming-of-age.’)

I didn’t know if I was going to finish the PhD, work some more on this novel I’d written, start a new one, or blow it all off and keep travelling. Part of me wanted to find a home—any home—but another part was more restless than ever. And in this state of mind I found myself reading more esoteric thought, more Rumi, but also, importantly, Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass:

SPONTANEOUS me, Nature,
The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with,
The arm of my friend hanging idly over my shoulder,
The hill-side whiten’d with blossoms of the mountain ash,
The same, late in autumn—the hues of red, yellow, drab, purple, and light and dark green,
The rich coverlid of the grass—animals and birds—the private untrimm’d bank—the primitive apples—the pebble-stones,
Beautiful dripping fragments—the negligent list of one after another, as I happen to call them to me, or think of them,
The real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures,) The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me,
This poem, drooping shy and unseen, that I always carry, and that all men carry,182

In Whitman I found—as Kerouac did—a great deal. From the vast back-and-forth, coming-and-going imagery, to the language that emerged out of this. From his great compassion and understanding to his sincere reverence and appreciation of

detail in the people and places of the world. I enjoyed, more than anything perhaps, the great Romantic eyes with which he looked out upon the world—eyes similar to those of Kerouac who often saw things, however, through sadder, bleaker lenses. But for Whitman, the world and all things in it unfolded like a wide and wonderful road awaiting our travel:

FACING west from California’s shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity,
the land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled;
For starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmire,
From Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the hero,
From the south, from the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands,
Long having wander’d since, round the earth having wander’d,
Now I face home again, very pleas’d and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)¹⁸³

And so with a touch of Whitman’s joy, though also with a recognition that what I had “started for” probably remained as yet “unfound,” I flew back again to Perth, and back again into the novel.

¹⁸³ Whitman, “Facing West From California’s Shores,” in Leaves of Grass, 95.
PART TEN

“An autobiographical essay”

After my supervisor commented on and returned my draft novel, I took some time to separate out, like a piece of rope, the two interweaving narratives. I looked at them both individually and contemplated which one might be able to stand best on its own. And then, in another spontaneous decision, I moved to the Kimberley for a couple of months.

In Halls Creek, while my girlfriend taught at the school, I stayed inside the wet-season airconditioning of our house, began to rework the American narrative, and let the other side of the story rest. I fiddled with what was already written, but then felt all too obviously the craft associated with what I was doing. So I made another start. And then another start, and then another. And before I knew it we were driving back down the coast to Perth.

I decided to keep the email format and make another go of the American story. I called this one “emails to god—a novel.” The email form was still appropriate for spontaneous prose, I felt, as it was for the quest I was attempting to represent.

While I was doing this, I was also reading Kerouac’s *Book of Dreams*, *Pomes All Sizes* (1992) and *Book of Sketches* (2006). These books helped me pay even closer attention to the small phenomena of the world—to the *details*—around us all the time, in both waking life, and dreaming life. Kerouac took this attentiveness to a highly focused and disciplined level—from his *Book of Dreams*:
Like Notre Dame in Montreal is the Cathedral, the church that the train of some sort is pulling into and I’m with Bull—a giant dog runs alongside in the aisle, by pews, it’s the “Hound of the Baskervilles”—Suddenly he takes off impatiently into the air, becoming a giant black bird, and flies over the altar and descends at the vestry doors where hurrying theological students pay no attention to him & he lands upright on his feet like a man—& humped with wings walks to a vestry door looking like Satan, black, sad …\(^\text{184}\)

Here Kerouac also avoided thinking \textit{about} his dreams (he did not overlay his post-dream thoughts onto them), but like all things he observed, tried to think along with them (and what better way of doing that than writing down the dreams straight after they happen?).

Similarly, his \textit{Book of Sketches} is a kind of training of observational skills, and development of the writing that followed. In his ‘sketches,’ Kerouac observes and notes in detail (and at the same time, with his feelings, as he does in much of his work, \textit{praises}) what exists in front of him:

\begin{quote}
Lovely motionless green leaves—vague plaster rocks lost in fields—the dazzling white sides of houses seen thru the tangle glade branches—the dry solemn ground of California fit for Indians to sleep on—the cardboard beds of hoboes along the S.P. track up at Milpitas—& the clean blue deep night at Permanente,
\end{quote}

the dogs barking under clear stars.\textsuperscript{185}

At the beginning of the book Kerouac writes: “Book of Sketches … (proving that sketches ain’t verse) But Only What Is.”\textsuperscript{186} Here again, in passages such as the one above, and throughout the book, I saw the way in which Kerouac was completely unconcerned about how his work might be categorised or defined in terms of content or form. His writing is “Only What Is.” Attempts to label it, therefore, are only (as usual with labelling) attempts to pin it down with the intellect alone. I saw his efforts striving towards other goals, however: namely, the desire not to pin things down, but to continually open things up.

I felt that I had been trying to open things up in my own writing, whether through my novels or notepad sketches. I wasn’t trying to begin with a form or a category or genre, then write something to fit it. Instead I sought to connect with the thing I was writing about and then let the form arise spontaneously out of that. I still maintained that Kerouac’s spontaneous prose form arose out of the essence—out of the content—of his quest, and that spontaneous prose could still provide an adequate form for the representation of today’s quest (albeit modified, of course, to suit my own stories).

And so I pushed on. Somewhere in there I began reading Rilke’s poetry, especially his Book of Hours: Love Poems to God, and Novalis’ Hymns to the Night, both of which encouraged me to continue writing to an (apparently) unresponsive addressee.

\textsuperscript{185} Kerouac, Book of Sketches (London: Penguin, 2006), 89.
\textsuperscript{186} Kerouac, Book of Sketches, v.
At this time I also did another writing course with the School of Integral Art, this time on biographical writing. It helped, I believed, with rounding out this version of the novel. It also helped me see the great potential for writing in community (that is, where the writing process itself unfolds in community). Writing in community, I came to believe, may very well be the ‘writing’ of the future. In this group writing process, the artwork is not only what is left on the page, but also, importantly, what unfolds between human beings in a communal creative setting. In such a process, individuality is not lost, but rather supported by the community, while at the same time the individual is able to support the community as a whole. We listened to each other’s stories, finished writing each other’s stories, developed imaginative pictures together, and went so far as to interweave imagery and ideas from a number of stories into a larger whole—a single narrative.

Soon after, I submitted “emails to god—a novel” (the second version of the creative piece) to my supervisor. I sympathise with her plight. It must be a great deal easier to simply receive a competently written, edited novel (that follows conventional rules of grammar, punctuation, syntax, sentence structure, plot-and-character development), than receive two or three versions of something that is attempting to be and do something else. It is also my experience that it is hard for spontaneous prose to find a home at universities—particularly when creative writing courses place such an importance on the editing process, especially at Honours, Masters and PhD level. It is also difficult when PhD students, for example, are given three years to complete a degree, when a novel can be written
spontaneously in a matter of months, weeks, or even days. Spontaneous writing of any kind is also largely misunderstood. At the same time, I also appreciate that spontaneity can also be used as a kind of excuse or justification for what some might call bad writing. But whether or not a novel is viewed as good or bad is not so much the point. The point is, rather, that a novel has some kind of substantial centre or essence, and that the way it is told comes out of that centre or essence. This may result in what some people call bad writing, but it also has great potential to result in excellent writing too (I make no judgments here about my own piece):

… the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind-tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow!—now!—your way is your only way—“good”—or “bad”—always honest (“ludi-crous”), spontaneous, “confessionals” interesting, because not “crafted” …

What a spontaneous piece does tend to resist (as some emails also do, particularly informal emails recounting road journeys) is following any kind of formal requirements of sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, syntax, plot and character development, dialogue, description of setting, etc., which leads to the production of what may be called competent or publishable novels. For ultimately, in my own work, I am not so concerned with following any kind of formula for novel writing but, rather, to be conscious of the way the essence of the novel itself wants to be written. This also leads to a kind of clearing the slate, which can allow new impulses to emerge, rather than simply following what has

187 Kerouac, “Essentials.”
188 Blindly following such formal requirements does not lead to freedom in the writing process because ideas are imposed from outside the writer—the writer is not themselves the lawgiver. This is not to say that these formal aspects can’t be included in a piece of writing in freedom—they can, if the writer feels that the essence of the story itself requires their inclusion.
already worked well in the past. In my experience, spontaneous writing has the potential to enable this to happen. For me, process is important. And the process in this case is not so much a looking back to the past, as it is a looking to a future that is seeking to emerge, through our activity, here and now.

This version of the exegesis—what you are now reading—has attempted to follow similar lines. That is, I have attempted to write a spontaneous exegesis. It is worth noting, however, that I wrote two versions prior to this one—versions that were more critical, more like my Honours thesis. For those other versions, I read a great deal of new critical material, as well as revisited much of what I had already read. Vast scribblings filled up notebooks, and critical footnotes filled up the computer screen. I then used what I had gathered together and formed what became the previous versions. (In the first version I focused on Kerouac’s representation of his eastern [Zen Buddhist] spiritual path, and his western [Catholic] spiritual path, as well as how Romanticism and music featured in his work. This, however, I felt was dividing up his work, and isolating the viewpoint from which I could survey all his writing. I felt this approach came from a thinking about rather than with his work, and chopped it up into ever more bite-sized and digestible pieces, rather than looking at his work as a whole. In the next version I focused entirely on the spiritual quest, and explored its representation in literature from Babylonian times, as well as how different philosophical and scientific models have approached the spiritual in the world. This version, however, seemed to deviate too far from the particular—from the reality I was working from—Kerouac’s work and my own. This approach seemed to work from the universal [the concept, the idea, the
spiritual] and then tried to support the universal with particular examples pulled from Kerouac’s and my own work. What I have attempted to do in this final version of the exegesis, instead, is allow the particulars of our work to reveal what they will of the universal [the conceptual, the ideal, the spiritual], in the same way Kerouac does in his writing, and as I have attempted to do in “the lonely and the road.”)\(^{189}\) Ultimately, I didn’t feel that my previous versions expressed how the exegesis itself wanted to be written. An exegesis about an autobiographical, spontaneous quest, for me, has to be written in an autobiographical, spontaneous form.\(^{190}\) It is also my experience that it is difficult if not impossible to write a conventional exegesis spontaneously. Nor can we work from the future to the present in such a conventional, research-based, exegesis—we must, necessarily, work from the past forwards.

(It should be noted that this version of the exegesis, like the creative component, has also undergone edits of its own. The doctoral research process and its conventions have demanded these changes.)

Interestingly, the greatest insight I gained during the research and writing of the other two versions of this exegesis came from the surprise discovery and reading of one of Kerouac’s first pieces, the recently published novella *Orpheus*

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\(^{189}\) This approach (in contrast to that used by Rumi, for example) finds echoes in Goethe’s method. See, again, *Aphorisms in Prose*, as quoted in Steiner, *Goethean Science*, 164: “The true is like God; it does not appear directly; we must guess it from its manifestations.”

\(^{190}\) For the way in which other creative writing PhD and Master’s theses interweave content and form, see, as I did prior to writing this version, Glyn Parry, “Behind Blue Eyes: A Memoir of Childhood (novel); Who am I: A Collection of Essays (exegesis)” (PhD diss., Edith Cowan University, 2006), *Australian Digital Theses Program*, http://portal.ecu.edu.au/adt-public/adt-ECU2007.0006.html (last accessed June 28 2008). In this case, Parry’s exegesis is a kind of memoir of the process of writing a memoir. His Master’s thesis, “The Summer of my Trespass (novel); The Not So Beautiful Lies: A Writer’s Reflections Upon Aspects of His Craft and Vocation (thesis)” (Masters thesis, University of Western Australia, 2001), contains a novel about a writer, and, as the title suggests, a thesis about his own reflections on the writing process and the vocation of being a writer.
Emerged (2002). In it, I found a twenty-three-year-old writer struggling to find a voice, a style, a form he could bring into union with the great themes that would continue to unfold throughout the rest of his works, as well as his life. In outlining the themes of the novella (in some of his journal entries published with the book), Kerouac writes about the two main characters, M. and Paul:

M. trying to transcend human emotions to those of God—emotions of creation, or of Eternity, etc. Thus he abandons his human self, Paul, and strikes off for the High Regions. But there he finds himself lost, lonely, and out of his element: his species-self, biologically speaking holds him back. A fish trying to live out of water, on air alone, M. finds that his life exists unquestionably on human terms: he cannot be God, or be like him, because he is human. This makes him see that the highest state he can attain is that of the “Lyre of God,” and in a contemporaneous sense, that of God’s representative to man … As Orpheus, the artist-man, rather than merely man, or merely Prometheus (the artist), he achieves his great goal of wholeness.191

Kerouac would seek to find this wholeness throughout the rest of his life, even as he became the “artist-man” himself. Indeed, much of Kerouac’s writing can be seen as an ongoing attempt to integrate these two aspects of his own makeup—the one writing or meditating on solitary mountain-tops, and the one that needed to find a job, or look after his mother, or pay the rent every month. From this point of view, Kerouac’s whole life, and his whole work, is about the ongoing spiritual quest and the struggle to find a balance between these two forces, these two polarities. The spontaneous prose style developed out of this quest—this energetic, earnest and yes, spontaneous, spiritual quest for balance, integration, redemption and wholeness. The quest for spontaneous prose, then, can also be seen as an ongoing

quest for balance between these same forces—a balance between completely incomprehensible, subjective writing that “strikes off for the High Regions,” and the conventional, earth-bound (and objective to the point of being emotionless, factual ‘telling’) writing of the “human self.”

In any case, I read again the introduction to Big Sur, where Kerouac writes:

My work comprises one vast book like Proust’s except that my remembrances are written on the run instead of afterwards in a sick bed. Because of the objections of my early publishers I was not allowed to use the same personae names in each work. On the Road, The Subterraneans, The Dharma Bums, Doctor Sax, Maggie Cassidy, Tristessa, Desolation Angels, Visions of Cody and the others including this book Big Sur are just chapters in the whole work which I call The Duluoz Legend. In my old age I intend to collect all my work and re-insert my pantheon of uniform names, leave the long shelf full of books there, and die happy. The whole thing forms one enormous comedy, seen through the eyes of poor Ti Jean (me), otherwise known as Jack Duluoz, the world of raging action and folly and also gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of his eye.192

Kerouac died before he could do this. It should not be assumed, however, that his works fail to comprise a certain collection—a certain “uniformity” or “legend.” They do, even if the names are not uniform, or the stories are not chronological. The thread that runs through them all is consistent—and that thread, that idea, is Kerouac’s spiritual quest, as represented in both content and form.

I was glad to read recently a New York Times article celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of On the Road. The article stated that Viking was going to release a previously unpublished edition of the original, unedited On the Road scroll, complete with Kerouac’s original character names. I placed an order and it arrived a couple of months ago. It is “a text that is as close as possible to the

192 Kerouac, note at the start of Big Sur, v.
one Kerouac produced between April 2 and April 22, 1951.” In this version, we find the whole long, spontaneous, unbroken On the Road quest, written in one whole, long, spontaneous, unbroken paragraph. Later in the article, the journalists interviewed Ann Douglas, who has been ‘teaching’ On the Road for more than twenty-five years at Columbia University:

Ms. Douglas says that her seminar on the Beats regularly has six times as many applicants as there are spaces, and that the novel still resonates strongly, partly because she gives her students an assignment to write an autobiographical essay in the spontaneous style made famous by Kerouac.

‘Again and again students do the best writing of their careers,’ she said. ‘It’s a summons to put aside fear of what people will say or what your family expects and to find a voice that is really their own.’

Not a voice that is Kerouac’s, I noted, but a voice that is “their own.” I also noticed the “summons to put aside fear of what people will say”—I guess that also includes supervisors and examiners. But in any case, through the process of writing the novel, now called “the lonely and the road,” as well as this accompanying exegesis (and in the development of my writing in general), I hope that I have worked towards finding “a voice that is really [my] own.” This idea is, of course, central to this exegesis: to explore how my own voice—my own road—may have

195 Title changed from “emails to god—a novel,” to “emails from the road—a novel,” to “the lonely and the road.” Part of the reason for this has been to remove presuppositions and barriers that might exist about the addressee, but also to remove presuppositions about the form. The novel could be a collection of emails as much as it could be a collection of journal or diary entries, as the narrator himself notes throughout. Ultimately, the narrator doesn’t really know what he searches for, nor what it is he writes. The quest (and its goal) is, in a sense, elusive in both content and form.
emerged more “its own” after spending so much time with Kerouac on his road, and with spontaneous prose in general.

This also recalls to mind something the critic James T. Jones writes: “Of all the potential rewards of spontaneity—both in Kerouac’s writing and in life—the most important thing is the conviction it gives a person that originality is possible …” In this sense, again, spontaneous prose can be used as a doorway to finding our own voice, our own road. From this point of view, Kerouac’s spontaneous prose can be seen as a great gift to the world, a selfless deed which can lead, as I’ve illustrated, beyond the fanatical following of it (as it is expressed in “Essentials” or “Belief”) to, ultimately, the liberation and finding of our own, individual voices. Whether we choose to go beyond the following to the finding (and, indeed, the personalising) is, of course, up to each of us.

At this point I am also reminded of a book by one of my creative writing teachers, Horst Kornberger—Story Medicine and How to Make It:

Stories surround us. We can never escape their influence. Our own life is a story in the making and with every deed and decision we continue the telling of it. Our own story is embedded in the larger tale of our time and interwoven with the many tales of all those we meet. We are story-beings and because of it we are often helped by the stories that come our way.

Kornberger then goes on to talk about the way in which hearing our own story told to us, as well as telling (and therefore owning) our own story, can be a great source
of healing and help for us in our lives.\textsuperscript{198} In a similar sense, then, so can the hearing
of another’s story (there is no question that Kerouac’s stories have helped me).

I am, of course, most glad and grateful to have experienced and learned what
I have during this doctoral project and during these moments of intersection with
Kerouac’s road. In looking back, perhaps what I found within Kerouac’s work
wasn’t \textit{influence} so much as an artistic \textit{language} that enabled me to express or
formulate the world that has \textit{always} lived within me. But in any case, I now feel
that, probably through my efforts in learning this language, I have created a space
in which a road that is truly my own—my own artistic road (with my own artistic
language)—is able to emerge from the landscape of the future, weaving and rolling
and rising on its way to meet me here and now.\textsuperscript{199}

\textbf{nullarbor plains}

i rise above the final hill
and turn the final bend

and then i’m there

the nullarbor plain at dusk

the long dark line of it
under the last orange horizon
glow

like driving into a vast
and silent ocean—

\textsuperscript{198} As it was for Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Parzival, Kerouac and many more.
\textsuperscript{199} Perhaps it is worth noting that this road has recently led to the published spontaneous prose piece
“by the front doors of notre dame de paris,” in the inaugural edition of the literary journal \textit{indigo} 1
36 (chosen by Australian poet Les Murray), and the spontaneous prose piece “same thing said in
while scattered stars open slowly
in the pale sky above

i turn off the lights
and watch the road
as it straightens,
fades and goes

as the ocean stretches out
to all directions
and i surrender
whole

my beginninglessness—
my loneliness—
pouring out
from every edge
of this eternity
onto the endless plain

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