Fingerprints: Exploration of Identity, Community and Place

Michelle Crawford
Bachelor of Arts with Honours (English and Comparative Literature).

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University, 2010.
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Michelle Crawford
Abstract

This thesis consists of two stand-alone but complementary components. The first, a work of fiction, ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’, is a narrative based in a West Australian community exploring questions of memory, identity and experience along with notions of social connectedness. Set in a landscape of grief, physical and emotional isolation, the text is grounded in the everyday-ness and mundanity of life and, through delving into characters’ memories in particular, makes visible that which is often largely hidden. This body of work comprises part of the development of a full-length novel.

The accompanying exegesis, ‘Fingerprints: the exegesis’, also engages in part with issues of memory, identity and experience, and explores both the creative processes and the evolution of my own identity as a creative writer and postgraduate student working within another type of community—the university. In a sense, it too is grounded in isolation, and foregrounds the everyday-ness around the development of creative work. It also aims to offer greater insights into and focus on the value of the processes (rather than the products) of creative work. It thus also endeavours to make visible that which is normally hidden in the development of an academic and/or creative project. I address questions arising directly from my own research practices alongside broader discussion of ways in which creative research is intimately connected with the doing of creative writing within the academy.
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Fingerprints: the fiction
Part One

2000
One

The end didn’t exactly come suddenly.

The night she topped herself, Crazy Catherine Connor didn’t phone the hospital and tell the temp nurse on duty she wanted to die. It probably wouldn’t have made a difference if she had. She’d phoned thirty seven times over the last one hundred and ninety two nights, saying much the same thing before the night nurses stopped logging her calls. There didn’t really seem much point in creating more work for themselves.

At 4.15 A.M Sam Jenkins-Anderson, dressed in her nightie and rubber thongs, keeps Cheryl Harvey company just outside the main doors of the hospital. A long and difficult labour, followed by a constant stream of visitors over the last few days, has left Sam exhausted. She’s too tired to work out whether her mind or body aches most. Cheryl, the senior nursing sister on duty tonight, is near the end of her shift and talks way too fast for Sam’s brain to keep up. She’s repeating something Sam thinks she’s already said—that how really, despite those calls Catherine used to make, nobody could have been more surprised than she was when the call came through from the coppers. Sam wonders if there is some sort of patient confidentiality rule that makes talking to a patient about these things illegal. At the least, it’s surely unethical? Maybe it’s one of those grey areas, and it’s sort of okay if you know the patient well?

Not that Sam really knows Cheryl well at all, when she thinks about it. They don’t really talk much. Apart from those half a dozen times over the last fifteen years
where Cheryl sought Sam’s ear, or the rare occasions Sam did likewise to Cheryl, they pretty much live their own lives—just waving over the hip-height wire fence in passing, or chatting at Christmas functions or occasional company dinners.

Sam could have gone home with the baby the previous day, but she was so weepy that morning that the day staff advised her to stay put.

‘It’s just the third day blues love. Don’t worry—you’ll be right as rain tomorrow.’

‘Surely it’s not normal to take this long to love your baby?’ Mark asked Cheryl.

For the first three days after giving birth, Sam felt empty, lacking any feeling for the squished up little creature that had taken so many years to conceive. She went through the motions, learning to breastfeed and care for a newborn. She smiled at all the right times when the visitors streamed in. But she felt strangely detached from the whole experience. Only Cheryl had managed to reassure her that it was okay to feel that way, perfectly normal even. And when one of the nurses told her to stay another day or two she’d agreed without hesitation—at least in part to avoid what she saw as Mark’s disappointment in her.

About halfway through the night, Cheryl had come and woken Sam to tell her there’d been some sort of drama. She’d thought something had happened to the baby, who’d been wheeled up to the nurse’s station to allow Sam a good night’s sleep. She’d been relieved to experience that physical pain, the wrench inside her chest, a stabbing so intense she’d curled up on the bed and moaned so loudly that Cheryl had taken Sam’s face in her hands and spoken close to her face. ‘Hayley is fine, she’s a perfect healthy girl.’
Now, standing outside with her next-door neighbor in the middle-night, listening to Cheryl bang on like they are the best of friends, Sam wonders why she is out here. It is surely more than a little bit strange for a nursing sister to wake a patient and bring her outside to talk to her?

‘Everyone tried. God they’ve tried . . . But what can you do if someone really wants to go that badly?’

Sam feels a bit sickened by Cheryl’s matter-of-fact manner. She’d have expected her to be more compassionate.

Cheryl talks about the first time Crazy Catherine Connor, or CCC, as they used to write on the paperwork, called the hospital. The junior who took the call was so distraught that she’d had to go home. That first night Catherine had gone to sleep, knocked herself out with booze and pills and by the time the police and her husband got there, everything had gone quiet. Her husband had forgotten to take his key to work that night, and had to break in to his own house with the cops’ help, to find his wife asleep.

‘Poor bastard nearly got the sack over all that, getting called away every couple of weeks when he was on nights. Neil told me that everyone at work was getting really pissed off having to cover for him. Catherine seemed much happier lately though.’

Sam wonders, but doesn’t ask Cheryl how she knows that.

‘I suppose that’s why I’m so thrown,’ Cheryl continues.

Sam yawns. ‘Well, maybe I should go and get some sleep before the . . . before Hayley wakes up. Do you want me to send the other nurse out to wait with you?’

Cheryl nods. ‘Yes. . . . And thanks.’
Cheryl chain-smokes Benson and Hedges. Stuart Wagstaff’s sophisticated voice purrs through her head, soothing her. *Benson and Hedges . . . when only the best will do*. How long since she’s seen one of those ads? She must have still been a kid, surely?

Tania the temp nurse sees Sam back to her bed, then joins Cheryl outside. It’s hot, oppressively muggy. ‘Maybe there’s a cyclone brewing up north,’ Cheryl says, ‘it’s a bit early in the season though.’

Tania has never heard Cheryl talk so much. When she’d almost completed her training years ago back in Perth, Cheryl had been responsible for filling in reports on her. She was always so aloof then, so unapproachable.

‘If I get cancer, maybe I can sue old Stewy . . . if he’s still alive of course,’ she says to a perplexed Tania.

Apart from Sam there are only two patients in tonight, both sleeping soundly. And it’s a week night, so there are no drunks to patch up. Other than a contractor due to fly out the next morning who’d been hit in the eye by an indoor cricket ball and admitted under duress for observation, things had been very slow—until the last hour, anyway.

Tania gave up smoking over a year ago, but tonight she resumes her old habit. She wipes sweat beads from her brow and wonders out loud what could have possessed her to follow a man up here after knowing him only three months—a married man at that.
‘I felt wrong, you know? He had a kid. But I believed him. . . . Bastard pissed off in the middle of the night while I was at work—had a skimp[y] barmaid in the passenger seat.’

‘Yeah, I heard. Not much gets past this mob, love.’

‘I suppose I could have left too, gone travelling with my mates who are all off in Europe now,’ Tania says.

It’s been ages since anyone other than Catherine had confided in Cheryl like this, and obviously Catherine hadn’t been that open, after all.

‘I have this theory, the ones who grab your heart like that, make you behave out of character, they arrive in your life for a reason—they are there to . . .’

Tania’s ears prick up. ‘What?’

‘Fucked if I know. Haven’t worked that bit out yet, love.’

The conversation shifts to the new, less formal uniforms now available to all nursing staff. Their opinions are divided. Tania says she can’t wait to leave her baby pink dress behind, that the new shirts and pants will be more flattering. She thinks the current nurses’ aides uniforms look like factory or canteen workers’ uniforms. Cheryl isn’t so sure. She likes her traditional crisp white dress, the watch pinned above the chest, and even the little white cap sometimes worn by the more senior registered nursing staff.

‘Sure it’s a bugger to keep the uniforms white up here, with all this red dirt, but people recognise us in them. There’s respect. Sounds a bit stupid I suppose, but it was once my dream—to wear that uniform.’

The two women are waiting to let the copper in when he comes back. The police often drop in for a chat in the long and lonely night hours, when things are
slow. Sometimes they are called in to help the predominantly female night staff deal with the drunks and junkies who tend to overdose or become injured or go crazy in the middle of the night. Other nights, they’ll just drop in because they are lonely and feel like a bit of company.

Tonight, it’s a bit different. A little over an hour earlier, before he’d driven out to the site to call the husband away from his shift and break the news, the young constable had called into the hospital, no doubt nervous about the task ahead, hoping for some reassurance and support from the nurses.

Sam was still outside with her at that point. Cheryl thinks that Sam had not seemed especially surprised when the young cop started voicing his fears.

*Doc’s over there with her now. He’ll clean her up and get her back here with the St John’s boys real soon. Not that the Doc’s much good to her, in the circumstances.*

His eyes were glassy wet and his voice had wavered when he said that. Cheryl had talked him calm and then sent him on his way. *Hurry up kid, you don’t want Catherine’s old man hearing the news from a bloody nosy neighbor, do you?*

Hardly more than a boy himself, the probationary constable had looked as if he’d fall apart when Cheryl said that. He’d said there’d been no real preparation for this kind of thing when he’d completed his training only a few months earlier and put his hand up for an adventure in the Pilbara.

Once he left, just before she went back to bed, Sam told Cheryl she felt sorry for him. He was just a kid and shouldn’t have to do that on his own. Cheryl had replied bluntly.
Bullshit. It’s his fucken job, isn’t it? He’s just going to have to toughen up. Mind you, it’s usually the men and teenage boys that are topping themselves up here. Not that you’ll ever read about that in the glossy recruitment ads.

Now, hearing that the volunteer ambos and doctor are on the way back with the body, Cheryl butts her smoke out against the wall and buries it under the monsteria in the garden bed near the reinforced glass automatic sliding door. She brushes the dirt off the tip of her white shoe, glances at her watch, then, reaching into her pocket for another smoke, lights it off Tania’s stub.

‘It’s the husband I feel sorry for, poor bastard. . .’ She thinks of Suze Murray as soon as the words are out of her mouth. Now she’s living in Perth and she’s changed a lot, but in her heyday Suze would have been in her element with a story like this to dissect. Cheryl’s hands sweep out towards the mostly sleeping town as though she is a game show hostess offering a contestant the choice of a prize on Sale of the Century. ‘Fucking gossips out there will feed off this one for ages.’

At 7-40 AM, driving past the street where until just a few hours ago Catherine lived and breathed, Cheryl avoids looking in the direction of Catherine’s house. Instead she focuses on two huge crows dancing along the steel mesh fencing of a house on the other side of the road. She wonders how long it takes to clean up that kind of mess inside a house and shakes her head clear. About ten years back, one of the local sergeants at a cops’ and nurses’ Christmas do was pissed as a fart and trying to feel her up under the table. While Neil sat next to him and talked about fishing to the bloke seated across from him, the cop had told her in grisly detail about the mess. She thought she’d long since let that information go. She remembers the cop topped
himself in that same way a few years later, at the front counter of a remote station
he’d been posted to after certain stories had circulated.

She sees the back of the high school bus disappear from sight as she turns into
Hansard Way. The kids won’t be looking but she waves anyway. She pulls up in the
carport and nods over the mesh fence at Sam’s husband Mark washing his car,
shirtless in the already steamy morning. He looks up and grins at Cheryl.

‘Want the car to look nice to bring my girls home.’

Cheryl pulls her lips into a smile and tells him they’ll be ready and waiting for
him after breakfast, waves and goes to the bottom of the driveway where she pulls
out a thick wad of junk mail and glances at it briefly before stuffing it into her tote
bag to read later. No doubt it’s the usual stuff—fashion brochures and toy catalogues
from Perth city stores touting business to retail-deprived north-westers. And the
closest thing they have to a local newspaper, a tabloid produced five hundred
kilometres away and filled with gossip about people from a town she’s never visited
and probably never will.

She makes her way back up the driveway toward the steel mesh front gate, lifts
the catch and pauses to look at the vacant house across the road. There is no sign of
life from within the house. Architecturally it’s a mirror image of theirs. But with its
concrete-kerbed garden bed stripped of all but the barbed company-planted
bougainvillea and a few yellowing shrubs, the thin strip of lawn almost destroyed by
beetles and the prison-like steel cyclone shutters pulled tight over the windows, the
house looks as though it has been vacant for ages, not merely two weeks. Hard to
believe that so recently the house overflowed from the earliest hours with the sound
of noisy children and incessantly barking dogs, bringing life to this end of the street.
She closes the security door behind her, throws her bag down on the back of a brown standard-issue metal and vinyl dining chair, and walks past the open door of the main bedroom to the kitchen, whisper-calling, ‘I’m home.’ Strewn across the bench top are her two teenagers’ cereal and toast leftovers. Neil’s contribution, an open Weetbix box and lidless plastic milk bottle, sit on the bench next to a half cup of black coffee. She pours a glass of water from a jug in the fridge, downs it quickly, picks up the lukewarm coffee, takes a mouthful, scrunches her face against its bitter taste and goes through to the bedroom. Neil brushes his teeth in the ensuite bathroom, the tap running full pelt, splashing over the sides of the tiny basin. She waves at his foamy-mouthed reflection in the mirror, grabs a few clothes and a pair of shoes from the wardrobe and drops them on the brown laminex dining table outside the bedroom as Neil comes out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair dripping wet, mouth ringed with toothpaste residue and water. Cheryl notices his limp seems more pronounced than usual.

‘Knackered huh?’

He nods and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, smoothes his hair down and weaves his arm loosely around her upper back, resting his hand on her shoulder.

‘What a fucked night.’

She agrees. ‘Yeah.’

She wants to be able to tell Neil about last night. It really shook her. She’s never been afraid of being by herself like that before, well not for a long time anyway. She wants to describe the look on the husband’s face when the young cop led him in—and the cop’s face too. And the consternation she’d felt over her lack of emotion—then her foul and inappropriate jokes over what Catherine had done. And how she
wishes she could deal with stuff better, rather than continue to use black humour to get by. But though Neil understands her better than anyone, she just feels unable to communicate that level of truth anymore. So she says nothing, smiles overly brightly, kisses him on the cheek, and backs out of the bedroom as he speaks.

‘Catch you in a few hours, babe. Kids were both fine—needed that money for the Exmouth camp today so I wrote a cheque. Hope there’s money in the account?’

She never sleeps much during the day after nightshift. Over the years she’s learned to survive on very little sleep at all, really. Today she tidies the kitchen a bit, throws a load into the washing machine and retreats to the back patio to water the plants. It’s her favourite time of day—before the sun gets too bright, the kids at school, Neil at work or asleep already. It’s her time to delight in her ritual coffee and fag as she wanders around the narrow backyard. She practices finding peace in these moments. *Find the joy in the everyday*, one of her counsellors had told her years ago. It’s about the only thing that she seems to have remembered from that expensive and mostly futile exercise in self-help.

She unrolls the hose from the reel on the wall and sprays water over the shade-cloth covered fernery, feeds the goldfish in the pond, half-heartedly pretends to nurture a little cottage garden somewhere else where the weather is cooler and the world a little less harsh. Once she used to dream her days away imagining living in such a place, but she’s pretty much given up on the fairytale. Imagining such a life is more a habit than anything else now. She just wants a peaceful existence these days.

A few years back, the movie *The Castle* came out, and the entire family had become hooked on the life of the Kerrigans. The kids pooled their money together
and bought the video for Cheryl for Christmas. It’s been played so much its pretty well worn out now—probably about time to start thinking about getting one of those DVD players everyone’s been buying lately. She jumps as the massive air-conditioning unit kick-starts with a squeal and throaty rumble and she chuckles, looking across at the rockery with the little wooden sign Neil made for her on their last anniversary. She walks the few steps over to it and runs her fingers over the wonky hand-carved words: *How’s the serenity?*

Back inside a little later, she dozes in fits and starts on the big soft faux velvet modular lounge suite they’d bought a few years back to replace the practical brown metal-framed company lounge that was now divided up between the two kids’ rooms. Despite the months of fights that eventually led to its purchase, she never fails to experience a flicker of contentment when she sits or lies on it. The original plan when they took that first job in the north-west had been to live frugally, take what perks the company provided for them and save as much as possible for two or three years before moving down to the south-west to a quiet little acreage between the forest and the sea—the kind of place she’d thought back then that they needed to be really happy. After ten years she’d pretended to stop counting how long they’d been up here, and now she’s more or less accepted that they are unlikely to leave the place in the foreseeable future.

Things happen. People change. Time gets away from you. Neil and she approach life a bit differently now and try to live more in the present. Don’t plan for the future so much, because who knows what’s around the corner, what life’s got in store for you? There’s a bumper sticker she’s seen around town lately, *Shit Happens.* She’d never have it on her own car, but every time she sees it she thinks it’s far more
appropriate than the embarrassingly silly purple *Magic Happens* sticker her girls bought from the stall at the annual country show and stuck on her back windscreen a while ago.

It’s dawned on Cheryl quite recently that without realising it’s happening, she and Neil buy things they don’t actually need when they can’t talk about the stuff that really bothers them. So, she’s got her lush temperature-monitored fernery that shouldn’t really survive in this harsh climate, her dishwasher, a new Slumberking orthopedic bed, the lounge suite, and more *stuff* than she knows what to do with. The house is practically bursting with material possessions. And when they go out, she grits her teeth and goes along with it when Neil gets tanked up and tells anyone who’ll listen that he’d have showered her with gifts for the house long ago if he’d known it’d make her this happy.

Cheryl wakes with a stabbing headache and wet face after a few hours and admonishes herself. *Jesus, woman.* She tosses and turns on the lounge for a while, then, giving up on the idea of more sleep, showers in the kids’ bathroom up the hallway, pulls a dress over her head and starts to get ready to go to lunch with Corazon. Neil staggers sleepily from the bedroom. He’s still the same, still moves like a drunken dancing bear as he wakes. Today she doesn’t feel irritated by his exaggerated movements—she’s relieved and comforted by the predictability of his actions. He moves toward her and she looks into his sleep-crunched face before allowing him to wrap her slight frame in a tight embrace. Tears prickle in the corners of her eyes. She shakes them away.

‘Okay?’
Neil, much taller than his wife, leans forward and rests his chin on the crown of her head for a moment.

‘Yeah. You?’

Neil nods, his chin digging into the top of Cheryl’s head. She moves away and turns her back to her husband. He yawns and tries to do her zip up, needing three goes at it before he’s awake enough to complete the simple task.
Part Two

1986
Two

They’re at the drive-in, flopped across beanbags and pillows, a blanket spread out on the ground in front of the car. Above them the night sky is littered with stars. At each corner of the blanket mosquito coils burn, the glowing tips strangely soothing. For a moment Cheryl pretends she is offering incense and candles at an altar, closes her eyes and gives thanks for something unnamable. Neil, worn out after eighteen twelve hour shifts without a day off, snores on an orange vinyl beanbag draped in a faded flannelette sheet. Even the kids, both asleep on the back seat of the old Landcruiser, outlasted him.

Cheryl is at that advanced stage of pregnancy where physical comfort is impossible. She feels as though her body has grown hugely distorted this time around. She pushes an oversized tie-dyed cushion away from her feet and using the roo bar for leverage, hauls herself up, yawns and stretches gingerly from side to side.

‘Going for a bit of a walk, okay?’

She nudges Neil with her toe as she speaks. He stops snoring, opens one bleary eye and grunts in response.

‘Kids are sleeping. Back soon.’

Cheryl walks slowly down the middle of the road between the two parking bays. Tucked behind the hills just out of town, it is eerily quiet for a Saturday night. It seems as though they are more detached than usual from the rest of Australia. Cheryl imagines that all that exists is this drive-in theatre, twenty or so cars, and a smattering of people. And of course, that endless expanse of sky that never fails to make her feel insignificant.
The drive-in is usually the hub of all social life on the weekends, unless one of the companies has a function in the recreation club or tavern. Lately everyone’s been buying VHS video recorders and renting movies from the recently opened hire shop. She supposes that’s got something to do with it being so quiet here tonight. Then again, maybe the Carters have just lost interest in the drive-in business they’ve been running for God knows how long. It’s been ages since they got a decent or at least newish movie up for the weekend. ET, already about three or four years old and played to death up here, has been running for three weekends in a row and most people who care to see it have already been at least once. Even the kids, who mostly don’t seem to care too much about the actual movie and use the drive-in as a place to hang out, drink and smoke pot out of bongs made from plastic orange juice bottles, have gone somewhere else for the night—out the back to Mangrove Beach, perhaps.

Realising the date that morning, even though he was completely stuffed, Neil had asked if she’d like to go along to the drive-in that night with the twins. He’s like that—thoughtful, selfless. Sometimes it shits her, and she wishes he’d slip up so she wasn’t always the bitch who caused the stress in the relationship.

So it was decided before breakfast was finished, that they’d celebrate their third anniversary with a picnic under the stars. She really wasn’t in the mood for the almost one hour drive to the next town in the rattly old four wheel drive to see the movie. She just wanted to strip off, tie her long hair in a bun, crank up the air-conditioner in the bedroom, elevate her puffy feet and ankles and sleep until the baby decided it was ready to be born. But he’d looked so keen to please her. And when he suggested going up a bit early and staying in the motel so she could do a bit of
shopping the next day at Kmart while he stayed with the twins by the motel pool, it hadn’t seemed like such a bad idea after all. She needs a few things for the baby and agreed that maybe a change of scenery, a bit of shopping in the bigger town, a meal in the motel bistro, would help lift her malaise.

It’s turned out to be a bit of a fizzer though. The air-conditioner in the motel room is stuffed, turning itself off every half hour. And they’re fully booked, so there’s not a spare room to be had. It stinks in there too, as though the drains are blocked. They’d had to call housekeeping to pour bleach down the plugholes in an effort to clear them. She’d felt a bit stupid, bursting into tears when the teenage girl had turned up to try and clear the stench.

Right now, she’s hot, tired and utterly sick of being pregnant. She aches all over and hates the movie. The alien thing gives her the creeps, and the rest of the family was asleep almost before the pre-show advertising had finished scrolling through the screen.

She’s twenty-nine, not much older than the other people she knows with little kids, but this pregnancy has really taken its toll. She feels old and decrepit. She aches in places she didn’t know you could ache and after the relatively hassle-free time she’d had being pregnant with the twins, it’s a bit of a shock to feel so crap all the time. If she could summon up some energy, she might be able to at least attempt to express how she feels. But she’s too tired to articulate the constant low-grade pain, the unceasing exhaustion, the verge-of-tears emotional state she’s in all day, every day. What does it achieve to talk about it anyway? The one time she’d tried, when her neighbor Sally dropped in and offered to have the twins come over and play in the inflatable pool so she could rest, she’d been taken down a peg or two. She’d felt
ten times worse than before she’d opened her trap, when Sally reminded her how lucky she was to be able to have babies. She’d completely forgotten that Sally had suffered nine or ten late miscarriages before finally giving up trying, resorting instead to fostering a stream of waifs and strays.

She completes a slow uncomfortable circuit of the drive-in grounds, waving at somebody, uncertain just who it is, when the headlights of a parked car flicker twice as she passes. A Nissan Patrol, could be any number of people. Her heart races. Maybe it’s him. She’s been living back up in this part of the state for over three years. She thought she’d finally stopped expecting to see him each time she turned a corner. He left the Pilbara years ago, back around the time she first did, she knows that. That was the deciding factor in her decision to finally give in and agree to Neil’s pleas to shift up to the north west, just for a couple of years to set ourselves up. Neil could never know her reason, of course. She’s always mildly surprised to discover herself reacting this way—actually feels a little relieved sometimes. It reminds her she’s still capable of feeling that old excitement, however inappropriate it might be.

She works her way back to the car. Though the movie is still running, she nudges Neil awake with her toes and asks him to please take them back to the motel. She’s had enough. The enlarged blue veins running up the back of her legs throb, her groin burns and the Braxton Hicks contractions she’s been experiencing for hours are becoming unbearable. She needs to lie down in bed with her feet up, even if there is no effective air-conditioning and the room stinks like somebody else’s shit. She starts to cry. Quietly. Bites her lip. Clenches her fingers into tight fists. Neil yawns and stretches, looks about, disoriented for a moment or so.

‘Want to go . . . right now?’
Cheryl nods and now sobbing, starts to collect pillows, clicks the lid on the esky shut, and with the toe end of her Masseuse sandals, steps on the glowing ends of the mosquito coils and grinds them into the lumpy bitumen. *I am thankful for . . . what?*

Neil rubs his gritty work-weary eyes, stands and staggers about gathering up the remaining pillows, blankets and beanbags. He throws them into the back of the Landcruiser and closes the door quietly so as not to wake the sleeping twins. He stashes the esky behind the front passenger seat, unwraps the speaker box he’d earlier lashed onto the roo bar with an occy strap and replaces it on the speaker stand.

He opens the back door and is about to lift Tessa into her safety harness when Cheryl, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, whispers to leave them there. ‘They’ll be alright, it’s just down the road. Leave them sleeping.’

‘Sixty three percent of recorded accidents happen within four kilometres of . . .’

His voice trails off.

Cheryl’s jaw tightens as she waits for Neil to say something. It had only been a few weeks since she’d read that statistic out and made him swear not to ever so much as back out of the driveway without the kids safely strapped into their seats. He shakes his head, shrugs and clicks Tessa into her booster seat, leaving Jaimee sprawled out on her back across the seat. He grins at the sight of her long knobbly-kneed leg resting vertically, her monkey toes hooked over the back seat and wrapped around the mounting bolt for the booster seats. One thumb is in her mouth, her index finger wrapped around her nose, a small tatty Raggedy Anne doll clutched in the other fingers of the same hand. Her other arm flops down over the esky lid. Cheryl relaxes a little as she observes his face soften at the sight of his sleeping twin daughters—so physically different, one dark, one fair, one tall and gangly, one
stocky and solid. He places the other rag doll Andy on Tessa’s lap and rests her hand on it, then gently closes the door. He checks that there is nothing left on the ground in front, climbs up into the driver’s seat, buckles his seat belt and without turning on the headlights, coasts the car in the dark toward the moon on the flickering screen, where ET cries to go home.

At the drive-in exit, Neil indicates to turn left, sees no car lights coming towards them and pulls out to head back towards town. Tonight Cheryl avoids the ritual of looking towards the only bitumen road out of this part of the Pilbara. Instead, she focuses on the road ahead, locks her eyes on the 5K sign and recalls herself as a little girl, travelling the length and breadth of the country with her truck driver father in her school holidays. She’d counted backwards, 195, 190, 185 kilometres to the next town. Excited to see 100 looming and counting loudly back down to 80. Then, fatigued and imagining the trip would never end, her head would start zinging from the oversupply of sugary lollies. She’d become agitated and fidget. And her dad, irritated by her incessant babble and requests to stop and pee, would lose it—*For Chrissakes, shut the hell up!* And she’d shrink into the seat, afraid to move. *I am invisible. I am invisible.* Little games inside her head—closing her eyes, trying to open them only after twenty kilometres had passed, then thirty—until finally, she was down to the magic 5K sign.

Neil glances across at his wife in the passenger seat. Tears roll down her bloated cheeks. He thinks of a blowfish dragged from the sea, gasping and flailing on the sand. He shakes the image away and looks ahead to where Cheryl stares, her eyes focused, as they usually are these days, on something and somewhere he cannot see,
no matter how hard he tries. He sighs loudly as he realises he hasn’t a bloody clue what to say or do to make any of this better for her, for him, for anyone.

He presses the button on the radio. He’s worried but he’s not letting on to Chez. She’s got enough on her plate. Something is going on out at work. There are increasingly frequent whispers. Rumours of all sorts. Japs taking over is the latest. A couple of his mates have been talking about trying to get in over here in Lawson, the swanky new town, seeing if they can get their hands on a couple of caravans, work on the construction phase of the gas project. Even better, trying to score one of the jobs that come with a house. Not much hope of that coming to fruition though. Apparently it’s a pretty closed shop—who you know, not what you know. And housing’s scarce still, as rare as hens’ teeth.

He sighs more deeply. He never thought he’d be seriously thinking about moving back down south so soon. He loves it here and promised himself and Chez he’d get them set up financially. That was the whole point of it. But who knows what’ll happen. If the take-over rumours are true, they may have no choice. They’ll be fucked, what with the third kid due any tick of the clock.

The local radio station, run out of somebody’s lounge room, plays the usual Saturday night party mix. He feels old. He doesn’t know the names of any of the bands they play now. He flicks through to find the ABC but can barely make out the words of the ten o’clock news through the crackly reception. After fussing with the dial for a moment, he grabs a tape at random from the messy pile on the deep dashboard, presses it into the player and waits to see what music starts. A melancholic guitar picks out a few chords and tinny piano notes waft from the speakers in the doors of the car. Neil can’t quite believe his luck as Mark Knopfler’s
voice flows through the speakers. He looks sideways at his wife, reaches with his left hand, latches on to her thigh, spider walks his fingers to the top of the floral tent dress-covered mound, and squeezes her protruding belly-button gently.

‘Whaddayaknow, our song babe.’ He grins across at her.

She flicks him the tiniest hint of a wet smile. For now, that is enough for him. It’ll have to be. He winks. And as tired and fat and miserable as she is right now, she can’t help but giggle as he joins Dire Straits with his awful flat voice; *I can’t do the talk like they talk on T.V. And I can’t do the love song like the way it’s meant to be.* And she is back there, outside the pub in Geraldton, angry as fuck at the way he’s gone off and left her alone to deal with his family. She’s furious, sick, she hates him more than anything in this world. And then his brother, seeing her there crying on the footpath, goes in and pulls Neil away from his game of pool. And Neil’s there, in front of her, slipping and slurring and struggling to be released from his older brother’s headlock. He sees her. Jaw fixed tight. Fists clenched by her sides. And he falls to his knees, throws his arms wide in full view of the Sunday afternoon session crowd and declares; *I can’t do everything, but I’d do anything for you. I can’t do anything, except be in love with you.* And just like in the movies, some dickhead starts clapping and cheering and instead of being angry and sad about being seventeen and pregnant with a drunken slob for a boyfriend, she holds her hand out and curtseys. Her stupid boyfriend stands up, pulls her in tight to his blue singlet-clad chest. He fucking reeks of beer and sweat, but she lets him dance her around the cracked pavers like a big dancing bear until the stench of his body and last night’s stale urine rising up from the heat of the concrete footpath becomes too much, and she pushes him away and bolts around the corner to chuck in the laneway.
‘Love ya, Chez.’ Neil yawns and grins, changing down through the gears as they approach the intersection of the ring road that loops around the edge of town. He starts to turn. She looks at him, her eyes not quite so watery now, and teases—‘Yeah, sure we all know what it is you loved about me. Buy me a drink and I’m yours.’

Neil winks across at her. ‘Not loved—I still love that you’re an easy root.’

Neil has worked eighteen shifts in a row. Always careful at work—he’s not the shift safety officer for nothing—he somehow fails to register the enormous spotlights on the loaded semi-trailer as it rushes back from the port and down the loop road towards them.

Music spills from the darkness. A wistful voice carries through the night air, accompanied by the blaring horns of the entangled Landcruiser and Mack Truck. You and me babe, how about it? A child cries. Cheryl is squashed up against the dashboard, her eyes closed. She’s remembering what she wore that day outside the pub—a pink and lemon sarong, a singlet over her bikini top. And she is seventeen years old again and dancing on the pavement with her stupid bear of a rigger... The bells on her two silver anklets jingle softly. She hears the cheering, the clapping. Neil stumbles, grins and turns to take a bow. Then he’s gone.
The rumours spread through the district like wildfire. They always do.

A day after the accident, and already it seems that anyone who has any knowledge of the crash and many of those who haven’t got a clue, have an opinion on what happened.

Neil was pissed (again); they were fighting and she grabbed the wheel and steered the car into the oncoming truck on purpose (she’s been really unhappy lately); a roo jumped out; the truckie fell asleep and swerved towards them and they ran off the road (of course he’ll never be able to tell his side of the story).

When she opens her eyes, Cheryl is unaware of this gossip. She’s unaware of anything, other than the fact that she is in a hushed semi-darkened room and that outside the room there are sounds of life and movement. She listens. Footsteps echo in a corridor. Something with squeaking wheels rattles along the floor. Muted voices. A cry. In the distance a car door slams. A dog barks. Someone revs the guts out of a car engine. Tiny pinprick specks of light poke through the stitching on a blind pulled tight over the window. She squints and peers into the specks for a long time. After a while she looks around and sees she is alone in a room containing three other beds, all empty, the sheets pulled tight. Strange, yet familiar. Her skin prickles. Is she being watched? She inhales deeply and releases her breath into the eerily quiet room, as though testing that she is alive. She closes her eyes and falls back into sleep.

When she wakes properly the second day after the accident, Cheryl slowly sits up on the bed and dangles her feet over the edge. Her belly contracts excruciatingly and her legs throb. She cramps up with what feels like the worst period pain ever.
and thinks that this must be the reason she’s here. Perplexed, she looks down at her softly rounded belly, at the arm bandaged by her side and back around the room.

Sensing movement in the darkest corner of the room, she sees someone hovering. Standing still, a spray bottle in her hand aimed at a bunch of gaudy supermarket flowers, her mouth poised as though on the verge of speaking. Cheryl shakes her head, trying to put a name to the face. She knows she’s seen her somewhere before, but can’t place her. She lies back down, curls into foetal position, hugs her throbbing belly close to her thighs with her good arm and tries to make sense of time and place.

Corazon moves calmly towards the button beside Cheryl’s bed and presses it once, summoning staff to the bedside. She rests the back of her hand on Cheryl’s cheek and smiles softly into her baffled eyes.

‘You must be resting now. They will be here soon.’

Cheryl tries to sit up again, but now other hands press down on her shoulders, holding her firmly to the hard bed. Corazon glides away with a barely perceptible glance over her shoulder. Cheryl gives in to the hands and voices pressing her down and closes her eyes.

A throaty male voice reaches her.

‘Just lie down, Cheryl, okay?’

She picks up other muttered words but cannot process them adequately. *Afterpains. Not yet. No, tell her later.* Her good arm is lifted then thumped to her side. Something is ripping close to her ear. *Velcro, but why?* She inhales the clean antiseptic sting of hospital hygiene. Why is she at work? She hasn’t nursed since well before the twins were born. She senses efficiency. Something tightens on her arm.
A heartbeat thumps loudly from somewhere outside her body.

‘What . . . ?’

‘Shh,’ a gentle but firm female voice, ‘close your eyes, Cheryl. That’s a girl. Be good.’

She tries to disobey. Doesn’t want to be good, cannot comply. Heat roars through her veins—then nothing.

***

Corazon leaves the hospital shortly after Cheryl is sent back into unknowingness. She stands by the side of the main road waiting for the bus that will take her on the twenty minute ride to the house where she lives. She doesn’t call it home, even though it has been three years since she first arrived to live there with her new but already old husband. She’d carried in her handbag the paperwork that proved she was an Australian daughter. Her battered suitcase had been filled with her brand new clothing. Clothing that soon other men’s wives would tell her was too bright, too showy, too sheer for this red dirt-stained town.

*We only want to help you belong . . . We’re pretty ordinary around here . . . Practical and simple. That’s how we’d like it to stay. That outfit, well it’s just too—too . . .

Even before she’d left her country of birth after Eric visited to meet her in person, the disappointments had begun to accumulate. Disappointments like finding out that Eric’s photos were at least twenty years old. That the man who wrote
flowery letters to her, was a shuffling, old-before-his-time man with a nervous tic in his left eyelid and a tendency to stutter slightly when embarrassed.

Then there was the disappointment of discovering that the Pilbara was nowhere near the Sydney Opera House, that place she’d thought she’d visit on weekends. Corazon’s late father was Australian but she’d still gone through some of the bureaucratic processes other Filipinas went through in order to become Australian wives. In the grainy movie they’d shown her at the embassy, she’d seen that Sydney was a place where people laughed in the sunshine as they sailed by on beautiful white painted yachts, waving at the cameras. *Follow the river down there and turn off and you are in the ridgy-didge outback—God’s own country,* the man at the embassy had said, tracing the line of the Hawkesbury then pointing towards the row of filing cabinets off to the side of the room. *God’s own country,* that’s what she thinks she remembers her father had called it too.

But the biggest disappointment of all came when she’d discovered she was expected to live in this red dirt town, named after a famous Australian bush poet who’d never been anywhere near the place. This place was a barely visible pinprick on only the newest of Australian maps, an iron-ore town near the edge of a torpid dull grey sea and separated from Sydney by an enormous expanse of nothing.

Yet looking up into the Pilbara night sky that first time with Eric three years earlier, seeing the way his eyes lit up she’d been briefly reassured when he’d said *home is any place where there is love in the heart.* Once he’d shyly uttered those words, with barely a sign of his stutter, she’d managed to set aside the memory of the neighbours. They’d lined the street that afternoon on the pretext of watering their front gardens, to watch and smirk as Old Eric Wozniak proudly brought home his
bride. She’d flinched and turned away as the nasty man from the house next door stood in his front garden, yelling so loudly that everyone in the street could surely hear, *I’ll bet she knows a few tricks in the cot, you lucky old bastard.* She was young, but not too young to know how people’s tongues and minds worked. Gossip was gossip, whichever country you were in.

Corazon knows every twist and bump in the road that takes her to that place where she lives. She knows that the driver will wink as she boards.

‘Owsitgoin’love? And she knows that she will smile and nod and think as she sits nearby, *It is going not as well as I would like, but thank you for asking.* And once seated, some of the more unruly of the high school children will laugh and joke and swear, throwing bags and scrunched up paper around the bus and the bus driver will sigh and yell to them to pick up that bloody lot before they get off, then look across at her and wink again.

*Kids huh?* And she will smile and nod again, while inside she’s more wretched than she could ever express. The words that were once waiting on the tip of her tongue for the right time to be spoken, words to bond her with other parents, seem to have disappeared.

She knows that the school bus will drop her off on the corner of her street with anywhere between two and five young students who attend the district high school up the road from the hospital in the next town. She knows that the two girls who live next door with their mother and a man who is not their father will wave to her as they part at her driveway. And she knows that if the boys who live further up the street are
on the bus, they will be ruder than ever before, making jiggy-jiggy signs behind her back, mimicking her in a sing-song voice as she walks away from them.

Once, she gathered up enough courage to say something, complaining to the boys’ parents and then to Eric. They’d laughed in her face and Eric told her to stop embarrassing him, to get a sense of humour if she wanted to belong here. She’d retreated back into the miserable little brick box, stopped catching the bus, ceased going to the hospital for the rest of that week and all of the next. But before long she could not bear the sound of her own breathing within the ugly grey-painted walls and almost looked forward to an encounter with the students. The next Monday she was there, lined up with them to catch the school bus to the small modern hospital in the newer, larger town with its better facilities and miniature shopping mall.

Standing by the roadside now, Corazon also knows that in just over half an hour, she will let herself into Eric’s clay brick mausoleum; she will walk through the rooms touching furniture and photographs as though willing them to life. She will go to the cupboard under the kitchen sink, the one place other than the laundry where Eric would never dream of looking. She will hesitate for a moment or two before reaching carefully behind the empty jam and pickled onion jars and clasping the throat of the cool glass bottle to maneuver the gin out of the cupboard.

The bus seems to be taking forever to come today. Corazon checks her watch for what feels like at least the tenth time and remembers that her life is no longer entirely predictable. Not since the other night.

She’d felt the resentment gradually escalating over the last couple of years, festering and bubbling like pus under the surface of her too thin skin. This was not the life she was promised. This Australia did not match the stories she vaguely
remembered from childhood. This Australia did not match the photographs, postcards or the poetry her father read out loud from the pages of his musty dog-eared poetry book. Nor did it match the outdated super-8 movie shown to her by Australian embassy staff in Manila before she’d migrated. And this tiny iron-ore town perched on a grey sea and a desolate wasteland of scrub and hard rock did not resemble at all the *most kindly and bountiful land* that Eric had described in his letters.

For three years Corazon had held the hurt and anger in. Why had she finally erupted? She can barely believe that it was only two nights ago. She hadn’t really expected to be invited by the new manager’s wife to play in the ladies’ social tennis competition and was taken aback when the wife stopped outside the bottle shop and asked. She’d quickly invented an excuse not to go along. When Eric asked her why she didn’t join in, why she didn’t stop being so *aloof and acting like a damn foreigner*, she’d finally broken, scaring even herself.

*It isn’t about the tennis. They hate me. Like I hate you—fool old man!*  

And without knowing quite how it happened, she’d squeezed his dry old neck in her hands. Realising just in time what she was doing, she’d panicked and fled, the metal flyscreen door slamming loudly shut behind her. She ran down the street towards Peace Park, shaking as she entered, at once overawed and empowered by her capacity to cause physical harm. She’d passed the tennis club on the edge of the park where she knew that tonight, the management wives’ doubles team challenged the staff wives under the brand new floodlights paid for by the gas company based in the nearby town, on the proviso their employees had equal access to the courts.
That night, after she’d passed the tennis club and entered the park, she’d tucked herself in behind a huge stand of Golden Cane palms, rocking and weeping silently, clawing at her palms with her sharp nails until her lifeline all but disappeared under the prickling blood. She stayed there until the tennis club lights flicked off one by one and the last car door slammed shut, the wheels crunching and spinning in the gravel before speeding off toward the bitumen road leading back into town.

Only then had Corazon calmed down enough to lie down on the scratchy buffalo lawn, staring up at the starlit canopy. It had seemed almost incomprehensible that this was the same sky that had excited her with its immensity on her first night here as Eric’s wife. Eric had led her outside that night, his wiry arm guiding her to the middle of the surprisingly lush back garden, telling her to keep her eyes closed until he told her she could open them.

*Look up now my girly, open your eyes. The whole universe is out there for you.*

She’d squealed as one falling star was followed by another.

*Your sky, it is dripping with stars!* She’d looked shyly into his face and seen kindness reflected back. His voice back then was still soft and gentle, and sounded almost like the one she’d imagined her future husband would have, when he’d written his earliest letters to her. While they stood and looked up at that space connecting everybody in the entire world, she’d allowed his voice and the warm night to wash her reservations away.

She knew she was considered something of an oddity in her first couple of years, not quite fitting into this place with its unwritten yet very specific rules. She was young enough to have a baby, but to the women of the town, she didn’t seem in a hurry to have one, despite not being employed fulltime onsite like many of the
childless women. One well-meaning woman, the wife of Eric’s supervisor, had told her at least once what her problem was. You play your cards too close to your chest for your own good. People can’t trust someone like that. We’re all in this together, it’s like a sisterhood. After that, Corazon had tried harder. She told some of them about her Australian father and about growing up in the orphanage in the Philippines run by an Australian priest, to show them she was perhaps a little more like them than they’d first thought. And for a while, she was at least partially accepted and invited to participate socially in the various bring-a-plate occasions. She’d taught herself to cook new recipes from the pages of the New Idea and Australian Women’s Weekly; food to make her seem more like these other women. A fruit cake, a carrot and walnut cake iced with Philadelphia brand cream cheese, even a pavlova. But she knew some looked down upon her, even considered her a threat in her too tight too bright clothing according to that same well-meaning woman who’d told her what was wrong with her in the early days.

They don’t appear to see it and she pretends not to care, but for over three years now, Corazon tried to remove as much of her old self as possible. She dresses like them, has her hair streaked and styled in the same spiral perms and cooks sausages or mutton chops with peas and mashed potatoes for tea. And though she is not paid, she has a little job, just like some of them. For the last one and a half of those years, on the nights that Eric is not driving his precious train, she’s stared at the ceiling as Eric thumped his tired little thing into her. She’s more or less resigned now to the likelihood that each month, the space inside her that she’d thought would fill with babies and love, will flow over with blood and hate. Each month she wants to tell him no more, that there is no point in allowing him to have sex if there is to be no
baby. That instead of new life, she only ever feels the weight of loneliness growing heavier in her belly.

The school bus is late. Why today, of all days? An assortment of cars and four-wheel-drives rush by, air-conditioned capsules driven by mothers on their way to the kindergarten and primary schools to pick up children. The day is warm, not really too hot for children to be walking home. Though most women won’t admit it, Corazon knows that the sun provides an excuse for some of them to drive the short distance to school, to park a little earlier than necessary and wait outside the classrooms to chat to other mothers seeking adult conversation. The new manager’s wife approaches in her shiny new Range Rover. She slows down when she sees Corazon then speeds up again, shrugging her shoulders and pulling a face as she passes, as if to say sorry, I am not going your way, though clearly she is.

Corazon leans forward and cups her hand above her eyes, looking into the distance for the bus that will take her away from Cheryl’s slowly unraveling nightmare. She follows the bitumen road with her eyes, tracking the white line until it disappears. It is barely a kilometre to the spot where she imagines the smell of spilled diesel fuel will still linger in the air. She imagines the scene—yellow police tape, broken glass, two garish chalk outlines on the road; one large, one small. Flattened spinifex littered with fragments of broken windscreen glass, a broken toy, an old magazine, a tiny shoe, a child’s cup. Trophies that will encourage a number of the town’s children and adults to become amateur sleuths, dissecting the evidence.

Not ready to face the empty house just yet, Corazon gets off the bus a few stops early and walks along the dirt path through the park to the shops. The Paterson shops have
been suffering since the new shopping centre opened in Lawson. Sometimes she’ll be one of only a handful there, even on pay day. She wonders how long until the shops close down altogether, leaving her without easy access to food and gin, dependent on Eric driving her into Lawson. Maybe she should learn to drive? It can’t be that hard.

She throws a few frozen meals into her trolley, picks a large bottle of tonic water off the shelf and heads to the only checkout open today. She picks up a magazine from beside the checkout and puts it on the conveyer belt with her groceries. *Battered Wives: Australia’s Silent Minority*, shout the big red letters across the top of the front page. She wonders if the checkout girl thinks she’s buying the magazine for that article.

On the night she’d nearly strangled Eric, she’d eventually returned from the park to their house. Eric had already left. They’d each have a week to calm down. She realised she’d been out so long that the sun would be up in a few hours. She could visualize him already heading out into the endless nothingness that he loved, squinting eyes glued to the track. Perhaps, in an attempt to forget her violence, he’d be imagining the Poland of his childhood, a little cottage filled with blond children and a rosy-cheeked adoring mother stirring soup over the stove, as Corazon had seen on an old television movie late one night.

In her first weeks in Paterson, Corazon had once asked him what he thought about as he guided the snaking train with its empty freight carriages along the tracks deeper inland to collect ore.

*I let my mind go silent. I think about nothing.*
She doesn’t believe that. It is impossible to think about nothing. She’s tried often enough, though. She remembers again, when they’d tried to impress one another with long and beautiful letters, before they met and it all began to go wrong.

If she were writing now to someone new, she would start like this: *Please help me; I am trapped inside the walls of a dying marriage.* It is something that she heard someone say once on talkback radio late at night when she was alone.

Just one week before she came to Australia, Corazon told a young fisherman she’d just met that she loved the feel of the ocean on her skin more than almost anything. Barely more than a boy, he’d held her hand tightly and ran with her to the edge of the long jetty. *One, two, three!* Together they’d jumped, holding hands until they hit the water. Down, down into the cool depths of the Indian Ocean, holding her breath until she thought she’d explode. Her lungs stinging with trapped air. They surfaced at the same time, ears popping, gasping for breath, eyes stinging from the salt water. Laughing and looking at each other then quickly away before she swam to the rusted old ladder down the side of the jetty and returned home. She sometimes wonders what it might have felt like to kiss the young man, to feel his fingertips trace around her lips and her nipples. To be mutually hungry to taste and touch one another.

Eric is different to her. His spirit soars highest when he’s away from the ocean and from the little town that is growing too fast and too big for him. The further inland he goes, the less tension he carries locked inside. In the days when they’d not yet met, he wrote the words that explained that to her. And he’d written of hating the ocean ever since being sent away as a young war orphan on a creaky old ship that terrified him. She’d cried upon reading his story about being sick the whole way to
the strange country and of being tied to a rope and dangled over the side of the ship as a joke, by boys only slightly older than he. Before she knew Eric, really knew him, she’d felt sad whenever she thought of that little boy. She sometimes wonders where she’d be now if the boy had fallen into the water and drowned.

When Eric gets to his great gaping gash in the earth, his precious iron-ore mine, he will probably laugh and joke and hide his true feelings again when his work friends ask when he and Bangkok Betty are going to start having babies. He’d told her all about the ribbing from his workmates, without the Bangkok Betty part. But she had ears, she was no fool. It seems to her that to be a true Australian, you must find people’s weaknesses and point them out to others. Then you must repeat this until you feel taller and stronger. So long as you smile and say *only joking*, it seems there are no boundaries.

Corazon puts the plastic shopping bags down on the ground and wrestles with the key to open the security door. Her head aches, either from the sun or thirsting for gin and tonic. She’s noticed lately that every afternoon around four-thirty, she grows edgy or headachey.

In a few days Eric will return. Things will be different then. No doubt he’ll be more tired than ever before, his shoulders tight, his body tensing as he approaches the coast. His engine will crawl to the edge of town, dragging up to two kilometres of carriages filled to the brim with ore, and he’ll look as though he himself had carried that load. As the ore is emptied into the hold of a huge red ship, he’ll make for home. Perhaps this time, before climbing into his old car and heading up the hill towards his
house, he’d brush his weathered old neck and wonder if her fingers really had gripped him like that.

*I am trapped inside the walls of a dying marriage.* Corazon imagines that back in Lawson, in the shiny new community hospital, Cheryl is having crazy messed up dreams in a drug-induced sleep. She recently saw a science program on the ABC about that kind of thing. She hopes Cheryl is still oblivious to the devastation of her family.
Four

Catherine goes to see Cheryl in hospital in the quiet space between afternoon and evening visiting hours. She walks in through the service entry, past the kitchen, down the hallway past the visiting doctors’ rooms and tiptoes into the darkened room at the end of the corridor. She pulls her hair over her ears to conceal the multiple studs and sleepers, checks that her tattoos are mostly covered by her sleeves, then pats the pockets of the oversized man’s button-up khaki work shirt she wears to ensure the treasures she saved from the car wreckage last night are still there. Cheryl will be so pleased. Since deciding to come and see Cheryl this morning, Catherine has imagined the conversation they’ll have. They’ve got something in common now, something most people could never begin to understand. Maybe they won’t talk about that today, but that’s okay, they’re bonded. She thinks that she’ll make small talk to begin with, maybe share the news about her daughter coming home at last. My daughter. Hard to believe Lila is practically an adult now.

But when she gets to Cheryl’s room and sees her lying there looking shocked and isolated, Catherine remembers with a jolt the night she’d come home late to see the caravan on fire, the park residents trying to put the flames out. The terror—were Charlie and Lila in there? Then—Lila in Suze’s arms. But where was Charlie? Now, scrabbling to pull her thoughts together in Cheryl’s hospital room, Catherine is tongue-tied, too ashamed to speak. She wants to back out of the room and run away from her foolish attempt to offer support to Cheryl, but instead sits on the edge of the chair at the foot of the bed. Cheryl does not seem remotely interested in the fact that someone has come to visit her. Catherine wonders if she looked like that. Did she
build a wall around herself so that people were afraid to talk to her, too? No, it was
different then. She’d wanted to talk. But everybody had blamed her. She still sensed
it every time someone pretended to be concerned about her.

After a few minutes pass, Catherine speaks in a strangely formal voice that
sounds to her as though it belongs to someone else.

‘It is not too hot outside today, not really, for this time of year.’

There is no reply. Catherine squirms. It’s not the first time she’s tried to engage
somebody in conversation and not had a reply. There have been occasions when
she’s actually wondered if she is invisible. She tried to explain this to a doctor once,
a year or two after Lila was taken away, but he’d ignored her and written out a
prescription for something to give her mind a rest from all the over-thinking.

She sits awkwardly and looks at Cheryl, willing her to take notice. Should she
clear her throat to try and draw attention to herself? Sometimes that works. She’s
about to do that when Cheryl eases herself out of bed and walks unsteadily past her
visitor, oblivious to the fact that her gown gapes at the back. Catherine moves
toward the door and watches Cheryl’s back as she moves slowly down the corridor towards
the nurse’s station. She’s so thin from behind that Catherine thinks anyone seeing her
would never guess that she’d just given birth.

‘Where are my twins?’ Cheryl demands as she approaches the nurses.

The two nurses, who’ve been quietly chatting and laughing for the past hour, are
startled. One, a pretty girl Cheryl has never seen before, speaks.

‘Um, Cheryl, you need to be in bed. Can you come with me . . . ?’

The other one, vaguely familiar to Cheryl, stands and walks toward her with her
hand outstretched. She keeps her eyes pinned to Cheryl’s chest, avoiding eye contact.
‘No!’ Cheryl insists, but turns and allows the younger of the two women to drape a towelling dressing gown over her shoulders, and the other to take her hand and lead her gently back to the room.

Catherine is gone. Cheryl does not acknowledge her absence. On the pillow are two little dolls, Raggedy Anne and Andy, the dolls Jaimee and Tessa take everywhere. The girls do not prefer one over the other, so long as they each have a doll to cuddle they are content. Cheryl climbs back into bed and brings the dolls to her chest, then to her nose, searching for the scent of her children. But there is only the smell of Dettol, as though somebody has scrubbed these dolls clean before leaving them on her pillow.

‘And my baby. . .’ Cheryl looks around the room, ‘. . . where is she?’

It takes a while, but finally they bring her to Cheryl. A tiny scrap with a shock of brown hair and a startled expression on her face. It seems everyone in the hospital has found an excuse to be in or near her room, so the two nurses are kept busy edging everybody away. The vaguely familiar one closes the door as the doctor ceremoniously places the baby in the cradle of Cheryl’s good arm.

‘She’s a little miracle,’ the young nurse, adjusting the baby, tells Cheryl in a brighter than bright voice.

‘What are you . . .?’

Cheryl catches the doctor’s warning glare at the sunny-voiced nurse.

‘It’s okay, Cheryl,’ he says. ‘Relax. Everything is going to be fine.’

‘Where are the twins?’ she demands. ‘And Neil, where is he?’

***
No one is quite sure later how it happened that the hospital volunteer became a sort of unofficial carer to Cheryl and her baby. Not that they’re complaining. They’ll take what assistance is offered, and Corazon seems to have a knack with both Cheryl and the baby. The hospital may be new and modern, opened to great fanfare just a few months earlier by the Western Australian Premier, but the staff are still more or less the same overworked skeleton crew from the now disused hospital annexe tacked onto the side of the old Doctor’s rooms in Paterson, the older town where Corazon lives.

On about the fourth day after the accident, when Cheryl’s breasts have become painful and engorged with milk, Corazon helps her position the baby girl so she is able to latch on to her breast with her mouth, kneading and snuffling ecstatically, as though she had always known that this was where she belonged. When she looks down at the mop of fine downy hair, Cheryl feels a tiny pulse of warmth spread through her chest. But it stops, and she draws her eyes towards the window when she remembers her situation.

She turns toward the door, hearing it gently creak open, and is momentarily blinded by a flash of light.

There’s a photo of Cheryl on the front page of both the local and *The West Australian* newspapers the next day. Her dark fringe covers one eye and her fine features look haggard, giving her usually pretty face an almost cold appearance. *WHAT COST A LIFE?* screams the headline in *The West*. 
They manage to keep the papers away from Cheryl for a few days, but she sees the article when a bunch of gerberas wrapped in the old front page arrive for her on a flight from Perth. And when she reads it she discovers that the cadet reporter, only in his second week in town, seems to know more than she does about what happened the night of the accident.
Five

Eager to begin their new life, Mark had picked the earliest flight north. It was still dark when they’d arrived by taxi at the airport, pulling up behind another taxi with a slightly demented looking teenager with black lips and frizzy hair struggling to remove a battered suitcase from the boot.

They’d said their goodbyes to friends and family in Perth last night and Sam feels dehydrated after too many Vodka and Tonic UDL’s from the motel fridge. It’s still dark when they take off. Sam has a window seat and the last thing she sees of Perth are the suburban lights twinkling like stars. She feels a wave of nostalgia for the city she claims she’s always hated and wonders how long it will be until she’s able to laugh about finally making the escape from Perth—not to London or New York as she’d always dreamed, but to some backwater mining town in the north-west of the State.

She has a new hairstyle and completely new outfit, right down to her underwear, for this occasion. Her friends told her she looked like Princess Diana when she turned up at their farewell drinks with the new hairstyle. For much of the flight, the first she’s ever taken, she can’t help thinking of Billy, sedated in his airfreight container in the plane’s cargo hold. They’d thought about leaving him behind with her mother, but decided they couldn’t bear to be without their big fluffy boy. He’d just have to learn to use a litter tray and stay in the cool air conditioning if it was too hot.

Despite the hangover and early morning start, Sam feels quite glamorous in her new clothes. She spends some of the flight flicking through the women’s magazines.
the hostesses bring to her, but mostly looks out the window as the new day emerges and civilisation as she knows it is left further behind.

Mark, trying not to think too much about the big change they’re undertaking, discovers that he’s read the first seventy-two pages of Sam’s copy of *An Open Swimmer* when it is time to buckle seat belts and get ready for landing. He’s quite impressed with himself. He hasn’t read a novel since he was forced to read something by that Steinbeck bloke when he was back in year ten. What was it, something about a retard and his brother? He’d actually quite liked that book, even though it was as miserable as hell. Funny, now he thinks about it, that he never got around to reading another one after that.

In the fortnight before the move Sam went mad, buying books as if there was no likelihood of ever seeing a bookshop again. He felt repulsed when he saw her greed, and told her so.

They never usually argued. That was one of their sickening traits, according to some of their friends. They were just too cute to be real. But the last few months had taken their toll. Packing up and saying goodbye to friends and family had been stressful enough. There was so much to organise in so little time. Then, on a whim, they’d decided to tie the knot. So when the first cracks appeared in the relationship a few weeks before the flight—well, it was hardly a surprise, was it?

Sam had been all for letting the removalists pack everything they owned and sending it up to their new home. They could stick all the extra stuff into some of the bedrooms that would be empty for years anyway. *I’m not having kids till I’m twenty-nine at least, and we don’t have to pay for the move, so why not?* Mark was all for streamlining, making use of the company-provided furniture they’d be getting and
culling some of the clutter that they’d accumulated over the three years they’d lived together.

*Drunk with your own importance*, she’d said to him when he told her he didn’t want to abuse the situation that had allowed them to have extra money in their bank account. *This money*, he read out to her from an official letter sent by the company, *is provided to assist with various sundry relocation expenses*. Her attitude irritated him beyond words. It was not, he said, money that was there to buy Miss Fancypants a personal library. Sam was silenced by that. Just this morning as they waited for the plane to take off, she’d told him she almost didn’t show for the wedding they’d hastily planned at the local beer garden to take place two days before they were due to leave.

Now whenever Sam picks up one of the five books she’d tucked into her carry-on luggage to tide her over until their belongings arrived on a truck in a week or so, she feels exposed. *Is* she materialistic? She doesn’t think so, or at least hadn’t up until their fight. She hopes she’ll actually be able to bring herself to read the books one day. The hostess brings her an orange juice and she sighs. She is still a little shell-shocked by the ugliness of Mark’s words, the coldness in his grey eyes. She doesn’t tell him this, he’d never get it. He’d probably sulk. She realises this is her first wife-type secret and wonders if now that she is married, this is how it will be between them.

Mark’s almost forgotten about the fight that had started over books. Blokes seem better able to have it out and then move on. Well, that’s his theory anyway. Since the
opening paragraph of *An Open Swimmer* he’d been hooked, dreaming his way into his new life as a fitter, more outdoorsy kind of man, like Jerra.

‘Fishing’s unreal they say.’ He looks up from the book at his new wife. It feels weird, to think of being married. He doesn’t feel any different.

‘What?’ She’s annoyed with him for switching off as soon as the plane took off.

‘At our new home.’ He rolls the word *home* around on his tongue, liking the way it feels. His mates were all so envious when he told them where they were going—thirty bucks a week for a furnished house, bills subsidised, no worries, no stress, fishing, camping, wide open spaces. He nearly laughs aloud as he remembers Paulie at the barby before they left, toasting them with Bundy swigged straight from the bottle, swaying and slipping and nearly falling right into the Weber barbecue as he gave them a send-off speech. *You’ll fucken have it made you lucky cunts.*

‘Paulie reckons someone told him you can chuck a line in off the beach and catch huge fish—snapper, coral trout, and without bait sometimes too.’

Sam sighs and puts down her magazine, folding it so that it stays open on the page about the romantic chain of events leading up to the conception of what will be Princess Diana and Prince Charles’ second child. She looks at him, readjusts her face and wonders if she looks attentive.

As Mark and Sam step onto the mobile steps to disembark, Sam thinks she’ll cease breathing. How can it be so early, and already so hot? She gasps as the sun sears her eyeballs, her ears filling with heat. It feels as though they’ve stepped into a huge oven. Clutching Mark’s upper arm and walking across the sticky tarmac towards the shed that appears to be the terminal, she remembers the recurring dream from her
childhood about sinking further and deeper into quicksand, unable to scream for help. Despite herself, she taps Mark’s arm and giggles at the sight of the red-haired woman standing at the wire and steel gate, puffing on a cigarette as though there were no tomorrow.

‘Jesus Christ,’ she splutters through the side of her mouth, ‘It’s Eileen Bond’s country cousin.’

The woman looks to be about forty-something. She has that particular style of brassy copper-coloured hair that certain types of middle-aged Perth women have adopted lately, wears an ill-fitting cheap business suit with massive shoulder pads, and has the worst smoker’s cough Sam thinks she has ever heard. Sam tells herself to remember that it’s 8.30 AM when they arrive in their new life, give or take a few minutes.

The middle-aged woman greets the couple outside the terminal next to a wire gate manned by a bored looking little man. She introduces herself as Suze Murray. Sam and Mark are the only couple disembarking today. The rest of the passengers appear to be sole travellers. There are a few women and a teenage girl with Madonna’s crimped hair, heavily kohled eyes and a glued-on scowl. But mostly they seem to be male workers in polo-style shirts carrying small canvas bags.

Suze taps her vinyl clipboard as though checking off many arrivals rather than just the two. She tells them many of the men rush to the bar for a last beer before flying out on choppers to work on oil rigs where they aren’t allowed to drink alcohol until they get back here between two weeks and one month later.

Suze’s lips appear to be permanently pursed. Sam thinks of her nana and wonders if Suze has had a lifetime of chain-smoking, too. Her ill-matched powder
highlights the wrinkles extending from her lips almost to her cheeks. Sam, who hasn’t slept properly since yesterday, can’t quite believe how hot she is right now. She feels like throwing up when Suze breathes on her.

Suze doesn’t notice though. She talks quickly, telling them about her role as a public relations representative.

‘I meet new people and settle them in; it’s a brand new role. I’m creating the job description for meself as I go.’

Ten minutes later, they collect their bags and a sulking Billy from a tractor parked beside the shed-like structure that serves as an air terminal. The series of mismatched trailers look as though they’d been whacked together in somebody’s backyard shed and the baggage handler wears an Akubra hat and Hawaiian shirt.

‘That’s Ern,’ says Suze, ‘He details the hire cars and cleans the terminal between flights. See the trailer rego? That’s our new shire motto... Community of the Future.’

Sam finds herself laughing out loud at her first impression of the community-of-the-future. But she softens a little as Suze fusses over the groggy and pissed-off Billy, who responds by hissing and trying to scratch her through the plastic bars of the travel crate.

Suze settles Sam, Mark, Billy and their three bags of belongings into the hire car they will drive until their own car arrives on the transport vehicle later in the week. Turning to look back at the taxi bay before getting in the car, she pauses for a moment to take in the oddly dressed teenage girl painted in black and white make-up. The girl, who looks to be around the same age as her daughter Beth, stares back at
her. Suze turns away and gets into the Commodore. There’s something about the girl besides her strange make up —something Suze can’t put her finger on. She turns the key, gives the car a few revs for good measure, and points it down the long straight airport access road toward the main road.

‘That road,’ Suze tells them, pointing ahead and waving her hand, ‘wraps around town, and runs all the way back this way to the next one. Sit by the side long enough and you’ll see everyone, sooner or later.’ She shudders as she thinks of what happened a few nights ago and is relieved that they will turn off before they reach the stretch of road where the crash occurred.

At the end of the access road she pauses the car and tells Mark it’s left for their new place, right for the plant and the other town.

‘That other town—Paterson,’ she says scornfully, ‘is a dirty closed ore town. The only good thing about that hole is the beach—don’t worry, there’s a steel cage to keep the sharks out. The two parks are okay too. One’s on the beach, looks like a fake tropical island. It was designed twenty years ago by an eccentric gardener employed by the only company that was up here then. Oh, and the pizzas they sometimes make at the pub on a Saturday night are pretty good. Huh, maybe there’s more good stuff there than I’d realised. . . . Reckon he must have had a sense of humour that one, trying to create a tropical paradise in the rock and ore dust near that shitty beach.’

Sam wants to ask when she can see the fake tropical island, what Suze means by a closed town, a shark cage, and why there are pizzas only sometimes on a Saturday. But Suze is talking way too fast and making plans with Mark to give them a more thorough guided tour in a couple of days with a few other new people, after he and
Sam have had some rest and checked out the new house. Sam can’t get a word in. Overtired, she is put out by the way Suze stuck her in the back seat with the cat without asking where she’d like to sit. Suze hasn’t asked her one question, either.

Suze turns the air conditioning up high and tells them to expect to take a while to settle in and become used to the heat.

‘It’s mostly dry heat but it gets a bit like Asia sometimes, humid when the cyclones are out there. Sorta like Bali. You’ve been there of course?’

She shakes her head incredulously when they say no, they haven’t been to Bali. She’s just returned from her first trip there herself, but she doesn’t share that.

‘That seems almost un-Australian, you know, not to have been to Bali. There’s even a song about it. You must have heard that?’

They turn left after letting a small convoy of white utilities and a Toyota personnel carrier pass.

‘Construction, must be smoko time,’ says Suze cryptically. ‘Cyclone just missed the town a few weeks back—crossed further south. Wrecked one station house and its buildings, took the roof off a road house. All we copped here was loads of rain.’

She tells them the road in was closed for three days and the plant had to shut until they could get staff through. All of this means little to Sam, still pondering the significance of Suze’s term construction. Sam’s surprised by how beautiful and soft everything outside the tinted car windows looks. She’d been expecting a dry desert—a dustbowl, with grey or brown foliage. Looking behind as the car picks up speed, she gasps at the contrast between the rich red-brown granite rocks and surprisingly green long grass, rippling in the breeze.

‘Is that spinifex?’
The top half of the immense turquoise sky is filled with fluffy cotton wool clouds wafting above the vast landscape. Sam feels calmer than she has since Mark first started pushing to move here. Perhaps she is going to like this place, after all.

‘Is this how it always looks?’ Sam asks, unsure if her earlier question had been heard or she’s just being ignored.

But Suze has moved on to the subject of staff relations. ‘Staff are scum... treat everyone like shit... Oops, shoulda checked. Are youse staff or wages?’

Suze releases an uneasy laugh, looking sideways across to Mark in the front seat. Mark, unsure what Suze means, tells her, ‘I don’t know, I’m just a worker.’

Suze bites her lip and nods as he continues. ‘Just two years out of my apprenticeship.’

She seems happy enough with that answer and leans back and asks Sam, ‘What do you mean? The green? The clouds?’

‘It’s just, well, nicer than I expected,’ says Sam.

‘There’s a bit of magic happening. The window tint makes everything look soft and as soon as there’s a sniff of rain in the summer it transforms into a bit of an oasis. It’s a bit of trickery really. Step outside and it’s more grey than green.’

They drive a few moments more before she adds, ‘And yeah, that’s spinifex, bloody prickly mongrel bastard stuff it is, too. Don’t be fooled. It’ll rip the crap out of your legs.’

Ten minutes after leaving the airport, the car turns into a straight long street lined with matching brick houses. Suze pulls over to the side of the road.

‘Here ya go. Your first look at your new life.’
Some houses still appear unfinished, the steel frames and incomplete brickwork visible. Those that are complete mostly have cream brick walls, colourbond roofs and mesh fencing around their postage-stamp sized blocks. Sam looks around. There are two main styles of house, some surrounded by wooden palings threaded through high wire fences, others without fencing. Occasionally a slightly different house is under construction, their red brick and smaller, boxy shape making them stand out.

Suze keeps talking and starts to slowly roll the car forward. Now she sounds like a Member of Parliament reading from a press release.

‘Thanks to some lobbying from various prominent community members we are incorporating a number of state and private houses into the suburb in order to make it more diverse—an interesting concept.’

The verges of the finished houses are devoid of greenery. Instead they’re filled with red-brown gravel. Each completed house seems to have a wispy bougainvillea, a few straggly lantana and oleander and some yellow-flowered shrubs Sam doesn’t recognise planted inside a concrete border around the edge of a patchy lawn. After every few houses there is a break and a cul-de-sac or crescent bearing an English or European surname. Sam wonders if the company knew they were filling the gardens of their orderly brick suburbs with toxic plants. She’d learned a few things when she worked in a plant nursery while she put herself through her history degree at uni. By the time she’d graduated, she’d learned so much it’d seemed she was practically a horticulturalist. She’d never really managed to put her history degree to use, working in the local library as a clerk. She’d been asked to apply for a research assistant’s job at the university in the history department, just weeks before they were due to move. She didn’t even bother telling Mark. He was so excited about going north, about
making the big bucks, starting a new life in an almost-new town. Driving past a large
block that appears to be some sort of construction site office, she resents him a bit as
it dawns on her that it’s unlikely she’ll ever get an opportunity like that again.

Suze stops again, in the middle of the road this time. There are no other cars,
and Sam thinks that all the people, if indeed there are any, must be tucked safely
inside their air-conditioned homes.

‘You are lucky, you know, being here in the new end of town,’ Suze says. ‘Up
here you’ll see none of the old asbestos state housing dumps, no construction people
crammed like sardines into private rentals.’

Suze drives slowly. Presumably, Sam thinks, to allow them to look at their new
neighbourhood. Sam wishes she’d just hurry up and get them to their house. She’s
had enough of the tour.

‘About to move up to this end with our daughter Beth,’ Suze goes on, ‘she’s
training to be a retail manager, at just sixteen. Barney, the old man, he’s just accepted
a job with the company too.’

She tells them they’ll practically be neighbours. They’ll only be one street
away, there’s only an alleyway between them. ‘We could walk and visit . . . if we
want to. My old man’s wages too—a leccy. Grew up in the bush, then started his
apprenticeship when he was about twenty-two in Raethorpe, just an hour up the
road—that’s where I met him. Then we moved around a bit before . . .’ She breaks
off and shapes her lips into a smile. ‘Well anyway, we came and stayed.’

This comment, like ninety percent of them, is directed at Mark, who already
senses that it is important he know his place in the pecking order of the workforce.
He supposes he should tell her he’s an electrician too, so that if they meet again at
one of the many social occasions Suze has already rabbited on about, she doesn’t consider him rude. But then Suze turns off to the right and the moment passes.

‘This is it, your new street, well way, actually. Your new house—number seven Hansard Way.’

The houses all appear finished and several show signs that they are already somebody’s homes: a metal rubbish bin left out, a bike thrown down carelessly in the front garden, different vegetation hopefully planted in plastic pots or directly into the concrete bordered garden beds. Sam notes that several houses have boats parked on the gravel verges or in their driveways.

‘This town,’ Suze says, sliding briefly back into her media release voice, ‘has the highest number of four wheel drives and boats per head of population in Australia.’ She points to a large boat on a verge. ‘Our new one, well new second-hand, is like that one. Maybe it’s a bit bigger. It’s supposed to be bad luck, but we’ll rename the boat. Rockefeller, because we feel rich and lucky. We were lucky, bought it when the construction people were on strike and a boilermaker whose wife shot through with his kids desperately needed to sell. A true steal, Barney reckons.’ Mark turns and catches Sam’s eye as she rolls her eyes in Suze’s direction. ‘Me and Barn we love it up here, especially now we’re moving into a new house like the one you’ve got . . . Love it all . . . well mostly.’ Suze shudders and points at a heavy-set middle-aged tattooed woman dressed in lycra cycle pants and singlet top walking towards them in rubber thongs, dragging a small reluctant terrier on a long leash behind her. ‘Watch that one. Don’t believe anything she says. She’s tapped in the head. Gets around like an Abo from Raethorpe. Acts like it too, even though she’s
married now. He works with us, but she never mixes. Nice bloke. Don’t know what
the hell he sees . . .’ Remembering she’s working, she stops herself.

‘Do you know her?’ Sam asks. There is no answer. ‘Who is she?’ Sam presses.

‘Well, here we are.’ Suze pulls into the driveway. The houses on either side of
theirs still appear to be empty. She turns the ignition off, steps out of the car and
hands the keys to Mark, continuing as if Sam hasn’t spoken at all.

‘No Abos in this town though, except for decent ones with jobs, you know.’

‘Is she okay?’ asks Sam. She watches the woman and her little dog, now
walking away from them.

Suze has had enough of this chatty little wife with her fancy Perth clothes and
streaked hair and can’t wait to be rid of her.

‘Yes. Best to ignore her.’ She turns back to Mark. ‘Now, when we get inside
you’ll see that you have lovely new furniture. It’s all the same; we all start with
exactly the same, and that way we know we are on equal footing.’

Suze opens the front door, removes the keys from the lock and hands them over
with a small ceremonious bow to Mark.

‘Your keys, Sir.’

Mark and Sam wipe their feet on the rubber welcome mat and are about to
follow Suze into the house when Sam realises they have left Billy in the car and
sends Mark back for him. She looks at the house next door and decides it is empty.
Though as finished as theirs, there are no cars or boats, no shoes by the front door
and there are no toys or personal items on the driveway or lawn, like some houses in
their street.
Inside the house it is roomier than they had anticipated. The air conditioning unit seems deafening, and Sam raises her voice to be heard.

‘You’ll get used to it.’ Suze tells them. ‘Before long I’ll bet you won’t even notice it until it isn’t running. The silence will deafen you then.’

The room smells strongly of chemicals. Seeing Sam wrinkle her nose against the stench Suze tells her, ‘Cockroaches. They’re bloody huge, but don’t worry, we come in every year or more if it’s needed and nuke ’em for nothing. There’s all sorts of helpful information in that book on the bench to help you settle in. I’ll run through it all with you, then call for my lift back to the office. There’s food in the fridge, towels in the bathroom, sheets on the bed, all you need to tide you over until your own gear arrives . . . and the phone’s already on. Your number is written on the paper next to it. We think of everything, huh?’
Cheryl says she is afraid to be alone with Tessa.

‘It’s enough to give me the shakes just thinking about it.’ Her voice is barely louder than a whisper. Corazon sits by her bedside, holding the newborn in readiness to introduce Tessa to her new baby sister. ‘How will . . . can I tell her . . . make her understand?’

Corazon remains silent, shrugs and gives Cheryl a small smile to indicate support. She cannot imagine Cheryl’s pain. Of course she feels an overwhelming sense of sadness for this woman, but she just cannot connect with her emotionally. While Cheryl says that she gets the shakes, the face she displays does not match the words that come from her mouth.

Corazon thinks of that Lindy Chamberlain woman whose story made it onto television in Manila. Corazon had heard countless stories of babies disappearing in the slums or in rural villages and never disbelieved that a hungry dog might drag away and eat a little baby. Yet every time the Lindy woman’s face appeared on the screen, her workmates stopped serving drinks or dancing with the customers. Somebody would reach to turn down the music and even the men stopped watching the dancing and paused their drinking to listen to the news in the silenced bar. And afterwards, clients and staff alike would debate the likelihood of the stony-faced woman’s guilt or innocence.

Corazon is surprised at her response to Cheryl. She’d loathed those discussions in the Manila bar about the woman they’d come to refer to as the dingo-lady. Recalling those days, she can’t understand these feelings she has toward Cheryl who,
while only slightly injured physically, has suffered incomprehensible loss. But there is something repugnant to Corazon about Cheryl’s cool detachment, her inability or unwillingness to bond with the baby and to begin to mourn the loss of one of her toddlers. Nor does she appear to show any concern for her husband. Corazon has overheard medical staff discussing his struggle in a Perth hospital to cope with the enormity of his loss. She tries to block her negative judgments about Cheryl whenever they bubble to the surface. She knows her own selfish desire to connect with a newborn baby has led to her involvement in Cheryl’s tragedy and now she realises it is not one she feels remotely qualified to deal with.

Someone had decided this would be the best way for Tessa to meet her new sister, but Cheryl is uncertain who made that decision. Maybe her mother, who has only raised one child herself? Cheryl is aware that she has lost control of this decision, along with many others, since becoming a patient here.

Cheryl hates this feeling of not being in control of her own situation, but they keep sedating her so that she feels like a ghost, like she’s there but unable to speak. She knows why they sedated her. She’s done it herself in the past, to grieving mothers of stillborn babies and to those whose babies pass away before they’ve lived. It just seemed kinder to take the edge off the extreme emotions and it made the job of dealing with the women easier. There was never enough time to look after all the patients’ needs adequately.

‘I know I may not be functioning properly now, but I do know that it does not feel right to have a stranger bring Tessa here,’ she tells Corazon loudly.
The previous night she’d lain awake for hours, imagining what it must feel like for Tessa to see her mum in a bed, her arm in a cast. She makes herself think of Tessa whenever her mind wanders towards Jaimee.

‘She must be wondering where they—her Dad and her sister have gone.’

Cheryl’s voice drops to a near whisper. She tells Corazon that in Tessa’s eyes, a stranger is surely what her maternal grandmother is, for they have not seen one another since a month after the twins were born.

‘I don’t know, Tessa seemed to be okay yesterday when she came. Don’t you think so?’ It was all Corazon could manage.

Corazon tries to remember her own mother, but all she can recall right now is her shrill laugh and her sickly sweet scent that lingered in the air long after she’d gone out the door into the night-time. How fortunate Cheryl is to have a mother who will risk her own safety to drive across this country in the heat through endless kilometres of dust and nothingness to be with her daughter.

‘Tessa is the quiet one, the observer,’ Cheryl tells Corazon. ‘I don’t understand her easily. She’s Neil’s girl really. Not mine.’

Corazon hopes that Cheryl’s mother hurries up so she can play her part and go home to her red-stained prison, which now seems more appealing than it ever has before. She needs to extract herself from this situation and from this cold woman. This is not her life. But the doctors and nurses and even Cheryl’s mother, Hazel, have told her she is invaluable. This is beginning to feel like another weight to bear.

‘Cheryl is lucky to have you for a friend,’ Hazel had cried on her shoulder on her first day here.
Corazon didn’t have the heart to tell her she wasn’t Cheryl’s friend, just a hospital volunteer. She’d felt a longing then, for a female friend, someone to rely on and to laugh with in the better times. Corazon briefly wonders what Cheryl would think if she acted like a friend and opened up to her. If she told her she is just so weary, so alone. Then she feels immediately guilty. For her problems—her loneliness, her inability to have a child with Eric—are miniscule compared to Cheryl’s.

‘Jaimee is already babbling away.’ Cheryl is becoming quite animated. ‘She has such language, and she’s such a character. She speaks for both of them.’

Corazon wonders if she should gently correct Cheryl, who still talks of her deceased daughter in the present tense. She made the mistake yesterday of saying Jaimee was with God. She’d thought it was the appropriate thing to say in these circumstances. She’d upset Cheryl, enraged her even. Maybe Cheryl is in shock, as Hazel had suggested, and will settle down soon. Cheryl continues, saying that she and Neil often joke that maybe Tessa will never speak. That with bossy Jaimee making her decisions and speaking for her, she will never need to. Corazon chews on the tip of her tongue. She imagines she can taste blood as she sits rocking Cheryl’s sleeping newborn baby. When Corazon finally speaks, there is little she can say.

‘Maybe you should talk to the doctor . . . about Jaimee, I mean.’

Hazel is staying in the town’s motel with Tessa. Until this week, the furthest Hazel had ever driven was the eighty or so kilometres from her home to the next decent-sized town to shop. She had never even driven the comparatively short three-hour journey on well-maintained bitumen roads from her south-west home to Perth before.
Back when Cheryl was training to become a nurse, Hazel would take the bus to the city to visit her and Neil every month. Neil was always nice to her, fussing, calling her Mum, even though he was still only Cheryl’s boyfriend then, but Cheryl more often than not appeared indifferent to her. She’d always been that way though, even as a child. More than once, Hazel had wondered if there was something wrong with Cheryl—some problem that prevented her from being like other children. Cheryl rarely came home in those days she was doing her nursing training. She was always too busy to make the three-hour journey—even at Christmas time. She found time to go to Geraldton, five hours away though, to visit Neil’s family. Hazel tried to understand, but felt hurt.

A true homebody, Hazel was rarely at ease elsewhere. She can’t forget the awful trip she’d taken to Geraldton with Harry when Cheryl ran away from home as a teenager without contacting them for five months. Those were the months in her life where Cheryl had first met Neil, become pregnant and engaged—then mysteriously not pregnant and not engaged, before running away again. She’d taken off, two days after Hazel and Harry had arrived for the hastily organised wedding, following some pipedream about going to Cable Beach to live alone. Poor Neil had been devastated. It had all worked out for the best in the long run though. Hazel had come to admire and respect Neil hugely. Any man who could face up to his responsibilities and put up with the nonsense Cheryl had dished out over the years had to be decent.

Now that she is here in Lawson, Hazel is not quite sure how to deal with Cheryl. Though she has spoken on the phone regularly and writes long, mostly unanswered letters weekly, she hasn’t actually seen her daughter face to face since just after the
twins were born by caesarean section in Perth. Upon receiving the call from Neil to let them know Cheryl had pre-eclampsia and was being airlifted to King Edward Hospital, Harry and she had driven to Perth together, arriving at the hospital before Cheryl and Neil, not realising that the Royal Flying Doctor plane that transported them would hop all over the country making visits to rural outposts along the way. As she was wheeled into the hospital past the room where Hazel and Harry waited anxiously for her arrival, Cheryl had made her feel really small. *We told you it wasn’t an emergency, Mum, just a precaution. Why’d you bother coming?*

Now, Hazel cautiously enters the Lawson hospital room, her body rigid, Tessa held somewhat unnaturally in her arms.

Cheryl reaches with her good arm for the toddler.

“She has been very good, Cheryl. A little clingy of course—but no need to worry about that. We are fine.’ Hazel pats Cheryl’s arm, then gently squeezes it in a way that Cheryl assumes is meant to reassure, to demonstrate unconditional maternal love.

Cheryl cannot remember her mother ever demonstrating affection openly. Sometimes as a child, she’d close her eyes tight and wish with all her might for her mother to come along and hug her, to brush her hair for her, to hold her hand so she could skip beside her on the way to the butcher or grocer down the main street. Now Cheryl turns away from her mother’s attention.

Hazel is embarrassed that Cheryl’s friend sees this.

“Everybody has been very kind to us.’ Hazel strokes Tessa’s blond hair and sits her on the edge of the bed, using her own body as a barrier to prevent the little girl falling. She is aware of her nervous tic above her left eye. She coughs gently and
brushes her hands down over her towelling sundress in an effort to cover the silence in the room.

‘Two lovely ladies from your town, neighbours of yours, Sally and Helen I think, drove all the way back in a car with a broken air-conditioner to leave this dress and a few other things for me when they saw how difficult it was for me to cope with the heat. It helps. I feel free, like an island native. And they brought some of Tessa’s things from your house too.’

Cheryl looks briefly back at her mother and reaches with her good arm towards Tessa who wriggles along the bed towards her.

Hazel quite likes this outfit—a voluminous pale green towelling shift with palm trees printed around the bottom hemline. She isn’t wearing her petticoat, hasn’t for the entire three days since arriving in this place. Her collar length salt-and-pepper hair is bobby-pinned up off her neck to let the prickly heat rash breathe and heal and she is wearing rubber thongs on her feet for the first time in her life. She wishes Cheryl would notice this, so they could have a little chuckle about it one day when everything is not so painful.

‘God, apart from that ugly heat rash your skin is lily white,’ Cheryl says.

Hazel feels grotesque and foolish. She is at a loss to know how she will cope with what must be dealt with next. She keeps remembering what the other widows in her home town had said to her when she’d taken that first step and gone to one of their non-denominational church friendship meetings. *One breath at a time, one step at a time, one day at a time*—or something like that. The strength to take the eighteen hundred kilometre drive came from a place inside her—the same place that she’d drawn strength from after Harry’s death. Along the seemingly endless bitumen road
north, as it got hotter, drier and more desolate, she’d repeated the words to keep her going—breath, step, day.

Hazel and Corazon move outside the room to allow Cheryl to spend a few moments alone with Tessa and her new baby sister. Hazel pops her head back in the door.

‘Just give a hoi if you need us, okay?’ Her voice sounds strangled.

She confides in Corazon that she feels out of her depth.

‘Maybe I should take Tessa and stay at Cheryl’s place. It might be easier.’ She sighs loudly, her voice trembling as she continues. ‘That damn music, it pounds through the walls and the drunks carry on to all hours.’

Corazon wraps her arms around herself. She knows exactly what it is like in that motel. She’d stayed there one night, the second time she’d tried to leave Eric. She’d barricaded herself in the dingy grey room, pushing furniture against the door. All night long there was pounding on her door and laughter. Some of the men, who’d heard her registering as a lone woman, assumed she was one of the prostitutes that passed through the north-west towns irregularly. *Let me in sweetie I just got paid... C’mom just one more tonight sweetie.* One had sounded like a boy and sat outside her door, crying, *I just wanna talk to you, I’m really lonely,* falling silent, then at around four in the morning shouting. *Well fuck you then, whore.* After that, she’d decided anything was better than trying to survive alone in this awful place. And having nowhere else to go, she went back to Eric, promising to try to be a better wife.

‘Maybe that would be best,’ she agrees with Hazel.

Hazel is relieved to have one of Cheryl’s friends to talk to. ‘But,’ she speaks in a loud whisper, ‘it is so far, an hour and a half each way on that awful gravel road.’
Just yesterday, the two women who’d brought clothes to her had told her that the situation in Redhill was very grim due to industrial action. Strikes and picketing had started the day after the car accident, when the whole workforce was sacked and locked out of the plant. Nobody really quite knew what was going on, and already people were talking about having to pack up and go south. It was all strange to her, this talk of a whole town being affected by the actions of one company. It really was a different world up here.

‘And those strikes,’ Hazel adds, thinking that being exposed to any more stress will be too much for her and for Tessa, who must surely be feeling completely bewildered already.

Corazon finds herself inviting Hazel and Tessa to stay at her house in Paterson only twenty minutes away by car. It seems the right thing to do. The last time she’d asked someone to come to the house was just for lunch, work mates of Eric’s. A bemused look had passed between that husband and wife before they simultaneously stammered different excuses for declining the invitation.

Hazel is too exhausted to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of Corazon’s generosity and accepts the offer on the spot, promising to be no trouble at all. After Cheryl spends a few minutes with Tessa, Hazel leaves Tessa with Corazon at the hospital and goes to collect their belongings before returning.

‘You really are a good friend to my daughter. I don’t know how to thank you enough,’ Hazel says an hour later, as Corazon climbs into the passenger seat beside her.
On the drive home, Corazon reassures herself that when he returns in just under two days, Eric will understand. That he will enjoy having a toddler around. And it will take the pressure away from her, from having to explain her actions that night when he last was at home.
Part Three

1991—1992
Seven

Corazon is holding onto the patio furniture, hosing the floor of Cheryl and Neil’s pergola, going through the motions of being useful while trying to reconstruct the events of the previous night. A fight with Cheryl. Leave me alone Cheryl, you are my friend, not my keeper. Don’t tell me what to do. Storming out, walking all the way—five kilometres in high heels and a short skirt to the tavern. Her white stilettos’ stained brown-red by the time she was three minutes down the road. Reaching the car park where three men stood in a little circle, as though doing this would hide the plumes of smoke rising from the joint they shared. Sitting at the table nearest the stage, but there was no band, just the jukebox. After washing her shoes in the bathroom, she’d sat with the three men drinking. It was a bit like the not so good old days in the clubs back in the Philippines. The men wore the usual out of work uniform for local venues with dress standards—polo shirts with an embroidered logo on the chest and a pair of dress shorts or perma-pleat chinos. Unlike her, they must have been wearing something on their feet. No thongs or work boots after 7pm. Their shirt logos matched and she’d laughed, tracing the outline of each one playfully. You all work for the enemy? Or you just like their shirts?

They’d competed for her attention at first, amazed at how she could drink so much yet still dance seductively on the tiny dance floor when the jukebox played something she liked. She forgot about her dimply thighs and her clothes clinging and creeping up to expose her soft belly and hips. She’d smiled and beckoned at the seated men, but they refused to dance. Then she was back with them, laughing and gyrating to the music, trying to drag one or another up to dance, trying on a strong
accent for effect. *You Aussie men, just can’t move to the music can you?* . . . They’d bought her increasingly more expensive drinks, cocktails with outlandish names. She’d mocked them. *Oh, you know how to please a girl.* She’d hated all men last night, especially men like them. But they were too stupid and too drunk to know that. How easy it would have been to take their money, but it had been years and a world away that she played those games to survive. She paced herself. She was drunk but not as drunk as she pretended to be. If nothing else, she’d learned to hold her alcohol like a true Australian since living in the north-west. She still got up after every few songs and danced, but with less enthusiasm. One of the men, the fat one, stank of body odour, sour milk and garlic. Sometime during the night he had slipped his wedding ring off, leaving a deep white indent in the speckled sausage of his left ring finger. He made up new names for the drinks that materialized at the table. *Here you go darl, get this into ya. It’s a Plump Asian Delight.* The quiet one said to stop that, looking at Corazon apologetically. She knew he too was testing her, that kindness was his tactic. She smiled. *It’s okay.* She didn’t tell them she knew all their games. Nor did she tell them that she is almost as Australian as they are. That her father was born in Sydney. That he once helped pull ten drowning children from the ocean. It didn’t matter. They were not her friends. She would never see them again.

She began to cry. She walked over to the jukebox, chose a song to play next and went back to the table to wait for her song, staring into her glass. Then, on her feet, resting her hand on the young one’s shoulders, singing along to the jukebox blaring from the corner, tears poured from her eyes. *I’m going back some day, come what may to Blue Bayou . . . where those fishing boats, with their sails . . . the silver moon and the evening tide.* She sat, or maybe she was pulled down by the wrist onto the
young one’s lap. She knocked her arm with a closed fist. I am hollow. There is nothing inside me at all anymore. And she was not surprised that her voice sounded hollow too—that nobody had acknowledged her. She laughed. Still nobody heard her. The young one had an erection. He looked so young he probably shouldn’t have even been in the pub. God you’re so pretty, the young one breathed into her ear. Do you like it, my—thing? At that moment, everyone in the bar seemed to stop talking. His friends laughed and encouraged him. She wondered if the fat one was his father. He was certainly old enough. The young one wriggled his tongue about in her ear. She hid her revulsion behind a smile. It was amazing how easily the old ways came back. Corazon waved across at somebody she knew. My friend, she told the men, remembering as she spoke that she didn’t actually know him. It was Cheryl who once knew him well—but she doesn’t speak to him at all now if she can help it. The young one ran his hand up under her skirt. His hands were scratchy and hard—labourers’ hands, not boys’ hands. She pushed him away and tried to stand up. He grabbed at her wrist. Prick tease. Fuck off then, you fat ugly slut.

She was crying, falling across the room—then standing next to Barney Murray. He took her shoulder and spoke. You okay? C’mon. Barney saying he’d take her home. Driving her in his car.

He’d pulled over. They were at the park where the treated sewerage is pumped into a stinking lake. Let’s just walk for a bit, can’t go back like that, Barney said. She was sick. It filled her nose and she was certain she’d die. He wiped her face with something soft, a cloth, his shirt maybe. Stay there. Don’t go anywhere. He disappeared. She lay down on the scratchy buffalo grass. He must have found a water bottle in the back of his car, tipped some into his hand and wiped her chin, tipped
more and wiped her eyes. He helped her up. They sat on the bench with the plaque that asks its reader to remember somebody, her head between her knees. There was a smell; she realised this is the place where they pump recycled human excrement onto the grass to keep it green. If you scratch your skin here you will get an infection.

*Cheryl never lets her girls play here,* she told him. He rubbed her back. Such big warm hands, soothing the ache. *Cheryl is right, you are handsome.* She sat up. He stopped rubbing her back and looked away. She put her arms around him. He removed them. Not unkindly. *C’mon, I better be getting you home.* They stood and moved toward the car.

*How long have we been in the park,* she’d asked, getting into the passenger seat.

*Not too long.*

*Your wife will be angry.*

*She’s always angry. I was out looking for my daughter. She’s trouble these days.*

*I know about you and Cheryl,* she had whispered in the car after she’d let him fuck her, her knee twisted awkwardly and painfully between the door handle and the seat.

By the time the car turned into Hansard Way she was annoyed with him, with herself and with Cheryl. Before she got out of the car she tried to evoke a response. *You should just screw her again . . . for old times’ sake. Then she’ll know you weren’t worth it.*

Still nothing. He didn’t turn his head as she left. *Goodbye Corazon.* Her anger almost made her sober. She hated all men. She could trust nobody . . . except Eric.
And where was he then? It was the first time he hadn’t come begging her to return home when she’d left him.

She’d tiptoed in to Cheryl’s home and along the hallway to the room Cheryl had given her. She’d taken her emergency bottle of gin to the lounge room. Cheryl was at work, would be for hours. Neil and the girls were asleep. Neil would sleep through anything, Cheryl had told her more than once. He sleeps through my not-sleeping most nights. As she poured her gins one after another into an old Vegemite jar, she cried.

She’d woken to the sun burning her eyes. She was sprawled, half her clothing discarded, on the lounge in Cheryl’s and Neil’s house. Gabby looked down at her. Cheryl slammed things around in the kitchen and entered the room. Leave Auntie Coz alone. Cheryl looked down at her, a jug of water and a glass in her hand. There’s a limit to how much of this I can take hun . . . it’s the kids you know? Or was that a dream? She’d slept and woken to find a note in Cheryl’s handwriting stuck to the fridge magnet photo frame. Back later. Do some thinking, hey?

Corazon moves gingerly across Cheryl’s patio, closes her eyes and presses her back up against the warmth of the air-conditioning unit that stands floor-to-ceiling height outside the backdoor. The gentle vibration of the engine on the metal cover soothes her. It was a trick Tessa had shown her one day, shortly before she’d left Eric and come to stay with the Harveys this time. She’d stayed with the two girls to give Cheryl and Neil a few days to go down south to sort out Hazel’s house after her death a few weeks earlier. She’d wished Cheryl had thought to ask her to the funeral. For the few years she’d known Hazel, it had been like having a mother of her own.
Hazel had been so kind to her, remembering her birthday and sending homemade Christmas gifts to Corazon and Eric each year. She hadn’t been right since Hazel’s death, even Eric could see that.

Standing against the air conditioning unit now, hung over, the hose still in her hand, she runs the tepid water over her neck, face and the front of her body. She swallows hard as she recalls a late night conversation from several years earlier, back when Cheryl and Neil and their broken little family had stayed at her house. She and Cheryl sat outside on the front porch, legs dangling over the edge, toes kicking up little dust storms where the lawn refused to grow. Gabby had fallen asleep at Cheryl’s breast. Quiet words and long silences passed between them deep into the night. Corazon noticed that Cheryl always looked away, avoiding eye contact as she spoke. *There are maybe a handful of really significant moments in our lives—turning points you know?* A long conversation had followed, both women opening up in a way that was unfamiliar to them, yet seemed perfectly natural at the time. They’d shared stories of relationships that were all wrong, tears, quiet laughter and finally a realisation that from tragedy a bond of trust had somehow formed between them.

*The one thing that matters most to me in my relationships with people,* Cheryl had said that night, *the only thing really, is trust.*
Cheryl still sees Corazon nearly every day now that she’s working at the school. One of Corazon’s daily tasks is to open the doors to the kindergarten classroom and allow the children to enter. As it has been her lifelong habit to fly into Corazon’s arms each time she sees her, whether at home, the shops, or anywhere else, Gabby cannot help but run across the floorboards of the transportable classroom and into her embrace each morning as soon as she is released from Cheryl’s grip.

Cheryl and Corazon still speak, but only about the usual things a parent might talk to a staff member about. Their distance is perhaps not particularly noticeable to others, but to Cheryl it feels obvious that everyone is talking about her and judging her again. She finds herself tensing each morning as she unloads the kids from the car and escorts them to their respective classrooms. Sometimes she wishes there was someone that she could trust. Just one person she could confide in about Corazon. Perhaps she would feel less at fault for falling out with Corazon then.

Mostly she manages to change the subject and prevent Gabby’s questioning about when she can stay with Auntie Coz after the other kids have gone home from kindy. But today, she’s done in.

‘Be good, don’t whine to stay with Corazon after school, and I’ll take you to Toyworld on the way home. You can pick a present—only a small one though.’ She glances up into the rear vision mirror and meets Tessa’s eye. ‘And you too, Tessie chick. Now, how about you go into class like a big girl today and you can have one too.’
Even as the words leave her mouth, she is ashamed of herself. It is such sloppy parenting. She’s been doing this sort of thing a bit too much lately.

Cheryl pulls out of the school driveway and turns the car air-conditioning up high. The air-conditioning is rattly, loud and not particularly effective. She wipes sweat from her brow and under each eye with the back of her hand and braces her nose against the smell of stale dust that blows directly at her face from the vents for the first thirty seconds or so. She makes a mental note to book the car in for aircon regassing. It pisses her off that these things always seem to need doing when Neil is on plant maintenance shut-downs—a couple of weeks of night shifts, no days off, completely preoccupied by work and unable to take some of the load off her. The extra money he makes will only go to balance the cheque book and meet necessary household expenses. Where the hell does the money go? There’s not that much to spend money on up here, but they sure seem to chew through it.

It’s going to be another stinker. Eight–twenty in the morning and already it must be pushing forty degrees celsius. A haze hangs in the air a few kilometres away over the low-lying hills on the edge of the town centre. She remembers childhood summers down south, the cicadas drowning out all the evening sounds. She thinks of the mirages she’d see when on the road with her dad in his truck. She was always anticipating the magical strangeness that might appear back them. Not anymore—it’s very much gritty realism these days.

Glancing back through the rear-view mirror at the little cluster of mothers and babies gathered in the shady patches under the poinciana trees, she notes how the trees thrive. They’ve been planted along the school driveways to divide the carefully
maintained school gardens from the scrubby semi-desert surroundings. On those rare occasions she’s been in a plane approaching the town, she’s noticed that from the air the school looks like a tropical oasis surrounded by an ocean of dirty red-brown sea. In fact, the whole town looks like a chain of small green islands surrounded by that sea. She’s always thought it strange that the town will use recycled sewerage water for its schools and parks, but will not allow people to use it at home in their gardens.

She’s not working any night shifts at all this week, so there’s a whole week of daytimes to fill in. Maybe when the girls get older she’ll do some days and afternoons, but for now, it works best for her to do nights when Neil is home. It’s not possible to juggle the kids with Neil on all these night shifts, so she’s taken some leave.

There’s not much that can be done at home with Neil sleeping the day away, so she heads into town the long way around so she doesn’t have to pass the drive-in turn off. The days of visiting that corner and tidying up around the cross regularly are gone. It’s too painful now, but in the beginning, it was like a sickness—a weird compulsion to visit the site, to tidy the dried flowers and soft toy arrangements that other people left. It’s become a public domain now and has little to do with her honouring Jaimee’s memory. Seeing yet another sun-faded soft toy or plastic flower attached to the white picket by some well-meaning do-gooder provides her with no comfort. Those objects left by other people raise too many confusing questions and responses for her.

The shopping centre car park is quite busy and she has to park a fair way from the main entrance. It isn’t one of the three main companies’ pay date, so there must be something else going on to attract so many people mid-week. These can’t all be
cars belonging to the wives and partners of men on night-shift, surely? She steps out of the car and the heat rises from the asphalt and sears her face and eyes. She puts her head down and walks towards the shops. She imagines the dry heat cooking her face and thinks that it’s no wonder that even the young women up here have skin like leather.

Inside the air-conditioned mall she wanders around Kmart for a while and picks the girls two pairs of fluorescent patterned socks each. She can’t recall if they actually need socks. Probably not, especially at this time of year when the temperature even at night rarely drops below twenty-five degrees celsius and the days are often in the mid forties. But the girls will love the crazy colours. The garish patterns make her think of Corazon and her love of outlandishly coloured clothes. She forces herself to focus on other things each time she feels herself recounting their last argument—if you could even call it an argument, with her exploding like that and Corazon being submissive: *Yes, I’ll go, tonight.*

It’s odd how since breaking the friendship with Corazon, she feels a bit like she had in those first months after the accident, her moods swinging between detached numbness and anger at the world. But Corazon isn’t dead. She’d told Neil after she kicked Corazon out that she’d tried to be supportive of Corazon’s difficulties and tried not to judge her. Corazon had given so much of herself to them and to the kids. But Cheryl wonders now if it had ever really been a balanced relationship. She didn’t say this to Neil, as he was too busy defending Corazon and suggesting that Cheryl had perhaps gone a bit overboard. But the truth of the matter is that she’d always felt Corazon clinging to her a bit too tightly, and she’d sometimes felt used by her. At times it seems that what Corazon did was vile—insinuating herself into the family
when they were at their most vulnerable, instead of leaving her and Neil to work their way through their loss in their own time.

Picking up some shiny plastic salad bowls, she finds herself thinking of Sally, her old neighbour in Redhill. Sally had said to her before she was pregnant with Gabby, long before they’d even really thought about moving to Lawson, that it was always a good idea not to make just one close friendship up in the north. People move on, husbands get new jobs, families relocate when contracts finish. Better to know lots of people, not to allow yourself to become too attached to one person. She’d thought that strange at the time and had even laughed a little about it with Neil.

She wonders what ever happened to Sally. She’d been good to her when the twins were babies—never intruding, but there if she needed a hand, or a chat. After their world changed, Sally was maybe the only one she wanted to see, the only one she trusted would not gossip about what had happened. She’d always meant to keep in touch, to thank Sally for her thoughtful cards and letters and for looking out for Hazel. But any pretence at a normal life dissolved after the accident. She’s seen a few of the people from Redhill from time to time, the ones who’d stuck around until the industrial strife finished and got their jobs back, albeit with lesser conditions. She wasn’t a part of that experience though, and when she sees them, they don’t really talk. Plus, she knows she went more than a little strange and unsociable for at least the first two years and now it’s a bit hard to try and undo those times that she’d pretended not to see or know people.

Today there are a couple of women she recognises wandering through Kmart, wives of other men on the plant maintenance shut down team. She nods and says
hello and makes small talk with one or two of them. She no longer feels compelled to scurry away, eyes to the ground, each time she sees someone she recognises.

At the check-out, someone standing behind her mentions that the new cafe down the other end of the air-conditioned mall is now open. She pays for the socks and other bits and pieces she’s collected and walks down the mall, past the mostly unfinished and vacant shop fronts, stopping at the newsagency to browse. She picks up a Grassroots sustainable lifestyle magazine and takes it to the counter. She’s been buying these since her late teens, but it’s more from habit now than from any desire to live an alternative life like the people featured in the magazine.

Down the other end of the mall, Cheryl is not surprised to discover that The Kangaroo Cafe is adorned with toy kangaroos and other Australiana. She thinks of the Gold Coast, where they’d holidayed last year. After a few years in the Pilbara, mostly flat, quiet and tinged with dirty red, they’d been stunned by the kitschy colour and busy pace of the tourism industry. It had been a great trip. They’d laughed a lot. Sometimes a whole day would pass where she’d forget to be guilty or sad until night time, when she was in bed and life had slowed down around her.

Maybe the Kangaroo Cafe owners know something about future tourism proposals that she doesn’t. She’s noticed a few European and Japanese tourists coming through town lately. There have been a few admitted to hospital. Keen for an outback experience, they’d headed into the bush. If they came out with nothing more than extreme sunburn, they were doing well. For that matter, if they came out at all, they were doing well. More than one international tourist had perished in the northwest in the last few years, the most recent one deciding to take a one thousand kilometre bike ride to explore the country in the middle of summer.
This new stage of the shopping centre is the second phase of development since they’ve lived in Lawson. The first stage was already open when they lived in Redhill. Now there’s talk of yet another extension after this, making it a real city in the Pilbara. The junk mail leading up to the opening of the latest stage had read: What more could a local need than Coles, Woolworths, Kmart, and twenty-three variety stores? She hadn’t known whether to laugh or cry. The more things change around here, the more they stay the same.

She orders a cappuccino and takes a small wooden kangaroo holding up a flag bearing the number three from the woman behind the counter.

‘So the staff can find you,’ the woman tells her. At the other end of the cafe, a group of five or six women are dressed up as though they’re out for lunch in the city. According to this week’s North West News, “The Boom Keeps Booming On.”

‘Pure fucking genius,’ Neil had scoffed, as he read the headline. Looking at it later, Cheryl had wondered if that cadet who’d taken her photo in the hospital still worked at the paper, and if karma had dealt with him yet.

The women look to Cheryl as if they might be the latest influx of management or staff wives. She can hear one making snide comments and a couple of them giggling about a morbidly obese woman who passes the coffee shop pushing a pram. Someone says something about the serving of canned cream on the side plate of the scones, never in Melbourne, and though the new cafe is about as tacky as anything she’s ever seen anywhere in the three states of Australia she’s visited so far, Cheryl feels personally affronted. She wants to tell these stuck-up women that you don’t just wander in and criticise the people and place like that. They’ll need to live here a while for that privilege. She estimates it will only be a matter of months before some
of these women are ducking down to the shops in their elastic-waisted shorts and t-shirts, because nothing else fits them since they’ve started eating more food just to pass the hours. And she feels marginally better—at least until she takes a swig of her tasteless cappuccino.

She gets home with some time to spare. Neil is still asleep and probably will be for a few more hours. She does a quick tidy up and turns the TV on very quietly, clicking the button off the ABC to the regional commercial station. Neil’s a heavy sleeper, but she doesn’t want to risk getting sprung. He’d never stop taking the piss if he caught her watching *Days of our Lives*. As a child she was occasionally allowed to sit with her mother on the green vinyl lounge in the school holidays and watch it with her, so long as she did not speak during the program. On the days she’s not at work she’s become hooked on the show, planning her errands and other activities around the timeslot. Now with Gabby at kindy, she’s got more time to fill and not enough things to fill it with. Becoming engrossed in the familiarity, longevity and predictability of the lives of the people of Salem helps. She likes the way that she can miss a few episodes of their lives but still catch up, never feeling left out. In a way the Bradys have become like a surrogate extended family, something she’d never really experienced as an only child of two rather reclusive parents with just three elderly relatives between them. She looks forward, a little too much perhaps, to time spent with the Brady family for an hour twice a week.

She still can’t focus though. It’s been one of those days. By the second ad break, she’s flicked the television off. Those women from the cafe have gotten to her. No, everything about the entire morning has gotten to her. She’s remembering things that
she doesn’t want to remember—do-gooders from the church landing on Corazon’s doorstep unannounced within days of Jaimee’s service, then others turning up at their house in Lawson just days after they moved in, wanting to tell her about the mysterious ways in which the Lord moves. Then there were the invitations to join the church and the craft group. What she needed, they said, was to meet new people and make friends, as if being part of the church somehow gave them insight into the workings of the mind of a woman they’d never met. And then there was the previous batch of management wives, inviting her to morning teas, making an exception to their social rules and welcoming her into their purple circle. But the ones who plague her thoughts more today are the women of the town who were invisible to her until the accident, the strangers who’d knock on her door, or stop her in the shops or at the pool—the grief-stricken ones. They’d begin by offering their condolences, and she’d be genuinely touched by their willingness to actually acknowledge her pain rather than talk in circles and riddles—but before long they’d be sharing their own stories and seeking comfort from her, and she’d be patting their hands saying there, there, and feeling there was nothing resembling happiness in the future at all anymore.

There’s something bothering her even more. The look on Corazon’s face this morning. She wanted to go up to her, to whisper in her ear that they could get together and talk when Coz finished work if she wanted to. Her extreme reaction leading up to Corazon’s last bender seems hard to rationalise. She feels guilty too—about the way she excluded Corazon from Hazel’s funeral arrangements, asking her to stay with the girls without even asking if she’d wanted to attend. She knew Corazon had grown almost as attached to Hazel as she had to her and the girls. And her mother had certainly cared deeply for Corazon; she’d made that perfectly clear.
She’d even accused her mother over the phone once, when she was feeling particularly low, of wishing Corazon was her daughter instead of her. Hazel had clammed up and made excuses to hang up the phone. What else could she do when her thirty-something year old daughter behaved like she was thirteen?

It’s dawned on Cheryl that each time she sees Corazon now, she feels a little more strongly that she has let her only real friend down. It’s the only time that she can think of when Corazon’s been the one to reach out to her. When it comes down to it, she is the one who has behaved appallingly.
Nine

Corazon lay down on the tiny daybed in the room she and Eric had set up for the babies that had failed to come. She thinks she should get rid of all the baby furniture—give it away or sell it perhaps, but she can’t bring herself to take that last step of acknowledging the futility of hoping for a baby.

Not long after she’d married Eric, she’d confided in the wife of Eric’s supervisor that they had begun to decorate the room in readiness for the baby. The supervisor’s wife, a mother of six wild boys spanning twelve years from youngest to oldest, had been horrified. *If you get the room ready before you are even pregnant, you’ll never have a baby. It is bad luck.* At the time Corazon had not even entertained the thought that she wouldn’t have a baby. She’d laughed off the superstitious talk and set about with more determination than ever to have everything just perfect for when the time came. As the months and years passed the superstitions did not seem so foolish, and the words came back to taunt Corazon whenever she saw that supervisor’s wife in town. She’d almost convinced herself that the woman had somehow jinxed her. For a period of time after the supervisor and his family moved away to give their boys a better education in the city, Corazon had entertained the notion that she’d conceive a baby now that they had gone. And Eric found himself on the receiving end of unexpected and not unwelcome attention from his wife for a while.

Corazon is aware that it is not healthy to spend so many hours hidden away in this room. But now that she’s trying not to numb herself with alcohol, she finds it’s simpler to retreat behind a closed door than to invent ways to overcome the silences
between Eric and her. When she first came back home from Cheryl and Neil’s, she’d pretend she had something to do for work when she came in here, or that she was reading a book to improve her mind. But now she doesn’t even bother to say anything. Eric doesn’t seem particularly interested anyway.

She’d heard once, when she worked at the hospital, about an apparently healthy Aboriginal woman from Raethorpe who’d gone to bed one day and not left it again until she died and was carried out of the house three months later to be buried. It was not that uncommon, she’d been told, for the Aboriginal people around here to will life away when they were ready to go. Sometimes, she feels something close to envy when she thinks about that. Not that she’d confide in anyone about that.

A company bus pulls into the end of the cul-de-sac and collects the afternoon shift workers, beeping once as though that will make the latecomers miraculously appear at the open door. She’s still lying there an hour and ten minutes later as it makes its return journey, dropping the day shift workers home. She supposes she should rouse herself and begin Eric’s tea. They haven’t spoken all day, though both have been home from work. She can hear him out in the shed, banging away at something. He used to make things—small wooden tables, wrought iron candelabras, strange objects made from old tin and wood to hang on the walls. Most of it he gave away as gifts, mumbling embarrassedly when anyone offered to pay. He’d always maintained that he just made these things for pleasure and brushed away any suggestion that he was an artist. He’s still always out there if he’s not at work, but now he doesn’t seem to actually produce anything. Instead he spends hours banging on metal and wood—making enough noise to surely drive the neighbours mad. And he regularly drags things out into the yard, as he yet again rearranges his large shed.
For a short while after she came home, he took over the cooking and most of the housework. They hadn’t discussed it, and she’d assumed he was trying to please her and be a more modern husband—after all she worked four and a half days at the kindergarten by then, so it was only fair. But one day, as though he’d realised he was no longer a man whose wife had left him, he simply stopped doing anything inside the house and things soon returned to being just as they had always been before. That’s when he retreated to the shed and began to bang things around. It had been a relief to her when he made the transition.

Digging potatoes and onions out of the bottom of the pantry, Corazon stops what she is doing and wanders into the lounge room. It has just dawned on her that Eric did make some changes while she was away, after all. There are bare patches on the wall where some of his creations had hung. Turning to the cheap, laminated wall unit in the corner, she realises the iron candelabra is missing. And the small wrought iron and recycled fence post lamp table he’d made and presented to her for one of their early wedding anniversaries wasn’t in its usual position next to the television either. She’s struck by a wave of sadness at this. She feels a surge of guilt too, for not having noticed for almost six months the absence of his hand-crafted gifts.

Leaning against the back of the lounge chair, she looks around the room again. She can almost see him, so upset by her leaving and so sure this time she wouldn’t return, gathering all the tokens of his love and disposing of them. She’d thought his artefacts ridiculous at first, unpainted, lacking beauty. But at the same time she’d been thrilled by his sentimentality and his gifts had grown on her.

Her favourite small piece had been made from a piece of old rusted iron twisted into a shape Eric had told her reminded him of her smile. He’d attached the iron to a
wooden frame made from timber salvaged from a derelict old shed. Then he’d arranged an old horseshoe, shells collected from a midden in a place far from the water and some metal stained an odd shade of green from an old copper mine they’d visited. Every object on that strange artwork was significant to him—the wood for the frame saved from a trip he’d made back to the remains of a station where he’d lived as a young man, the horseshoe picked up after he’d wondered if it had come from a horse he’d ridden through the same station all those years ago. The shells, he’d said, were to remind them not to forget they were not the first people here. And the metal from the copper mine, a souvenir from their first camping trip together.

That day he’d thrown the artefacts away, his rage would eventually have subsided. She sees him crumpled into his saggy old armchair in front of the television, finally letting the anger go. He may have been a disappointment to her, as she surely was to him, but she’d never meant to hurt him, to make him feel demeaned. She decides that tonight at tea, she will try harder. She’ll smile, take an interest and try to coax a conversation out of him to show him that she cares.

Back in the kitchen, peeling the last of the potatoes, she remembers the man from last night’s 7.30 Report. He’d be settling in now, confused perhaps by the events of the last few days. The man, around the same age as her, came from an island not too far from where Corazon lived as a child before being sent to live in the orphanage run by the Australian priest. It was the mention of that island that had made her look up from the skirt she was hemming. She’d stared at the screen as though looking for her younger self there. She heard the reporter tell how the young man and his younger brother had somehow made their way to China and stowed away in the hull of an ore ship heading back to Australia for reloading. The man,
barely alive himself when discovered huddled beside his dead brother, had told the authorities they’d wanted to come to a land of freedom, where people were kind to each other and nobody went to sleep hungry.

‘Overrun our bloody land, take our jobs and spread disease more like it,’ Eric had snorted.

There is no passion left inside Corazon anymore. She’d realised that last night. As Eric had continued his ranting, she’d become aware that she seemed unable to feel—whether it be anger at Eric, empathy for the man, sadness for the dead brother, or any emotion for anyone. She’d stuck the needle into the half-finished hem and rolled up her sewing. On screen, the man was led handcuffed towards the airplane that would take him to the detention centre some three hours away by road up the North West Coastal Highway.

‘Not good enough to drive ’em, now they give the parasites a free flight too.’

Eric shook his head in disgust as he stood and pressed the button on the remote control. Just before the television screen went blank, the man had turned to the camera smiling and in stilted English had thanked Australians for giving him a new life and a futuring of prosperity. Corazon stood up and reached for her own and Eric’s empty teacups. Still muttering, Eric walked out of the room to the toilet. Corazon perched back down on the edge of the lounge chair, closed her eyes and willed herself into remembering how it had felt to be running and jumping into the water, holding hands with a young man. She’d tried to recall the way the young fisherman had stroked her fingers, but she could only conjure one image—a flash of toothy grin. But it was the face of the man on the television that she saw, not the young fisherman.
The potatoes peeled and in the pot, the meat searing in the frying pan, Corazon goes to the fridge and reaches for the container of flavoured diet yogurt, scoops two tablespoons into a bowl and takes it to the breakfast bar to eat. She rinses her bowl and spoon under the running tap and dries the dishes before reaching behind the bread box for the half block of Cadbury family-size chocolate that she’d nibbled at earlier that afternoon. Standing at the sink, she eats the rest of it in one go before burying the silver foil and purple paper wrappers under the potato and carrot peelings.

She removes the plastic bag and takes it out to the rubbish bin by the back shed, calling to Eric on the way past that his tea will be ready in half an hour.

Back inside she washes her hands, reaches for three Tim Tams from the open packet on the pantry shelf and eats them before resuming preparation of the evening meal. What she really wants right now is a good strong gin and tonic.
Cheryl feels the panic rising up into her throat from her chest. It’s too late to escape. Suze Murray, still dressed in the too-tight navy blue power suit she wore to work, is almost upon them. Gabby spots her father and sister and tries to take off and join them. Cheryl shifts back two steps, grabs at Gabby’s hand, pulls her close and looks across to her husband who approaches with his wonky loping stride.

Tessa is perched up on Neil’s shoulders. Cheryl watches her wobble and wrap her legs around him like a scarf, her feet tucked in his armpits for security. She holds the small patchwork bag containing the drinks, long sleeve t-shirts and long pants Cheryl had packed earlier for the girls to put on. The bag sits on top of Neil’s head and Tessa laughs along with him at a shared joke. Perhaps she is telling him the bag is his crown. She’s been obsessed by kings and queens lately. Cheryl is surprised to experience a sharp stab of jealousy at her exclusion from this moment. Catching her eye, Neil winks and waves the purple can of Rid insect spray to show her that he’s found it. Seeing that Suze Murray has bailed his wife up, he turns sharply and engages in conversation with two men Cheryl does not know. Looking into Suze’s heavily made-up face, Cheryl feigns surprise at seeing her and yanks hard at Gabby’s wrist to stop her escaping.

‘You’ve broken my arm,’ Gabby wails. She dramatically shakes the fingers of her loose hand, gathers a bunch of unruly brown hair together and brings it to her mouth to suck on the ends.

As Cheryl had expected, Suze launches into talk about the latest Community Group she is forming or chairing or something like that. But not before commenting
how washed out Cheryl looks. At least it’s a change from the usual personal health issues that people around here insist on raising whenever there’s a nurse around. She supposes the teachers and cops get a similar deal with education and crime.

‘I should get Beth to pop in and see you—she’s doing very well for herself with Sarah-Kay you know. She could do your colours—make sure you wear the right ones for that washed-out complexion.’

Cheryl baulks at the idea. She rarely wears make-up. It’s too bloody hot and it just melts as soon as you walk out the door, anyway. Besides, if Suze’s daughter Beth is responsible for talking Suze into changing her hair from her distinctive Eileen Bond style brassy copper bob to this shaggy cut with muddy-coloured streaks and a thick black drag strip down the centre part, she’s not letting Beth anywhere near her, washed-out complexion or not.

Cheryl has managed to avoid about five of Beth’s Sarah-Kay in-home demonstrations this past month alone—including one at the school. She’d had to work that night and conveniently forgot to place an outside order from the catalogue the kindergarten so thoughtfully sent home in Gabby’s bag. The school had promoted it as a major fundraiser for new sandpit toys for the kindy group that Gabby and Beth’s son Jimmy belonged to. Beth hung about the kindergarten all week spruiking her fundraiser, playing on everyone’s sense of duty to their children.

Cheryl’s sick to bloody death of all the in-home parties, occasions where she’s not only forced to be sociable, but also buy products she does not want or need—jewellery, kitchenware, clothes, linen, cleaning products, lingerie and ‘marital aids’, as they’d called the range from the sex shop in Perth. The list just goes on and on,
and she’s pretty well exhausted her repertoire of excuses for not turning up. Her neighbour Sam is having one next week; she’d slipped the invite into Neil’s hand while he was out watering the front garden. She’ll have to go to that one she supposes, she can hardly pretend not to know about it. A while back it had been craft groups that occupied everyone she knew. Her own house is filled with everything from basket-weaving disasters to Laura Ashley-inspired paisley print toilet roll covers. Sitting in a room with a dozen other women in the church hall a few years back, cross-stitching a cushion cover for a Christmas gift for her mother, she’d suddenly stopped, packed up and left, feigning illness. That afternoon she went into the hospital and came out an hour later with two shifts per week, back to nursing, the job she’d vowed she never wanted to return to after Gabby was born. At the tea table that night she’d laughed with Neil for the first time in ages—that at least now she had an excuse to never make crap craft projects again.

Now, though, in-home parties are in fashion. They run in cycles. Everyone goes crazy on the latest product, and once they’ve bought all they want or need and coerced their friends and acquaintances into holding an in-home demonstration, a new product quickly takes its place. Six months ago it was Amway. In six months time, who knows? Toys, lingerie, or maybe even Tupperware would do the rounds again. To make it more painful, the gatherings have become like CWA bake-offs, with the hostesses dragging out their best family recipes in an effort to be recognised as not only the best mother, housekeeper and wife in town, but the best cook too. One clique had taken to ordering gourmet ingredients from Perth and having them sent up in some local’s refrigerated truck for the standard north-western currency of slabs of beer. And it seems lately to be the trend to join wine clubs, to have cartons
of wine from South Australia delivered to the door. Whatever happened to the days when you could throw a Philly-cheese and corn relish dip together and add a plate of chopped salami, cocktail onions and Jatz crackers, open a cask of Coolabah and have a good time?

Cheryl imagines she’s being accused of working too much for her kids’ good now. They’ve got to talk about something at these gatherings, so why not the person who is not there to set them straight? That’s how it usually goes. While technically she works no more than two shifts a week, with the girls now at school and kindy she feels her old ‘work’ excuse doesn’t hold up so well. So lately she’s resorted to occasionally taking on extra night-shifts at the hospital. When Neil’s on nights, she’s got a ready-made excuse—she never uses babysitters.

‘Good turnout tonight, hey Suze?’ Cheryl brushes her hair off her face and tucks it behind her ear. She feels self-conscious in her bright Hawaiian style shirt and wilting frangipani flower garland that Neil and the girls made earlier that day. While she dozed on and off, they must have spent ages gathering flowers from the tree in the park down the road. The whole family’s got a variation of the same outfit. She’d felt the sneer forming, but tried to hide it as she brightly declared them all to be quite the Westies poster family. When they were all dressed to go, Neil had insisted they all pose for a photo using the self-timer on his new camera. He’s into recording every moment of family life these days. It’s as if he’s trying to constantly capture and immortalise them all, to prove they existed, for some unspecified time in the future when they may need proof. She can just imagine the photos that will come back from the processors in Perth. She’d been in a vile mood. Her smile will be there, but her eyes would give her away.
Looking around, it seems to Cheryl that nobody else other than management has made an effort to dress for the theme of this bi-monthly Sunset Gathering, and their costumes look as though they’ve been sent from a hire shop in Perth—and paid for from some special fund, no doubt. Everybody appears to be getting into the free booze though. The hospital and cops will be busy tonight. They always are after these company piss-ups. More than once after one of these functions, she’s patched up people she knows, often respectable members of the community, for drug and alcohol related matters that will cause them no end of embarrassment come the light of day.

‘Yes, it’s wonderful to see so many of our community join us in coming together as one in harmony.’

Cheryl can’t quite believe what she is hearing. Suze has lifted the motto *together as one in harmony* straight from some State Government advertising campaign. Yet at the same time, she is unsurprised that Suze takes the credit for a bunch of people with nothing else to do showing up on a sandfly-blanketed sports oval on a Saturday night to load up on free grog and lukewarm soggy Kentucky Fried Chicken. The boxes of chicken, as is always the case for these occasions, had been wrapped in alfoil and flown from Perth on an Ansett commercial flight.

‘Did they order wine this time?’ Cheryl can’t seem to help herself tonight. After the last Sunset Gathering she had attended, she’d complained to the president of the social club about the fact that there was enough beer to fuel a riot, but no wine and no non-alcoholic drinks for those who may have been driving home or had just not wanted to drink. Early the next week she’d come home from dropping the girls off at school and kindy to discover a case of wine on the doorstep and a written apology,
signed by Suze on behalf of the company and social club. She was furious, scribbled a note saying *Thanks but no thanks, you’ve missed the point*, loaded the wine into the car and drove the twenty kilometres to the plant, insisting that the security guard on the gate sign it in and ensure that it be returned to Suze’s office. Later she was contrite. Suze had meant well.

She watches Suze’s face. She doesn’t appear to take offence. She leans towards Cheryl and says that she’s become very busy with all the new people coming to town.

‘Prince Charles is coming to visit soon. And oh, there’s so much work to be done. I’ve had to delegate. Got me own PA now. She’s got a lot to learn, but she’s not bad. It’s your neighbour Sam, but you’d know that. Anyway *she* ordered the wine—two cartons of casks of red wine and six of white. There’s a ton there. She made sure of that.’ Suze leans forward, lowering her voice. ‘Between us, she overspent on the bloody budget.’

Cheryl didn’t know about Sam’s new job. Why should she? They barely ever talk beyond a hello over the fence. She looks across to the footy club kiosk where a couple of the senior company management dressed in their elaborate national costumes make a great show of playing bartenders. Four commercial fridges are filled to the brim with a half dozen or so brands of beer and at least another dozen cartons are stacked up waiting to be loaded when the stock levels deplete. She scans the grounds. An hour in, there’s already somebody chucking his guts up at the side of the toilet block. It’s going to be a long night. With a bit of luck the lukewarm chicken won’t give them all salmonella too.
‘So... warm KFC, fifteen varieties of beer, and a few casks of gins’ piss for this lot.’ Cheryl gestures towards the hessian-screened section of the oval filled to near capacity with company people and their families.

_Gins’ piss._ She doesn’t know where that came from, probably hasn’t heard those words spoken together since she was a kid in her school holidays sitting at greasy laminex tables in bars, eating cold chips and greasy burgers while waiting to get back on the road with her dad.

She tries to cover her embarrassment by continuing as though that were a perfectly normal way for her to speak. ‘Did Sam get anything for the kids?’

Suze goes quiet and looks away from Cheryl.

‘Yes, there’s cordial, and some fizzy drinks.’

Cheryl trips over her words and finds herself confiding in Suze.

‘Look Suze, I’m really sorry okay? I don’t know what’s come over me... I just dunno. Look I’m stressed to the max, having a really rough patch.’

Suze swallows. ‘Nothin’ to be sorry for.’ She reaches and brushes a piece of Gabby’s unruly hair from her mouth. ‘You and Jimmy, peas in a pod you are. I should have brought him along to play with you huh, Missy?’

Cheryl looks around the oval for Neil. He’s moved about ten feet from where she last saw him and is talking now to their neighbours Sam and Mark. He likes them, he’s always saying they should have them over for a drink. And she’s always finding excuses not to. She used to tease him light-heartedly, _You’re such a social butterfly, flitting about._ For a while she’d tried to become more like him. But now it just grates on her, his need to make endless small talk with people just because they share the experience of living and working in a small community. If they lived in the
city or proper suburbs, they wouldn’t even have to know their neighbours, much less feel obliged to socialise.

From the corner of her eye she sees a couple of teenagers, boys about eighteen or so, scale the fence and meld into the crowd. One of them meets her eye as he lands on the grassed oval. She tries not to blink or draw attention to them, to allow these boys their taste of company-paid food and drink. Good luck to them. Someone will pick them out soon as imposters, as there are only a handful of Aboriginal staff living in town or working for the company—token blacks, Neil calls them, ever cynical about management intentions. If these boys don’t gravitate towards the small bunch of Aboriginal employees and their families, gathered at the edges of the fenced-off section at the rear of the oval, they’ll be thrown out before they get so much as a soggy KFC drumstick.

‘Yes, Jimmy would have had a ball running around with his best friends here,’ Suze finishes.

Cheryl is relieved that Suze did not bring her grandson along. Not that she has a problem with the boy; he’s a nice little kid and the girls love him. But with Gabby and him having four mornings each week at kindy together, and him wandering up the road at all hours to play with Gabby and Tessa most afternoons and weekends, she’s forever breaking up squabbles between the three of them as the girls compete to be his bestest friend. Worse, she is forced to talk to Suze far more often than she’d like.

‘I left him home with Barney,’ Suze said, as if reading her mind. ‘They’re both a bit unwell with the latest bug, and Beth has gone away to Mount Stevens for the weekend on a training course.’
Cheryl says nothing about Suze’s unwell husband and grandchild. Nor does she care to find out what sort of training Beth could possibly be doing in a closed company town a quarter the size of this, only a hundred kilometres away up a company-owned private access track.

About two hundred metres away, at the other end of the oval, roadies start check-one-two-ing into microphones, tuning up for the band the company has flown in from Perth. After an uncomfortable pause pretending to listen to the men tuning up, Cheryl struggles to find some neutral small talk.

‘So, what made you think of the harmony theme?’ Not that she needs to ask. It’s been all over the local media and the company propaganda that gets posted home lately.

Suze fiddles with the lapel of her suit jacket and coughs. Cheryl nods, simultaneously enjoying Suze’s discomfort and loathing herself for it. Suze opens her handbag, takes out a Mintie packet and offers one to Cheryl and Gabby.

Cheryl shakes her head and Gabby reaches in and takes one, then another, which she places in her skirt pocket. ‘For Tessa—my sister.’

Suze laughs and pats Gabby’s head, embarrassing her. ‘You’re a funny little thing.’ She turns back to Cheryl. ‘I’m giving up smoking again—the second time this year, and this time I’ve stuck it out for over two months. Trouble is, I’m stacking on the weight.’

Cheryl can see that quite clearly, but doesn’t say so

‘Barney says he likes me with a bit of meat on me bones. Doesn’t like the skinny malnourished looking ones. They turn him cold.’ She looks Cheryl’s slight frame up and down.
Cheryl forces a grin. Her hand had been reaching into her handbag for a cigarette, but she changes her mind, pretending to look for a tissue. She has to escape this evening as soon as possible or she’s going to completely lose the plot. But right now, Cheryl needs the kids’ long-sleeved tops and pants, has to spray them liberally with Rid and feed them before everything is gone so she can make a getaway at the earliest opportunity.

Last week the health department had issued another warning about Ross River virus, and three patients were admitted to hospital in the last month with some sort of mysterious illness—probably a mosquito-borne virus. She’d tried to use it as an excuse not to come tonight, but for once Neil didn’t back down when she chucked the shits, giving back as good as he got.

‘You have to stop being so overprotective, so unfriendly, so . . .’

‘So what? So me?’

The girls were excited about the Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Neil wanted to talk to a few of the blokes he’d not caught up with for a while about something, some potential union strife that was brewing. She was shocked when he’d said dismissively, ‘You can stay home or come with us. It’s up to you, Cheryl. But I’m taking the girls.’

Yeah right, as if she’d let him go out on the booze with a bunch of pissheads, without her to watch out for the girls. She’d fumed as she climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door closed. Neil knows she’s still scared being in the car with him, that she likes to drive, to be in control. Normally, they have an unspoken agreement—she drives everywhere now. Except the long runs to Perth, they share
those. Earlier tonight though, he was just being a wanker—tryinge to piss her off on purpose.

She looks over in Neil’s direction, but he has his back to them. He’s piggy-backing Tessa and her arms are draped over his shoulders. She thinks Tessa is getting too big to be all over her father like that and has tried lately to encourage her not to be so physically demonstrative to him.

They’d fought about that after he overheard her talking to Tessa one day, just like they fight over bloody everything now. He thought she was suggesting that he was behaving inappropriately with Tessa. He was hurt, naturally enough. She was gutted to think she’d made him feel so bad. He didn’t get it when she tried to say that it hadn’t occurred to her, but other people might think that. *Fuck them*, he’d roared, *and fuck you!* And he’d walked out, slamming the door and revving the guts out of the car before taking off. She’d very nearly mentioned Jaimee that day, how seeing Tessa and he together like that makes her ache all over. Jaimee was her girl, Tessa his. Christ, they’d joked about it often enough before the accident. But of course she didn’t talk to him about Jaimee, ever. They’d worked out not to speak about her pretty soon after it all happened. The trouble is, all these years later, it doesn’t get easier not naming the source of much of her tension and pain.

Cheryl looks down at her chest. Her frangipanis are wilting and turning brown already. She’s hardly the exotic Hawaiian Queen now. For the first time in years, she wants a joint. Just to take the edge of all this nervous energy. *Fanging for a cone. Shall we m’ dear?* Neil used to ask with a grand sweeping gesture. Then he’d ceremoniously prepare the bong that was permanently housed on the coffee table in
the little North Perth house they’d lived in before they got married and moved to the
Pilbara when she was a few months pregnant with the twins.

It’s humid. The oval is filling rapidly and a cloud of cigarette smoke hangs
above the chatter. Cheryl closes her eyes and inhales the faint but distinctive aroma
of mull winding its way through the crowd. No wonder she was craving a joint. What
do they call it, sublime messages, or something like that? She’d take the edge off
with a drink, but just the thought of having even one drink in this pissy environment
makes her feel physically ill. Besides, she’s got to drive home; Neil will no doubt be
pissed as a fart before the night’s out. And obnoxious and funny only to himself—
making the most of his rare R and R, as he calls it.

‘The band is about to start,’ says Suze, disrupting Cheryl’s thoughts.
‘Everybody loves Elvis, don’t they?’

Cheryl groans inwardly. Fucking perfect—an impersonator. She hadn’t known.
Now Neil won’t want to leave early. She looks to where she last saw Neil. He’s
talking to someone with a mass of blonde curly hair. From where she stands, Cheryl
can see that she’s wearing a tiny denim mini skirt, an oversized colourful pirate style
shirt cinched with a wide red shiny belt at the waist. It must be a Perth fashion.
Cheryl’s never seen anyone dressed like that here. Her long tan legs are finished off
with bright red stiletto-heeled shoes. She turns Cheryl’s way as Neil points her out
and waves. Cheryl’s breath draws involuntarily inward. She cannot help staring. It
has to be the young woman some of the mothers were talking about before kindy the
other day. The fiancé of someone new in the plant workshop—a dancer who used to
be in the Australian Ballet before she fell for a boilermaker and quit the ballet
company to follow him up north. Apparently it had made the papers and television
news. Cheryl rarely watches the news and can’t be bothered reading the Perth newspaper. It seems like another world down south, one that she has no real connection to now. This is home now, it has to be. Trying to dig that hole with the star picket and hammer, scratching millimetre by millimetre into the rock-hard ground, finally giving in and strapping that white cross into the broken marker on the side of the road late at night nearly six years ago, has given her a reason to stay.

There’s been talk that the dancer—Ellie, Cheryl thinks she’s called—might open up a dance school in one of the under-utilised function rooms at the recreation club. A week or two back she’d even advertised in all the school newsletters seeking expressions of interest, asking the parents what their children would be most interested in. Cheryl was pleased to see she had used the words *sons and daughters*. It’s about time the boys here were offered something other than football and cricket. Though looking around at the men swilling back their beer like there was no tomorrow, Cheryl doubts too many would be jumping for joy if their little Johnnies and Brandons wanted to take up ballet.

Cheryl had filled in the form enthusiastically—*something fresh, age appropriate, and most of all—fun*. She’s seen the little girls dressed up for end of year shows in outfits far too skimpy and provocative for her to be comfortable with. She’d thought about suggesting classes for the women too. For all of about five minutes the idea of taking up dance classes had excited her. Christ knows, they need something other than bloody netball and craft groups to occupy the hours they aren’t working. Or to give those that don’t have an outlet some time away from home. But she didn’t in the end. Just imagining the sight of herself up there, wheezing and clunking along, uncoordinated amongst the lithe and lovely teenage girls of the town,
was enough to put an end to that idea. Still, she hopes the dance school goes ahead. It’s about time that woman running the one up the other end of town had some competition.

Tessa has been asking to join that dance school for the last two years, but so far she’s not allowed her to. Next year, Cheryl says each year, when you are older. She’s sure the same old routines, songs and even costumes are rehashed each year for the dance school’s Christmas show. Suze and Barney’s daughter, Beth and her friend Lila had ended up with seats next to hers and the girls last year. Beth had told her that the show was virtually unchanged from the last one she’d been in back when she was fifteen—seven years earlier.

The way the mothers were all talking about the new dancer at kindy that day, you’d have thought she’d proposed setting up a brothel aimed at attracting their men as the main clientele. The fact that she was looking at starting something new for their kids and had arrived here with a fiancé, seemed to matter little. Outside kindy, Cheryl had stood back and felt herself bristling at their carry-on. God, she hated being part of all that shit. But now that she sees her, Cheryl feels very dowdy and cannot help but understand their insecurities. It’s as if a glamorous supermodel from the women’s magazines has been deposited in their midst to unsettle them all.

Suze catches Cheryl watching Neil and the dancer. Cheryl braces herself for some more of Suze’s pearls of wisdom.

‘No need to worry there, love. You’ve got yourself a loyal one . . . like me.’

Cheryl flinches, swills the words around and searches them for innuendo.
Maybe Barney’s said something. She doesn’t think so though. Besides, Suze has never been known to be subtle. She looks back at Suze’s face. Suze is speaking. She’s missed something she’s said but hopes she can bluff her way through.

‘So anyway, about that group I was. . .’

‘Alright.’

Suze looks momentarily stunned. Then, seizing the moment, she takes a breath and tells Cheryl that there aren’t many professional women joining the group—that it’s all bored stay-at-home Mums and new temporary women who’ve come to town with their engineering, geologist and management husbands until they relocate to a better paying mine or plant somewhere else.

‘You see, Cheryl, they send out the wrong message to the majority of new people in town—most of them everyday people like you and me. I’m trying to get the message across to newcomers that this isn’t just a town of bored rich housewives. No disrespect meant to those rich women who choose not to work in real jobs of course. But interesting, vibrant young mothers and career women live here too, women like us— who lead fulfilling, exciting lives.’

‘Fulfilling, exciting lives? You’ve got the wrong person if that’s what you’re after.’ Cheryl laughs just a little too loudly and brightly. She wonders for a second if she sounds manic. She’s wondered about that lately, maybe there is something wrong with her. There’s similar conjecture in the town about poor Catherine—she’s manic, bipolar, just crazy, a hypochondriac. Despite her training highlighting the importance of speaking up and listening, it didn’t take Cheryl long to figure out that one of the worst things you can do in a place like this is admit to mental health problems.
‘Suze, look, I’m just a part-time nurse. I just don’t feel comfortable with committees and all that stuff. And between the hospital and the girls, I don’t have much time, you know? But look, I’ll see what I can do.’

She excuses herself, saying Neil is waiting for her. ‘Give us a call next week and we’ll talk about it, okay?’

None of Cheryl’s problems are Suze’s fault. Cheryl knows that, but she can’t seem to help herself when she’s in one of these moods. She walks across the oval to the toilet block with Gabby, trying to avoid making small talk with too many people on the way. There’s a line of at least twenty women waiting, some of them holding one or more beers, making sure they don’t go thirsty while they wait. Classy. Still holding Gabby’s hand, she arrives at the end of the queue just as her neighbour Sam does. She smiles and greets her, congratulates her on the PA job and tunes out as Gabby starts asking Sam about going over to play with Sam’s new puppy.

No, none of her problems are Suze’s fault but the fact is, Suze does seem to bring out Cheryl’s ugly side. Maybe it’s her own guilt that drives it? It’s easier to forgive herself her own stupidity if she makes Suze the enemy. Really though, she’s clever enough to work out this frame of mind is a cyclic thing, her own problem. Something that she can’t talk about, a wave that builds in intensity and threatens to engulf her. It starts to build a few weeks before the anniversary of the accident each year and is not spoken about until all the worst of the rage, the self-loathing and pain has been worked through and put to rest just under the surface to simmer and fester for another year. Only then will she and Neil speak in vague terms, *it* has passed, *that time*, that *date* has passed for another year. It’s the same every year, but according to the counsellors and the books, it should get easier with the passing of time. Yet the
truth is, even before the accident there was something else. The miscarriage—their first mutual pain. That grief had stirred up similar emotions and responses—leading firstly to her running away from Neil and their hastily organised wedding, and later to her becoming moody around the same time each year. After the accident though, that annual pain pretty much disappeared—submerged and subsumed by Jaimee’s death.

She thought she was doing okay. But lately, Cheryl again feels incapable of looking ahead to better days. She sits with Crazy Catherine when her husband or her daughter admits her to hospital, listens to her ranting and raving until the medication slows the chatter in her head and allows her to sleep. Sometimes she feels that Catherine is possibly the only woman who she really relates to. Of course Corazon, despite their falling apart, still means a lot to her. But there is something in Catherine, something that goes beyond the experience Cheryl shared with Corazon, that resonates so deeply with Cheryl that it confuses her and sometimes even causes her to question her own sanity.

She suspects often that despite all her efforts, this cycle is getting worse, not better. She nearly always feels so fucking raw. Exposed. She wonders if she’ll ever get better. Do you ever heal from grief? Can you? If Catherine Connor is anything to go by, she thinks not.

Instead of the usual feeling of being almost invisible in the vastness of the Pilbara, lately she feels like a glowing beacon, the centre of attention, just as she had in those first months after losing Jaimee. The air feels too heavy to breathe. The dust chokes her. The past stalks her, almost overwhelming her. Every mistake she ever made, every wrong choice, every cruel word she ever heard or uttered thunders at
her, closer and louder. Then in a moment of clarity, she’ll work it out—look at the calendar and realise that it is coming up to Gabby’s birthday, and so, Jaimee’s death day. Each year at this time she has the same overwhelming urge to run away, but it’s as if her shoes and body are made of lead.

She cringes inwardly as she remembers that latest attack she’d made on Neil. Just the other night she’d screamed that between him and the small minds inhabiting this place, she’s drowning out of water. Once voiced, she knew her thoughts sounded melodramatic, but it seemed that she’d clenched her jaw and bitten the tip of her tongue to stop the words coming out for so long that when she finally opened her mouth she went overboard. *My spirit is oppressed! Living with you is like dying slowly and painfully!*

She’d wanted to hurt him. She’d needed to. She’s always hated with more passion than she’d been capable of loving with.

He didn’t say anything. Not a word.

The rest remained there, trapped inside her. She could almost visualise the words pouring from her mouth, stabbing at him like sharp knives. *YOU crashed.* *YOU killed her.* But somehow she managed to hold back. He saw it though. She knows he did. And she read his expression at the exact moment they locked eyes and turned away from one another. *YOU made the fuss about leaving the seatbelt off just this once. YOU are as much to blame as me.*

She sighs heavily. Tears are trickling from the corners of her eyes. Gabby races forward to take the next free toilet. Sam takes Cheryl’s hand and looks into her eyes. Cheryl realises her fingers are ice cold as Sam’s warmth envelopes her bony fingers. She wonders if she is getting sick.
‘I know,’ says Sam with a lowered voice. She looks around at the other women in the line as if daring them to notice, before looking again into Cheryl’s eyes. ‘Tessa told me—about the anniversary. I am sorry.’ She squeezes Cheryl’s hand. ‘If you want to drop by and talk or something—I’m always home after six.’

Cheryl doesn’t speak at first. Tessa knows about the anniversary? How? She talks about it—to a neighbour?

‘I’m just tired, working too hard, that’s all,’ she says abruptly, wriggling her hand from Sam’s grip. ‘But... thanks.’

Returning from the toilets, she sees Neil is still talking to the dancer. Maybe she should ask her about adult dancing classes? Neil’s leaning in towards the dancer, no doubt entranced by every pretty word that falls from her tongue. Cheryl had confided in Corazon one night, *I used to entrance him—until he got sick of rejection.* She misses her friend more than she’d thought possible. How stupid to cut her off like that.

The dancer’s hand touches Neil’s upper arm softly in that way only truly beautiful, confident women can get away with. Cheryl supposes she should feel jealous but doesn’t. She feels detached, an observer of her husband’s other, secret, side.

For Neil is acting like the man she used to know when she was someone else, his head thrown back in genuine laughter—a belly laugh. She’s reeling slightly from what Sam has just said, but somehow she’s also struck by the fact that Neil’s still so handsome. She knows, though cannot see, that his eyes are crinkled at the edges, his top lip curled slightly over his beautiful strong teeth. His laughter was what first
attracted her to him when she stopped to rest in Geraldton all those years ago. It was the most ridiculous laugh she’d ever heard.

The fake Elvis’s dreadful version of *Burning Love* belts out into the air. Neil sees her watching and waves her over, dropping to one knee as he mimes an Elvis karate move, a grin spreading across his face.
Eleven

Sam yells through the kitchen doorway, ‘Look, Mark, just stay out of the way tonight if you aren’t going to squash.’

The oven door bangs shut and from the lounge room where he’s parked in front of Stateline, Mark can hear his wife slamming dishes about, opening and closing cupboard doors and cursing everything that dares to cross her path.

‘Why have these things at all if you get so stressed, babe? Just ring and cancel.’

‘They’re due in five minutes, it’s too late.’ Sam pokes her head through the door way dividing the kitchen from the dining area. ‘Oh, fuck it!’ She shrieks as something metal clangs across the room.

Mark stands, presses the button on the television and walks through the lounge room to the kitchen, wrapping his arms around the rigid frame of his now sobbing wife, hushing her. She pushes him away.

‘Never mind. There’s plenty of time. Next month, maybe?’

It’s not what he meant to say. He wants to say how sorry he is, how he knows it’s probably all his fault, that he’d seen the article she’d left open on the coffee table linking infertility and heavy pot usage and he’ll stop soon. But a pair of headlights sweeps the driveway and lights up the kitchen momentarily. Sam turns, goes to the mirror in the hallway, wipes her eyes, drags her fingers though her hair and moves toward the front door to allow her supervisor’s daughter in.
Forty minutes later Sam tunes out as Beth Murray begins her sales pitch. She’s a little wobbly and has that annoying speech habit teenagers seem to have these days, raising her voice into a squeaky upward inflection at the end of each sentence.

Sam looks around the kitchen table at the six women she’s managed to coerce into coming. Really, she only managed to get three of them herself—her neighbour Cheryl, who looks about as excited as she is to be here tonight, Anna from work and Gaynor, a woman about her own age who’s new to town and works at Kmart. She’d invited Gaynor on a whim. One minute she was standing waiting at the Kmart checkout to pay for her Bonds undies, the next she’d invited a stranger to come along to her Sarah-Kay demonstration. And she’d agreed, turning up with two friends. But it’s Cheryl who has surprised her most, arriving with Ellie, that new dancer who’d arrived in town a few months back. She thought Mark’s eyes would pop out of his head when he came out of the back room where he’d been watching T.V. to grab a beer and saw Cheryl walk into the kitchen with Ellie.

Each of the women around the table have sample kits, pink plastic bowls of water and a mirror on a stand in front of them. Cheryl’s ended up seated next to Gaynor, who is laughing loudly and whispering as Beth tries to speak. Sam wishes she hadn’t asked Gaynor to come. She’s a little embarrassed that Cheryl and Anna might think that Gaynor and her sidekicks are friends of hers. Then again, maybe she’s even more embarrassed to realise that she’d prefer Cheryl to think that, than to know that she’d stooped to asking a stranger at Kmart to come along.

There was so much messing about at the beginning that Sam thought they’d never get the demonstration started. As if it wasn’t bad enough that Beth walked in on the tail end of an argument and seen her red eyes and nose, for a while there it had
seemed that nobody would show up. Then, when they finally did, those three from Kmart had marched in like they owned the place and started knocking back the wine she’d offered them like it was going out of fashion.

They’re all quite awful with their loud mouths and miniskirts, but Gaynor is particularly repugnant. The others at least had thanked her for inviting them—though actually, she hadn’t. Gaynor had walked into the house and immediately started talking about how she could never live in one of these houses, how she’d go crazy being the same as everybody else, could never work for a company where you are just a number. She’d rubbed everyone up the wrong way in about two seconds flat.

Anna saved the moment though. ‘Is working for Kmart fulfilling all your dreams?’ she’d asked Gaynor in a nice-as-pie voice, silencing her for a few minutes.

In the six years they’ve been living here, Sam’s noticed a number of people say that sort of thing about the houses. She can only assume they are jealous. If they don’t have a job with a house provided, it seems they’ll make out you’ve sold your soul to get one, that working ‘for the company’ was some sort of moral crime. She doesn’t get it. It is hardly the type of place you’d come to because you’d always wanted to. Why would anyone come here at all, if not to secure a comfortable lifestyle and financial future?

‘Okay ladies, let’s move on.’ Beth no longer sounds like a nervous teenage girl. Suze had told Sam at work that she’d been coaching her, teaching her to project her voice. Sam is surprised and strangely relieved that Beth seems to have overcome her awkward start.

‘Ladies... for tonight only, as a special offer, if one of you chooses to have an in-home demonstration within the next ten days, your hostess—Sam, will receive one
hundred dollars worth of bonus product as a special thank you.’ Beth pauses, and with her long red painted nails wipes a non-existent piece of fluff from the new Top Sales badge pinned to her chest.

Cheryl groans out loud and looks quickly around the table to see if anyone has noticed. Sam grimaces, shrugging her shoulders, hoping to convey that this is news to her, that she doesn’t care about any of that. She’d only agreed to hold this demonstration at all because her new supervisor, Suze Murray, pressured her into it with tales of woe. Her daughter, a single mother, was trying to make a go of it and build a business. Though from what Sam hears from Suze herself, Beth is on a pretty good wicket and getting more support than most of the single mothers around here.

By the end of her first working week, she’d discovered that nowadays Suze and Barney virtually raise Beth’s son. Ever since Beth’s boyfriend shot through she had lost the plot, running around town, living it up like she had no responsibilities and causing no end of embarrassment for her parents. Sam feels a bit sorry for Suze. It must be humiliating to have your kid go wild like that. If she ever manages to have kids they’ll be out of this place before they start school. There seems to be too much freedom, too much alcohol and too many parents who don’t give a damn about their teenagers. Not that she thinks Suze hasn’t tried in her way to do the right thing. As for Barney—well, from what Mark says, he’d probably have been too busy throughout Beth’s childhood and teen years trying to get into the pants of anyone with a vagina to have been aware of what was going on in his daughter’s life. It’s no wonder she was a mother by sixteen.

Sam looks around the table again. ‘No really, please don’t feel. . .’ She sees that Gaynor and her friends seem mildly interested in buying something. Good, maybe
they’ll do that and leave soon. They’ve already polished off nearly a cask of wine between them and that’s the last of it—so, no point hanging around.

She hasn’t previously seen either of the girls Gaynor brought along. Focused on trying to conceal her anger and sadness, Sam wasn’t really paying that much attention when they did their introductions. She thinks they said they’re new here and are staying in the caravan park outside town in the old industrial area. It was hard to hold it together once the other one walked in with her huge pregnant belly squeezed into a tight fluoro yellow and pink lycra outfit. Maybe it was the one with bleached yellow-blonde frizzy hair who’d said she was travelling around Australia? Funny, the transient people all say that they are travelling at the beginning. But it seems they get here, stay put earning big money for a few years on construction teams, get a company job or State house and start popping out babies—not necessarily in that order. Maybe that’s what they were really looking for all along, but didn’t want to admit it? She feels for those babies, born and raised in those stinking hot dirty caravan parks. It was no wonder they grew up feral, with that start.

Gaynor’s sniggering about something else now. Sam’s had enough and wants her out of her home. If she’s shown up for having no friends in front of her neighbour, so be it. Who really does up here? They’re all contacts, colleagues or partners of workmates. More often than not you lose contact with people once they inevitably move on. She doesn’t really think that much of Beth, but these girls were so rude that she’d felt herself bristling on Beth’s behalf. She wishes she were brave enough to just order them out or to go to the spare room and tell Mark she wants them out of her home. Trouble is, he’d probably go off with them to the Tav and
come home telling her what an uptight bitch she’s grown into since she’d become obsessed with having a baby.

If only she’d not been so impulsive at the checkouts the other day. So much for her plan to try and be a little more spontaneous, to get more involved in the wider community. But she’s starting to think Suze was right, it’s just easier to stick with similar types, to mix socially with people in the same company or long-term people from other companies—if they’ll talk to you, of course. They’re more likely to understand what it’s all about and not think you’re a spoilt snob if you complain about anything.

Cheryl looks across at Sam, who’s wearing a pasted-on smile. Gaynor has become increasingly obnoxious. Maybe she’s on something? Cheryl recognises Sam’s look. She calls it the have a nice day look. She’s got it down to a tee herself.

Beth wraps up her sales pitch and tells everyone she will be ready to take their orders in the lounge room, then moves across the room to sit on the brown metal and fabric Sebel lounge chair that every Westies family has at home. Cheryl hates those chairs. She can’t remember how exactly it happened, but somehow over the last couple of years they’ve become a physical reminder of her inability to really let go and move forward. She doesn’t remember feeling anything at all about the chairs or anything else really, when they first came to Lawson. It was a brand new house, brand new furniture and a brand new start. So people kept saying. She went through the motions, feigning enthusiasm, making plans to stay here for a few years, to save a lot of money, to go south and buy a few acres—an extension of the daydreams she’d begun having before moving to Redhill back when she’d been pregnant with the
twins. Back then they’d talked about coming for two years initially, and staying no more than five at the most. Already, she’s forgotten who’d initially revised those plans in those first months after moving to Lawson. Had Neil agreed with her, or was she going along with his desperate attempts at resuming normal life?

So what! she’d wanted to scream at people as they reacted with fake enthusiasm to the opportunity she and Neil had been given. Though she was aware after the accident and the sackings at Redhill that they couldn’t stay with Corazon and Eric forever, she hadn’t asked for any of this. They simply weren’t ready to make a major change. And always, even now, she was aware of some people’s perception that Neil had only ever been offered the Westies job out of sympathy, or worse, a publicity stunt.

She’d always been insular. But in those earliest months, those most intense months of grieving, she was bitter and hated especially those who were nicest to her. She imagined their perfect, untarnished lives in their stupid brick and tile matching houses. Sometimes she’d wanted to say My kid is dead, have you arseholes forgotten that? But mostly she didn’t want to talk to anyone. She wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out.

She supposes she must have thought that the house, Neil’s job, the furniture and the town of Lawson itself were okay when they’d first moved here. They had a place to live, food on the table. Cleaning the house and watering the crappy garden had provided a reason to wake up each morning. And of course, she was closer to the crude roadside memorial, something that had mattered so much to her then. But she’d spent too much time sitting in those brown Sebel chairs, calculating how many
hours until the baby and Tessa would be asleep for the night, waiting for that time when she could pop a pill to stop the thinking and crawl into bed.

Now she’s got it into her head that if they get rid of all the company furniture and try to be a bit more individual, they’ll be happy. But Neil won’t budge. For starters, they have nowhere to store the furniture and the company policy states that when they vacate the house all furniture must be in the same rooms they found it. There’s even a map in the manual, to show the exact placement of the furniture in the various rooms of the house. *When they vacate.* What a joke. Where would they go now? The truth is they’ll probably never leave. She tells herself it’s the company that has them cornered, but somehow she knew as soon as she became aware their daughter had died on that road, that they’d remain here.

The other women stay at the table. Ellie is talking to one of the women about her dance school, hopefully soon to be running in the recreation centre, and the others listen attentively. Not for the first time she feels a pang of something like envy, at the way Ellie seems to command attention without any effort on her part. It’s more than simply being attractive, Cheryl thinks, that draws people toward her like that. There’s a certain level of self-confidence required, something that she doesn’t imagine she’ll possess in her own lifetime. That aside, she doesn’t connect with Ellie and really only asked her in order to show Neil after their last argument that she was making some effort at being at least a little bit sociable.

She looks across the room. Beth organises her order book, trying to look busy, trying, perhaps, to project a similar air of confidence to Ellie. Beth too, will be unlikely to possess real confidence. Even when she’d been a little kid in Raethorpe and Cheryl had occasionally spent time with her, she’d felt a bit sorry for Beth.
was clumsy, not very bright and even then, aged only eighteen herself, Cheryl could see that Beth would grow up to be one of those people who’d go through life barely noticed by others. That she would probably give all of herself away to anyone who showed affection or attention.

*It would be my worst nightmare,* Cheryl had yelled the last time she’d fought with Neil about moving and her unhappiness, *to stay here for long enough for one of the girls to become like Suze Murray’s daughter.* Neil, to his credit, bit his tongue and let it slide. There were any number of recriminations he could have spat at her, any number of possible responses. Instead, he’d simply said he could actually think of many worse scenarios, and she’d felt about two inches tall. No point telling him then that she’d never forget about the worst things that could happen to people like them.

Turning her attention back to the table at which she is seated, she becomes aware that everyone is tuned in to something Gaynor is saying.

‘. . . should’ve heard the carry on, the cops had to drag her out kicking and screaming. She wouldn’t let go of the birthday card—she’s crazy, that one.’

Cheryl becomes aware that Sam is looking at her, perhaps waiting for her to add to the conversation. After that incident the other night outside the toilets, Cheryl had talked to Sam, wanting to know more about what Tessa had confided in her. Keen to let Sam think it wasn’t an issue, Cheryl had begun the conversation with small talk. At some point, Sam raised Catherine’s name. She’d asked Cheryl straight out why Crazy Catherine was always stealing children’s clothing and toys and most recently, according to the gossip, a four year old’s birthday card.
Perhaps Sam is waiting for her response to Gaynor’s gossip about Catherine. Cheryl had been a bit abrasive as she’d responded to Sam the other night. She was pissed off, hurt too, to think that Sam had befriended her daughter and managed to somehow coerce her into talking about personal family matters when Tessa rarely spoke to her. *I can’t talk about work, she’d said to Sam. And her name is Catherine, not Crazy Catherine.*

The chatter and laughter about Catherine continues around the table. There’s a knot the size of a baseball twisting in her gut. To her credit, Sam seems to be trying to change the subject.

‘I’m going to nick outside for a smoke,’ Cheryl tells Sam loudly. ‘Back in five.’

She looks across at Beth at the other end of the open plan living space and mimes going outside for a cigarette. ‘Coming?’ she asks, with a wave of her hand, adding more loudly than necessary that everyone could have a think about what to buy while Beth was outside with her.

‘Really should give up one of these days,’ Cheryl says. ‘But, it’s my only vice.’ She winks at Beth. They’ve finished a cigarette and Cheryl lights another off the butt, offering Beth one, which she refuses. ‘What do you think about Gaynor? A bit much, huh?’

Beth wonders how Cheryl knew she was thinking right at that moment about what Gaynor had said earlier.

‘I dunno. She’s pretty rude, saying stuff about our houses, I suppose. And that stuff she said about Lila’s mother just shits me. What would *she* know about her?’
Just a few minutes earlier in Sam’s lounge room, Beth had been trying to think of how to tell Cheryl something. She’d felt like she’d been there for ages hoping someone would come over and buy some of her stupid products. Leslie had told her that he had to get away from the sameness of the whole town and the people in it, that they messed with his brain chemistry. She knows that’s bull though. Who can blame him for shooting through? No bloke wants to have a kid at seventeen and live with his girlfriend’s parents forever. She didn’t really like him that much anymore, anyway. It was just that he was nice to her at first. And he had stuck around labouring for hardly any money for two years after she had Jimmy, before finally disappearing back to Raethorpe.

‘I know,’ Cheryl said. ‘How’s your dad? And your mum?’ Cheryl added too quickly as the door opened and Anna came outside.

‘They’re okay. Fighting . . . as usual. Dad’s a bastard . . . as usual. Better go in now.’

It’s only later, when Sam is taking stuff to the kitchen and everyone except Cheryl has left, that Beth has the guts to say what has been on her mind all night. She takes a deep breath and speaks quietly. ‘Um, can I talk to you later, alone? It’s about, the umm, the thingy you made—not the one on the road—the other one.’
Twelve

It’s been ages since Cheryl last came out this way. The last time she’d gone out, six months after Jaimee’s death, she’d thought it would give her some sort of closure, or at least some semblance of peace. But after she’d done it, it had just seemed stupid and pointless, something a teenage kid would do, and she couldn’t make herself go back there again.

Some years prior to that, not long after they had moved to Redhill and just a couple of months before the twins were born, Neil made his one and only trip out here with her. The place was already changing from the way she’d remembered it. The people of the area had formed some sort of society to restore and preserve the old town and graveyard. The signs said they’d been raising funds through the government and the mining companies to make it a viable tourist attraction.

Before they’d first moved up this way to take on the job in Redhill—she returning, and Neil coming this far north for the first time—she’d tried to tell him how much she’d loved the old cemetery. How spending quiet time there had helped her decide to go back to Perth, to do her nursing training and to return to him. He’d responded in the way he always did when she talked about that time they were apart. He’d try to hide his hurt, but his body went stiff, his eyes steely and the words coming out of his mouth were sharp around the edges. She’d thought at first he exaggerated the level of the pain he’d claimed to have suffered after she shot through from Geraldton, that it was just a male ego thing—after all, it wasn’t as if they’d planned that first baby. Cheryl had been just a teenager and had no plans to get married after falling pregnant to a guy she’d known for only six weeks. But as she
matured, she came to understand him better. There was no one else for him, never had been and probably never would be.

The weather had been beautiful all that week—unseasonably cool and crisp. It had been several weeks since they’d had torrential summer rains, and they’d each agreed during the drive out to the old ghost town that it felt almost like the cool coastal plain of the state’s south west. They were excited about the fact that in a few months they’d have twins—one each, they’d kidded. They’d decided, once the first nervous months passed, that it was as though they were being repaid for the one she’d miscarried before running away from him all those years back.

As soon as they’d pulled up at the rusted chain-link fence, she’d suspected it was a mistake to take him there. But for a while she’d explored the graveyard, trying to block out Neil’s negativity. He kept making stupid jokes about hanging around the dead and saying he could not understand her fascination with old corpses. She’d wandered around brushing broken glass off particular headstones or markers and arranging small bunches of lavender spinifex, sticky cassia, mulla mulla and native fuchsias she’d picked when they’d stopped by the side of the road for Neil to take a pee. She’d tried, after getting back into the car, to engage him in talk about the correct plant names. She’d said she felt they should be called by their Aboriginal names to show respect, but she didn’t know them. The talk seemed to bore him and she’d gone quiet.

While she wandered around the old cemetery, Neil sat perched on the roo bar of the old ex-army Landrover they’d bought before leaving Perth. Watching her, he’d chain-smoked rollies and finished a couple of beers. He became impatient quickly and called her back to the car. Come on, it’s hot. It’s fucking depressing too. Let’s go.
This was the place that had helped her make sense of her own thoughts when she’d been messed up. But he didn’t get it. He’d just felt threatened or something—and truth be told, she couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that she’d not been alone on her previous times here. So when he complained, she’d shrugged and climbed back into the car. She’d surprised him by refusing his offers to stop for a swim at the beach and to explore the partially restored buildings.

On the drive back to Redhill, some forty-five minutes away by back roads on rough gravel and dust tracks, he’d begun to ask questions. ‘So, when you came here before, how did you know about it?’

‘Someone who lived in Raethorpe drove me there.’

She tried to remain calm. Perhaps he thought she answered too fast, that her response sounded rehearsed.

‘How often?’

‘Oh, maybe five or six. Maybe more. They left the area around the same time as I went back to Perth.’ She knew what was on his mind. ‘Look, it was a long time ago. I was eighteen, it was a different life, let’s leave it, love.’ And with that, she reached across and placed her hand over his on the gear stick.

Later that night in bed, just as she was about to fall asleep, he’d asked, ‘Was it a bloke?’

She’d pretended not to hear.

Driving out there now, she feels withered. She’s just short of thirty-five and feels as if she’s lived several lives. Little has changed out here in all those years since she first came to the area when she was eighteen. Still the same sea of spinifex, the
familiar craggy red rock outcrops in the distance, and those might well be the same broken station fences. The only thing that has really obviously changed is the road. They’ve done a lot of work on it over the last couple of years. On her earliest visits it had been a single lane, lumpy bitumen track with dangerous potholes. She can’t remember how many times she thought she’d busted an axle in her tiny Morris Minor back then. Now it’s smooth all the way, with wide overtaking lanes marked every few kilometres. And it’s signposted, presumably to help the growing numbers of travellers—the truckies bringing supplies through, hippies heading to Broome, the retired couples or grey nomads, as the media calls them.

Apart from the last time Cheryl was out there six years ago, taking only six month-old Gabby for the drive, she hasn’t been back to the ghost town since that day with Neil when she was pregnant with the twins.

It had taken a few months after the accident for Cheryl to really work out what she needed to do. She needed to give herself permission to let go—*to allow herself closure*, as the visiting psychologist had said when she told him she thought she was going absolutely insane with guilt and grief.

There’d been a service in town around a fortnight after the accident—people seemed to expect it, and Cheryl found herself being swept along, yet not really part of the event. She just had to *be* there, her mother said. And on that occasion Cheryl succumbed to the maternal instructions from Hazel. Neil was there, flown home that morning from Perth, his parents and brother with him, shielding him from public scrutiny—and maybe from her.

She’d barely spoken to him since the crash. She had been unable to work out what to say to him and what not to say. At one point during the service, looking at
Neil surrounded by his family, his broken legs still wrapped in plaster, his head wrapped in bandages, she thought he looked like some sort of comic mummy from a cartoon strip. She felt so removed from him that it was as if she was watching a strange movie.

Even though Cheryl and Neil didn’t live in Lawson at that time, the Lawson and Paterson locals had quickly adopted their private loss as the loss of one their own. In hindsight, Cheryl thinks the whole situation was completely bizarre. People collected money for the newly unemployed Redhill worker and his family and set up a bank account in town. Some locals bought toys and left them in different places—the hospital, the motel, even at Eric and Corazon’s doorstep. Cheryl remembers thinking that the toy department in Kmart must have looked bare that month.

Before the service was even announced, prisoners at Raethorpe prison decided they wanted to build a monument, a huge monolithic angel. They’d been honing their skills in stonework in preparation for rebuilding sections of the old ghost town for future tourism and offered to send rough sketches for Neil and Cheryl to examine. That was the one topic of conversation she’d really had with Neil on the phone before he was flown back from Perth. They’d fought, he still in his hospital bed in Perth, she leaning across the kitchen bench screaming into the mouthpiece of the avocado-green wall phone, sending Corazon and Eric scuttling from their own kitchen to the outside patio, and Hazel down the hallway to check that the baby and Tessa were still asleep. I will not bury her in the red, hard, ugly ground of the Raethorpe cemetery, she’d told Neil. She didn’t have a better suggestion though. The next day she’d accepted the help of a local chaplain and called him to make some arrangements. That same afternoon, she sat in the passenger seat of a regular station
wagon with the simple wooden box on the seat beside her. At the airport the driver, an official of some sort, walked with her behind the miniature forklift that carried the box containing the broken shell of their daughter. She was loaded like a suitcase onto the plane that carried her to Perth for cremation. The man bought Cheryl a cup of bitter tea in a styrofoam cup and a stale biscuit from the airport shop before dropping her back at Corazon’s house. He didn’t look directly at her once in the two hours they spent together that afternoon.

Outside the gymnasium before the service, there were people from Redhill, the playgroup, the owners of shops, the nice man who gave the twins a slice of polony each time they went to buy meat. There were strange faces too, faces she’d later learn belonged to people who came from Paterson and Lawson. All these people, familiar and unfamiliar alike, seemed willing to be involved in the show of public mourning, but few were willing to approach her and Neil, or to try and find language to acknowledge their loss personally. There was one woman though, who approached and spoke to Cheryl as she stood awkwardly by the open gymnasium door beside Neil in the wheelchair. A washed out looking woman around her own age, she had stringy hair, missing teeth and home-made tattoos. Prison tatts, Neil had always called them. She’d come up to Cheryl, looked her directly in the eyes, taken her hands in her own and said, You don’t remember, do you? Cheryl shook her head. The woman squeezed Cheryl’s limp hands in her own. I came . . . to the hospital, with the dolls. And tilting her head towards the people assembled around the outside of the gymnasium she added, I’m best known as Crazy Catherine around here.

Walking into the high school gymnasium, leaning on Corazon for support as the high school band played Amazing Grace on a podium decorated with pink balloons,
Cheryl felt herself tighten with mistrust at the intentions of everyone at the service. Were they so starved for entertainment that the death of a little girl and a truck driver from out of town became an excuse for an ‘event?’ She knew she was being vile. But those deaths were none of these people’s business. She’d sat quietly at first, holding Tessa in her lap, listening but not really hearing the saccharine speeches by people who didn’t actually know her family at all. She screened out the religious mumbo jumbo, unable to absorb the words about the Lord’s will and suffering angels, only tuning in when somebody from Redhill, the company that had sacked the entire workforce the morning after the accident, stood up. He was a union representative whom Neil had despised. He spoke, he said, on behalf of the whole town of Redhill. But it was hardly a eulogy, more a plug for solidarity amongst the sacked workers who had taken time out from their picketing to attend the service for the child of one of their own. Cheryl wondered if there was a similar service going on somewhere else, a public outpouring of grief for the man who’d driven the truck that had ploughed into them. She’d stood up then, clutched Tessa tightly and walked out to sit in the car until it was all over, leaving Gabby asleep in Corazon’s arms.

Cheryl is not far from the old ghost town and cemetery now. Her neck and shoulders are knotted. She’d never have picked Beth as the type to drive all this way to visit the old cemetery. Perhaps it’s the beach that attracts her? Far from the industrial towns, the beach is a quiet place to visit. Cheryl allows herself to dwell on the possibility of what she might find. Beth hadn’t revealed much. She’d seemed quite uncomfortable talking about it. The graves were damaged, she’d said. What exactly did that mean?
A week after the town’s memorial service, the same day her mother returned to the south-west, Cheryl got out of bed in the middle of the night and went out to Eric and Corazon’s back shed. Earlier that day, she’d hidden something she’d made from a piece of driftwood she’d found on the dirty red-tinged beach a short walk from the house. Eric had spotted her coming back with the wood, and she’d shyly told him what she was up to. He gave her paint and sandpaper to smooth the edges and touching her shoulder softly, promised to keep her secret.

She’d driven alone the forty kilometres to the spot where they’d so recently crashed. Shaking, she’d scraped and dug into the rock-hard ground with a crow bar borrowed from Eric’s shed, barely making a scratch in the surface. She’d finally strapped the crudely made cross to the broken roadside marker with a lace from her jogger, propped a soft toy beside it and driven back to Eric and Corazon’s house in Paterson before anybody even knew she had gone.

The rough cross had made the front page of the regional paper and somebody unknown, full of good intentions, crafted another cross out of iron, engraved with Jaimee’s name. Somehow the mystery person dug into the rock hard ground and cemented that cross in. More pictures were taken, this time appearing in the West Australian newspaper. People she’d no recollection of seeing before were interviewed for the ABC TV news. Distraught at what she saw as yet more appropriation of her personal grief, Cheryl talked properly with Neil for the last time about Jaimee.

Two months after that, just days before moving out of Eric and Corazon’s home into the Lawson house for their so-called new start, they’d scattered Jaimee’s ashes over the ocean into the wind—just the four of them. Cheryl had nervously driven the
new four wheel drive the insurance company had provided to the base of a hill at the end of a corrugated track and parked. While Neil carried Tessa up the craggy track to the top, she’d carried the baby in a sling. They stopped at the top and looked out to sea, facing away from the direction of the industry that was beginning to crowd the bays of the archipelago. Neil walked away some fifty metres or so holding Tessa’s hand, talking gently, pointing out discarded oyster shells thrown into a small midden from Aboriginal families’ long ago feasts. Cheryl breastfed Gabby under a golf umbrella Neil had propped between some rocks, watching him. He’d changed. She often looked at him now and felt she had no idea who he was, this man who’d come back from Perth on the day of Jaimee’s public memorial service. He looked different. He even walked differently. And they’d both lost their ability to laugh, it seemed.

After she’d fed Gabby she’d stood up, reaching behind her for support. She noticed then that they’d been leaning against a rock engraving depicting a turtle and fish. She wanted to mention it to Neil, to say she hoped they were good omens, or totems, or whatever the Aboriginal people called them, but he was looking out over the water, and she’d not bothered.

Earlier that day, she’d carefully transferred some of the grey ash into a plastic lunch bag as she tipped it from the green plastic box into the pretty blue jar they’d bought especially for this at the United Churches recent fete. *Something for you,* the shrink had said.

*Let go now,* Neil had said as the ashes fell from the blue jar and caught the wind before disappearing. *Time for a new start.*

Cheryl took the jar from his hand and ditched it out over the rocks into the water. She’d hated him far beyond the time it took to speak those two short
sentences. Later, she’d thought that those words spoken too soon by him were the hardest of all to forgive.

She had asked Neil to accompany her to the abandoned old cemetery, that day she’d driven out with six month old Gabby. Cheryl reminds herself of that fact whenever she feels guilty about screening him out from so much of her inner life. When she’d asked, reminding him how much she’d loved that place, he’d refused point blank.

*You’re fucking morbid*, he’d said, turning away from her. *We’re done with ceremony.*

So in the end she took the tiny packet of ash and tipped it into the ceramic box she’d bought and driven straight to the old town and the graveyard on the hill. She’d left her sleeping baby with a towel draped over the open car door for shade and taken the little ash-filled ceramic box from the glove box. It had been easy to find the headstone of the *most lovingly missed* mother and three children who’d drowned in the passage between the town and the island in a cyclone. After scraping away the top layer of hard red earth with the small miner’s pick she’d brought along, she asked the dead mother to watch over her little girl and placed the little ceramic box into the shallow grave. She quickly covered up the spot she’d scraped away and made her way over the craggy red rocks and through the spinifex to the car where Gabby was beginning to stir.

Now Cheryl pulls off the gravel road towards the cemetery again. She notes that there’s a new limestone entrance and a small gazebo providing shade just outside the main gate. She parks next to it and gets out of the car. She walks through the
entrance and is shocked at what she sees in front of her. She breaks into a run along
the dirt path near the far left corner where the mother and children are buried, for the
headstone and wrought iron fence that had surrounded the grave are missing.

It is only twenty minutes later, as she’s leaving the old cemetery behind and
driving back towards the ghost town one kilometre away, that she becomes aware the
roadside is now clear of the broken bottles and car bodies that had littered it
whenever she’d been there in the past. The town is becoming a fully fledged tourist
destination. Random building activity seems to be in progress. She notes a team of
men in prison khaki eating lunch under a grassed shaded area and wonders, as a few
of them raise their hands to acknowledge her presence, if some of them are the same
men she’d refused to allow to build a headstone six years earlier.

Tears trickle down her cheeks and her breathing becomes rapid and shallow as
she pulls her car in to where the old hall used to stand. She wonders what became of
it and why they chose not to restore it. A tiny little shop tucked into the corner sells
Coca Cola and ice-creams along with a range of I’ve been scared in the old ghost
town stickers and t-shirts that hang displayed in the front window. She’s trembling at
what she’s just seen, especially the vandalism of the mother’s and children’s
gravestones where she’d buried some of Jaimee’s ashes. It was as though someone
had taken a sledgehammer and smashed the headstone into tiny pieces. And they’d
flattened the fence around the grave and others too, with some kind of machinery. A
grader, perhaps? She turns the ignition off and looks down at her hands. Her palms
are coated in dust, her nails broken and stained with red dirt. After arriving breathless
at the mother and children’s grave site, she’d dropped to her knees and attempted to
gather the fragmented pieces of headstone together and reconstruct them on the
ground. But it was impossible to tell what belonged where. She’d searched amongst the rubble for traces of her little box but found nothing. She’d stayed only a few minutes longer before walking slowly back along the path to her car.

She knows she needs to calm down before driving back to Lawson. She has a cup of tea and makes small talk with the old couple who tell her they volunteer at the shop. All the while she feels as though she’s observing herself from afar. She drives back past the cemetery, slowing the car to take one last look in the direction of the grave where she’d buried Jaimee’s ashes. She’s about to turn back onto the main road when it dawns on her that the only way Beth Murray could possibly know about this private memorial is through her father, Barney.
Part Four

1996
Thirteen

Uncharacteristically, Eric has taken leave from his much loved job and is around the house twenty-four hours a day. Corazon spends yet another Sunday afternoon in the darkened room at the back of the house—the same room that Eric uses to rest during the daytime when he has to drive the train through the night, the same room that Cheryl and her children slept in before Neil came back from Perth.

The air conditioning is turned up high so the room is chilled enough for Corazon to snuggle down under a light doona. She hovers in that delicious state between sleep and wakefulness—dreaming, imagining and remembering. Letters fall from the sky behind her closed eyes.

The first letter she ever received from Eric, only weeks after she placed the small advertisement in the Australian magazine, had arrived tucked inside a small parcel containing a lace handkerchief, seashells and deliciously scented dried leaves. Gum leaves—eucalypts, he’d called them in response to her next letter, written and posted the day after the parcel arrived, querying the name of the plant that grew with such a pretty smell.

She keeps her eyes tightly closed. She is a child, writing a letter. Tatay stands behind her, leaning on the back of the rickety old blue and yellow painted chair as she painstakingly copies each word of the poem from the open pages of the falling-to-pieces book, her tongue pressed into the spongy new space between her front teeth. She grips the pencil tightly. A dull ache intensifies along the bone in her index finger as the page fills with words. She copies the letters, forming words Tatay says will shape into a poem. When she is finished they will send the letter over the sea all the way to Australia to a lady she has never met. She calls the lady Lola inside her
head, and *Grandmother* in the letters she is learning to write. If she writes a beautiful letter, maybe Lola-Grandmother will come and help Tatay care for Corazon, now that Mama has gone away with her baby sisters.

Later that day, or perhaps another day, she swam in the ocean while Tatay watched, seated cross-legged on the sand. Remembering something, she ran up the beach to him and asked loudly, *Tatay, what is a gum leaf?* He was crying big blobby tears. He turned away. She climbed into his wide lap and sat quietly, patting the tears away with her fingertips.

*You’re a good kid, taking care of your old man like this.* He looked into the sky and back at Corazon. *Remember your English, please.*

‘Tell me the lifesaver story Ta. . . Daddy’, she demanded after a while. Her father patted the top of her head and began the story about saving ten children in one day, ten silly children who went too far beyond the flags. Soothed, she rested, her head against his strong chest. Her Lola-Grandmother lived near the beach with the flags.

Corazon shakes herself into wakefulness, not sure if she’s dreaming, remembering, or inventing. She thinks she hears her father’s voice coming from outside the house. She opens and closes her eyes a few times, moves to the window and squints through the space in the blinds, adjusting her eyes to the bright outside light. Eric sits on his old green canvas deckchair under the shaded part of the back patio. Scratching the top of his old red heeler cross’s head with one hand and holding an open brown beer bottle in the other, he talks to the dog.

‘She’s knocked the wind out of me sails, Betsy.’

It’s the look on his face that shakes her more than anything.
Eric has changed so much over the last few years that sometimes she is startled when he walks into the same room. His once nut-brown sinewy old body now looks yellowed and loose. The tattoos on his arms, once vibrantly coloured, are now motley and dull. The charcoal smudges under his eyes extend almost to his cheekbones. Always thin, his sparse hairline has receded to a thin strip around his skull. He moves slowly and leans on furniture as he drifts around the house, his presence marked by a constant dry cough. She’s been hearing stories on the news and sometimes wonders if the blue asbestos in the town where he spent some of his youth has poisoned his lungs. Whatever the cause, she suspects he is seriously ill and should make an appointment to see the doctor in the next town. But when she tentatively broached the subject one morning he snapped that it was only his heart that was poorly—that she had broken it a long time ago. And there was nothing she could say to that.

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The following day Eric is taking Corazon to Lawson for her driving lesson. For years he refused to teach her to drive, reasoning that he would drive his wife anywhere she needed to go. And at first she’d accepted that. It was only when Cheryl moved in with them for that short time after the car accident that Corazon began entertaining ideas of having her own car, her own freedom. Finally, after Cheryl, Neil and their children left to start a new life with the fancy company in Lawson and Corazon moped about missing them, he’d caved in. He begrudgingly gave her lessons, hoping
that being able to visit her friends in the next town forty-five kilometres away while he was at work might make her happy. But she was too jumpy and could never relax enough to listen and learn. Before long she became afraid of being behind the steering wheel and one day decided she no longer wanted to drive. She cannot help wondering if he made her nervous intentionally, snapping at her, calling her an idiot, or a stupid crazy Filipina each time she stalled the car or swerved across the dusty back roads trying to avoid the rocks, potholes and even the occasional kangaroo.

Since their time apart, Eric no longer seems threatened by the thought of her having mobility and independence and offered no resistance when she came home from her work recently and told him she was to be the first student of the Pilbara Driving Academy. The Pilbara Driving Academy had one old temperamental rusty Ford Escort and the promise of a new car very soon.

He knows now that whether she can drive or not, if she is really determined to flee, then she will. She has demonstrated in more ways than he’d ever imagined possible that she will do anything she wants to, just like any other modern woman.

She glances sideways across at him. He has grown nasty. She does not blame him. After all, she made him this way. His eyes are screened behind dark glasses. Since his cataract operation last year he is barely without them, even forgetting to take them off inside the house at times. Sometimes she thinks that he does it on purpose so he can watch her unobserved for signs that she might stray again. But she knows that is unlikely. There is something else about this changed Eric that bothers her, something that goes beyond ageing, or love, or hurt. She can’t quite put her finger on it.
Soon they will approach the airport turnoff with its big new signpost and feature stone wall and statue of some white male founding pioneer of the area. She likes to read books and hear stories about the area, to try to find a way to feel connected to this dirty dry place, but this statue is of a man she has never heard of, and she can find no stories about him. Each time she sees it, she wonders why they made a statue of a man who looks so miserable.

She calculates that she must have travelled this road three hundred times each way every year, for more than thirteen years. There has been so much growth in the area. But on this main road between the two towns, just out of sight of the endlessly expanding coastal industrial strip, this wall and statue of the miserable stranger are the only visible changes on the seemingly barren landscape. On those rare occasions they drive along here at night, though, she can pretend to be someone else, going out for a night in the city with lots of friends. When lit up at night, even from a distance, the industrial sprawl snaking along the coast resembles a glittering modern metropolis.

Corazon glances across at her husband and attempts to bridge the space between the two of them.

‘You drive your van like it is your train.’ She tries to adopt a light voice, a frivolous, playful voice. She’d heard the relationship counsellor on talkback radio suggest this was imperative to keep the fun in a marriage. But it comes out more like an accusation. A sharp, shrill squawk. You’re like a vulture, always pecking away at my carcass, Eric had spat at her just the other night before shuffling slowly out of the house, whistling for old Betsy to follow him. They’d disappeared for hours.
Not long after she’d come to live here with him, when they thought they’d have children of their own before long, he’d told her about being a boy of ten in charge of the hens in the chook house on the station where he’d been sent to live. After the migrant camp, where other children’s mothers had tried to ensure he had at least some attention, he’d thought he would perish from the lack of human touch. Though he could barely remember his mother, he cherished the memory of her hand brushing across his cheek more than anything else. He still did not understand fully the idiosyncrasies of the station people’s Australian-English language. And he believed no person could ever have felt as alone as he did then.

*Our children must never feel that way, my girl.* Her heart had swelled and she’d thought of Tatay, wondering what sort of Grandfather he would have made.

Vulnerable in the strangeness and the incessant heat, the child-Eric had been terrified by all that space, the dust in his nose and chest, that infinite sky. He’d developed an illness. His mind was sick. He could not stop weeping and his guardian, seeing his pain, spoke to him kindly and sent him to rest. Misunderstanding his guardian’s line of questioning, he’d nodded as the tears rolled down his face, *Yes, someone else will take care of the chicken-house. Thank you.*

He went to his bed on the closed-in verandah and had his food and drink brought to him at regular intervals on a tray by an even younger girl who worked in the station kitchen and main house with her mother. Stretched out on the lumpy mattress on the skinny camp bed, he dreamt feverishly while asleep and while awake too.

After a few days, his guardian came to his room on the verandah, yelled something incomprehensible and indicated that Eric should follow him. When they
came to the chook house Eric was unprepared for the sight within the wire enclosure and had dry-retched at the stench. Following his guardian in, he poked his toe into a bloated hen’s carcass, one of many on the floor. Cracked eggs littered the ground, their insides pecked dry. A few motley hens were still alive, only just, huddled together in one corner, observing their human carers with caution and pecking despondently at the bloated carcass of one of the dead chooks. His guardian indicated that he should clean the mess up, bury the dead and fill the food and water for the few remaining hens. Eric had tried, but unable to cope, he’d run off into the scrub, disappearing for days.

‘Where did you go?’ Corazon had asked him, her heart aching for the child-Eric. ‘You were just a little boy.’

‘And now that is enough talk of that,’ her then new husband had answered brusquely, as if realising he’d spoken a secret aloud. ‘We don’t need to go into that.’

She didn’t ask him where he’d been the other night, or any other night he’d disappeared for hours at a time since her return. Maybe she should have? Perhaps it would have made a difference. She’s been back home with Eric for almost five years now, since returning from Cheryl’s house. She’d gone wild for a while when she left Eric that last time. And she’d pushed Cheryl’s friendship to the limit more times than she cares to remember, before Cheryl threw her out. So she came back to Eric—there was nowhere else to go. And maybe nowhere else she wanted to be, really.

Earlier in the week, Corazon did a relationship survey in a woman’s magazine left in the staffroom at the school. She knows she’s made a lot of mistakes, but since that time at Cheryl’s, she’s worked hard at being a better wife. When she’d tallied her answers in that quiz, she was shocked to discover she only put in a twenty to
thirty-five percent effort into keeping her marriage alive. She knew the quiz couldn’t be taken too seriously, but it made her consider how much she actually wanted her marriage to work.
In just four days Gabby turns ten and Cheryl is determined that this year, she will have a really special birthday. It’s about time the poor kid was allowed to escape from beneath the shadow. Each year as Gabby’s birth date moves closer, Cheryl tries to remind herself that the birthday of Gabby is a special day—a reason to celebrate her life, not dwell on loss. But it seems that each birthday ends in tears for Gabby—coming down sick with tonsillitis one year, a broken arm another. And just last year, she’d had a huge temper tantrum that ended with her sobbing herself to sleep because Cheryl wouldn’t allow Jimmy Murray to stay for a sleepover. Cheryl had known she was being unreasonable. But Suze and Beth were away for the weekend, so if Jimmy were to come over, he’d be dropped off and collected by his grandfather, Barney. And Cheryl just wasn’t up to facing him at that time, particularly with Neil away for the rest of the week.

The plans are on track for Gabby’s tenth birthday—a fancy dress surprise party. Tessa is involved in the preparations, taking quiet delight in making sneaky visits to various houses in the area to deliver invitations and accompanying Cheryl on secret shopping expeditions to buy balloons and decorations that Tessa hides in her bedroom. They’ve arranged costumes too, real ones from the new party hire shop in the light industrial area on the edge of town. If it had occurred to Tessa to feel resentment or jealousy over the fact she’s yet to have such a fuss made over her birthday, then she’s being very gracious about it and isn’t letting on. But then—she probably wouldn’t.
Cheryl worries about both the girls, though more about Tessa. Gabby is a little minx, full of beans and mischief, and Cheryl suspects that she will somehow always land on her feet. Tessa is growing up almost too fast. Always quiet, Tessa seems even more guarded now. Cheryl has tried once or twice to express her need for honest open communication with her older daughter. While Tessa always listens politely, she soon resumes whatever private activity she was immersed in before Cheryl’s clumsy attempts at engagement.

Sometimes Cheryl observes Tessa engrossed in the pages of the latest *Saddle Club* or *Babysitters Club* book, apparently oblivious to any activity going on around her, and she has the urge to ask Tess to put the book down so they can talk freely in that way she imagines good mothers and daughters do. She tries to remember how it felt to be almost thirteen and communicating with her own mother, but cannot dredge up many memories of actual conversations with Hazel. She yearns to be comfortable enough with her daughter to ask personal questions, to gently ask what she thinks about when she gets that distant look on her face. Instead of asking, though, Cheryl waits, hopeful that one day Tessa will initiate such a conversation herself.

Lately, Cheryl lies awake at night, anguishing over the possibility that when Tessa becomes a teenager, that she will lose her completely. Not that she ever really had her, of course. For all of Gabby’s life and most of Tessa’s, she has held them and Neil at arm’s length much of the time. Was she sometimes afraid to love them fully in case she lost them too? Or just angry and confused by the way they reminded her of the accident that had changed their lives? In those middle-night hours her guilt swells. A normal wife and mother would surely cling tighter to those closest to her. A normal woman would love them fully, instead of trying to cushion herself from the
next possible trauma. Cheryl imagines all the awful fates that could await her
daughter who, she convinces herself, has been starved of an honest open connection
with her mother.

She can’t remember much about being almost thirteen but she can remember the
intensity of emotion that accompanied the ages of fifteen and sixteen. Strongest was
the almost overwhelming sense that she needed to escape small town life or she’d
die. Though she’d outgrown the habit of accompanying her father on long-haul trips
in his road train on her school holidays around the age of ten or eleven, she’d never
forgotten the sense of freedom she’d felt as they drove down the road, away from her
mother’s detachment and apparent indifference to her only daughter’s presence.
Much of the time she’d been bored on those trips, saved only by her imagination
which took her to all those capital cities that were linked by Highway One, just about
the longest highway network in the whole world, according to her dad.

Often when she looks at Tessa now, she realises she’s searching for a hint that
such thoughts of escape may already be germinating in her daughter’s mind. It would
kill her, she thinks, if Tessa were to follow in her footsteps. For as soon as she’d
completed high school, escaping was exactly what she’d done, taking the little
money she’d saved and hitching to Geraldton where she’d picked up work in a
supermarket, met Neil and fallen pregnant within only six weeks.

But just a few months later she’d driven to Raethorpe. The first day she’d driven
from Geraldton to Carnarvon, a distance of some six hundred kilometres spent
crawling along the road, clutching the steering wheel tight each time road trains and
larger cars passed her, making her tiny car shake and rattle. It was dark when she’d
set out from Geraldton and getting dark again as she arrived in the outskirts of
Carnarvon. She’d covered around the same distance the next day, stopping only to eat, stretch her legs and refuel. She’d pulled her weary old Morris Minor up to a Mobil workshop on the outskirts of a dusty, derelict settlement consisting of a few fibro houses and one or two stone buildings, to ask where the town of Raethorpe and the hospital were. She’d been as brave as she could possibly be as she drove from Geraldton, but once she stopped driving, the events of the past week had hit her. It seemed that one minute she’d been about to be married to someone she liked but did not think she loved, the next she was in Geraldton hospital experiencing the excruciating pain of a miscarriage. Just twenty-fours after that, she’d fled north with a vague plan to become a kitchen hand in a hospital. They were so desperate in the Pilbara for staff that she was hired after just a two-minute phone call, on the recommendation of a sister she’d confided in at the Geraldton Regional Hospital.

She’d figured she’d work as long as she needed to save some money and go on to Broome, the place she’d set out for just a few months earlier before meeting Neil. There she was at the end of a journey through country so hot and immense that she sensed she would disappear if she left the highway, and she’d been almost beaten by a half-grown feral cat, of all things. The snarling, flea-ridden creature being chased by a mangy dog had jumped into the open door of her old car and wouldn’t come out. She was so fatigued by then that all she could do was open the doors and stand back and cry.

Even then, in that first moment of seeing him, she’d romanticised Barney Murray. She’d always remember him as appearing like a mirage out of the workshop and saving the day—removing the animals and then escorting her, teary and one week short of eighteen years old, to a fridge filled with icy cold Coca-Colas and
Swan beers. When she’d calmed down enough, he’d driven her in his ute to the old stone hospital to meet the matron, promising to bring her car to her when he’d given it the once over.

Her father always used to tell her she had too many fanciful romantic ideas, that she needed to get her nose out of her book and into the world. Maybe he was right. When she was young she’d had a terrible habit of falling too-hard too-fast, just like those women in the pink-covered romances her mother had read. From the age of eight or nine, Cheryl had sneaked those books into her own room to read; in much the same way she’s noticed that Tessa now disappears with some of her Colleen McCullough and Bryce Courtenay novels.

She’d told Barney she missed the ocean. She was disconcerted by the fact that she’d only known him a few days, but already she’d told him all about Neil and running away. She hadn’t mentioned the miscarriage, though. She’d told him other things too. Some of them she’d just made up as she went along—cobbling together fragments of remembered moments from various love stories and making them her own. She said that she longed to hear soothing waves washing into the shore, to float mindlessly on her back, ears submerged, eyes closed tight against the rays of the sun. She’d wanted to impress him. She was scared and lonely and needed a friend. So she kept making stories up. And though she hardly ever went to the beach at home, she told him she needed to be near the ocean again.

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She’s as organised as she ever will be but now, the night before Gabby’s party,
Cheryl’s thoughts are all over the place. She’s trying too hard, but she’s not about to
admit it. She senses that Neil thinks she’s overdoing it, that he’s watching for signs
that she’s going to crack. But he’s going along with her, relieved no doubt that she’s
at least pretending to be okay.

‘Going to have a bath. Got a bit of a headache.’ She stands up, massaging her
temples with her fingertips.

Neil looks up from the late news on television. ‘Do you want something?
Panadol?’

‘No thanks. Stay there.’ She makes her way towards the bathroom at the end of
the hallway, poking her head in to check on the girls asleep in their bedrooms.

As the bath fills she perches on the edge, examining her long fingers, their nails
bitten to the quick. Pianist’s hands, her father had called them when she was young.
Did she bite her nails then? She cannot remember. She splays her fingers and circles
her wrist with the fingers of her left hand, stretching them to touch the tips of each of
her fingers to her thumb in turn.

Baby wrists, Barney had said as he tied her birthday present to her wrist. He’d
arranged to take her to the beach on her first day off from the hospital. She hadn’t
told him it was her birthday. Someone at the hospital must have let it slip because
he’d given her some wooden beads threaded onto leather as soon as he met her on
the corner behind the hospital. As he tied them to her wrist he told her he’d seen
them in the General Store and thought of her. He’d remembered what she’d said
about missing the ocean, and told her that several times on the way out there. She
tests the temperature of her bath and adjusts the cold water tap. A wave of nausea
passes through her as she calculates that she was only five years older than Tessa when she’d first met Barney.

The first time Barney and she went out there they were completely alone. She’d stopped making up so much to tell him by then. On the way out she felt relaxed. After they parked the car they stood gazing out towards the line where the red-tinged sand ended and the water began. *The tide is too low,* he told her. He’d timed it all wrong. He’d seemed annoyed that he’d mucked up. He got angry and punched the car bonnet. She’d felt a little bit scared and wondered what would happen if he hit her, out there, where nobody would know. She’d wondered if her mother ever felt like that when her father came home drunk and resentful. *It’s okay,* she’d said to Barney, recovering a little from her fear. She was disappointed, but tried not to show it. *Such a long way to walk, but at least I can see the sea.*

As they started to walk out towards the water, she’d said, *Tell me something—about you.*

He didn’t say anything for a bit. She was still annoyed, a little afraid and a bit bored too. She’d told him so much and he’d hardly talked at all. She’d thought older men would be more interesting. She’d started to miss Neil and wondered if she should go back to Geraldton and try to make up with him. Then Barney told her something.

_Not long after the New Year, January sometime, this woman, she walked in from nowhere by herself, climbed up the steps of the big old stone building and knocked on the door. No-one was there. Matron was fishing down at Samson, and the Doctor, he was gone too. So the woman, well she was clutching her belly in agony, real pain. She just lay down on the verandah and waited for the pain to stop. She knew
somethin’ serious was happening and started screaming. A little girl from the hostel, they said she looked no more than twelve, came around the corner and seeing what was happening, she tried to help. When Matron came back, there she was, that little girl, holding on to this big screeamin’ baby, as if it was perfectly normal; the woman, well, she was passed out in the heat.

They took her inside and tried to get her cool. But after the doctor came back . . . well, the baby’s mother, she was gone. Not passed away gone. Disappeared into the desert gone.

His voice trailed off.

That baby was you? she’d asked, interested in him once more.

He shook his head. Nah, it was just someone in the town. He’d turned away, like he was embarrassed at having told her that particular story—like it wasn’t the right one to tell.

They’d kept walking. Every so often Cheryl’s thongs caught on shells or small rocks so the soles of her feet touched the searing sand, making her wince. Barney had no thongs on his feet. He had a band of lighter skin beneath the heavy tan of his upper legs, showing where his boots and socks had been. Though his feet looked tender, as though they’d sheltered inside his boots, he did not wince at the scalding hot sand. He wore a stained once-white singlet with his King Gee work shorts and a stockman-style hat. He had a plain gold band on the ring finger of his left hand. But she didn’t notice that at first. Or maybe she chose not to think about what that meant. Although he’d said he was working for a prospecting company doing electrical work for some of those fancy uni-bloody-versity types, she’d imagined him out on the land, rounding up cattle on horseback, whistling in a dog, tilting his head respectfully
to the missus when he came up for tea. She liked him better when she thought of him like that, more like the men of the outback she’d read about in her middle teens. The incessant heat didn’t appear to bother him at all. But Cheryl had felt ill, like she was going to melt into a puddle, just like in her recurring childhood nightmares. *Maybe this is what those dreams were about,* she’d thought. She’d still believed in signs and premonitions then.

When they’d finally reached the water’s edge Barney had stopped, pulled off his singlet and flashed a toothy grin at Cheryl.

*Well, here’s the ocean . . . Race ya.*

Cheryl self-consciously removed the shift dress she wore and adjusted the bathers she’d borrowed from one of the nurses at the hospital. The nurse was much bigger than her and the bathers gaped in all the wrong places. She wondered if he could tell, looking at her, that she’d recently been pregnant.

They walked through the shallow water until finally the land dropped away sharply and he jumped in. Cheryl followed, clutching the excess fabric in a bunch on her right hip. Far from refreshing her, the water was like diving into a tepid bath. She swam out as far as she could before tiring, trying to find a cool deep place to float. But it was blood warm, and suddenly she wanted to go home to Hazel, to tell her she was sorry for running away again.

Later, leaning against a blanket thrown across the bonnet of her barely working old car, a towel over her scorched shoulders as they gulped down warm Coke from glass bottles, she told him it was all wrong.

*The ocean should not be like that.*

*I’m sorry. It’s all I know,* he said quietly.
You should see ours . . . where I was a kid, I mean . . . down south. In the winter months, well, you would freeze to death before drowning in there. Cheryl broke off, worried that she’d offended him. *Well that’s where I used to live, anyway . . .*

*Perhaps you’ll see it one day?* She’d squinted into the haze over the flat torpid water.

*Maybe. But probably not. I don’t like it down south, too cold . . . I’ll show you something else . . . watch out for glass.* He’d wriggled his socks and boots back on and taken her hand, leading her up a rough track littered with broken brown beer bottles, to the abandoned old cemetery at the top of the hill.

Cheryl turns the taps off and eases her body into the warm bath, closing her eyes and pressing her neck against the hard fibreglass ridge to try to ease the pressure on the back of her neck. She’d been so bloody naive and vulnerable back then. He must have seen her coming from a mile away. She starts as the bathroom door opens just enough for Neil to poke his head through.

‘Got something for you.’ Neil enters, carrying cups in each hand. He places a cup of tea on the edge of the bath by her toes and opens his palm to reveal two painkillers. He hands the paracetamol and the cup of water to her, kissing the top of her head gently. He returns to the kitchen, reappearing a few moments later with a lit scented candle that he tentatively places in the soap dish on the wall above the bath. He flicks the bright fluorescent bathroom lighting off and squats down beside her. Taking the empty water cup away, he hands her the hot tea.

‘I have to get to bed. Gotta be up in five hours. Do you want something else?’ She shakes her head and smiles up at him. ‘No thanks. This is good. Ta.’ He kisses the top of her head again and stands.
‘It’ll be okay . . . tomorrow, I mean. We’ll get through . . . and Gabby will love it.’

She sips her tea and looks up at him. ‘Hope so.’
Fifteen

The house is clean and Suze hasn’t a clue how to pass the rest of the day. She’s become used to a busy life. For the last few years she’s worked so hard between her job and her community groups that she’s paid someone else to clean the house and do the ironing. Now that Beth has gone back again with Jimmy to live with Leslie in Raethorpe, there’s really nothing to do here.

She’s on her second week of leave. Barney is away on the second of four days away—camping out on the islands not far from their home town with a bunch of blokes from work. A male bonding fishing trip, Barney had called the bi-annual trip.

Another piss-up, she’d reported to Sam as she made arrangements for her to cover her duties while she was on leave.

She likes Sam. Since they began working as a team, the department has operated so much more efficiently. She just gets on and does what needs doing. She’s strong too. Even when she’s down about another failed IVF attempt, she usually manages to hold her head up and keep things light at work. What was it she’d said on the phone last night about the drinking and fishing trips the men took? Any excuse to indulge in a spot of homo-erotic behaviour. She wishes she’d thought of that. Sam had another point last night on the phone too. The women of the workforce work just as hard as the men, maybe harder when you consider most of them go home and deal with the majority of the house and family commitments. But they weren’t provided with alcohol or anything else to help them go off and do some team building.
Working for Westies has certainly lost its gloss. Suze suspects the company is trying to shift her— to shift her sideways and move Sam up and into her role. Sam calling her last night with her suspicions along the same lines only added credibility to what Barney had dismissed as Suze’s neurotic paranoia. If that’s what they are trying to do, Sam says she isn’t interested anyway. Like she says, she’s only doing a job, filling in time until she’s in a position to leave. Ideally she’d be leaving because she’s pregnant, but she’s being a little less optimistic about that now and has approached the shire with a proposal for her to run a local history centre.

Suze told Sam she’s not even sure she cares that much anymore, that she’s given enough of herself to the company to last a lifetime. Saying it out loud was a revelation. She’d never really thought about it a lot before. Now, twelve hours later, she still believes it to be true. Christ, talk about life being convoluted. *Careful what you wish for*, she always used to say to Beth when she was growing up, just as her own mother had said to her. *You never know what might happen.*

Back when they first started building the new stage of town to house the workers for the new oil and gas project, it’d become Suze’s obsession to be a part of it all. She’d think about the houses up the new end, so lovely and fresh with their big pale green or beige metal roofs, their industrial-strength cyclone screens and double glass sliding doors. Sure, when they started arriving in town, the new women were so up themselves it wasn’t funny. But she knew deep down they couldn’t help it, that they were just used to nicer things. They were a better class of people. They’d probably never had to live in a stinking hot caravan, or pay someone rent to live in a house that should have been condemned long ago.
'They're just city sheilas who think they’re bringing a bit of class to us rednecks. They think they’re gunna live rough—like pioneers,’ Barney would say, mostly to wind her up when she started talking about it.

She could pick the new city women when she saw them at the shops. They stood out with their fancy clothes and their hair blow-dried like they were going to a wedding or something. Beth, once she started work at Farmers, told her that they always complained about the price of everything, or the limited range of groceries and fresh foods. They’d stick together too—they weren’t friendly like the ore people or even the transients following the construction jobs around.

At the tea table Suze and Beth always made jokes about the city women, mimicking this one or that. But Beth could surely see in her mother’s make-up, dyed hair and new shoes and clothes that she really wanted to be more like those women.

When she stops to think about it now, Suze realises that the idea to move up must have been on her mind for a long time, because before Beth even left school, Suze had finished the correspondence course in public relations and started applying for jobs. Before that, Barney said he thought she’d seemed happy enough doing the housework, helping down at the footy club and working in the school canteen every Thursday.

For nearly two years those monthly parcels had come to Suze, addressed care of the post office. She’d carry her bundle home and open up the package of reading materials and assignments. A few weeks later she would send it back finished. Around the time the first new influx of Westies staff came in, even before she’d completed the course, she’d begun to mail-order clothes from Perth shops like *Loretta’s Career Wear*. For ages she didn’t even wear them, saving them wrapped up
in tissue paper in a suitcase on top of the wardrobe for later. Barney hadn’t really approved, reckoned if she really had to work at all, she should have got herself a job onsite. The construction of the plant paid big bucks and with both of them working there they could’ve soon been rolling in dough, just like she’d always wanted.

‘Plenty of sheilas are Trade Assistants, I could put a word in.’

But Suze didn’t want that. She wanted a career. And she didn’t want him on the contract teams any longer than necessary, either. She wanted him to get a stable job, to start thinking about the future, to make something of himself, so they could be proud of who they were.

She had such big plans for this work break, but lately it is all she can do to get out of bed in the morning and get dressed. That’s why she went to the doctor in the first place. She’d thought that maybe he could give her something to take the edge off whatever it was that was stopping her from functioning properly. Since Beth and Jimmy moved out and life reverted to just her and Barney looking at each other over the tea table of an evening again, she seems to have nothing of much substance to say. She hadn’t realised how much she’d relied on Jimmy’s presence to fill the awkward spaces and how meeting his needs and trying to keep Beth focused on her responsibilities added to her sense of purpose.

She’d been shocked when the doctor insisted she take time off—for your nerves, he’d said, like she was some highly-strung basket case. Stress-leave, he’d called it. She wasn’t convinced about the need for that. Surely a pill each day to give her a little lift would be more useful? Of course she was bloody stressed, wouldn’t he be in her place? That’s life, she’d shrugged. She could hardly tell him her blood pressure was probably all over the place because she’d just spent twenty minutes
sitting in the waiting room with Crazy Catherine Connor staring her down like that, could she?

Despite having both lived in town for all these years, she and Catherine haven’t spoken directly to one another since Beth was six and they’d had to take that restraining order out to keep Catherine away. Suze pretends to herself that she’d long since reconciled with their decision to go down that path. The things that had happened over the years since then had eased her conscience to an extent. It had been for the good of everyone in the long run. They’d had to do something after Catherine went off the rails. She really was mad. The way she’d been talking, who knew what would happen to Beth if Catherine had got her hands on her in that state of mind?

Sitting there last week in the waiting room, Catherine had looked old and used up—harmless and hopeless, really. Suze couldn’t help thinking of how Catherine had been when she’d first met her. She was tough— most women wouldn’t dare cross her—but she’d always tried to look nice, copying fashions from the women’s magazines that would arrive on the freight trucks that came through town each week. It took a lot of nerve to try and raise two kids without a man in the Pilbara back then. She might not have always approved of Catherine’s choices, but she’d always been a little bit in awe of her. At least until she began neglecting her kids and sleeping with men for drugs and money.

Waiting for the receptionist to call her name, Suze had been half expecting Catherine to speak to her. It had been such a long time. A part of her had wanted Catherine to say something. It had been nagging at her for ages, this need to clear the air between them. But she’d never really known how to go about it. She’d tried writing a few times over the years, but binned the letters without finishing them.
She’d opened up a little bit about it to Sam at work one day. Not the whole story of course, she’d never confide in anyone those calls she’d made to Community Services trying to have Lila taken into care after Catherine completely lost it. She’d felt at the time that she had no choice really. Suze had seen it with her own eyes, several times—Catherine barely bothering to conceal herself as she shot up in the toilet block before taking men into the van. She’d only really wanted Community Services to force Catherine to wake up to herself. She hadn’t imagined for one moment things would turn out as they had.

They’d been such good friends in the early days, Catherine and her. Living in adjacent old vans in the Raethorpe caravan park, they’d spent much of their time together devising ways to stay cool while the men worked. And of course Lila and Beth were born just weeks apart. Two days after she’d come home to the caravan park with Lila from the hospital, Catherine’s man had shot through in the middle of the night, leaving Catherine a bruised mess with a new baby to care for. Catherine had cried for a few days then pulled herself together and made a go of it. She’d disappear every so often. Hitching up the van and strapping Lila into the baby seat, she’d follow the work on the railway lines. She didn’t talk about it much whenever she came back, just told them it was hard going and that she needed to come back to Raethorpe to rest for a while.

Each time Catherine came back she had so much money, and the parcels she’d collect from the post office—toys for Lila, new clothes from the city, a shade house she erected next to her van—had made Suze envious. They’d sat around talking about it one night and Suze had come up with what seemed a great idea. Suze could look after the kids while Catherine and Barney worked on the construction teams on...
the railway lines. It would save Catherine paying for babysitters. Maybe other
women could go out with the men and get jobs too? Perhaps Suze could set up a little
childcare centre for the women? The camp might let her use a transportable building
for the purpose. The more they’d talked about it, the more excited she’d become.
Barney wasn’t keen. He liked his job and life in Raethorpe. But he’d agreed, saying
he’d try it on his own the first time. It was decided that the next time Catherine went
out, Barney would tag along and check out the possibilities. And this time, instead of
taking Lila, Catherine would leave her with Suze. The girls were fourteen months
old. It was often easier looking after them when they were together, anyway.

Barney had returned from the railway work three weeks later to say he wasn’t
going to work out there, that it was no place for a kid or a decent woman like Suze.
Suze had carried on over that—he was lazy, they’d never get anywhere, at least
Catherine had the guts to work hard. Instead of coming home to Lila, Catherine had
stayed away for another two months while Lila lived with them in their van.
Catherine finally came back visibly pregnant. She must have been pregnant before
she’d gone out there the last time. But she wouldn’t tell them anything. She just came
back one night and sat outside their van with them, saying she was sorry, that she’d
explain things in the morning. But when morning came around she’d collected Lila and
disappeared. She’d turned up again two years later, sometime after the Murrays
had moved to the caravan park in Lawson. She had a little boy and Lila.

Suze tries to call Beth. A drive out to visit Beth and Jimmy in Raethorpe might be
just the thing to lift her malaise. Perhaps they can take a drive out to the fish and chip
shop in the nearby fishing town. She misses having Jimmy around and often finds
herself making excuses to ring her grandson. Just last week, she’d gone to the town’s record store and purchased a t-shirt screen printed with an image of Jimmy Barnes, the musician Beth and Leslie had named their son after, and driven all the way out to Raethorpe to give it to him. When she’d arrived there, Jimmy was nowhere to be seen and Beth had seemed annoyed at her just turning up uninvited. When she’d asked where Jimmy was, Beth had snapped *He’s at school, of course. What the hell is wrong with you, Mum? You’ve been weird lately.* Now Beth’s phone rings out and Suze makes a note to buy her an answering machine for her next birthday. She tries calling once more, then, realising that Jimmy will be at school for another three hours, goes into the lounge room and flicks on the television.

Being confronted with Catherine like that at the Doctor’s surgery sure got you thinking about a few home truths. Now that Beth and Jimmy are gone and there is nothing to hold her and Barney together; it’s become more an issue of when, rather than if, they separate. It’s about the only civil conversation they manage to have with each other nowadays.

She’d worked so hard for so many years to create the illusion that Barney and she were pretty special, that they had something other couples didn’t. But when Suze is honest with herself, and Christ knows she’s the only person she can really be honest with, she sees it wasn’t right from the beginning. She and Barney had just jumped straight into a relationship knowing bugger all about the other. And her lie about being on the pill, well it had worked, hadn’t it? And they got married. *For better or worse.*

The day they met and how it all started is crystal clear, fresh in her mind like it was just yesterday. Two weeks and one day after she’d arrived in town to work as a
switchboard operator for the PMG, he’d driven off the station he’d been working on into Raethorpe to drop off some drilling parts for repairs. He was on his way up the road to the back bar of the pub for a beer just as she came out of the PMG for her break. They’d almost collided in the street. She’d dropped her blue vinyl handbag in the dust. He reached down to pick it up and brushed the dust off using all he had—the sweaty navy blue work singlet he was wearing. Then, before she knew what she was saying she’d invited him for lunch at the bar. And he’d blushed like a little boy when he told her he’d like to eat with her but there were rules and standards—no Abos and no women to be served in the front bar.

There was something about him. He had a sad, lost puppy look about him that he tried to hide behind a macho swagger. She had an urge to fix the sadness and neediness that he tried to hide. His good looks didn’t hurt, either. For her part, she got a huge thrill watching the envy roll across the faces of all the girls she worked with when he met her at the PMG back entrance every Friday afternoon. None of the girls she worked with had landed a man like hers, not a good looking and charming local who courted them as though it was still 1960, anyway. Most of the blokes up here were temporary—hardened roughnecks from the construction teams who by and large were not interested in wooing decent white girls who’d come, mostly from Perth, to work in the telephone exchange. There were less complicated alternatives for them in town. This was the wild north-west and there was easier bounty to be found amongst the local women and girls. Far easier to offer them a night they’d never forget in exchange for a couple of drinks. It was common knowledge that more men than owned up to it had wives at home—wherever home might be. Or if they didn’t, it was probably because they were running from something or someone—and
often the law too. As far as she could tell, Barney had neither wife nor past to escape from.

She’d never experienced feelings like those she had then for Barney. Though she wonders if in the early days it was the thrill of being looked up to by the other girls at the PMG that made her so determined to have him.

In the beginning he’d seemed perfect. He was the first person to treat her like a decent human being. He had a real sense of right and wrong and while she didn’t understand it, she took pride in seeing him try to help some of the town’s underdogs. Once he had a few beers he became completely different though—nasty and fuelled by a truckload of resentment. He hated the government—couldn’t trust any of them, he said. They were the bastards that revoked his family’s pastoral lease in order to make way for mining on the land he’d grown up on.

If she could keep him away from the beer, he’d be perfect, she’d thought. People around Raethorpe respected him and listened when he talked. Apart from when he was affected by the booze and the mood swings, he was quiet, charming and endearingly awkward. And certainly better-mannered than anyone she’d ever known as she grew up in Perth’s southern housing commission suburbs.

After all these years, she’s realised that he’s never once told her what it was he liked about her when they met. Was it her tiny little waist and her long lean legs in those miniskirts she wore back then that first attracted him? Or perhaps her outgoing personality had appealed to his quieter side? Did he like the way she could strike up a conversation with just about anybody at all and find something to talk about? Coming from the city he’d never visited, perhaps he’d found her worldly? Or gregarious, as her boss at the time called her. She’d rushed to look that word up in
the dictionary in the women’s boarding rooms she then lived in. Maybe he hadn’t fallen for her at all. Maybe he was just too polite to tell her he didn’t like her that much. She had been the one who’d made all the moves. Perhaps she’d imagined he loved her?

It’s dawned on her lately that though they worked together reasonably well as a team when it came to raising Beth, at least in the beginning, they were never really a very good match sexually. She’d blamed herself for that for a long time and tried to make herself more attractive. She got so fat after she got pregnant and married him. Once she was cooped up in that stinking caravan moving from camp to construction site for the first few years, there was nothing to do but sit around and wait for him to get back from his fifteen hour days. She’d lost the weight in time—well most of it. But by the time she’d got it together and started to study to make herself more interesting to him when Beth went to high school, she knew deep down she’d lost him years before.

Anyway, the reality is that with Barney, she’d never been sexually thrilled, despite his good looks. She’d never experienced that, not with him, anyway. But she’d seen those looks on her husband’s face at the mere sight of other women. And now that the extent of his womanising has been revealed to her, she’s ashamed and angry, mostly at herself, for wearing blinkers and for being the laughing stock of the whole town for all these years.
Sixteen

‘You okay?’

Neil doesn’t answer for a while. Cheryl starts to pack up the remains of the breakfast they’d carried up the hill in backpacks. Already the sun has a bite. They’ve been up here for a little over an hour and a half, talking and eating breakfast. They’ll have to leave soon. It was dark when they left home, the sun just coming up as they started to climb the hill. They’d forgotten hats and sunscreen.

‘I tried to understand. You know that, I hope?’

Cheryl nods. ‘Yeah, I do.’

‘I thought it was how you wanted it.’

‘I didn’t know what I wanted. How could I? How could anyone, really? I thought it was what you wanted.’

Neil nods, moving away from the rocky edge to sit next to her on one of the towels. ‘We should think about going back. Don’t want you burning.’

Cheryl agrees. She’d thought it would help coming up here close to dawn—that they’d somehow feel more open to discussing things at the beginning of the day. She’d deliberately chosen the anniversary of the date they’d scattered Jaimee’s ashes to come back up here to talk. But it hasn’t really made any difference. They keep talking themselves into walls. She thinks maybe there was too much expectation on her part that all the stuff that was important to her would be important to him. She thinks too that maybe he’s a bit grudging in speaking up. She’d put an ultimatum to him before they left Perth a few weeks back, after their annual trip. Communicate—
or else. She could hardly blame him for being pissed off, even though he said he wasn’t.

‘I thought you’d gone troppo back then, Chez, with all those memorials. You were, I dunno, possessed or something. It was scary to be around. You were scary to be around.’

Cheryl looks at her nails, bitten to the quick. Awful hands. Man hands, she calls them.

‘Go on,’ she manages.

‘The roadside one, well I can sort of understand that, and this one here, well we had to do something to try to move on after the town service was such a fucking circus. But I don’t know, it seemed like you were never going to stop. . . like you wouldn’t admit that she was gone or something—I thought maybe you were trying to keep punishing me.’

‘It was no-one’s fault, Neil. And both our faults, too.’ She looks away from him as she speaks. She feels a bit of a hypocrite. She’s insisting he speak up, that he tells the absolute truth of his feelings, although she’s remained silent about some matters too. But to speak about those will not help. ‘Look, Neil, we’ve made a start on this. It’s something—better than nothing. Perhaps we should talk more in a few days?’

‘Okay, if that’s how you want to play it. You’re calling the shots.’ Neil tries to grin, but manages only a grimace as he turns away from Cheryl.

They sit listening to the waves crashing into the rocks below them for a few moments. Cheryl thinks about the day she’d left the girls at home asleep, tucked up in the oversized single bed they’d shared until Gabby had one day decided she was too big to sleep with her older sister. Without checking to see if the tide would be
high enough to swim, she’d driven to the beach around the bend from this spot. Once in the water, her clothes discarded on the sand in a bundle several metres from the water’s edge, she’d walked into the warm water and started swimming—purposefully at first, her strokes strong and powerful as she worked through the water. Before long she’d relaxed and slowed her pace, stopped the freestyle arm strokes. Keeping her head above water and her eyes fixed on a cargo ship in the distance, she’d used a relaxed breast stroke style movement to move away from the shore. *How far,* she’d wondered, *would I need to swim until I just stopped?* She’d thought then of the town’s people rallying together to organise Neil and the girls after yet another tragedy, and realised that she’d removed her wedding ring and left it tucked in the pocket of her cut-off cargo pants. Nobody would believe it had been an accident if that got out. She’d turned and swum back to shore, replaced her ring and clothing and sat on the deserted beach until she’d composed herself enough to go home.

‘Hey, check this out. . . behind us, have you seen it?’ Neil turns to face her. ‘Over there, the turtle and the fish on the rock face, they’re like your tat.’ Cheryl says nothing. It seems that ages pass before he speaks again. ‘Of course you have.’ He taps his fingers on her shoulder where her t-shirt covers the tattoo. ‘Fuck, Cheryl, why do you keep . . . ?’ His voice drops away.

They’d stayed out in the sun for another hour after he’d made the connection between the tattoo and the rock art. Neil going on and on about her behaviour making it impossible for them both to move on from the accident, and for him to let go of his guilt. And Cheryl going on and on about his refusal to communicate being
much more harmful to their relationship than her memorials. They’d gone home and not spoken all afternoon. Now she’s at work and sunburned.

‘Bloody stupid thing to let happen, huh?’ she said.

Catherine shrugged. ‘It happens. Could’ve been worse.’

Cheryl laughs. ‘Yes. Lucky I wasn’t naked, huh? I’d be very sore and sorry.’

She rises from the chair next to Catherine’s bed where she’s been sitting for the past hour. ‘Do you need anything? I probably should get back to work and rub some more cream on this old face of mine. And you should get some sleep.’

She’s surprised herself tonight. Sitting there, she’d found herself telling Catherine a story about someone she’d once known—a friend, who at only eighteen had fallen for a married man. She’d told Catherine that he’d neglected to tell her friend that he was married, and her friend was too naive and inexperienced to work it out for a long time. Her friend had moved away, and he had too, with his wife and child.

Catherine had listened, nodding every so often but not speaking, until Cheryl reached the next part of her story: this friend had bumped into the man some years later and had fallen back into a brief relationship with him, though she knew by then that his charming behaviour was just a part of the process of obtaining sex for him, nothing more.

To Cheryl’s surprise Catherine had started laughing—really laughing, so much so that tears poured down her cheeks. She supposed Catherine, with her colourful past, must have found Cheryl’s so-called friend pretty naïve.

She checks her watch and moves away from Catherine’s bed. She stops at the door of the room and looks back at her.
‘I’ll be back in a bit to check on you. If you can’t sleep we’ll chat more then.
Okay?’

Catherine nods. ‘Um, Cheryl. . . ? Suze Murray had her reasons you know, for what she did to me back then. But him? Well he’s got no excuses. You should maybe remember that.’

‘Okay Catherine, thanks.’

Cheryl has only a vague idea of what Catherine is on about. But she knows that it isn’t solely related to the story she just told Catherine.
Part Five

2000
Seventeen

Even before Catherine’s death, Cheryl hadn’t wanted to go to lunch. If it weren’t for the fact she’d postponed lunch with Corazon and Ellie at the last minute twice recently, she’d have stayed home. The purpose of the lunch was supposedly to discuss arrangements for the redirection of their informal fundraising community group—an offshoot of the now defunct Community Action and Cultural Preservation Society. Cheryl, Corazon and Ellie were the only remaining members. Like so many other groups around town, Suze Murray had started it with a flurry of good intent, but now that half the members, including Suze herself, had left the area, some decisions had to be made. Cheryl is keen to step back from the fundraising committee, another one she’d been coerced into joining a few years earlier by Suze, and had known that today’s informal lunch meeting just might be her opportunity. She just doesn’t have the desire today to talk to Ellie, who’d raised over $80 000 just over a year ago, been crowned Mrs Lawson Charity Queen and now wants to take on the role of fundraising coordinator.

As soon as Cheryl arrives at the Sunset Bar, known locally in an earlier incarnation as the Animal Bar, Ellie, with her usual lack of tact, presses for information about Catherine.

‘I heard she splattered her brains all over the ceiling in front of that strange man she lives with.’

Cheryl had snapped at that. ‘That strange man is her husband. He has been for about ten years.’ She bites her tongue. Ellie looks as though she’s going to cry, but
Cheryl just doesn’t have the energy for placating her and mopping up her tears after the previous evening’s traumatic shift.

Exhausted by that and lack of sleep, Cheryl has her first glass of wine in a couple of years and opens her mouth more than usual. She tells Ellie and Corazon that she’d been having occasional talks with Catherine lately and Catherine had seemed quite happy, that she’d been looking forward to her daughter Lila coming back from her holiday in Broome with her kids and the new man in her life. When Ellie gets up and goes to the bathroom, Cheryl leans in close to Corazon and whispers not to say anything to anyone, but she really had thought Catherine would be okay.

‘I spoke to her just yesterday, Coz.’ She reaches across the varnished pine table and squeezes Corazon’s hand, noticing as she does, that Corazon no longer wears her wedding ring.

Corazon hasn’t seen Cheryl like this in ages. Not since those very early years of their friendship. While comforted by the knowledge that some of the old ease of their once close friendship has returned, she knows that Cheryl must be at least a bit unnerved to get tipsy in the middle of the day and open up like that in front of someone like Ellie.

‘You know you can’t blame yourself, Cheryl. She has always been...’ Corazon, having noticed Cheryl looking at her left hand a few moments earlier, fiddles with her wedding ring, now far too tight for her finger and hanging on a heavy gold chain around her neck. She fishes for the right word, at the same time trying to hold firmly to the image of Tatay building a sandcastle. *The beauty of the sandcastles is the*
impermanence of the sand itself. What a strange thing to say to a little child. Then again, maybe she’d invented that whole memory and he didn’t say it at all. She’d often wondered, particularly in the early years of her marriage, what had pushed her father over the edge. The day following Catherine’s suicide, the unanswered and unanswerable question looms again. Surely it had to have been more than the prospect of raising his daughter alone? What makes one miserable man end his life, and another resign himself to a life without love? She’d like to ask Cheryl about that one day—she misses their talks about such difficult life questions. The Backyard Philosophy Club, Eric and Neil had called the two of them when they were all close. She never did quite work out if they were being sarcastic or if they somehow approved of the two women’s long private conversations.


‘Yeah, I know all that. But, I dunno, I think I really fucked up. Maybe I didn’t push her hard enough to seek help again. . . She just seemed okay.’

Corazon swallows a mouthful of her Diet Coke. ‘It wasn’t your responsibility.’

Cheryl looks across at her friend, hoping that she’ll pick up her unspoken plea: Don’t go into the no-blame spiel, please. But they both know the friendship isn’t what it had once been. Life has changed, for both of them.

‘Who would she have seen—even if she’d wanted to, anyway? What could they do? Put her on a waiting list to see a visiting specialist when an appointment became available months later? You’ve told me yourself often enough in the past, that there is precious little help for the head sick up here. Only one month ago maybe, you said that it would take a suicide plague up here for anybody down south to sit up and notice what’s going on.’
As Corazon speaks she remembers her mother laughing and mocking her father: *Stupid, stupid fat man, I never have loved you.* Her mother had grabbed Corazon’s younger twin sisters. Then they were all gone.

Corazon stretches in the chair and neatens her hair. Did Tatay go after them? She remembers nothing else. Funny, that incident that had consumed her secret thoughts for so many years, no longer really seems to matter to her. She looks down at her legs. Lately she’d grown so fat. Nothing in her wardrobe fits and she can only shop in the larger ladies section of Kmart and Chain Reaction—horrid scratchy artificial fabrics, elasticised waists, plain black or big ugly floral monstrosities, turquoise and lavender patterns that no self-respecting woman would be seen wearing in public. How ugly, compared to the clothes she’d first worn when she’d arrived in this country. Clothing that she’d soon pushed to the back of her wardrobe and tried to forget about. Hard to believe that same person lives buried deep inside all this blubber.

The women’s magazines call people like her who eat all day *comfort eaters,* but Corazon thinks that is a ridiculous term. She gets little comfort from her gorging. Food is like sex once was to her, and alcohol too—something to try and fill the emptiness. She can’t remember the last time a man, any man, looked at her with interest. Despite the fact she’s close to bursting her way out of the largest of the large ladies’ fashions from both stores in town, she’s become invisible to the male species. Strangely, though he’s no longer healthy, Eric has become more considerate towards her—in a kindly, non-sexual way. There is a tenderness that she hasn’t sensed since their earliest times together. And apart from her insatiable need for food, she feels more content with her life than she’s probably ever been.
‘Do you still have lust for Neil?’

Cheryl, still reflecting on what Corazon had said about suicide a few moments earlier, misses the first part of the question. When she asks Corazon to repeat it, Corazon shrugs. ‘It doesn’t matter. It was a silly question.’

Last year, Cheryl had completed a course in caring for mentally ill patients. While she’d come away feeling less than confident about dealing with some of the hypothetical cases who might present at casualty, she thought she’d been on top of it with Catherine, who hadn’t called the hospital in a distressed state in many months. Cheryl had assumed that finally something had given Catherine some sort of inner peace.

For four or five weeks, Cheryl had walked past Catherine’s house of an afternoon, often stopping to briefly chat with her as she tended her front garden. She’d been thinking about asking Catherine to pop over for a coffee and to offer her some plant cuttings. She’d wondered once or twice if Catherine had begun timing her afternoon watering to coincide with her walks, but brushed those thoughts away as foolish. Everyone watered then. Just like everyone walked, jogged, or took bike rides then. It was the only time of day where being outdoors in summer was almost bearable.

Driving home after lunch with Corazon and Ellie, the reins of the fundraising group handed to Ellie, Cheryl thinks more about that mental health course. She’d thought that the best part of it was getting away from here, if only for a while. She’d spent the last two weeks of the course in Adelaide, a place she’d never been to, away from this bloody town that she feels so chained to. She doesn’t really want to nurse at
all these days. She doesn’t hate her job, but nor is she passionate about it. She is as ambivalent towards it as most things in her life, really. Only last night she’d said to Tania the temp nurse, that she’d once dreamed of wearing the white nursing sister’s uniform. But she can’t actually recall ever dreaming anything of the sort. The words had just come from nowhere really, just something to fill a gap in an awkward conversation.

Soon she’d quit nursing and find something new, perhaps something part-time. She hasn’t told Neil this yet, but she’s rehearsed the conversation many times. They would all just have to pull their belts in. It’s insane to think that they’d struggle to survive on Neil’s good wage. They pay next to nothing for rent, no rates or air-conditioning bills, either. Financially it had been easier earlier, when they had less money—when Neil was on wages, had regular overtime to pay for treats and was paid fortnightly. What had happened to them since then? Fuck the investment properties down south and the tree farm shares they’d started accumulating, they must be able to get out of those commitments. What was that all about anyway? Since when had they been into keeping up with the Joneses?

As she turns into the driveway after lunch with Ellie and Corazon, there he is—Catherine’s husband Ian, leaning on her front gate as though he’d popped by for a chat, just fourteen or fifteen hours after his wife had blown her brains out. Cheryl is almost reluctant to leave the safety of her car.

As Ian moves toward her, Cheryl feels herself bracing for an attack, partly expecting him to hurl abuse at her. She’s relieved and a little surprised when he reaches out and clutches her close. His shirt stinks as if he’d been too busy to shower and change and had doused himself in cheap deodorant on the way out the door.
Cheryl allows herself to sink into Ian’s broad spongy chest for a few moments before pulling away to breathe. *A big old heart attack waiting to happen,* Catherine had affectionately called him when speaking to Cheryl just a few weeks earlier.

Cheryl doesn’t really know Ian. Until the night before she’d only said hello in passing. She knows what Catherine has told her—that he’s a kind man, gentle with her, loves Lila and her two kids like his own. She knows from Neil that Ian is a good worker who keeps his home life close to his chest, that he shuts down if anyone pries. *Protective of his crazy wife.* . . Neil began, his words hanging unfinished when Cheryl gave him the evil eye.

From next door, Cheryl hears a newborn baby’s cry and makes a note to go over in a day or two and see if Sam needs anything. After hauling Sam out of bed early that same morning before she’d checked out of hospital and offloading all that crap on her, it was the least she could do. Poor Sam, she didn’t look as though becoming a mother was going to come easily to her.

It’s only then that Cheryl notices Barney standing behind Ian, leaning against the wall.

‘Ian . . . Barney.’ She lights her cigarette and backs away a few steps, looking away from Barney’s face as she says his name. His name had once filled her mind from morning until night like some sort of mantra, both grounding and destabilising her. Just the thought of him had caused her to flush with confusion and shame. Today his name is nothing more than a word.

The three of them stand in awkward silence for a few moments. Cheryl recalls the young cop’s stricken face and Ian’s huge but oddly deflated body as the cop led
him into the hospital staffroom last night, sat him down and looked across to Cheryl for help.

Ian clears his throat and Cheryl remembers what he’d reminded her of last night. There was a photograph she’d seen a few years earlier in a travelling exhibition of old newspaper photographs displayed at the shire library. The large black and white print featured a man standing in front of a train wreck. She didn’t know the exact story behind the man, but imagines that everybody in Australia over a certain age remembered the Granville Train Disaster of 1977. She could tell from the unnamed man in the photograph’s posture—the dropped shoulders, the deflated chest—that someone dear to him had been lost forever. She’d seen that look in Neil, especially in those early years after the accident. Even now, the traces of that loss are still visible in his body.

For the last hour or so of her shift the previous night, Cheryl had sat beside Ian in an empty room in the hospital, her hand resting lightly over his on the armrest of the green vinyl chair. They spoke quietly about Cheryl’s garden, her daughters, Lila’s children and finally, when they’d run out of small talk, the weather. So oppressive, a storm brewing up north. Anything but what had happened in Ian’s very own lounge room just a few hours earlier.

It’s clear that there is something Ian has to say as he stands in her front garden, but there is nothing she can do to make it any easier for him. She tries to maintain a respectful silence, to be a good listener—a skill she has to develop, according to that course she’d done. She looks briefly away from the two men towards the road, just in time to see Pat Norris and Sandy Price power-walking along the road verge, with their matching ponytails, knee length black lycra leggings and oversized khaki
company men’s polo shirts. Sandy turns back and looks directly at Cheryl, her eyebrows raised just enough for Cheryl to wonder if Sandy actually has the hide to do that.

Cheryl tries to crack a joke with the two men. ‘Great. Wonder what tomorrow’s stories will be?’ But it falls flat. Nice one, trying to make a joke at a time like this. Not even twenty four hours ago. Fuck! She drags heavily on her cigarette and finishes it quickly, stubs the lit end on the solid metal fence post and walks across to the green wheelie bin at the end of the driveway to dispose of the butt. Abrasive, is how Neil had more than once described her humour when they’d argued.

Barney interrupts her scattered thoughts. ‘Cheryl, Ian has something to ask you. He wanted to do it today. Maybe we could . . .’ He breaks off mid-sentence and looks towards the house.

Realising they probably want to talk in private, she ushers them towards the front door. Inside, she shifts the mass of coloured junk mail from the faux velvet lounge. She places it on top of the television cabinet and kicks her discarded work stockings and shoes under the lounge.

‘Let’s go outside to the pergola, it’s looking really nice now and we’ve got a bloody whopping great industrial fan out there to keep it cool.’ Even as the words leave her mouth she knows she’s gone over the top, speaking too brightly. She keeps her mouth shut as Barney and Ian follow her through the kitchen and laundry to the backyard.

She’s finally woken up to herself, thank Christ. She sees Barney for the pathetic excuse for a man he really is—a man who’d taken advantage of her—preyed on her vulnerability not once, but twice. Still, there’s no denying Barney is ageing well,
physically at least. Since Suze finally left him, Cheryl’s tried to ignore the talk around town. But without meaning to, she absorbs every sordid story about Barney and this and that woman. Poor Suze, the gossip must still hurt. She’d spent years creating the illusion that she’d had it all.

Cheryl moves toward the switch on the wall and turns the fan on.

‘Told you it was powerful,’ she says as a pile of folded newspapers blows across the patio. ‘Please . . .’ She indicates for the two men to be seated at the glass topped outdoor table. ‘Leave the papers, I’ll grab them later. They’re not important.’

Barney wanders over to her fernery and examines the garden beds made from layers of the local rock they call Lawson Stone, runs his eye over the *How’s the serenity?* sign.

‘Looking nice out here, Chezzie. What’s this, an in-joke or something?’ He points to the sign and turns to face her.

Cheryl bristles at his old name for her.

‘Have a seat, Barney.’

He moves back to the table and reaches for the back for the chair next to the one Cheryl is about to sit at. She pushes her chair back in and walks around to the other side of the table to sit next to Ian.

‘Can I get you something, Ian? A cold drink, or a cuppa maybe?’
The last thing Cheryl really wants to do is stand up and speak about Catherine in front of a bunch of people who don’t give a toss.

She tells Neil so on the morning of the service.

‘Well don’t,’ he says after a few moments pause, as though a commitment like that could just be dropped. ‘But I think it’s a bit harsh to say nobody gives a toss about her.’

It’s 7-45 AM and both Cheryl and Neil are still in bed. The girls have just left for school, yelling goodbyes through the closed bedroom door as they rush to catch the school bus.

‘I know. People do care. I can’t not do it after Ian asked me to. She deserves better than that.’

‘Sure you can. She’s not going to know, is she?’

Cheryl reaches across and punches Neil lightly on the upper arm. ‘You bastard. You reckon I’m harsh? That’s awful.’

Outside the wind howls and despite everything that she must do today, Cheryl feels a sense of anticipation growing inside. Excitement ripples through her body as she anticipates the cyclone heading towards the coast. Neil once told her that a change in atmospheric conditions affected a lot of people, that she was not alone in such shifts of mood. There were claims and theories that more babies are born nine months after a cyclone than any other time. Just a year ago, an informal tally done on a whiteboard outside the labour room at the hospital had supported that theory, and
she’d joked with Neil about going back to school one day to study the relationship between cyclones and horniness.

‘You know the dolls? The twin Raggedy Anne and Andy dolls?’

‘No,’ Neil says. ‘Oh. You mean the ones Tessie and . . . Jaimee . . . ? The ones that Tessie used to take everywhere . . . after . . .?’ His voice drops to a whisper.

Cheryl turns around to face him, their faces only centimetres apart. She is conscious of her own breath, shallow and quickening, and of his.

‘Yes. . . those ones.’

‘What about them?’ His voice sounds strangled. She knows this is a big deal, that how she responds in the next few moments could make or break this conversation. They’ve come a long way recently, both of them opening up to one another more than they have in many years. But speaking about Jaimee is still fraught.

‘It’s something nice Catherine did . . . a long time ago. I actually forgot all about it for years. I’m going to talk about it a bit . . . at the service.’ She moves so that her chin rests on her cupped hands on his chest. She looks deeply into his eyes, inhaling his exhaled breath and sending it back to him. They don’t move for a few moments. She tells him about Catherine coming to the hospital with the dolls. Neil reaches to her face and pushes her dark fringe from over her eyes, tucking the longer strands over her ears.

‘Your eyes are leaking.’

She smiles, remembering how Tessa used to say that when she was a little girl and Cheryl spent half her life, it must have seemed, with leaking eyes.

‘Do you remember when we first met? And I used to . . .’
She groans and laughs. ‘And you used to sing bloody awful Dire Straits songs all the time.’

Neil strokes the skin around her ears, pats the tears from around her eyes and nose and loosens her hair so it falls back over her eyes.

‘Just the way that her hair fell down around her face.’ He tucks her hair back behind her ears and loosens it again. ‘Another time, another place.’

‘How about we turn the air-conditioning down and stay in bed while the storm moves in. We can drag a blanket out and pretend that . . .’

‘I know this one, heard it a thousand times at least.’ He feigns boredom. ‘We live on the edge of a wintery southern coastline.’

‘In a cottage with a roaring fireplace and a massive stone chimney.’

It has been so long—years, she thinks, since they were so relaxed and in tune with the other. She tries to push it all aside. It seems wrong somehow, to be rekindling old dreams and connecting with Neil like this on the day of Catherine’s service.

‘Where are we then?’ Neil asks her, sensing her mind wandering. ‘Getting down and dirty in a rundown shack by the sea, or indulging in five star luxury?’

Cheryl puts one hand over Neil’s mouth and traces the side of his body with the other hand. She’s wearing an old grey t-shirt that was once Neil’s. She grins at him and sits up, easing it over her head.

‘I should record the wind and pipe it through those new fuck-off speakers we just bought.’ Neil reaches over to grab her with his work-roughened hands and pulls her close. ‘It’s the only time you ever make the first move.’
Neil pulls Cheryl on top of him. She can’t help recalling her last conversation with Catherine. She thinks Catherine laughed that day about something one of Lila’s kids had done, but she forgets what it was. It seems important now that she try to remember it, that Catherine not be forgotten so fast. Neil’s hands move up and over her body, the familiarity annoying and comforting at the same time. She closes her eyes to avoid meeting his as she works to find the right formula— the rhythm, the pattern, that will help her to relax enough to unjumble her thoughts. She already knows, as she senses he must, that she’s too distracted now for passionate lovemaking, but that what happens now between them still matters—maybe more so.

The rain begins hammering on the tin roof. She squeezes her muscles tight, clutching her knees close to Neil’s hips and moving over his body. At least, she thinks, her body is alive, and she is still capable of experiencing physical pleasure. She glances at the alarm clock on the bedside table. Still another two hours until they need to leave home. No rush. She’s worked out what she’s going to say. She’ll start by telling the story of two dolls, favourites of her twin daughters Jaimee and Tessa. And of the kindness of a troubled woman who’d salvaged and cleaned them, and brought them to Cheryl in hospital in her worst of times.
Works referenced in ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’.


Fingerprints: the exegesis
Foreword

When I embark on a writing journey the path will lead somewhere, I know that much. I may even have an idea where a particular track might lead, but I am never quite sure of what I will encounter along the way and how my perceptions and approach might shift. Gilles Deleuze describes writing, as being in part “to trace lines of flight which are not imaginary and which one is indeed forced to follow, because in reality writing involves us there, draws us in there” (Deleuze 2002, 43). Reading can be an intensely intimate experience for me, involving being drawn in to follow someone else’s lines of flight, to immerse myself in their journey, to become an active participant and, on some level, to make their journey my own.

My exegesis is written in a personal voice and grounded in personal experience, an approach still often absent in scholarly writing despite the work of many, particularly feminists, to retrieve it. In an effort to maintain both the human presence and the flow of a personal narrative within a suitably scholarly body of work, the format of the exegesis is presented in a less conventional form. It becomes, if you like, a visual and conceptual demonstration of my own ‘lines of flight’ undertaken over the past few years. The structure makes visible the subtext—the material that would typically remain unseen in a finished artefact.

Writers and scholars such as Kevin Brophy, Hélène Cixous, Beverley Farmer and Julia Kristeva have variously influenced the structural design and layout of the exegesis. The format aims to represent the similarly meandering, fragmentary and sometimes intersecting and serendipitous trajectories of a PhD journey.

To enable the reader to navigate the text, the following reading key defines and explains the function of the various sources deployed in the margins of the text.
Women’s writing about place reveals the connective tissue that holds their lives together (MacKellar 2004, 271).

Calibri font size 10, left aligned: This style is used for direct quotes from various primary and secondary sources that may have inspired a particular line of thinking. The quote may simply be one that resonated strongly at some point in my candidature (ABC 1973, 123).

**May 06**

*Exploration of:*
- Identity
- Sense of place
- Community
- 1970’s

*Need to determine which area to focus on at some point*

Bookman Old Style font size 10, italicised, left aligned:

This font is used for samples from my ‘informal’ paper journals. These journals were integral to my research project. I had intended to paste samples into the margin, but my hand-writing is nowhere near as stylish as this font. In fact, at times it is barely legible. These journals contain lists of key points and reflections on readings or research experiences, straight journal entries, as well as samples of reasonably well-developed life-writing. I have mostly left those unedited, though brief informal reference details have been included where appropriate. Some names have been changed where necessary.

Boopee font size 10, left aligned: This font is used for those extras that don’t seem to fit anywhere else—snippets from remembered conversations, a note scribbled on a scrap of paper, a personal exchange with a friend that got me thinking, for example. Again, names have been changed where I deemed it appropriate. (context of source noted in brackets)

The woman heads north. She seeks the long white beaches of her daydream but she becomes stuck in the dusty red town. (from a very early fiction draft)

MacKellar talks about not knowing the stories of grief that went before hers or her mothers. Reflect on silence. “There is a silence on our histories” (273). (from research notes, Mackellar, first read June 06)

Courier New, size 10, left aligned: Samples of creative writing, from various stages in the project’s development are written this way. Where relevant to context, I will add a brief note at end to explain the excerpt. (from a discarded early draft)

You mean, you just get to sit there and think of stuff to write for three years? (comment received from a post grad student from another discipline ~approx 6 weeks into my project.)

Arial font size 10, left aligned: In addition to my informal paper journals, I kept some more structured journals onscreen. Rather naively, in the early stages, I considered this my ‘real’ academic research. I insert some of this writing and reflection to indicate how some of this research informed my creative work. The material included here is perhaps the closest to a ‘traditional’ foot/endnote.

(Brief note on context/date)
Part One

. . . beginnings

Things happen. People change. Time gets away from you. Neil and she approach life a bit differently now and try to live more in the present. Don’t plan for the future so much, because who knows what’s around the corner, what life’s got in store for you? There’s a bumper sticker she’s seen around town lately, *Shit Happens*. She’d never have it on her own car, but every time she sees it she thinks it’s far more appropriate than the embarrassingly silly purple *Magic Happens* sticker her girls bought from the stall at the annual country show and stuck on her back windscreen a while ago.

-from ‘Fingerprints; the fiction’, Part One, page 18.
February 09
It seems that the words just don’t seem to be able to come into existence right now. It’s not like I am trying to come up with something completely new. It’s the umpteenth draft of the first chapter of my writing about writing that I am trying to (re)start. So, it’s not really starting at all, is it? I’ve been working on this writing in one way or another for years. What did I say to Jordan as he tried to find a way into his latest multimedia project? ‘Take a break, walk away from the computer. Go for a surf.’ Yeah, I am good at giving other people advice. ‘The ideas will come.’ I said. ‘You need to relax and free up space in your head.’

March 2009
It is hardly ideal timing for the words to stop coming, but that is precisely what seems to have happened lately. Type. Backspace. Type. Backspace. Type. Backspace. Wait. Type. Backspace. Wait some more. Check email. Nothing pressing to attend to. Google something, anything. No, don’t go there. Disconnect from the internet. Type. Backspace.

Writing itself is always bad enough, but writing about writing is surely worse, in the futility department. You don’t even have the usual excuses of fiction - namely, that of verisimilitude. Perhaps the auditors, and then the readers—you arrogantly assume there will be some—will want literary theories, or abstract plans, or declarations or manifestos, and then you open the theory-and-manifesto drawer and find it empty. Or at least I did. And then what? (Atwood 2002, xvi)

Problem solved. Albeit temporarily. When in doubt, quote someone else. Yet, within moments of writing When in doubt, quote, and feeling quite pleased with that fragment, the doubts begin to surface. I suspect that perhaps what I write is not original. I add someone else, but it does not sit easily. Oscar Wilde gives me a nod and a wink. Have I just unwittingly stolen words from him, or from other writers who’ve come before me? I pause in my writing and do a few online key-word searches, but I find no obvious evidence of that. I decide to leave it, but I can’t help feeling that leaving that clumsy add-on, someone else, might, down the track, save me from charges of plagiarism.

Upon deciding to write about writing, Margaret Atwood (2002, xvi) discovered her theory-and-manifesto drawer empty, and asked, “And then what?” Upon deciding to write about writing
April 2006
I have a meeting in a few hours... I sat up reading until 3AM, trying to articulate what it is I want to say. I fell asleep surrounded by a sea of highlighted pages, scribbles, and cross-referenced notes—postcolonialism, feminism, postmodernism, structuralism?

I dreamt I went to the premiere of a movie written by someone I know and slept through it. I woke up to give a speech and I realised I had nothing to say. I had no ideas of my own.

Me: A few years ago I took way too many large green bags of designer clothes, unworn to charity. When I was young and stupid, and certainly not able to afford them, I would buy designer bargains that didn’t quite fit. I happened to live in a bush town with NOWHERE to go out. By the time I moved to the city I was (ahem) a few sizes bigger, and not remotely interested in frilly girly clothes made in shiny material. Now with the eighties in vogue again, I think if only I’d held on to that stuff, my daughters would be very happy.

Linda: Your comment reinforces what Trina is saying about not wanting to get rid of her clothes because, sure enough, it’s when you get rid of them that the moment comes when you need or want them the most!

(26.04.09 from personal email correspondence)

for this exegesis, I had a different problem. After several years of reading, thinking about, and doing writing around my PhD project, my ‘drawer’ was cluttered and overflowing with a range of materials. Sorting through that bulging drawer in search of potentially useful material was a tricky process indeed. A spring clean was way overdue. There was stuff in that drawer that I hadn’t really engaged with in several years. And there was other stuff that had seemed to work for me for a while, but as my approach to, and focus of, my research had changed significantly, it had become outdated. It was time for a thorough clean-out. The first step was to cull, to empty the drawer and take out everything that was not going to be useful in the short term—store it away, out of sight under the bed, or on top of the wardrobe, just in case I needed it later.

In order to be in a position to ask myself, ‘And then what?...’ as Atwood had done, I had needed to remove myself, at least temporarily—to strip back to the essentials and simplify my approach. That worked, at least for a while. All the same, in that time, like Atwood, I too, experienced periods of “frenzied scribblings,” and had difficulties sourcing materials and meeting deadlines (2002, xvii).

Today, though, there is no frenzied scribbling, for I find myself reflecting, a little too closely perhaps, on Margaret Atwood’s words quoted above. The word futility sticks most
I believe that if it were left for artists to choose labels, most would choose none (Ben Shahn, in Cameron 1993, 27).

March 09
Using the wearers of mass produced t-shirts to define my position—what is that about? It strikes me now, that perhaps I was a little too ruthless in my clean up.

clearly in my mind.

I decide that the words *futility* and *insecurity* complement each other, and remember a t-shirt that was popular a number of years ago. It parodied the t-shirts big brawny bouncers wore at pubs and live music gigs in my then hometown in the north-west of Australia—tight black t-shirts with the word SECURITY emblazoned across the chest in big white letters. Those bouncers knew their place. It was there as plain as day for themselves and others to see. They stood in a line, arms crossed over their chests, exuding confidence, their faces daring anyone to challenge them.

Already uncertain about my position as a writer and/or academic/researcher, I entered a three-year PhD program, at least in part, to enjoy the protection offered by such a metaphorical t-shirt. But soon after entering the academy as a postgraduate candidate in 2006, I realised the position of the creative writer, and perhaps even of Creative Writing itself within the university, was perhaps more suited to that other t-shirt—the one with the print timidly whispered across the chest in much smaller letters, reading insecurity.

Fortunately, when I remember Atwood’s words, I am reminded that she moved beyond that sense of futility to complete her book.
I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I began my PhD in 1990. I saw it as an attempt to understand how I had come to have the sort of childhood that I had had, but I was really looking for the answer to a personal question (Penglase 2005, 37).

This exegesis, as well as exploring the evolution of my identity as a creative writer and postgraduate student working within a university context, interrogates more broadly the practices and processes involved in researching and developing creative work—dealing, in part, with identity. Very much grounded in individual experience, it addresses questions and issues arising directly from my own research practices alongside discussion of the ways in which creative writing research is intimately connected with the doing of creative work in the academy. I consider too, by drawing on excerpts from different stages of the development of ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’, how, in turn, the doing of creative work might influence research practices.

‘Fingerprints, the exegesis’ is, then, my version of that question Atwood (2002) asked when deciding to write about writing—“And then what?” The focus is a reflection on the action and activities or doing of my own creative writing in a university setting—a set of actions and activities that has differed in some ways, though not necessarily radically, from writing I might have produced in another creative environment (Krauth 2008).

As the research developed it became apparent that there were certain elements—such as stronger integration of the personal or individual experience and voice into the project, and the contribution of serendipitous ‘findings’ to my research—that led me to re-evaluate my approach, ultimately leading me to deeper...
consideration of my work in terms of practice-led research.

Suzanne Fleischman, arguing in defence of use of the personal voice in scholarly writing, explores what she refers to as “the tangled nature of women's relationship to our professional language” (1998, 976). She engages with a range of examples and looks at some of the issues raised by academics across various disciplines and their efforts to “restore to scholarship the person of the scholar—a human presence long eclipsed by the ideology of impersonal objectivity that underwrites the Discourse of Knowledge” (1998, 976). In choosing to foreground the personal voice, as Fleischman does, I challenge the notion that the “Discourse of Knowledge” in the university is developed from a position of “impersonal objectivity.”

While explicitly privileging my own experiences and narrating largely from that voice, I am aware that all experience is mediated. We are, after all, social animals who come into being through interaction and collaboration with others. As Calvin O. Schrag states, “No ‘I’ is an island entire of itself; every subject is a piece of the continent of other subjects, a part of the main of intersubjectivity” (in Berry and Warren 2009, 604). In electing to foreground my own experience and the I, in this project, I thus do so with the conviction that shared experience provides an “epistemic and political” (Alcoff 2000, 315) basis for wider
—the secret is that it isn’t the writer who decides whether or not the work is relevant. Instead it’s the reader (Atwood 2002, 122).

One can repudiate the absolute authority of one’s claims about the meaning of one’s own experience without forsaking the ability to draw from that experience (Alcoff 2000, 314).

cultural understanding. Therefore, while my experience is my own and the meaning revealed through the reading of that experience will be different for each reader, it is worth noting that as the I (or the subject) in this project I am, to use Schrag’s terms, “a piece of the continent of other subjects.” The knowledge revealed from my experience, then, has a value that exceeds the personal. In providing experiential evidence as research, I hope to “open up that experience for dialogue”, rather than “shut it down” (Berry and Warren 2009, 601).

Of course, the questions and debate around the use of the authorial I in scholarly work as a means of removing at least some of that impersonal objectivity discussed by Fleischman have been explored at length, particularly amongst feminist scholars (for example, see Cixous 1997, 2004; Kirsch 1994; Rockhill 1987). Kirsch asks if “it is appropriate—and ethically responsible—to exclude the authorial I” (1994, 383). She argues that instead of questioning whether we should or should not be using the authorial I—that for as long as our identities are shaped by “gender, race, ethnicity, and a host of other factors” (1993, 383)—then the appropriateness of exclusion is the question we really need to be asking. The decision to use both the personal voice and experience might, then, be considered an ethical strategy to contribute both to the wider epistemological understanding of Creative Writing research, and to assert the case
A writer’s journal might be used as a place for conceiving writing-theory. I wonder about the idea of a thesis that is part creative text and part writer’s notebook. A published example is Beverley Farmer’s *A Body of Water*, partly the writer’s journal, with completed and developing works appearing throughout. It contains no theoretical material in the current scholarly sense. But a writer’s journal could be compatible with the aims of the creative work, and would contribute to writing-theory by providing original reflections on writing and the writer’s self (Perry 1998).

I argue that academic research, and creative writers’ engagement in academic research, is not only an important part of the development of the creative writer and the creative process, but that research which critically investigates different aspects of creative writing potentially has an important role to play in research across the Arts, if not the university. On this basis, there is a need to provide a better, more useful ‘map’ of where creative writing as a discipline sits - and one possibility is a map drawn on the basis of the writing concerns common to a wide range of both arts and science disciplines (Owen 2006).

for the *inclusion* of the authorial *I* by “restor[ing] to scholarship the person of the scholar” (Fleischman 1998, 976) in Creative Writing research and practice.

Academic and writer, Cathy Davidson (in Fleischman 1998, 987) asserts that “the decision to use or not to use a personal voice is generic and strategic; the silencing of the writerly *I* does not make the personal motivations for writing less insistent.” As a writer, I am aware that we tend to write from engagement with our own passions, ideas, interests, knowledges and strengths, and that personal motivations are very much a part of each project we undertake. In the exegesis I explore my own (shifting) motivations and document my encounter with various creative writing research practices and experiences. By considering the impact of these in relation to the development of both my fiction and exegesis, I hope that readers—potential and current postgraduate students, established researchers and others with an interest in the discipline of Creative Writing—will be more confident when choosing to situate their research around their own practices and present their findings as part of their research outcome. It has been variously argued that academic scholarship as we know it needs “re-bodying, re-imagining” (Neilson 1998, 282; see also Owen 2006; Perry 1998). The opportunity to engage in a reflexive examination of their own practices and present some of the results of that examination as formal outcomes will
The contingent development of theories about the world means that we cannot claim an absolute progression of correspondence, precisely because there are no such things as “out of theory” experiences. Knowledge claims are contingent on theories which are themselves contingent . . . (Alcoff 2000, 21).

July 2008
I have been reading about the US model for Creative Writing PhD’s but have decided to focus on the Australian model—based on the U.K. one, which is more ‘developed’, and where necessary draw from that for guidance. To get too caught up in the ins and outs of the development of the discipline of Creative Writing globally would take me too far from where I need to go.

enable writers and researchers to make decisions about new and original ways to take their own research forward.

Thus, this exegesis is a body of research which complements the fiction, but which also stands alone in its own right. On one level the exegesis could work as a writer’s notebook containing a collection of knowledge/s and (human) engagements with the material, physical, intellectual and emotional environments revealed through a writer’s research project. And it may serve too as a critical text written from within a particular creative landscape or environment.

Academe has been the home of creative practitioners, in some form, since its very beginnings. However, while writing has been taught in Australian universities for a number of years, the Creative Writing PhD in its present form—comprising a creative work and a commentary/exegesis—is only a little over a decade old. The fact that the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) was formed only in 1996 (Harper and Kroll, 2008) highlights the status of the discipline as a relative newcomer amongst the more firmly established fields, such as English, the discipline with which Creative Writing is often closely associated in the academy. As recently as April 2009, Marcelle Freiman, in her role as chair of the AAWP, commented in the association’s newsletter that the complex question “what is creative research?”
At the meeting today there must have been at least fifteen students doing a mixture of Honours, Masters and PhDs. When we went around the room introducing ourselves, I was the only one who said anything about looking at the practices around creative writing. The majority of their topics seemed heavily grounded in theory. Very few even mentioned their creative work at all. I don’t think anyone was looking at practice-led research.

May 2009
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is still one which she is asked to speak about in various capacities (AAWP 2009, 2). She states that there are still ongoing questions researchers and writers are working on in relation to framing research in relation to creative work. To assist future writers and researchers with this, the AAWP aims to establish a set of guidelines and expectations for academic creative writing. For those Australian writers and researchers currently working without such guidelines, it is perhaps hardly surprising, then, that ideas about identity relating to both the discipline and the creative writer’s place within that discipline are still being explored.

As happens sometimes, I originally overlooked one of the earlier Creative Writing PhD projects undertaken in Australia that deals, in part, with material similar to my own. Finding it in early 2009, as I completed my early exegesis drafts, I went into a minor state of panic. What if Tess Brady had already covered territory I had explored? As postgraduate researchers, we are ‘conditioned’ from the very early stages to be on the search for new knowledge, and the idea that someone has already ‘found’ that knowledge can be unsettling. Belatedly discovering Brady’s thesis abstract, which mentioned key phrases such as ‘exploring the journey’ (women’s stories) and ‘notions of research in the creative arts,’ I understood there could be similarities between her project and my own.

Brady, a pioneer in Australia in the field of the creative
It would be impractical and nor particularly useful to list all the PhDs I looked at early in the course of my candidature. However there were several others that related to my planned program of study and considered similar terrain. See for examples:
- Perry (2000)
- McCleod (2001)

January 07
Unsure of how it was appropriate to proceed, I initially approached the project with the attitude that my creative writing needed to be practiced under the “umbrella of another humanities discipline” (see North 2006).

writing PhD undertaken within the academy, explicitly discussed research in the creative arts. She commented on some of the concerns of the writing and research activities around the writing of her complementary novel, Fragments of a Map, as I chose to do a decade later with ‘Fingerprints: the fiction.’ Brady’s exegesis differed from mine, however, in the sense that it quite specifically traced the thematic concerns of her novel, whereas mine focuses more around the development of my own fiction and the practices and processes involved in creative research more generally.

I was interested to note that Brady, in introducing her exegesis, says that “the question of what an exegesis accompanying a creative work should contain will probably always be one of the form’s most pressing problems” (1998, 1). She then spends several pages clarifying definitions, outlining the terms, and mapping the terrain of her exegesis. Particularly interesting to me was her decision to state for her purposes what an exegesis “should not be” (1998, 1). Ten years or so later, my first response was Thank goodness we’ve established what an exegesis is and is not, and I don’t have to do that. But is that really the case? While I now have a clear picture of where I see my research sitting alongside other work in the field, I consider that I have spent an inordinately long time establishing what my own exegesis will and will not be.

The fears about duplication of content had dissipated by the
...it [the exegesis] is also evolving into a more reflective piece of writing in which the contribution to knowledge becomes insights into the individual creative process with reference to ideas in the relevant literature (Arnold 2005, 41).

Researcher’s lived experience can and does come to play in the writing of our research; however, how scholars use experiential evidence must be considered carefully as its purpose should be to open up for dialogue, not shut it down (Berry and Warren 2009, 601).

More recently, for example, approximately ten years after Brady’s exegesis was completed, a manuscript that had its genesis as the exegetical component of a PhD project was published in book form with the title The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady (Woolfe 2007). Sue Woolfe, like Brady and me, approached the subject from a position of interest in her own creative processes. Her exploration, as the title suggests, was strongly focused around western science, a theme that recurs in her fiction. I mention it here, not in order to compare it to my own project, but to highlight that the scope for research into creative processes covers a vast territory.

It has been argued that Creative Writing as a discipline differs in some respects from others in the humanities in that it places a “premium” on process (Nelson, 2008). If we accept this claim, it is interesting to note that many Creative Writing PhDs undertaken in Australia in the form of creative work/artefact with exegetical component do not focus specifically on the researching and writing of the creative work in their exegesis in the way my own
April 2006
Have spent a lot of time reading a range of papers from the TEXT website. This one is a special issue focused on the Exegesis ‘Illuminating the Exegesis’ (April 2004). Hopefully once I have had time to process some of that information I will be a little clearer. At this stage I am more overwhelmed than anything else. I doubt my approach will be along any of these lines.

What is the point of writing in your notebooks if they are not going to be used for a story or something? I don’t really understand that.
(a question asked by a student I tutored in 2008)

and Brady and Woolfe’s do. I do not suggest that this is necessarily problematic, as research practice is surely healthier, and the body of knowledge developed ultimately more thorough, if approached from diverse perspectives. However, based on my experiences of the past few years, I do agree with Freiman that there is a real need for the establishment of “a set of guidelines and expectations for academic creative writing” (AAWP 2009, 2). Such a set of guidelines, available to researchers and writers, will surely alleviate some of the early confusion that can hinder progress of projects.

Much of the initial uncertainty that I felt early in my candidature, in relation to both my own and the discipline of Creative Writing’s position in the academy, stemmed from my inability to understand and articulate, with any degree of confidence, just what constitutes valid research in the field of creative writing and, taking it back a step further, whether it was even acceptable to talk about my own creative exploration and practice. It seemed to me, in the formative stages of my research, that through an exploration of Australian creative writing PhDs available both through the Australasian Digital Theses Program and in hard-copy, there was relatively little material dealing directly with the practices and processes, or actions and activities, around the doing of Creative Writing within the academy. Yet there was much material dealing with the doing of the exegesis.
November 2007

Books such as those by Farmer (1990) and Grenville (2006) reflecting on the creative research process in personal ways, resonated when I read them. I suspect that the impact of such books meant that at least the stirrings of the idea to draw directly from my research process was there from the early stages.

Examples of such material can be found throughout various issues of TEXT, Creative Writing Theory Beyond Practice (eds Krauth & Brady 2006), and New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing.

I knew early on that for this project the practices around the practices and processes around the creative writing were to be the central focus of the exegetical research. But I could not even think about framing my research and its relationship to my creative work without developing a stronger, more focused and more confident approach to my own research practices.

In the early stages of research I approached my project from a more analytical perspective, drawing from a range of literary, cultural and historical texts. It was only when I was into my second year of work and had begun strengthening my own views and understanding about what constituted (for me) valid research as a writer working within the academy that I began to conceive of a way to develop a framework that might not only fit into but could perhaps add to the existing body of knowledge about creative arts practice. As my understanding of my own research practices grew, I realised that the differences that I believed existed between the theory and practices of creative and more traditional scholarly work had, if not disappeared, at least become less marked. I then began to understand that knowledge needed to occur at the production level, “through practice and about
March 2009
I was reminded by Anne, of Lessing’s Golden Notebook. I had forgotten about that, and have not read it for years. Perhaps I’d somehow retained something of the essence that book too, as I began to think about this project?

I later remembered, reading in my undergraduate studies Julia Kristeva’s Stabat Mater, with the personal text written around and though the scholarly work. Odd, that I forgot all about it until now.

May 2006
Dot points

- I’ve been thinking about the old drunk who used to sleep in the doorway of the Catholic church. How did he come to live in the town?
- Note on back of Caroline Steedman’s (1986) book: A book about... “interpretations, about the places we rework what has happened to give current events meaning.”
- Remember dentist appointment tomorrow.

I set out, early in my candidature primarily to read texts I felt relevant to my research. One day I ordered the ‘wrong’ book when trawling online second-hand bookstores, and was surprised when a few weeks later Hélène Cixous, Rootprints (Cixous and Calle-Cruber 1997) arrived in my post box. While I had been interested in Hélène Cixous’ writing, the arrival of this book in my post box was a happy accident resulting from an incorrectly finalised online order. This book was soon marked in my End Note database research notes as a potentially important discovery.

In a journal entry written around the same time, I go on to question the possibility that mistakenly ordering this book (containing a range of writings including an interview with Cixous and Mirielle Calle-Cruber exploring Cixous’s creative processes, and a range of images and writings from Cixous’s notebooks) may have been serendipitous. Later, I realised that it was not purely the subject matter of the main text that had appealed to me (though it had too). The insight into Cixous’s creative processes, highlighted in small text boxes placed throughout that book, had also captured my imagination. Used to
The main difficulty I have encountered so far is probably self-imposed. For in trying to bring my creativity to the academic arena, I have become tangled up in the ‘seriousness’ of academic life. But this is wrong. I need to ‘write into the unknown’ not just ‘read into the unknown’ for the two experiences of reading new words and writing new words, must travel together.

(extract from email sent to friend Oct 2006)

illuminate Cixous’s notebooks, they demonstrate the role and value of these notebooks in the process of her writing, and further highlight the fact that writing does not happen in a vacuum when the writer is seated at the desk, and that the work of writing, in fact, “includes the activities carried out over any of the twenty-four hours in a day” (Krauth 2006, 192). This was something I was increasingly keen to emphasise as central to my own creative work and, as a result, selected excerpts from my own notebooks or journals and activities of ‘twenty-four hour periods’, began to wind their way through my research notes.

As well as by Cixous’s approach, I was inspired by reading writers such as Kevin Brophy (1998, 2003), who draws on life experience, including samples of journals and fragments to show how writing “gets done” (2003, 1). He describes some of his writing as having “no clear divisions”, and as a “movement between” essay, autobiography, fiction and poetry (2003, 2). My interest in writing with ‘movement’ continues with writers such as Stephen Muecke (1994, 1997), who combines the personal journey with storytelling and cultural exchange to tell his stories in an accessible style.

I experimented by adapting some of each of these and other writers’ techniques, along with my own ideas as I considered how best to approach the writing and presentation of the exegesis and the fiction.
March 09

For some months I had a note to myself typed next to my record of the quote—double check if Atwood quote actually says her, then him.

Such a minor detail in the overall project, but it bothered me. I'd returned the book to an interstate university, and of course, the page had to be one I had not photocopied. Finally, though I knew in my heart that Atwood had said this, I recalled the book. Once I had clarification, I felt as though a weight had been lifted. Now I could move on to clarifying the next tiny detail.

I kept quiet for a bit and thought about language myself. When we write, we sometimes run out of words. This is because we come to the edge of the city of words, where there are no words left in the place we find ourselves. There are places on the surface of the earth where there are no words at all. There are also places in the heart where words are lost forever (Muecke 1997, 21).

To address the questions and discussions pertinent to the development of the exegesis, I have loosely modelled my approach on that described by Atwood (2002, xxv) in relation to her book of writing on writing. She describes the structure of her book as “not tightly sequential. One chapter does not lead by a direct pathway to the next, though all circle around a set of common themes to do with the writer, her medium, and his art.”

‘Fingerprints: the exegesis’ can be read similarly. While each section of writing deals with a set of enquiries that were addressed at different stages of my postgraduate research journey, there is an overlap and echoing of themes in successive chapters. Through a layering and melding of various experiences and sources of knowledge, the amorphous and sometimes fragmentary structure of the exegesis is designed to complement the similarly meandering, fragmentary and sometimes intersecting and serendipitous trajectories of my PhD journey.

The exegetical work is therefore cumulative and constitutes a narrative with a number of entwined stories or threads exploring the discipline of Creative Writing, the position of the writer/researcher inside that discipline, and the insecurities that influenced the development of both the fiction and exegetical work. So, while divided into five separate Parts, those narrative
Identity is about belonging. It is about artists and their audience addressing the nature of the environment in which they find themselves and finding some means of representation that can be used to establish a site of personal significance. On an individual score, it is about making a site of home, or feeling at home—at home in one’s body and in the space it occupies (Weston 2003, 171).

HC (1993, 11), says writing finds its origins in loss, in “l’expérience de la disparition”. She says that the theme of loss (that of losing her father when she was ten) recurs through all of her work. The death cannot be mourned, or put into the past. Rather, it is endlessly lived in the present tense.

Part One has provided a broad overview of my approach, early expectations of my research program, and situated me as a visible and active participant in the project. It has raised too some of the research activities and questions that have been pertinent to my project from an early stage. The following Parts of the exegesis engage with questions and issues that have grown from that initial enquiry. In Part Two I grapple with further questions about the sense of insecurity that was first raised in Part One—both my own, and that I perceived in the discipline of Creative Writing. I track my journey towards reaching a new appreciation of practice-led research, and try to situate myself as a writer and researcher inside the discipline. As my relationship with scholarly research shifted, so too did the influence and impact of those various questions on my investigations.

In Part Three I explore the paths that I felt compelled to follow, having established in Part Two that my research would be primarily practice-led. The stronger influence of the personal or individual, and an understanding of the blurring between the various perceived ‘selves’ is a significant thread in Part Three. So too is the growing sense of acceptance of coming to terms with an unexpected approach to the exegetical project—one where I searched for answers about the impetus behind my own creativity in relation to the development of my fiction. In order to
Within the realm of a creative narrative, it is possible to explore the depth and breadth of human experience that may not actually eventuate in one's life but because of the narrative experience can produce new knowledge about something (North, 2004, 222).

understand the way history, life and culture make their way into a text and how questions might be raised about the place of that experience in (academic) Creative Writing research, this seemed a critical step in this project—however confronting it felt.

In Part Four, I continue developing these threads of enquiry mentioned above. A key feature of this Part is the acceptance that a work of writing is very much shaped by the circumstances under which it is produced, and that this body of work, produced for academic examination, had to be developed in a particular way that included articulating my feelings of ambivalence about my research project. Getting away from what I perceived to be the work of writing proved helpful in consolidating my understanding of and approach to academic Creative Writing research, of the place of the individual in that research, and of the project’s progression.

In the final section, Part Five, I acknowledge that, that while close to finished in the formal sense, the overall project is now considered as being part of a continuum—or an ongoing exploration. After a four-year journey following various paths and threads, and engaging with all manner of insecurity and uncertainty in terms of my project, I achieved an unexpected outcome. I conclude the formal part of the project with an optimistic vision of the future for Creative Writing research.
He presses the button on the radio. He’s worried but he’s not letting on to Chez. She’s got enough on her plate. Something is going on out at work. There are increasingly frequent whispers. Rumours of all sorts. Japs taking over is the latest. A couple of his mates have been talking about trying to get in over here in Lawson, the swanky new town, seeing if they can get their hands on a couple of caravans, work on the construction phase of the gas project. Even better, trying to score one of the jobs that come with a house. Not much hope of that coming to fruition though. Apparently it’s a pretty closed shop—who you know, not what you know. And housing’s scarce still, as rare as hens’ teeth.

February 06

. . . has been filled with seminars and workshops. Finding my way about campus into the new places I am now allowed to inhabit. My journal has changed. It contains lists—take notes on chapter two, literature of WA, organise annotated bibliography, etc.

I am taking the notes I expect a postgraduate student of English Literature should take, for that is what I am, technically, isn’t it?

28 March 2006

Five weeks and one day since the first official day of postgraduate study. A chaotic start, an almost stop. . .

It is almost three years to the day since those words were handwritten in the first of the red cardboard-covered, feint-lined A4-sized notebooks that were to become integral to the development of my Creative Writing research project. Flicking through that book, I am reminded of how I had tried, in those first few weeks, to keep a journal on the screen. Remembering a tip given to me by a professor in my Honours year of study, I endeavoured to write as much as possible directly onto the computer. Bearing his words in mind, I reasoned that when the still-distant later time came, it would be simpler to lift the words from the page, to tweak and paste them into what was at that point still a barely imagined body of writing—the exegesis. But despite trying three different software programs in addition to regular Microsoft Word documents, it seemed I could not train my brain into believing that journaling could be done any way other than with pen and paper.

I kept separate files and made lists in folders labelled with various ‘research-related’ terms, such as those reproduced in the margin on the next page. I had separated the various elements of

Files so far March 2006
- Early research notes
- Fiction reading notes
- Reflective journal notes
- Theory reading notes
- Administrative notes
- Personal notes
- Personal journal
my early research work into so many compartmentalised sections that, before long, I was completely bamboozled.

As I read back now, in mid 2009, through those notes written early in my candidature, I see that I was puzzled even then, by this change in my approach to my early research patterns. It was a time of tasting and sampling, of engaging with ideas, like an animal wandering the countryside and grazing on different grasses, tasting a little here and little more there, going back to test whether patch A really was more tender than patch B after all—until finally settling on a clump that tastes just right. Or, imagining this in more human terms, I might see this stage as sampling a range of similar-but-slightly-different-tasting dishes in a Spanish-themed tapas restaurant or bar, searching for just the right flavour combination to engage my tastebuds and draw me back for more.

Part Two details a time in my candidature that seemed to comprise *more beginnings*. The first section in Part Two focuses on the early stages of my research following acceptance into the postgraduate program at Murdoch University—a time that might be considered the start of the journey. Yet, while this protracted period took place at the chronological ‘beginning’ of the research project, it is really a *pre-beginning* phase, a confusing and messy time. In order to start work productively on my research project
armed with, at the very least, the beginnings of a sense of my own place as a writer and researcher working within the academy, that confusion and messiness was a necessary part of the journey. It is the point where, without a set of formal guidelines for approaching creative writing or any real understanding of what constituted valid creative research, I set out to do creative writing at postgraduate level. The second section in Part Two explores the idea of practice-led research and marks a re-beginning. It was in this period that I realised the importance of emphasising the centrality of the creative writing practices throughout the project. This stage was significant in that it marks a shift in my own perceptions and a growing awareness of the inextricable link between everyday life experiences and creative practice.

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There is no one-size-fits-all formula for approaching the work of writing. For some of us, at the start of any writing project, before the grazing or sampling even begins, there is an itch in the body and the brain. It may only be a slight irritation at first, and sometimes it goes away on its own without being addressed. Often, though, that itch comes back stronger—and try as we might, we cannot ignore it. Once we start to scratch we are done for. We may not know what is causing the itch, but we have to
Impulsions are the beginnings of a complete experience because they proceed from need; from a hunger and demand that belongs to the organism as a whole and that can be supplied only by instituting definite relations (Dewey 1958, 58).

Do you remember when just after we moved to Perth there was that terrible accident? The rumours were rife (of course). Helen and Shane had split up some months earlier, and he was supposedly taking the kids away from her ‘forever.’ How the hell could anyone possibly know that? Did he turn into the truck on purpose? Who knows? And did it help or hinder Helen to have those of us who were not especially close there while she buried her husband and son? I’ve always felt a little shamed about being there. I felt so sad. I had a soft spot for little Tim when I worked at the kindy. But felt a bit dirty for being there in the midst of their grief... and somehow voyeuristic.

(from personal email May 2006)

address it, gently at first, but increasingly more vigorously as we work toward the source.

At this point in my own practice I might identify that the itch is about a need to write about a something, which I probably cannot yet identify. I may at that stage have a vague notion of a character and/or situation. More likely, though, it is an emotion or physical sensation that somehow embeds itself in my mind and compels me to explore it. I find myself seeking out books on themes different to those I am usually drawn to. Or I might find myself revisiting old memories, listening to specific musicians or genres of music. Sometimes I will get caught up looking at old photographs, or reading blogs and googling topics of no obvious interest to me. I might try to imagine what it would be like to live in another country, to be an orphan, to lose a child tragically. I am likely to be more in tune with my own emotions than at other times, and my awareness and sensitivity are heightened. I write more in my journals and often find I write more ‘complex’ emails and letters to friends than the usual How-are-you-hope-you-are-well correspondence. I am quite certain that I am more difficult to live with than usual.

I don’t try to intellectualise any of that while in the midst of it. I don’t see it as the potential beginnings of a writing project, and certainly not as part of the research process. It is too soon for that. More often than not, at these times I am hard on myself for
May 2006
Some shapes, and shadows emerged today. A lady sees a photograph of a long beach in the north. The person showing her the photograph told her of Broome, Chinatown, Pearls, and sunset on Cable beach.

And this goes on when you are shopping, cooking, anything. You are reading but you find the book has lowered itself: you are wool-gathering (Doris Lessing, cited in Brophy 2003, 220).

time-wasting, and drag myself away from writing emails and journal entries in order to do something more ‘useful’ with my time. I barely ever recognise the relevance of this pattern to the beginning of the soothing of that itch until I am some way into the early writing.

I look from the present back to the chaotic beginnings of this PhD project and see that the early stage of research, even the early journal entries, resembled the way all my creative writing projects invariably begin and sometimes continue, until I find the right taste to engage with. How easy it seems now, with the benefit of hindsight, to reflect on several years of work and say, *I should have relaxed at the beginning, recognised the similarities between the early grazing stages of researching a creative and a more self-consciously scholarly work.*

If I *had* to wear a label (for it does seem that in the early period of my research at least, I strove to find a label that fitted or worked for me), then I defined myself in those early stages as a writer first, and researcher second. I often struggled with my almost-ininctive research patterns in those early stages, and forced myself to ignore, or at least downplay, the value of that grazing or tasting stage in order to concentrate on ‘more important’ matters. For all my griping about how my field of research was undervalued, and how the discourses of other humanities subjects, such as Literature, seemed to be more highly
June 2006
I keep returning to disappearing children and mothers. The image of the woman in the clipping stuck in my file, the woman who sometime in the 1960s went out for bread and milk, leaving her children at home, and never being seen again, haunts me. She is a real woman. I wonder what became of her? All I know of her is that she was a mother, and that she disappeared. I don’t think she is a bad woman, maybe she is widowed. Maybe she had a mental problem? I think the ‘idea’ of this woman is perhaps to ‘become’ the woman who will head north after walking out on her family. She will seek the long white beaches of her daydream but become stuck in a dusty red hot new town developing thirty kilometres from the destitute and squalid town of Roebourne. I think her name will be Catherine.

regarded, I now recognise that in those early stages, by pulling myself away from those early grazing stages in order to focus on the reading of other texts, literary theories for example, I was the one placing little emphasis on the creative writing research.

I return briefly now to reflect on the period that preceded the commencement of my candidature, for in some respects the PhD journey might be considered as having started around that time. Prior to submitting application for candidature, I was aware that the production of a work of fiction alone would not be deemed sufficient for acceptance into the PhD program. I understood through various communications with university academic and support staff that I would need to support the creative work with ‘theory’ or ‘critical’ writing, drawing from English or another related humanities discipline. I understood too that while the quality of each component of writing was expected to be equal, the percentage breakdown of 80 000 words creative and 20 000 words ‘other’ as indicated (and later approved) on my application, would be acceptable. From the beginning then, it seemed to me that creative writing—and by extension, creativity—while being accepted on principle in the academy, was for the most part required to be practised under the umbrella of another, related discipline “and as an aspect of that discipline’s general function” (North 2006).
All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that you see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved (Woolf 1992,4).

In my initial application I outlined a desire to (in part) explore in a “Multidisciplinary manner and encompass English, oral and social history, community development and sociology and so provide ample scope to explore various directions in the social sciences and humanities. I hope to undertake writings in fields such as humanities based journal papers and non-fiction life-writings relevant to area of interest.”

(from draft application notes 2005)

My goal at that point in my writing-life prior to acceptance into the PhD program was to complete the full-length novel I felt was trying to emerge. I had to consider my options: whether to spend the next three (or more) years at home busy with a family and attempting to complete that full-length novel unsupported, or to avail myself of the opportunity to undertake a project with university support, and possibly even a scholarship.

So, as informed as I could be without the benefit of guidelines specific to the PhD with a creative production component, I began what was perhaps my first creative exercise of the PhD project—a document outlining the focus, aims and objectives of my thesis which I would submit with my application for a position in the postgraduate program. Making limited reference to the practices of creative writing, in one section of the document I outlined a desire to explore in an multidisciplinary manner and encompass English . . . social history, community development . . . and provide ample scope to explore various directions in the humanities.

The truth was, that although in that support document I had outlined some specific aims and suggested the significance and innovative potential of my project, and had every intention of following the trajectory of research that I had outlined, I knew
... and yes, I am still trying to work out how to approach this. I know somehow I am to write connected fiction and theory side by side. That’s about it so far! I read an article last week promoting those creativity workshops John Cleese is running. $595 for the sessions! Apparently he timetables a ‘free space’ or meditation time if you like, into his schedule to allow a quiet space for the creativity to occur. It doesn't matter whether it is writing for comedy or business. I guess I'd need two sessions then—one for the fiction and one for the exegesis. He claims you need to create a sense of calm (yeah, right). My life outside university is as chaotic as ever right now. Perhaps that is what I should aim to do?

But realistically I can’t even fit in ‘breathing’ into the timetable half the time.
(from personal email correspondence to a friend, Lisa, 2006)

Researchers are expected to conceive an outcome in advance, and identify the significance and innovation of the research proposal. Intentionality sets in place preconceptions about what the work will do. Thus in creative research, a battle emerges in the writing process. All too often the preconception wins out. The concept dominates over what is emerging in practice. (Bolt 2004, 4)

very little about the unwritten project that I had envisioned. At best, I could say I knew, or thought I knew, that I wanted to write a narrative about a specific type of community that has been largely unexplored in contemporary fiction, and that I hoped to present that narrative as one “means of studying the ‘ways of seeing’ a culture” (Turner 1993, 9). Beyond that, I could not then know what might emerge in the writing process. Still, I was concerned that whatever might emerge might not match the project outline I had provided the university and I was uncertain of the impact pre-empting outcomes might have on my working practices.

Nigel Krauth speaks of the ways in which postgraduate students fear that the creation of a novel for a doctorate might affect both the process and end product. He finds that while writers working in the academy may feel supported, those benefits, flowing “from a bureaucratic structure, can impact upon the novelist’s freedom to create” (2008, xii). Krauth’s discussion had not been published when I began my studies in early 2006, but my journals indicate that I was already concerned on some level about approaching my creative writing in a postgraduate academic environment, particularly in respect of that bureaucratic structure.

My usual approach to creative writing until then had been to work through the early uncertainty until I began to write
The dark. The cave. The empty head. Why aren’t we more empty-headed when we write? Is it because we are too aware of opinion-laden readers waiting to pounce in judgement on us? Is it because we don’t want to appear empty-headed? (Brophy 2003, 121)

I never have a theoretical idea for a book. What I write usually emerges from the things I’ve witnessed, experiences I’ve had myself, or that people around me have had. It emerges organically. . . Writing isn’t like other artforms in that it’s at second remove from the physical. It has to be so conscious, writing; but there are some days when your inhibitions go away. . . I wish I could write like that more often (Helen Garner in Woolfe and Grenville 1993, 59).

something that made some kind of narrative or thematic sense, allowing the story to reveal itself in the physical act of writing. More often than not, in the redrafting of a story, poem or play, or perhaps some time post-completion, I would have a light-bulb moment: Ah, so that is what I was writing about!

Though I had now elected, as a PhD candidate, to accept—and try—an alternative approach to that more free-flowing one, and had acquired enough knowledge to understand how creative writing in the postgraduate system apparently worked, I was concerned. I feared that my writing risked being shaped by the requirement that I specify, in advance and in some detail, what my work would say and what it might reveal. There just didn’t seem to be much room for the find-and-reveal-meaning-in-process approach to writing that had so far served me well. I privately wondered too how on earth anyone, regardless of their discipline, could expect to discover something in order to contribute to ‘scholarly knowledge’ if they had already stated the result of a not-yet-commenced project?

Experience had taught me that if I tried to plot and plan too heavily, if I thought too deeply about what I wanted to achieve, if I tried to write about something that was too clearly defined, then my creative writing emerged largely ineffective. If I managed to
November 2006

I am writing a new section and I find myself wondering if perhaps Catherine was born too early? Maybe she is a child in the sixties, moves north in the seventies?

I am in my office at uni today. What luxury. A place to myself. When it is quiet the place becomes mine. Then I can relax and organise my notes into my journals. Unfortunately it is rarely quiet anywhere.

A lot of theory has overlooked human emotion—it has denied us the capacity to say it moves us. —Paraphrased comment by Professor Vijay Mishra in informal discussion post Honours submission 

write anything at all, then it was likely that the writing sounded self-conscious and contrived. Inevitably, and before too long the writing would end up deleted or, in the case of paper, shredded and added to my compost bin.

Kate Grenville talks about writers needing to “unlearn a lot before [being] free to write” (1990, 4). She advises writers and aspiring writers not to listen to the voices telling them the rules and conditions under which to write, to “unlearn for a while, the desire to have a finished product.” And hardest of all, she says, we need “to unlearn a lifetime’s training in being orderly and making sense.” We need, she adds, a “certain amount of apparent disorder” (1990, 4). I am a little disconcerted, when I look back at my writings of that period following commencement of my candidature, to see how quickly and easily I had ‘unlearned’ the unlearning that I’d developed and used in approaching my own creative writing practices to date. Now, with the advantage of hindsight I can identify that the disorder in that early writing was both valuable and necessary to the writing project. I revisit those preliminary notes and journal entries and see long tracts of prose focusing on something that on the surface is insignificant, such as my inability to write a journal entry or note on a computer screen and my disorderly filing systems.

My thoughts on revisiting those pages a few years after first writing them were to ask myself questions such as: What did it
He had taught her... how to accept the flawed barrier between cause and effect, how to see that the present continually altered the past, just as the past was a strange inheritance that fell upside down into one's life like an image through a camera obscura (Ondaatje 2007, 104).

Kroll (2006, 198) says that when students present their thesis as a whole, they are communicating "beyond their supervisors and examiners" to demonstrate to a wider culture their understanding of what writing means.

She cites Graeme Harper who describes this interaction as:

- "first and foremost a response, a method of engagement with the world that is defined by the meeting of personal and public circumstance."

Important point to remember that this meeting:

- "highlights the role of individual in determining the measure and style of that meeting."

(from research notes April 2007)

matter in the grand scheme of things where my journal-words were written, and how they were presented? But clearly, looking at the extraordinary amount of space I devote to such ponderings, along with the musings about my fears in relation to the expectations for successful completion of a Creative Writing PhD, my inability to establish a relaxed and open, un(self)-censored journal, or to sit down and free-write without expectation that it would become useful to my project, was causing me genuine concern. For an integral part of my creative writing practice was then, and still remains, revisiting old notebooks and journals.

But was it really only the journaling and note-taking frustrations, or the compromises I felt I would have to make in my writing that were creating problems for me as a beginning PhD candidate? While they certainly played a part, I do think there were several layers to this initial confusion. Perhaps another story behind this leg of the research journey lay hidden? Maybe my own insecurity about my new position or identity as a writer working at postgraduate level within the university was a factor? Perhaps, then, it was plain fear of the unknown? I was, after all, moving into an unfamiliar space, one that I had not, in the past, really envisaged would play a role in the development of my first novel.

To move your desk to a new part of the room or to shift
house and re-establish a physical writing space surrounded by the familiar material objects that help you feel at ease in your creative writing environment is one thing. Perhaps with such a shift there comes a change in your research and writing that you will later partly attribute to the new view, bigger desk, improved shelving system to store your books, or better lighting to allow you to read later into the night. In a personal creative environment, at the beginning stages of writing at least, you are likely to be accountable only to yourself. It is another thing altogether to shift into an exciting, but alien creative environment, where accountability to supervisors and university regulations, and all manner of other unforeseen expectations and requirements become part of the package. It is unsurprising perhaps that a writer might fear that the creation of a novel for a doctorate might affect both the doing of, and end product.

In Part One I wrote of entering the academy as a postgraduate student in part for the authority afforded by the protection of that metaphorical SECURITY t-shirt. For some years before that, like many who write, I had been trying to squeeze writing into the small spaces and gaps that existed while raising children, studying, and earning extra money in various jobs. I had experienced some publication and competition successes and, several years earlier, had had a play professionally produced. But
I felt that I had not yet managed to find a place I belonged in the writing community. I had been referred to a number of times as an emerging writer, and I felt the time had come to find a way to throw off that label. Rather naively, I had thought that gaining a postgraduate place to research and write a work of fiction and accompanying exegesis meant that for three years I’d have the opportunity to wear that SECURITY t-shirt—that in taking up a place as a postgraduate research student, I would find a place to belong as a writer.

I mentioned too in Part One that in the earlier stages of my project I felt that a dichotomy existed between the actions or doing of my creative work on the one hand and my academic work on the other. I had not experienced this dichotomy in my undergraduate and Honours studies. Then, I had managed to combine studying various units ranging from literary theory units to creative writing units without too much angst.

I needed (though I did not know it then) to understand that there were possibly fewer, or at least different, challenges than I had anticipated to be overcome in approaching Creative Writing as a discipline in this new material environment. I had to acknowledge that within this context, my uncertainty about my identity had caused me to erect barriers that prevented me from engaging fully with my research and writing processes. All too quickly, in shifting from one creative environment to another, I

One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world (Sartre 2001, 28).
March 06
There was a meeting of all the new arts postgraduates today. The information was dispersed quite generally. But then, in this large lecture theatre, the speaker asked who was doing a project with a creative component. I looked around. My hand was the only one up. “You will need to come and see me.”

I felt everyone watching me. Did they envy me? But then, I walked past the guy from the welcome morning tea, the one who had rolled his eyes and snorted incredulously when I told him I was writing fiction. “Pft, for a PhD? What next?”

A Body of Water (1990)—Beverley Farmer
Coonardoo (1994)—Katherine Susannah Pritchard
Road Story (2005)—Julienne Van Loon
Cusp—Josephine Wilson
True Stories (1999)—Inga Clendinnen
Shadow of the Hill (1985)—Colleen Heath
A New Map of the Universe (2005)—Annabel Smith

{Excerpt from: Fiction/life writing read file, May 06}

had become one of those people who “want to write but cannot” (Cixous 1997, 39). These people, says Cixous, are the people who put barriers up, and these barriers become “the stranger” that lives within them. And thus, in order to write, “one must let oneself go. One must not be afraid” (1997, 39). I had to acknowledge that since ‘shifting house’ and beginning work within the academy, I had erected just such barriers. I had been a postgraduate student for just a few months, but already I was terribly confused. I no longer knew which box to tick. How was I to identify my position? Was I an academic? A writer? A writer/academic? A researcher? An arts practitioner? Or none of the above? I needed to find a way to make that ‘stranger’ leave and let me get back on with working that out in order to write.

Fast forward a month or two: I am spending time with Barbara, a fellow PhD candidate, over coffee. We started our PhDs a month apart, and compare our loosely related fields. She is looking at representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian literature. I am too, though less directly. But as well as reading contemporary Australian literature, I am planning to write it. As has already become the pattern, I struggle to explain what I am going to write for the exegesis. I wonder briefly why no one ever seems to ask what I am going to do for the fiction before returning my thoughts to the exegesis. The fact is, I actually don’t
It reached a point where I felt that if I wanted to attain a sense of ‘belonging’ then I needed to DO something. I organised informal gatherings with some postgraduate students from within the same faculty. As I listened to their talk of their ‘thesis questions’ and ‘anticipated outcomes’, it became apparent that a creative writing English postgraduate student writing a novel and exegesis was perceived by some as something quite alien to those working in the same broad field. This was highlighted when a whole table erupted in laughter and more than a couple of supportive responses were flagged in response to someone’s comment that they wished they’d thought of “just writing a novel.”

really know what an exegesis is. Everything I have read so far has done little more than confuse me. So I change direction several times and keep talking about the literary theories and fiction I imagine I will draw upon to situate my own work within a wider context. I say that I have been reading a lot of books, many the same as those Barbara has read.

What I don’t say is that what I really want to be doing now, what I feel a burning physical need to be doing now—is begin writing fiction, that I am practically bursting with this need to write. But having attended a number of non-discipline-specific arts and humanities workshops on approaching the PhD program, and even having organised a few informal opportunities for postgraduate students enrolled in the English program to meet to talk about projects, for the moment I feel compelled to take notes, to write literature reviews—still to read fiction, but to focus more on texts grounded in literary theory.

By the second coffee with Barbara I am talking about my early experiences as a wife and young mother in a remote north-western Australian mining community. All the time we talk, I feel slightly guilty that we are not discussing more relevant subjects—discussing theorists, or literature, for example. But nonetheless, we keep chatting. I discover that her experiences as an ‘army wife’ were not unlike some of mine as a ‘company wife’ in a small town. She moved around a lot, found it hard to connect with
Some women withdraw into home
- the house becomes everything.
- become obsessive as there is nothing else.
- homes are company owned, and all renovations are regarded as depreciation so women are limited what they can do there.
- homemaker cannot identify the house as her own—therefore has no sense of permanence.

(notes from Research Journal see Holden, 1981)

people who did not share that lifestyle. I tell her that it is interesting to discover this, as it is something I had wondered about when the army established a base in the town where I had lived. Then, the army women had not appeared willing to connect with the mining company women I knew (primarily other stay-at-home mothers with young children). I had always wondered if perhaps they had felt they didn’t quite fit, coming in as they had, into an already established mining community.

We talk about the similarities in the lifestyles, and of often experiencing that climbing-the-walls feeling as we were locked into our respective lives as young wives and mothers in geographically and emotionally remote locations. We laugh a lot, and talk about the types of things we’d do to amuse ourselves in those small towns. While she had not lived near me, there were certain common factors in our lives—the sense of dissatisfaction, the boredom, and the loneliness that comes with being bookish, insular and non-sporting in a small, sociable, sports-oriented community, for example.

We share too, ways we dealt with these matters. First, there was the heavy drinking/social phase, when alcohol seemed to be a way through the boredom and sense of isolation; then the domestic goddess phase, where suddenly it mattered to have a nice clean house to show off; and, of course, the party-plan phase. For what better way to show off a clean house than to invite your
April 08

After I tutored Intro to Lit today, one of the mature age students, Christine, told me about living in Karratha as an company wife. It turned out her husband had briefly been employed for a short-term contract for another smaller company. One day she’d somehow locked herself in her house and could not escape. With the cyclone shutters up, she felt trapped in that house. I asked her, ‘Other than that, how did you like Karratha?’

She told me, ‘I thought I was going to die. You wouldn’t believe how much I drank while I lived there.’

I would believe it, and told her so. ‘I went through that phase too.’ I was gratified to hear someone who’d lived there some years after I left, and several years into my PhD, talk about the very things that I keep going back to in my writing—loneliness, isolation, survival techniques.

‘How did you settle in?’ I asked.

‘I didn’t. I ended up on antidepressants. I had no kids, so nothing in common with others, and I had to take such a crappy job just so I did not sit at home and stare at the walls.’

neighbours over to look at some desirable material item unavailable in the limited range of shops in the Pilbara, and at the same time allow them the opportunity to admire your housekeeping and cooking prowess? We laugh about the craft groups and school P & C clubs (or rather, cliques) that we were hopelessly unsuited to. An afternoon passes by quickly. I feel guilty about sitting around chatting when I should be studying.

I tell my colleague that for the next few weeks I won’t be on campus, that I am going to the Battye library to trawl through archives, to read microfilm and old newspapers, and gather research materials for my creative work.

On 29 July 2006, approximately five months after beginning my candidature, I wrote a note in yet another notebook. This notebook did not have a label. Perhaps I was already tiring of the need for labels?

*I am starting to understand*, the note says in my own scrawling handwriting. Around that note, jotted down while trawling though old newspapers and microfilm at the Battye library, there is detail from an advertisement for a sale being held at a local hardware store in 1986, a photocopied advertisement for a video store and notes from a local gossip article about someone I once knew and did not particularly like. I had started to write paragraphs here and there, of what could perhaps loosely be
If my early research approaches were to be described a game, at this point it would be that childhood game pick-up-sticks. All the information is drawn together randomly and held tight. Then every so often it is allowed to fall where it may. Starting with one idea or fragment, I begin to pick up the fragments and ideas, selecting firstly at random, but then becoming more selective as the collection grows. I don’t want to pick up all the ideas and fragments at this stage, but at the same time, I am scared not to pick them all up in case they are useful later. Luckily I have left this game behind now.

What was it that I was beginning to understand? The fact that my notes were all jumbled together indicates that perhaps I was starting to understand that I needed to loosen up my approach, to treat this as I would any other creative writing project and allow the messy early grazing period to be worked through.

At that stage my writing featured scribbles and studies for characters that didn’t make it into the next stage of the project. Therefore I doubt I was beginning to understand them, at least beyond knowing I did not wish to engage with them any further for the moment. Perhaps, then, I was beginning to understand what constituted meaningful and productive creative writing research in an academic environment?

How neat it would be if I could slot in a note here to the effect that I had recognised the importance of all of my experiences throughout that period—and that reading old magazines, googling old weather reports, flicking through photograph albums, finding space to think and imagine while gardening or walking the dog, or chatting informally with a peer or friend would open the door to my imagination. That somehow all of those experiences of my life past and present would form a vital element of my research. That every lived moment would

deemed *creative* writing. There seemed to be something resembling a narrative thread developing, at any rate.
We are going to cross over borders, just as we recross borders, without knowing about it. Where is our border? When I cross a border, it’s my border I’m crossing, though I don’t know which one I’m crossing or which side I end up on. This is the charm of crossing the border. It is also what can constitute its distressing side (Cixous 1993, 130).

directly or indirectly shape some of the writing that would follow. Alas, that is far from the truth. The fact is, I was still as confused by the notion of what constituted valid academic research as before.

Yet, there was a glimmer of hope. For in that same notebook, interspersed with notes from my explorations at the Battye library and initial character sketches and ideas, were some first impressions from a PhD thesis I had begun reading at nights. Could this be the clue to what I was beginning to understand? These notes seem to indicate that I was beginning to think about the questions around my approach more earnestly. Sue North, in *Relations of Power and Competing Knowledges Within the Academy: Creative Writing as Research* (2004), explores the politics of discourse. In her thesis she argues that some discourses have more power than others, that some forms of knowledge are considered more valid than others, at least in research terms. “I want to show,” said North, in the introductory pages to her thesis (I see that I highlighted this quote in my notes with fluorescent marker and underlined it three times), “that creative writing practice, like the trees, breathes out the stuff on which the world feeds” (2004, 4).

Was I, then, beginning to understand that it was acceptable and perhaps even necessary (at least to me) that for my PhD exegetical writing I chose to emphasise the centrality of the *doing*
The first day he told me this story. I had said, ‘Tell me something about yourself’, and he went quiet for a while. Then he told me something. It went like this:

“It was one hundred and thirteen degrees that day—not long after the new year but before school started. It must have been January then. This girl, she walked to the hospital and climbed up the stone stairs of that old building over there and tapped on the door.”

This excerpt comes from the first writings I thought may eventually form a part of the fiction component of my project. In time that piece of writing developed into several thousand words. The girl knocks, and at first nobody answers. She waits, some time later giving birth on the verandah of the old hospital. At some point someone comes along and lets her in. Once inside, unable to cope, she flees—leaving her baby behind.

I eventually put that writing aside, having realised I was heading towards the writing of a story about a mother abandoning a child. I was resistant to heading down that path. After all, I had written two extended short stories that explored such a theme as

of the creative writing—the thinking, speculating, imagining, talking, drafting, reading, revising, and those other acts that come together in the act of creating, to my entire project? I would like to think so. Perhaps, then, it was time to get a firmer understanding of just what I was getting myself into.

***

June 2006
I think I may have started my fiction. Only 250 words or so, perhaps it won’t be kept, but something feels different. It really does feel like a start this time. I am quite surprised how I froze with terror at the thought that I had actually now begun to write. After all, wasn’t that the point of the whole exercise?

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part of my Honours project, just one year prior to commencing the PhD (Crawford 2005). I had determined from the outset that I could, and would, do something else this time.

Revisiting those early writings a year or so later, by then some eighteen months into my candidature, the creative writing had started at last to come together and loosely resemble a cohesive body of related fragments of writing. Still searching for a way into approaching my exegesis, I reflected on that early piece of creative work. At one point I had decided it was significant enough to mark a turning point in my postgraduate research and writing—why?

I was able to identify that I was tussling with several issues at the time I set it aside: as well as resisting the story that was forcing my attention, I was still very conscious of the fact that creative writers are still working in a university system where an empiricist notion of research insisting on describing the outcomes in advance influences the “framing of research questions across all disciplines” (Carter 2004, 7). I felt I had to be careful not to stray too far from the statements recorded on the various progress reports I had submitted and had had approved by the university administration. I had indicated that I hoped my exegetical writing might assist future creative writing students in determining an approach to theorising their own art practice as research. I had also stated that I hoped to contribute to current literary theories on
Brophy (2003, 93) talks about fragments as being like parts of “maps across which our gaze can move.” At each crossroad we make a decision—which way to go? With each new decision there are more journeys we could have taken. (from research journal January 2008)

If research implies finding something that was not there before, it ought to be obvious that it involves imagination. If it is claimed that what is found was always there (and merely lost), still an act of creative remembering occurs, as an act of materialising ideas, research is unavoidably creative (Carter 2004, 7).

concepts such as identity and loss in relation to contemporary postcolonial theories relevant to Australian writing. But once I began engaging with the early research, I realised that for this project I was primarily interested in questions around the nature of creative research. For it seemed to me, from the readings I had undertaken, that there remained something of the entrenched view that those in the humanities can describe what they do so long as they leave out the “processes of invention” (Carter 2004).

While I was on the way to taking ownership of my research and practice, I had yet to acknowledge that the processes and practices around the invention of my creative work could, or should, serve as the main site for knowledge-making for my project. Maybe I was not so unlike that girl who had climbed the stairs of that old building. Like her, I had begun my postgraduate journey not long after the new year. And while it would take quite a stretch of the imagination to visualise myself as a young girl at the beginning of that journey, I certainly had all the uncertainty and insecurity of an adolescent about to embark on something new as I had climbed the “old stone stairs” of the academy, tapped nervously on the door and asked to be let in. Like the girl, I had given birth just outside the main doors—in my case to a jumble of ideas and notions about writing, identity and community, and about finding a place (specifically my own place) as a creative writer in the academy. Once inside, unlike
Arnold (2005) reproduced a list originally published by Scrivener (2000). They constituted what we essentially benchmarks for creative work. The report said (in brief) that work should:

- Not be imitative/derivative of another writers work.
- Could be seen a “response to a set of on-going issues, concerns and interests.”
- Generally rooted in “cultural context.”
- “Contributes to human experience and hence knowledge.”
- “manifests cultural issues, concerns and interests.”

*Note to self: reflect on these periodically and use as a ‘guide’ to ensure I don’t go off-track*  
(from research journal 2007)

the girl—though regularly tempted to ‘abandon the baby’—I did not flee. Instead, having tried to make my researcher–writer–self comfortable, I realised I had entered, if not the wrong place altogether, then perhaps the wrong ‘room’.

It had taken some months of attending seminars aimed at general arts-based PhD candidates, of writing literature reviews, and of taking notes on a range of critical literary readings and theoretical material before I wondered if perhaps what I needed to do was to resituate myself. I felt as though I was working in a room—the Literature room, where the entrenched practices around literary research and theory were influencing my approach too strongly. I felt that maybe I needed to go through the connecting door and see how I felt next door, in the Creative Writing room. I hoped that from there perhaps I could focus on my research and practice while shifting back from time to time to revisit the space I had first inhabited at the beginning of my candidature.

The desire to be able to pop back and forth between the two connecting rooms of Literature and Creative Writing was unsurprising given the fact that, like many postgraduate students, my previous studies had been in the discipline of Literature. And, though undertaking a project in Creative Writing, I was enrolled as a PhD candidate in English and Comparative Literature.
As mentioned in Part One, only ten years had passed since the first creative writing PhDs were undertaken in Australia—PhDs that, in both Australia and the UK, grew from the Literature PhD as a “sort of creative rebellion against a theory/research-only regime” (Krauth 2007, 11). The territory was still relatively new, and with no national “guidelines and expectations for academic creative writing” (AAWP 2009, 2) or, in my own case (then), no formalised institutional discipline-specific guidelines available to creative writing postgraduate candidates or potential candidates, it was perhaps only to be expected that negotiating a way through to a comfortable position straddling the linked disciplines might be a challenge.

At around this time, having become aware of a program name change resulting from restructuring of schools and programs within my university, I endeavoured to have my enrolment details amended to indicate that I was now undertaking postgraduate studies in English and Creative Arts, rather than in English and Comparative Literature. It was an obvious effort to locate myself more firmly within the university space as a writer and researcher more strongly associated with the discipline of Creative Writing. Yet, despite my requests, the university administration continued to identify me as an English and Comparative Literature postgraduate student.

Regardless of the category or label I had been assigned on a
Writers often claim to be concerned with the practice of writing rather than theories of literature, with the theories of literature, with the creative process rather than the literary product. It might thus be reasonable to argue that writers offer a practical knowledge of the craft of writing which cannot be gained from literary criticism and theory. However, when writers talk about their craft they are also inevitably articulating the theories which to varying degrees of reflexivity underpin their creative practice. The pronouncements of writers, then, in whatever mode of address they employ, must also be seen as contributions to the field of literary criticism (Dawson 2006, 21).

What is a sense of place? Why is a sense of place so fundamental to our identity as individuals and as communities? A sense of place is a complex connection between land and self. Place is both inside and outside; it takes us beyond ourselves and exists outside of ourselves, yet allows us to make sense of ourselves. . . . The expression of a sense of place is difficult to pin down. It shifts constantly and eludes definition (MacKellar 2004, 17).

university database, by then, at around the official half-way point of my candidature, I had established that my primary research focus was to be the doing of Creative Writing in the academy. However, the fact was I had come from an English and Comparative Literature background and despite my insistence (then) that I felt the need to somehow distinguish between the various disciplines, I was not prepared to stand up and declare that Creative Writing existed outside the realm of my prior academic and life experiences.

By then I had come to recognise the existence of many links and similarities between the various disciplines in the humanities. But the question of whether or not there is knowledge specific to the discipline of Creative Writing was one that continued to intrigue me as I attempted to strengthen my own understanding of its identity. I suspected, at what I then expected would be the half-way point in my candidature, that this knowledge, if it existed at all, might be found embedded somewhere around or through the practices, of my own writing.

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This phase that I refer to as the beginnings of the ‘real’ research and writing process marks a time of shifting in my own perceptions. I moved towards, and then acknowledged, that the
Paul Dawson (2005) appears to dispute Brophy’s view of creative writing as a practice or ‘pursuit of creativity.’ In *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Dawson approaches “Creative Writing as a discipline that is a body of knowledge and a set of pedagogical practices which operate through the writing workshop and are inscribed within the institutional site of a university (21-22).

I wonder:
- Can’t it (Creative Writing) be a practice AND a discipline?
- North (2004,6) used the term *creative writing* to comment on the outcome of the process (produced results)—NOT the process of writing.
- For my purposes I see Creative Writing as a discipline in its own right as well as sharing space with a range of other disciplines and experiences—so, both a process AND ‘produced results.’
- Look for more information on this at a later date. (from research journal February 2007)

Other terms used for practice led research include:
- Practice-as-research
- Creative research
- Practice-integrated research
- Studio research (research notes, see also Haseman 2007)

making of the creative work itself could be the site for knowledge-making, and that the material for future theoretical (or exegetical) work could be located within the processes around the development of my own creative writing project. On paper, reduced to several paragraphs of words, this mental shift from following *research-led practice* to *practice-led research* may sound as though it happened simply. But it was not straightforward at all. I did not sit at my desk one day and experience a eureka moment. Nor did I rearrange the three words on scraps of paper or a magnet board and realise that by shuffling the word order I could shift the meaning. Rather, it was a dawning awareness during the first half of my candidature, as I realised that what appeared lacking in much discussion of creative writing in the academy was a foregrounding of or focus on the practices of the craft.

Carole Gray (in Haseman 2007, 147) defines practice-led research as:

Firstly, research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners, and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners.

While I had been reflecting on my own work and considering new possibilities for approaching my research, all I had determined at this stage was that the creative writing practice was to be the
focus of the research and that I wanted to work ‘outward’ from there. That meant I needed to keep writing, and to deliberate on the processes and practices of that writing.

Following those initial two hundred and fifty words starting with a young girl climbing the stairs of an old stone building, I somehow managed to write another forty thousand words of fiction. However, tired and dissatisfied with the development of that fiction, I felt as if I had climbed forty thousand stairs.

I had developed a number of fictional characters, most constructed as composites of real women from true stories and accounts of ‘real’ experiences of Pilbara women of the 1970s–1990s (for examples, see Bickerton 1989; Brehaut 2000; Fraser 1990; Hardie 1988; Heath 1985), and from reading social history and general background on the region (for examples, see Dominance of Giants 1976; Atherton 1989; Battye 1985; Holden 1981). I tried to enrich the storylines I had imagined by drawing from extensive readings from some of my areas of research interest—mainly memory, trauma, grief, and identity in literature (for examples, see Caruth 1985; Cixous 1997,2005; Damousi 2001; Felman 1992; King 2000). I continued to shape my fiction—or at least I tried to shape my fiction by drawing from a body of theoretical readings and life writings to develop plausible narratives and believable characters.
This knowledge here means an approach to a subject based on knowledge acquired through the act of creating. This knowledge is not superficial. It results from a sustained and serious examination of the art of writerly practice and might include not only contemporary theoretical or critical models but the writers’ own past works as well as predecessors and traditions (Harper, Kroll 2007, 4).

Barney and Suze weren’t too rapt in her leaving at the end of year ten. In fact they tried to stop it, but there’s no law against leaving at the end of year ten if you’ve got a job. . . Today she’s trying to follow the guidelines from the management trainee manual, trying hard to be professional. She’s been told off four times already, but has managed to get away with it by blaming her excitement and nerves on the new job, and promises to settle down. (extract from early writing where Beth was a key character. On reflection, I cannot help drawing parallels with the experiences of my characters to my own research experiences)

Always aware of the two parts that would form the one whole of my project, I hoped that I would later be able to write an exegesis using the texts referred to above to give the required substance to enhance and inform my creative work, and so address one of the questions that is asked throughout the various stages of a PhD program: How will your project contribute to scholarly knowledge in the field?

It seems that in approaching my fiction I was attempting to “produce new knowledge about something” (North 2004, 222), by cobbling together those composites of other people’s work in order to later write (in my exegesis) “about rather than of” (Bull, in Carter 2004, 9; my emphasis). But these characters I had tried to develop were not real to me, and no matter what approach I tried, I did not seem to have the capacity or even a real desire to make them, or their stories, come alive.

With the passing of time, I can acknowledge that the elimination of unwanted approaches was a necessary part of my research and writing process. In the midst of it all, though, there was a constant frustration. I had read the literature and knew, or thought I knew, what needed to be done. But like one of those annoying music ear worms that gets stuck in your head and won’t go away, the idea took hold that I needed to push aside my research in order to get on with writing: to allow the characters and stories to develop more instinctively and organically, and to
Laurel Marsh (32) comes to the region in 1998 with her two daughters, and her partner, an employee of Westside Petroleum. Laurel has recently completed a tertiary degree in history and upon arriving in town discovered there little opportunity for a woman with her skills. After some time, to commemorate the new millennium, the council appoints her to document the history of the ‘new settler’ women in the area. Laurel wins the role over other, ‘local’ people and this creates some unrest. However, she is passionate about her role, feels a connection to the area that she cannot understand.

- In connecting with the ‘place’ by way of working as a historian she is searching for her own connection-to place and land, to other people
- See Rossiter (ed) (2003), Pierce (1999), Read (2000) for follow up later

(working notes from journal – early fiction planning notes.)

try not to think about the exegetical component of the writing, at least for the moment.

John Dewey talks about life as “consisting of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things” to later “recover unison” with it either by “effort or happy chance” (1958, 14; see also Pope 2005, 261-262). If my research project was the organism, then it appeared to have fallen out of step with the march of the ‘surrounding things’, of my writing practices. I felt I had made real progress, but my research felt stagnant, uninspiring and constricting, and as for the fiction writing—certainly there was quantity, insofar as there were words filling pages, but I was less than satisfied with what I was producing. My dissatisfaction went beyond a need to redraft or rewrite. I was inclined, at this stage, to dispose of nearly every self-conscious word I had written in relation to these fictional people who had consumed much of my life in recent months. I had been working very hard, certainly over and above the thirty-eight hours a week I had committed to. But what would I have to show for that if I killed off these over-researched and contrived characters?

I came to believe that if there was to be any hope of enrichment or ‘recovery of unison’ I had to listen to that worm. And after almost one and a half years of constant thinking about writing, planning writing and some not particularly satisfactory
Donna Lee Brien (2004) "found that [she] had, without making a conscious decision to, completed a first draft of [her] doctoral exegesis while finishing the research necessary for writing [her] creative project."

- See her survey on various approaches to research undertaken. Interested in fact that 10% wrote drafts of components alongside each other. . . 10% started exegesis first (therefore one can assume 90% started creative first). . . 80% claimed to plan creative before even thinking about exegesis.

(from research notes December 2006)

It might take me several more years and a number of new stories to work my way though a proposition. This will be my research, and it will be a messy, improbable and largely personal process (Brophy 2003, 222).

**doing** of writing, I decided it was time I took a few weeks break to think (or not think)—to paint, potter in the garden, and to see if I could remember how to read something just for the sheer pleasure of it. I could only hope that by “effort or happy chance” my project would benefit, and that rather than “recovering unison” by simply returning to a prior state, that it might be “enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed” (Dewey 1958, 14).

By the time I got around to actually taking that break, several more months had passed. It seemed that once I had acknowledged that need to push aside my research and preparatory planning, a strange voice whispered in my ear, and I started jotting down what I heard before it disappeared. Cheryl, Beth, Corazon, Suze, Sam and a few other named and nameless characters had begun jostling for the space to have their story told. For a while I relaxed and went with it. Liberated from the constraints I had imposed upon myself earlier, I played a game with myself, pretending that I was a writer who had magically secured arts funding to write the novel I wanted to write.

One day, having filled in a university progress report, complete with references to my ‘research questions’, I remembered my position as a creative writer within the academy. Recalling that I had what I then expected would be a maximum of
August 2009
Following a discussion with Anne at our meeting I need to consider, as I had to when informed of the ‘70 000 word fiction limit’, whether to follow the new guidelines or continue as I have been. At this stage I am not sure. While it makes sense to me to write the 80 000 word novel (at least easier in the sense of future development for publication), I do like the idea of making my work fit into the guidelines that were originally missing and 20 000 really doesn’t give much space for a deep engagement with exegetical work.

80 000 words to say something in fiction, I stalled in my writing. How on earth was I to tell the evolving story in so few words?

And how fortunate, I think, writing now—from close to the end of my candidature—that I did not know then that by the time another twelve months had passed I would be informed informally that ‘the rules’ had changed, that my fiction should comprise no more than 70 000 words. Or that shortly before my submission date, some months after being informed of that rule change, I would discover that new rules requiring an exegetical component of at least forty thousand words were now formally enshrined by the university (Murdoch 2009), and that I would decide to submit a body of fiction that was not a complete full-length novel, after all.

By now I suspected my writer friends who’d tried to warn me off undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing as a potential path to publication may have had a valid point. Who on earth in their right mind would put themselves through this, thinking it would be a good path to future publication? I am loath to admit it, but until this point, I had been one of those people. I really hadn’t given much thought to other reasons I might choose to undertake a creative writing PhD research program. With much to think about, it was absolutely time to take that break.

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It had been a long time since I had immersed myself in the experience of creating visual art. I had more often than not kept a working journal that combined words and images, and had found satisfaction throughout the times when I had taught workshops combining the two—but painting and textile work as art forms in their own right, two of my one-time creative passions, had fallen by the wayside some years earlier.

The desire to resume those other creative pursuits never left me, but I told myself that my lack of involvement in a creative outlet (other than writing) was the sacrifice I had to make: and that between my academic pursuits and working through the various challenges that life kept throwing my way, there was simply no space in my life to paint. Yet, over time an “impulsion” (Dewey 1958, 58) turned into an itch that insisted on being paid attention.

That almost-physical need to paint led me to enrol in an evening weekly painting class, starting in the first week of my three-week break period. Two weeks into the classes I wrote in my journal: My challenge with the art class has been in bringing together the separated parts of myself. I can’t stop my academic writer-brain from working long enough to allow myself to become someone who makes visual art just for the sensory experience of making. For these past two weeks I have struggled with this and
August 2007
Julia Cameron (1992) speaks of how for ten years (at that point) she taught creativity workshops aimed at letting people be creative. In her classes she encourages participants to recover and rediscover the creativity that was already there buried inside them. The classes I taught at the community arts centres were designed along the same lines. Running these classes, allowed a balance, I told people, between the academic and the creative sides of my personality. I wonder if I’d have found it less or more challenging if I had not dropped them once I took on the commitment of three years on the PhD.

have felt unable to reconnect with that part of me that delights in throwing colour around and getting messy as I add texture to see what emerges. Instead I am controlled and restrained as I pile on layer after layer of paint, scrape back into it, add more paint, and avoid answering questions about my intent when the puzzled-looking teacher is brave enough to come near me and my mess to ask questions.

But over a relatively short time, I began to recover some of that buried self. And I started to understand where the impulsion causing the itch had come from. The following week, the morning after my next art class, I had something new to add to my journal:

*It dawned on me this morning that I am working on my visual art in the same way I write. I pile the paint (or words) in, playing and exploring, and scrape back into it, hoping to reveal something in the layers that engages me, or that I view as worth taking the time to work on. There was a moment of clarity last night as I scratched back into the almost dry paint. I realised that the abstract image that seems to be evolving is something that could have come straight from inside Cheryl’s memory, from that place she continues to go back to for comfort—the roadside memorial, and I realised in that moment, that the reality of the place was actually less than comforting to her. Thinking of her responding to that place in that way made me nostalgic too, for something I never really had when I lived in the Pilbara—a sense of place,*
Each painting has its own way of evolving... When the painting is finished, the subject reveals itself (William Baziotes in Cameron 1993, 80)

September 2007
I will be interested to look back at this time from some point in the future and see if allowing myself the space for the visual art practice at this point in time altered my writing practice at all. If I can splash paint around and consider later the emotional responses I have to the process and product retrospectively, then why not do this with my creative writing—surely the process is important enough to warrant that?

and of identity, as one who belongs as part of a community.

My painting practice had become a part of the research project. Allowing that rather desolate painting to reveal itself gave me a clarity that changed my approach to the fiction. I realised that if I were true to myself I could not possibly try to create a ‘warm and fuzzy’ fictional community where, by engaging with a unique physical environment, people easily find the answers they seek about identity and place.

The following week—the last days of my break—I tried to catch up with domestic chores that had fallen behind over the period of my candidature. I cleaned and organised the house in the mornings and in the afternoons weeded garden beds and mulched and fertilised. At night, though exhausted from the physical activity, my brain would not rest. I wrote pages and pages of first drafts of poems. One of them, The Mad Woman, seemed to write itself.

The mad woman
in a small company town lounge room the women whisper about the mad woman like fourteen year olds in the toilet block at recess

the popular one declares the mad woman too freaky to fit in here her tattooed body and shaved head doing her no favours at all

a nurse not naming names (of course) tells of numerous help calls made by someone late at night while her husband works
October 2007

The nature of my research both directly and indirectly related to my ‘topic’ has shifted somewhat... I keep thinking about the comment Jo Dutton made earlier this year at the Perth Writers’ Festival in regard to her book, Out of Place (2006). She began writing, she said, in order to remember, saying that she’d felt a sense of loss after leaving Alice Springs, her home. It dawned on me at the time that though I was often unhappy and isolated in my fifteen years in the Pilbara, since leaving there I have experienced similar feelings of loss. Everything I had written since 2001 has somehow inadvertently demonstrated that... Place is still important to my writing, but is not necessarily about (only) country/geography but rather about connectedness, relationships, and awareness within these relationships. Perhaps what I am trying to do (but maybe not) is to find a sense of the relationship between place and people through emotional connectedness, and not necessarily physical place?

& the women feel sorry for her for a few moments it can’t be easy to be different in a place like this to not fit

but hearing about a certain incident from someone who knows someone who knows something they change their minds

& laugh about the crazy one always threatening never meaning it attention seeker making no effort with anything

until the day she cleaned her house, mowed the lawn, paid all her bills & splattered her brains over her lounge room walls (Crawford 2006)

Though a fictional poem, in as much as such a conversation or a suicide never happened in quite that way, I felt that something had altered for me. For over twelve months of my PhD candidature, I had struggled with the focus of my fiction. I had tried to shape my fiction writing to fit the goals and outcomes outlined for various university reports rather than allowing the story to emerge in the doing of the writing. I did this largely by drawing externally from print fiction, non-fiction and theoretical texts to shape my writing. Letting go of that self-consciousness and writing that poem brought into focus for me the fact that I had been trying to remove myself from my writing. Looking back to a particular way of life with nostalgia at a time when my own life was challenging me, I had endeavoured to create an idealised fictional community. In this place, as outlined in my various
reports, I anticipated that *through narrative and layering of fragments of the lives these people I would explore notions of community.* . . . Then later, though I did not say as much, I expected I would write *about* it rather than *of* it, ticking all the boxes as my fiction slotted neatly into a category and explained this or that theory nicely.

By allowing myself once again to engage with my lived emotional, and social experiences to create fiction, and through the (re)engagement with arts practices other than the writing of fiction, I came to a new understanding. The whole fixation with labelling, whether me, my work, or the disciplinary rooms in which to situate that work, was restricting and constricting me. In that reengagement with a range of arts practices, I saw that the walls dividing the various rooms needed to be collapsed. Perhaps now I was ready to stride back up those stone steps knock assertively on the door of whichever space I wanted to enter, and have it remain open. Perhaps I could even remove the doors.

Were the days of nervously tapping and hoping someone (including me) might take my research program seriously behind me?
This new stage of the shopping centre is the second phase of development since they’ve lived in Lawson. The first stage was already open when they lived in Redhill. Now there’s talk of yet another extension after this, making it a real city in the Pilbara. The junk mail leading up to the opening of the latest stage had read: *What more could a local need than Coles, Woolworths, Kmart, and twenty-three variety stores?* She hadn’t known whether to laugh or cry. The more things change around here, the more they stay the same.

October 2007
As in the way that just a few weeks ago, from somewhere between my head and the page (or computer screen), a poem beginning with an ending had formed after first writing the words “in a small company town lounge room the women whisper about the mad woman like fourteen year olds in the toilet block at recess,” so too, the first draft of the true/new beginnings of the fictional component of my PhD project formed.

I am writing a lot at the moment, thank goodness!

The irony in the fact that this new fiction beginning marks an endpoint or outcome is not lost on me either—so much for my resistance to the notion of working ‘backwards’, of stating an outcome, and working towards it. Will I need to cover my tracks later?

Sometimes I feel like a walking, talking, thinking, not-thinking contradiction.

September 2007
Though I went through the motions, I was resistant to stating an outcome in advance. My own private rebellion against ‘the system’. Yet in the past few weeks everything I had already written towards the fiction seemed to turn upside down as I wrote what this time I sense really will become the beginning of the eventual novel. How do I know this? There is no simple explanation.

Completely unintentionally, I started this latest version of the fiction by stating an outcome—Crazy Catherine tops herself. The end, or so one might think. . . . Now that I have written this latest ending/beginning, I am excited. Something leads to this point, but Catherine’s life is not really the crux of the storyline. Is it one of those stories that lies under another story?

And that poem is back. In small (and perhaps not so small towns too), people gossip and make assumptions. I know this to be true. I’ve read plenty about it, I’ve been told about it, and, more relevantly perhaps, I’ve lived it. The traces of those experiences are imprinted. . . . It’s the ‘lived’ I want to draw from more from this point forward. It seems somehow more honest. If I am to write about a physical and emotional environment in an invented community that is imagined, yet familiar to me, why try to remove the fact of lived experience?

. . . Catherine killed herself. Is that the beginning, the end, or the outcome (and of what)?

Come closer and will tell you something quietly. Just between us, you understand. It’s like this—I have not been entirely honest so far. In Part One, I mentioned that I am interested in writing that flows between essay, autobiography, fiction and poetry (as discussed in Brophy 2003), and in writing with movement between storytelling and the personal or individual journey (see Muecke, 1994,1997) but I keep pulling away from demonstrating why I felt it necessary to mention that interest. And although I indicated in Parts One and Two that many of the writings of
Cixous resonate with me, I touched on her work only briefly—shying away from engaging too deeply with the material that causes me to react most strongly in relation to my own writing practices. In Part One I mentioned too that I was interested in teasing out the notion that the work of writing does not happen in a vacuum when the writer is seated at a desk, that the work of writing, in fact, “includes the activities carried out over any of the twenty-four hours in a day” (Krauth 2006, 192). In the first section of Part Two I considered some of the issues that had arisen throughout my candidature in the second twelve months and in the second section touched on that notion of the work of writing occurring over the twenty-four hours in a day. I concluded Part Two asserting that I had come to a new understanding, but, I still held back from saying what I meant. I indicated too that Jo Dutton’s comments, in relation to writing from a sense of loss, evoked a response. And again, I stopped. To admit to writing from, for example, a sense of loss, might have required me to expose my own fragility and/or vulnerability. The truth is, I really had no desire to explicitly bring my own experience into my university work.

Part Three, marks a time of (re)beginnings, and further explores the blurring of the divide between the creative work and the parts of my identity that I had until then tried to segregate—my writer-
What I hope to do from this point onward, is to set time aside to engage with questions I addressed in my reports, and then somehow spread out—shift those preconceived ideas and look for the ‘spaces’ or ‘silences’.

That summer, Mavis was lonelier than she had ever been in her life. It was not the emptiness that she felt. It was not the yawning absence of something that used to be there, but a terrible ache, as if a limb were slowly dying on her body (Wilson 2005, 203).

I had been forced to collapse the walls and recognise that the various fields and disciplines of my research interests could not be neatly separated and categorised to suit my purposes. Now it seemed I needed to scrutinise myself and collapse those walls between me as writer and as academic, as academic who writes, as wife, mother, daughter, friend, and so on, in order to proceed. I had to acknowledge too that, for me, one project cannot exist in isolation from another.

Brophy (2003, 145) says that “every writer is drawn to the themes that are still unresolved in their own lives.” In the past I had always considered that I wrote, on some level at least, to make sense of my world. Now I had to consider, if Brophy was correct, what impact resolving those themes might have on my creative practice, and the way in which I engaged with that practice in future.
March 2008
Kerry O’Brien interview
last night on 7-30 Report
with Peter Carey
(paraphrased) KO-Have
you known how one of
your books was going to
end when you started?
Have you known where
it would take you?
PC-Er, yes, sometimes it
was the only thing I
knew. . . in Oscar and
Lucinda I only knew
about the glass church
and the
Christian/Aboriginal
stories. The book was
planned on getting to
that one thing I knew.

In a previous project, I developed characters whose “memories
insist at their unconscious until they are forced to look back into
the mirror in order to explore the shifting relationship between
their past and present selves” (Crawford 2005, 56). Then, I
explored memory, not as an entity that lies “dormant in the past,
awaiting resurrection, but [instead] holds the ‘potential for
creative collaboration’ between past and present” (King 2000,
180). I approached the writing of that fiction with these ideas
already in my consciousness, and my creative writing was thus
shaped, in part, by the theory that I engaged with through the
earlier stages of the project. After writing the fiction, I wrote the
‘theory’ retrospectively, engaging with issues of trauma, identity
and loss, drawing from writers such as Caruth (1996), Curti
same theorists and writers whose work had helped shape my two
creative works for that project. The theoretical component then
became a critique or value judgement, a measurement of my own
creative work.

In the years since completing that project (if it can really be
considered ‘finished’ when I am clearly revisiting it now), I
continued to engage with memory under those same terms—
holding onto the idea of memory as an entity with a potential to
offer ‘creative collaboration’ between past and present. But I
came to believe that there might be a more useful approach to

March 2008
I always write of various
lives weaving in and out.
I’m not sure why. While I
write there is one woman
from my real life who
keeps coming back.
Why? I remember talking
to her outside the bank
several times. I always
made a point of being
friendly. She was
different, but always
pleasant to me. I wonder
if I would even think of
her now if she hadn’t
done that.
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine remembering. Putting together, inch by inch the starry worlds. From all the lost collections (Rich 1984, 285).

**December 2008**

. . . finding the new U.K. guidelines for Creative Writing Research useful. In lieu of anything similar being available here, I will refer to these when I feel the need for formal ‘guidance’ in future.

Practice-led research in Creative Writing uses creative practice to explore, articulate and investigate. The range of explorations and articulations is as broad as the range of possible subjects, emotions and ideals prevalent in the world. However, the simple definition is: that the creative writer will undertake this research through the act of creating; that they will invest knowledge and understanding into this practice, and that they will develop their knowledge and understanding through their practice. The results of this practice-led research will demonstrate this knowledge and understanding (NAWE 2008,11).

writing a project with a focus on the doing of creative writing. I did not want simply to make value judgements on my own creative work.

Memory features in much of my writing, and as ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’ evolved, this continued to be so. I wondered whether when examining memory, and the ways it influences creative processes and practices as they work on a specific creative project, writers might understand the ‘creative collaboration’ between their past and present selves. Could a deeper understanding of this collaboration possibly enrich creative practices? Could or would that understanding have wider implications for future writing practices?

Throughout the development of my PhD project, I have gradually come to believe that while all research potentially enriches a project, some of the most interesting and most challenging creative research is not located before—preconceptualised—or examined after—post-analysis—a creative art work. This project, requiring close consideration of my own practices, has led me to consider that some of the most original creative research happens in the accidents, the serendipitous discoveries, in the pushing up against blockages, ambiguities and tensions. That is, it lies in the challenges—and in the unknown—and emerges in the doing. Of course, it can only be written about retrospectively, but it does appear that it is in the performative
Sometimes the only way to tell the truth, to get at the meaning of what you are trying to say, is to tell it in fiction (Bird 1996, 147).

After a time Filth said, ‘All my life Tansy, from my early childhood, I have been left, or dumped, or separated by death, from everyone I loved or who cared for me. I want to know why’ (Gardam 2004, 241).

The people who appear in the pages of my fiction each engage, to varying degrees, with their own experiences and memories, as their memories force them to explore the shifting relationship between past and present selves. I have noted retrospectively that, as I worked on my fiction, I seemed to achieve this in early drafts by incorporating flashbacks a great deal in my writing. This was not planned. And, I suspect, judging from my early feedback, it was something that was a little frustrating to one of my PhD supervisors, who regularly reminded me that my use of flashbacks within flashbacks was excessive.

My work-in-development was messy and hard to understand at times. Annie Dillard says of finding the meaning in writing: “You write it all, discovering it at the end of the line of words. The line of words is a fiber optic, flexible as wire; it illuminates the path just before its fragile tip” (1990, 7). At that stage of development I hadn’t yet stopped writing it all down. While I was making progress, I was nowhere near the end of the “line of words” and became frustrated each time I needed to stop and attempt to explain what I was trying to achieve at a particular stage. The way I work in fiction (or indeed any writing) tends to
...one can repudiate the absolute authority of one's own experience without forsaking the ability to draw knowledge from experience (Alcoff 2000, 314).

In *White Ink* (2008), Crista Stevens asks Hélène Cixous how to convey the darkness and ‘transmit the untransmittable.’ Cixous responds that ‘wandering’ is the only way that allows one to move towards truth—not to reach it, but to move towards it. (from research notes, 2009)

Nicola King suggests that some autobiographical writers “resist the over-determination which highly reconstructed memories can produce by deliberately leaving their texts fragmentary and provisional” (2003, 23). In the same book, she talks about Margaret Atwood’s book, *Cat’s Eye* (1988)—a novel which reads like an autobiography and deals (like mine may) with recovered traumatic memories. (from research notes, 2007)

start with the recording of random fragments. I write it all down, no matter how many writing rules are broken along the way. Over time the chaotic fragments arrange themselves into some kind of order. Only then, am I able to begin to work back, or *rewrite*, into the words.

At that point I wanted to hide away, and not share my work, to continue using flashbacks within flashbacks, or any other messy techniques that emerged in the rewriting of each new draft, until some of the chaos disappeared. It was difficult for me to be sharing my writing in these early stages when I was so far from both the “end of the line of words” and from the illuminated path of which Dillard writes. It became a constant internal struggle not to allow considered advice to overwhelm the writing I was trying to produce more intuitively this time around.

Once I *am* ready to begin to work back, or rewrite, into the words, I tend to approach the early writing of each character as though writing their autobiography or life story. As I became more absorbed in my fiction-writing for this project, I felt a heightened sense that my own life ran in parallel, and sometimes and perhaps necessarily, blurred or melded into my writing activities. I realised that, like Cheryl and Corazon and, to a lesser extent, Sam and Catherine, I too was (and continue to be) forced to examine the blurring and shifting relationships between (my) past and
"It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.

(Scribbled on the back of an old receipt; found on Victoria State Library wall—attributed to Salman Rushdie)

Because creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns, it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit knowledge. An innovative dimension of this subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view, particularities of lived experience that reflect alternative realities that are either marginalised or not yet recognised in established theory and practice (Barrett 2007,143).

Me: . . . this is something I have been pondering all week: I have in recent times managed to find some peace about writing about previously unresolved themes in my own life. And when I look back at my own writings, often containing thinly veiled or ‘coded’ autobiographies (another Brophyism), I tell myself it is time to move on. Been there, done that. But just because something is resolved, doesn’t mean it isn’t still important. Maybe the resolution is the end of the story, and now the story wants to be told?

(excerpt from email exchange with a friend May, 2007)

Stories, like poems, are coded autobiographies (Brophy 2003,144).

present (writer) selves. I became somehow more attuned to my own memories, becoming aware at times of stepping outside the sensory experiences of remembering to note how my own memory worked, and to question the memories of people around me.

At one point I sought to articulate this in my journals. I looked for crossovers to explain the logic in what I was doing. I then found myself returning to old study habits—pausing the natural flow of my fiction-writing, seeking theories about memory and writing to support and explain or justify how I thought, and how I discovered something about my work in relation to that of others. I looked closely at the writing undertaken around my fiction writing, in my journals, in communications with my network of writerly friends, and in dinner-table conversations with family.

I established in Part One that one of the aims in the exegesis was to use the personal voice, my personal voice, as a means of “restor[ing] to scholarship the person of the scholar” (Fleischman 1998, 976). But what I noticed was still missing when I talked about my creative processes in my journals and correspondence and communications on the matter, was me—the “person of the scholar”. Where did I fit into all this talk about my role in my own creative processes?
Fleischman, in her article (1998, 1008) talked about the way in which some scholars who choose to personalise their research come from marginalised groups traditionally perceived as marginalised in the academy—women, “gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities, academics from working-class backgrounds”. She goes on to say that such writers “evoke their personal experiences both as individuals and as members of a group for which they seek recognition by endowing it with a voice (the position of representativity)”. (from research notes 2010)

... Structurally, it seems I am opening in the present—Catherine has killed herself. Cheryl the nurse on duty and Sam has just had a baby. I then slip back to 1986. Cheryl is pregnant. Her chapter ends with a car-crash.

I next introduce Corazon. I see her at this stage as being a minor character (compared to Cheryl and Catherine). Much of her story is told through memory flashbacks within flashbacks. I am not sure why I am going this way at the moment. It feels a bit clunky, but seems to need to be this way. I do not want a chronological timeline. I like the layering and fragmentation. I guess I want to capture that sense of ‘incompleteness’—we only ever know so much about anybody.

(excerpt from note sent to my ‘creative writing’ supervisor, Dec 2007 ahead of meeting shortly after this new draft was written to approx 50 000 words)

While rewriting those first drafts—then a series of fragmented yet linked narratives, and ‘snapshots’ from various characters’ memories and experiences—I still regularly found myself trying to understand my own creativity in relation to the fiction that emerged. At some point while in this writing stage, I came across research on the notion of shame in literature. As the title suggests, Rosamund Dalziell’s Shameful Autobiographies (1999), deals with shame, most specifically in autobiography, though it is also discussed in the context of fiction. Reflecting on some of the points discussed in Dalzell’s book in relation to my own memories and life experiences along with those of my characters, I acknowledged the way in which much of what I produce creatively comes back to or stems from the themes of abandonment, isolation and grief.

Author and theorist John Berger links autobiography to solitude and grief. He remarks that “autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form” (in Dalziell 1999, 261). ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’ seemed to have emerged in part from my own sense of being alone—and from a desire to eke out a place of belonging on various levels, whilst in the midst of that isolation.

As I revisited what I wrote it was confronting, but at the same time empowering, to see my fictional women articulate or
She keeps her eyes tightly closed. She is a child writing a letter—Tatay stands behind her, leaning on the back of the rickety old blue and yellow painted chair as she painstakingly copies each word of the poem from the open pages of the falling-to-pieces book, her tongue pressed into the spongy new space between her front teeth. She grips the pencil tightly, a dull ache intensifies along the bone in her index finger as the page fills with words. She copies the letters, forming words Tatay says will shape into a poem. When she is finished they will send the letter over the sea all the way to Australia to a lady she has never met. She calls the lady Lola inside her head, and Grandmother in the letters she is learning to write. If she writes a beautiful letter, maybe Lola Grandmother will come and help Tatay care for Corazon, now that Mama has gone away with her baby sisters.  

(from last fiction draft, page 100)

demonstrate the emotional impact of loss, isolation and abandonment, and deal or not deal with some of the ghosts resembling those that inhabit my own past and present life. I imagine that embedded in each page I write there are ghostly traces—which I would rather not or cannot explicitly identify—of myself, of my past and present selves, of my dreams and hopes, and of my sadesses and disappointments.

It occurred to me, not for the first time, that there are times when my most intense bursts of fiction writing are possibly a form of grief-writing. Dalziell, drawing on Berger’s theory of autobiography as having its genesis in abandonment and solitude, declares that “grieving customarily involves a process of revisiting, reviewing and evaluating the past, and reinterpreting memories”. . . . and that that particular aspect of grieving “closely resembles the autobiographical process, and the two tend to be connected” (1999, 261). Perhaps grief experienced in my own life had forced me to revisit, review and reevaluate my own past?

Yet in defining my work as fiction, I was enabled to create a version of my own autobiographical writings without revealing more than I was comfortable with. My fiction writing, then, as well as being a form of grief-writing, allowed a creative reinterpretation of memories and experiences.

With this in mind, I returned to mull over the idea of the impetus
of creativity coming from a scar or wound (Cixous 1993, 2005, 2007). It seemed to me that as my stories developed I continued to explore the same themes, to revisit the same (possibly) unresolved issues (Brophy 2003), and draw from that same sense of shame or pain (Dalziell 1999). This only served to highlight what I was coming to believe—that there is something embedded within each of us that drives and directs us to focus our passions and creativity in a particular way. There seemed, for me, to be a connection between the notion of shame as something that enables (or disables) the telling of story, and of wounding as, if not the source then certainly a trigger of (my own) creativity.

The end didn’t exactly come suddenly. The night she topped herself, Crazy Catherine Connor didn’t phone the hospital and tell the nurse on duty she wanted to die. (the opening sentences of ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’).

Before I wrote the two sentences above, I had written perhaps eighty thousand words as part of my fiction project. It would be impossible to estimate how many other words I read, wrote, spoke or thought, that I did not attribute to being directly related to the development of the fiction that I eventually wrote. There may have been hundreds of thousands of words in total,
January 2009

Each time I read back through my writing, I feel somehow that I have let the ‘real Catherine’ down. Strange, as there never was a ‘real Catherine.’ There was a woman though, and she was gossiped about. She was mentally ill, and she did commit suicide. That is all I remember. How sad that someone who took such a drastic decision to end her life in the small town we both lived in, can be so ‘barely remembered.’

Catherine has become so real to me though, I feel I have somehow let her down in keeping her silent throughout much of the fiction. At the same time, when Simone suggested I needed to bring her story forward, I was resistant. Do I feel a need to protect her (or me)?

Eddie and Catherine are back together. He’s back from Vietnam, she’s fresh out of the home. There is a lot that Catherine doesn’t know about the ways of the world, and Eddie is probably not the best person to teach her. (from early draft of Catherine writing—discarded)

especially if the thought words, the spoken words, the unthought and the unspoken words were included. As soon as I wrote those two sentences, I realised that much of that which had been so far written, thought, or left unthought or unspoken served a crucial role in working through to find the story I needed to tell by exposing layers of subtext. These layers provided the depth and substance from which a believable person rather than simply a character might emerge.

Ernest Hemingway, in his novel Death in the Afternoon—on one level a novel about Spanish bullfighting, but a work also detailing at length his views on the craft of writing—says: “When writing a novel, a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature” (1966, 182). Crazy Catherine Connor was different to anyone else I had introduced into my fiction. Right from the start I sensed that somehow she would feature in the final work.

The Catherine who had first revealed herself to me had a difficult life, but at the same time, a not especially unusual life for the circumstances she was born into: an orphan child migrant sent from England during the second World War, an upbringing in Fairbridge children’s home in the south of Perth, a short-lived marriage, a string of unsuccessful relationships following the breakdown of her marriage, the subsequent decline of her sense of self-worth, and so on. She stood apart from the characters I
July 2009
I've been thinking lately that maybe initially invented Catherine to somehow protect myself from what was going on in our lives around that time. Catherine was the stereotypical woman who one might imagine would bumble through life and raise a drug-addicted child. Maybe I needed to ‘kill her off’ when I was strong enough to accept that sometimes stuff just happens and there is no real logic in life.

Before I was aware of that fact, I was still at the stage of ‘writ[ing] it all’ (Dillard 1990, 7). And though Catherine’s story seemed to unfold easily, one night I archived every file on my computer that was related, however tenuously, to the development of the fictional component of my project. I then boxed up the piles of paper writing, including all the journals into archive boxes, taped them up with packing tape, opened a new word document on my computer, labelled it ‘New Start Sep 2007’, and began to write: The end didn’t exactly come suddenly... continuing until my fingers ached, and my eyes strained to see the screen, stopping only when I could no longer stay awake.

While I had pushed away all the fiction so far written, archiving all the writing relating to Catherine, her character had passed through those layers of subtext, allowing her to become the first in this project to make the transition from character to living person.

I had chopped and changed, started and restarted the fiction so often that I had to stop every so often and ask myself what it was mentioned in Part Two—those cardboard composites who had been constructed in my imagination after reading a range of non-fiction texts. Catherine Connor was the first to evolve more freely, emerging from somewhere inside me—a deeper, emotional source.
Even as a teenager, upon receiving a lockable private diary (which we all knew could be unpicked within seconds with a bobby pin) I was unable to maintain a record of my most personal thoughts for more than a few days at a time. Was it fear of being ‘found out’ (for what I am not certain) or something else that causes me to hold back from revealing myself. The fact is, for years I have kept working journals, filled with a mixture of quotes, images, notes, fragments and occasional select life stories, but as soon as I write something too personal, something that I feel crosses over my invisible comfort or privacy barrier, I put it away, shred it, delete it, and sometimes, even burn it.

What you want to reach is a secret because you don’t know what it is, except that it emits signs that appeal to you in a way that is vital. So you race towards that secret, which escapes. You approach it, and it escapes, and the painting, or the writing (what will be the painting or the writing, or the work of art) happens in the chase. It’s the chasing—every which way you move in the direction of the secret (Cixous 2008, 146).

November 2007
Even as a teenager, upon receiving a lockable private diary (which we all knew could be unpicked within seconds with a bobby pin) I was unable to maintain a record of my most personal thoughts for more than a few days at a time. Was it fear of being ‘found out’ (for what I am not certain) or something else that causes me to hold back from revealing myself. The fact is, for years I have kept working journals, filled with a mixture of quotes, images, notes, fragments and occasional select life stories, but as soon as I write something too personal, something that I feel crosses over my invisible comfort or privacy barrier, I put it away, shred it, delete it, and sometimes, even burn it.

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that that we writers chase. Cixous writes of the creative process as racing towards a secret, which escapes. The chase is where the painting, writing or work of art happens (2008, 146). It seemed to me, having started that ‘New Start Sep 2007’ file, that something more tangible was finally emerging from my own chase.

Catherine Connor killed herself and I began to write the first draft that this time I knew would become the beginnings of the story. I was conscious of the fact that my plans to write a layered narrative with Catherine’s life story functioning as the central focus of the plotline was not right, at least for the fiction I was to write and present for PhD examination. I had a sense that there was something I was working towards, something I knew but didn’t know I knew—about myself, about writing, and about Crazy Catherine and all the other people who were emerging or reemerging in a different way in this latest version. I sensed that in my fiction-writing I was working towards a broader outcome than I had anticipated in those early university progress reports—one that just maybe, would not be neat and tidy, and might, in fact, expose more unanswered or unanswerable questions than answers. This carried over into my pre-exegetical writings too.

In both my fiction and exegetical research and writing, I had been listening for what had been left out of the stories I had heard, read, imagined, lived and so-far tried to tell, and was trying to articulate at least some of those gaps. The exegesis, or rather,
I don’t mind the sneaking in, and I think it is somewhat inevitable. I think as writers we work with a distillation of the sum total of everything we’ve ever seen, felt, done or read. (a reply I wrote to a friend via email in relation to the impossibility of separating the self from the writing. I do not recall if these words were ‘borrowed’ from another source)

In respect to my own fiction, I have previously acknowledged the presence of my physical self in the process of development and argued that therefore, in a sense, my storytelling in the form of fiction, could be considered a form of autobiography (see Crawford 2005) or at the least, somehow a ‘transformation’ of autobiography. (from research notes 2007)

the notes that preceded the writing of the exegesis, became a means of interpreting and elaborating on the knowledge I had gained through the practice-led research. I came to realise that recording the knowledge in this way is not to “write about art but to write of creative research, to document the making of a new social relation through a concomitant act of production” (Carter 2004, 10). Such an approach attributes value to the writing process, and helps elaborate on how “history, culture, and all the rest gets into text” (Harris 2009, 44).

In effect, this latest approach to the fiction, and to the pre-exegetical writings too, meant that what I was doing was relinquishing control of the plotting and planning, and making-up of the narrative—and, at the same time, permitting the blurring of the lines between my writer-self and other-selves. What I felt I wanted to do, in fact what I had to do, was to continue to explore those same human, emotional themes that had guided me through previous writing projects and my early research and planning for the PhD, but to do this more organically—to allow the stories to grow without forcing them to “pass through narrative” (Cixous 2008, 8), and to carry this approach into all of my project-related writing. I quietly hoped to achieve a finished body of work where those themes would reveal and express themselves through my exploration, transformation and invention of the “raw stuff of everyday life” (Cixous 2008, 9).
Called upon to talk about what they do, they rationalise its internal logic instead of gauging its social effect. Rather that account for the work as a structure for reinventing human relations, they explain the ideas behind the work (Carter 2004, 10).

As a reader, I tend to engage more with the personal story and that raw everyday stuff Cixous refers to. I am drawn equally to fiction and memoir. But I think that, as a writer, my desire to reinvent myself, my life, my experiences, to take them and to transform them into something other, tends to overshadow my desire to tell a story and say, *This is my life, this is how it happened*. I feel increasingly uncomfortable with revealing my deepest fears, longings and insecurities, even (or perhaps I should say, especially) here. However, I am increasingly coming to believe that in this context, in attempting to give voice to some of the previously silenced activities relating to the production of a work of fiction in the academy, it is *right* to reveal something of myself.

In the past, I have shunned writing memoir. This reluctance to insert myself into my writing goes so far that even in my fiction and poetry I tend not to use first person lest someone believes the text is about me. But since allowing and sometimes forcing myself to examine the doing of my writing from the practice ‘outwards’ for the purposes of this research project, I am compelled to refer to myself in the first-person. I feel exposed and I have had to examine closely the rationale (or perhaps *irrationale*) behind this thinking. In broader terms, perhaps I feel I

If we are to begin with Heidegger’s premise that we come to know the world theoretically only after we understand it through handling, then how do we structure programs to give a voice to material thinking? Theorising out of practice is, I would argue, a very different way of thinking than applying theory to practice (Bolt 2007, 33).

In writing herself the woman is also reaching into writing and her story will obviously be informed by the dynamics of self-becoming. But there is no point of arrival; she can neither transcend herself nor attain to some authentic fullness of being. It is a dynamic which is shadowed by loss, which exists between loss, absence and what might be (Anderson 1986, 60).

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There was never any one day when Irene took in the details of her life and formulated the thought, I want to be someone else, I want to be somewhere else (Jennings 1996, 39).

The whole story cannot be told. With each view there is another story, a different story, each one silences the other, and no one of them is truer than any other—perhaps none of them is true (Skoller 1993, 37-38).

can explain or justify the obvious absence of the explicit I from my other writing as being somehow artistically more appropriate to the stories I tell. But why, in a scholarly project largely about my own research, do I still have a sense that I would feel more comfortable if the I is to remain absent?

***

In Coming to Writing and Other Essays (1991, 3), Cixous defines writing as:

a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss. Of never becoming resigned, consoled; never turning over in bed to face the wall and drift asleep again as if nothing had happened; as if nothing could happen.

Late August to early September is a time when emotionally I am at my most hypersensitive, and when Cixous’ words resonate for me. This is the time of year I am least likely to “drift asleep again as if nothing had happened”. It has been this way for a long time. I find that I am more attuned to other people’s losses and suffering. I don’t watch the evening news; I avoid reading newspapers; I don’t check my usual online news websites; and I am even careful which fiction I select to read. Perhaps it is no coincidence that I painted, and wrote the poems, including The Mad Woman, in the middle of the month of September when that
Really though, she’s clever enough to work out this frame of mind is a cyclic thing, her own problem. Something that she can’t talk about, a wave that builds in intensity and threatens to engulf her. It starts to build a few weeks before the anniversary of the accident each year and is not spoken about until all the worst of the rage, the self-loathing and pain has been worked through and put to rest just under the surface to simmer and fester for another year. Only then will she and Neil speak in vague terms, it has passed, that time, that date has passed for another year.

(Cheryl, reflecting on her grief-cycle, from draft written in 2008)

most intense period had passed, and shortly after followed that with writing the opening chapters of ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’. I experience that annual wave of emotional intensity for several weeks; afterwards it seems that my brain and body are able to process it and allow me to draw from that intensity and express myself creatively.

I look back on my journals for the past few years and am not at all surprised (though was oblivious to the fact while it was happening) that I had heightened emotional responses and an intense burst of creativity in mid-late September 2006, 2007 and 2008. I write these words in early October, and note that 2009 has been no different. Often my ongoing projects begin in that calendar period. I imagine that if I could somehow back-track through the rhythm of my creative energy I would discover I had similar bursts for many Septembers prior to 2006. I expect that I will continue to do so in September 2010 and beyond.

Twenty-two years ago, in early September, I experienced personal trauma. It was not the only trauma of my life, but the impact it had and continues to have on my life has been, until recent years, the most enduring. It has caused me to assess my sense of identity, and my position and role, as an individual, as a partner, and especially as a mother. When I began my PhD project, I did not foresee that traces of this experience, written
The search for an individual identity by a woman through both theoretical and fictional works can be traced back at least as far as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Wollstonecraft is acknowledged for highlighting the issue of the search for an individual identity in this and other theoretical works. Hoeveler asserts that Wollstonecraft's fictions, in particular her last unfinished novel *Wrongs of Women, or Maria* (1798), can be recognised as a test case for "revealing the cognitive value of trauma as a source for literary creativity." (Hoeveler 1999, 387-388).

(from research notes, 2008)

I have always written, but it is only since the period following that experience—the birth and death of our second baby within a 36-hour period—that I am able to pinpoint the difference between wanting to write, and somehow having to write. In fact, it was somewhere in the middle of that 36-hour period, our baby connected to a machine that was essentially keeping him alive (if one could call that living), when I had to leave the neonatal intensive care unit. I went to the ensuite room I had been allocated following our transfer via the Royal Flying Doctor Service from the country, and searched through my bags for a pen and paper. I wrote furiously across the pages, berating myself mostly, certain that I was to blame; that I had made bad choices in my younger years; that I, who as a child had been physically abandoned by my father, and emotionally abandoned by my mother, did not deserve this child, and was being punished for every wrong thought or action ever undertaken. I recall my fingers racing across the pages and, when done, I found a full bag of jelly beans that someone had brought along to the hospital to compensate our toddler for not having a baby brother. I poured the contents into my mouth, barely chewing, swallowing lumpy jelly beans until the sugar made my head spin and I thought I would collapse from the effects of all the sugar and artificial colouring rushing though my system. I punched the walls, pulled...
2. Nature and Scope of Creative Writing Research. . .

2.1 Many aspects of research carried out by creative writers can be seen as formal preparatory work that would be familiar to other academic disciplines.

2.2 Although Creative Writing uses ‘factual’ knowledge, it is not primarily a vehicle for such knowledge, but a synthesizing process that brings about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative simulation of experience.

2.3 Creative writers often draw upon their tacit knowledge of human experience and writing forms and have the essential liberty to invent what they need to create an aesthetic whole.

2.4 Creative Writing research is often kinetic, the creative writer tapping internal emotional, intellectual or psychological energy to shape their work in ways that may be difficult to predict, but are nevertheless valid as research (NAWE 2008, 12).

at my own hair, ripped the paper into tiny pieces and flushed it all down the toilet. Feeling stronger, I made my way back towards the intensive care unit. Before reaching it I was asked by a nurse to go and sit for a few minutes, in the waiting room amongst relatives who had come to the hospital and needed my support. They only infuriated me with their incapacity to understand, and I resented them in those long minutes, for taking me away from my dying baby, and for sucking up my little energy I had with their need for my reassurance and attention.

For the first years after that loss, remembered as a time of wounding and of feeling grief-stricken in my isolation, I wrote mostly in secret, starting with notes and emotional responses, such as the following three samples found scribbled in one of the few notebooks retained from that time.

Who am I now? The person I thought I was is gone.

I am fragmented.

Not knowing what else to do, I crawled into myself and hid.

Without language to express my grief I said nothing.
Ian cleared his throat and Cheryl remembered what seeing him in the hospital had reminded her of last night. There was a photograph she’d seen a few years earlier in a travelling exhibition of old newspaper photographs displayed at the shire library. The large black and white print featured a man standing in front of a train wreck. She didn’t know the exact story behind the man, but imagines that everybody in Australia over a certain age remembered the Granville Train Disaster of 1977. She could tell from the unnamed man in the photograph’s posture—the dropped shoulders, the deflated chest—that someone dear to him had been lost forever. She’d seen that look in Neil, especially in those early years after the accident. And even more recently, though he tries to shield her, it’s still there—the traces of that loss in his body. (from a working draft)

I couldn’t look at him, because I had failed.

I stepped out of my body at the hospital. I became an observer. I was responsible for making others feel uncomfortable.

Over time, I began writing poetry and stories, non-fiction articles and academic papers where the I was always present, but masked. A pattern emerged. I seemed always to write out of that wounding, and my themes were centred around a search for identity which is subsumed by loss.

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Perhaps in this re-beginning period of creative exploration I did start coming to terms with my relationship with my writing. I suspect that I will only really know this later, upon reflection, ‘through that afterwards effect’ (King 2003). I expect too it will only be later, as I work on new writing and look at this phase of my research retrospectively, that I will know if this knowledge about the impact of my own loss on my working practices has enriched or even hindered them. Perhaps I came closer to discovering the impulse driving my creativity as being somehow related to shame or wounding (Dalziell 1999; Cixous 1993, 2005, 2007); and perhaps I acknowledged too some of the themes that I
I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon a ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. . . But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in (Woolf 1992,53-4).

have always been drawn to (Brophy 2003). However, whether any of this knowledge has any impact on the ways in which I engage with my creative practice in future remains to be seen.

I am not quite sure where any of this fits into my overall project. Certainly my questions belong somewhere, but I cannot help wondering whether this is the right place. Much of it feels somehow too private to reveal here. I try to reassure myself that this is, in part, the point. The personal is one of those voices that are sometimes silenced in academic work. Yet, what is creative work if not personal? I tell myself not to scrap these pages, as I did that day some 22 years ago when I revealed something else that challenged me. And in an attempt to bring my mind back to matters academic, I tell myself to remember that “creative arts practice is transformational; it changes our frameworks and changes our understanding and approach to established knowledge (Barrett 2009, 5).

In the short-term, one outcome of this phase of exploration has been that I can now acknowledge that my attempts to position Creative Writing as a stand-alone discipline within the academy, distinct from Literature or Cultural Studies, were misguided.

Nonetheless, throughout this stage I maintained and strengthened my conviction that, in order to develop understanding of how knowledge can be articulated and
3. Research Methodologies
3.1 Investigations in Creative Writing include creative practice, critical or theoretical reflection, and responses to advanced reading (in the broadest sense of the word ‘reading’).

3.2 Creative Writing is research in its own right. All Creative Writing involves research in Creative Writing whereby experience is transmuted into language (and some of that experience may concern language itself). (NAWE 2008, 13)

interpreted, a focus on the creative practices and processes of the individual writer or researcher is legitimate. I do think that understanding and developing ways to apply this practice-led knowledge will be helpful in strengthening understanding of how, as creative writers, we might work within the academy.

I have a sense that there is something else I need to be saying—something stronger perhaps, about the collaborative nature of arts-based research and practice, and related disciplines, for it seems obvious that arts practice cannot exist in isolation, but as yet I have not found the words.

Grenville, in *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels were Written* (1993, 105), writing about how *Lilian’s Story* (1985) was written, remarked

> if you write for the reasons I think I do, as a way of contemplating problems—scratching the itch of something you don’t understand—there’s an inbuilt reason to keep going, no matter how strong your doubts are. There’s an internal pressure to go on, not because you think what you produce is going to be worth it, but because you need to know something that you can only know by writing it.

Like Grenville, I continue scratching at that itch so that I may know.
Without checking to see if the tide would be high enough to swim, she’d driven to the beach around the bend from this spot. Once in the water, her clothes discarded on the sand in a bundle several metres from the water’s edge, she’d walked into the warm water and started swimming—purposefully at first, her strokes strong and powerful as she worked through the water. Before long she’d relaxed and slowed her pace, stopped the freestyle arm strokes. Keeping her head above water and her eyes fixed on a cargo ship in the distance, she’d used a relaxed breast stroke style movement to move away from the shore. How far, she’d wondered, would I need to swim until I just stopped?

-from Fingerprints: the fiction, Part Four, page 172-173.
He was never fully certain as to what made him write. He had seen his mother dance at her wedding with the clockmaker, just a few embraced steps. And once, with a cat—his mother dancing with a cat in a meadow, he remembered that. It had become for him this delicious, witnessed example. It was a way he could enter the world himself. (Ondaatje 2007, 222)

2nd October 2009
I found an artist today, via one of those down-time-google-hopping-link-following chance encounters. I think, but am not absolutely certain, that I started with the search term ‘assemblage art’ and after a few clicks, somehow found a short film featuring an artist by the name of Janice Lowry talking about her creative process. There was something about this artist and her working style that appealed strongly to my own inner-artist.

I discovered that Lowry’s journals—beautiful works, collages of words and images—had been kept and catalogued for most of her life, starting in childhood at the age of five. As I listened to her speak, I lamented my lifetime of written (and mostly) destroyed journals and notebooks. Destroying those tangible reminders of my lived life did not take away the fact that the life happened, did it?

I was fascinated by the fact that in 2007 Lowry had all her journals inducted into the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Archives of America in Washington, D.C. Describing her working process, Lowry said she takes found objects and “transforms, transfigures, and puts them in unexpected ways.” Each assembly then become, she added, about “an emotional place in my life.”

I finished Part Three declaring that I write in order to discover something. Part Four continues with further discussion about the writing and writing-related experiences that were undertaken in the search. I observed too, that I have a sense that there is something more I need to say about the collaborative nature of arts-based research and practice—that it appears obvious that arts practice cannot exist apart from everyday life. In approaching both the fiction and this exegesis, I wanted to tell a story, and in the search for that story I listened for a silence. Somewhere along the way I came to believe that approaches harnessed in related disciplines—poststructuralist theories used in Literature, for...
example, and often drawn on by creative writers in discussion of their creative projects undertaken in the academy—while serving an important role, often fail to account for activities of the doing of writing itself. Therein lay the silence I had listened for.

By focusing on the actions and activities around the research and production of my fiction writing for this project, I have aimed to present a body of writing that is not simply a ‘process diary’ but rather a work that serves to illuminate how history, theory, culture, and life make their way into a text. Yet, while trying to indicate how some of this life experience makes its way into a text, it does seem that much of the real stuff of life is actually beyond representation—and that the most interesting things in life are those which we choose to leave out of the stories we tell. These hidden words, these stripped out and silenced words, these camouflaged ghosts work to give meaning to the story which remains.

In Part Four I focus on more of those hidden, stripped out and silenced words that are typically left out of the finished story. I talk about my continuing uncertainty about both my own position and of writing a work of fiction in the academy for PhD examination, and explain how I developed a way to articulate the uncertainty. I engage too with the ways in which through a prolonged not-writing period I was able to at last consolidate my relationship with the (academic) creative environment: writing
All of us here who ‘write,’ we do not know what we do, we are crazy, foolish, we wander along invisible streams, we run backwards and forwards incessantly before metal-grating that doesn’t exist, we seek till the exhaustion of the contents of our heads, to pass, to pass what, to pass from a region of feeling to a region of what, of painting with words what moves us without wandering abandoned along deserts without knowing where the door that opens that gives access to the other side (Cixous 2005, 106).

“Nearly all topics seem to be grounded in literary theories. Not one other student mentioned looking at theories around writing! Shouldn’t people learn about writing along with doing it?” (Note found scribbled on receipt slipped into pages of a notebook following meeting of creative writing postgrads - May 2009)

To read traces it is necessary to be a tracker—to let the shadow of one’s intention fall across the track; it is to become part of the movement (Carter 2009, 7).

from a position I felt to be more truthful, and feeling that my research and writing, and I too, had a place within the academy.

By mid 2008, I had completed a first draft of what I then thought would become a full-length novel. I felt a certain satisfaction with that progress, though I knew that there still remained a lot of work to be done. At the same time, I still experienced a sense that I had yet to find a way into organising and presenting the writing of my exegesis. Perhaps I was too close to the project to be able to recognise that all the preparatory work—the thinking, the writing, the rejecting of ideas—was happening for a reason, that this was in fact, a part of the whole process.

By now, the exegesis had come to represent a form of memoir for me, an opportunity to record some of my own personal knowledge and experiences. I struggled with devising a way to make this work take shape. I did not know it then, but I needed to write the exegesis in the same way I had written the fiction—by allowing the practice to lead, and this would mean approaching the writing of the exegesis in the same way as I had worked on the early fiction—by continuing the writing down of fragments and waiting until those fragments began to fall into some kind of order. Practising artist and academic, Estelle Barrett, writes that in arts practice it is in the “back-and-forth or discourse, that provides the testing-ground of new ideas, which
It is a mistake to stand outside examining ‘methods’. Any method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist’s intention if we are readers (Woolf 1986, 110).

Michael Ondaatje begins with fragmentary images or situations and starts to construct scenes from fragments. It might take several years before “a kind of approximate draft” materialises. . . . a self-editing phase of perhaps two years follows. He says, “I move things around till they become sharp and clear, till they are in the right location. And it is in this stage that I discover the work’s true voice and structure.” (notes from research notes. Quotes attributed to West Australian, ‘Weekend Extra’ July 31 /2008)

establishes their interest” (2007, 19). Approaching the writing of the exegesis would, then, be no different to approaching the writing of the fiction—for it would be in the writing down of fragments that new ideas would be tested and interest established.

I say that I did not know how to approach the early writing of the exegesis at that stage, but what did I know? I knew that I did not want to write a commentary that would simply inform the reading of the fiction. Conversely, I did not want the fiction to inform too explicitly the reading of the commentary or exegesis. I knew I wanted a space to articulate some of those hidden or stripped-out words, and to explore connections between the spoken and unspoken words (or written and unwritten words). I wanted too a space for discussion of the paths considered but not taken. After all, if I was to stand by my earlier conviction that it is in the making of the ‘thing’ that we come to the understanding of how we know what we know, then surely the essence of that knowledge emerges in the residual traces of that making or doing, waiting—or in some cases, not-waiting—to be accessed and explored?

I knew too, that I was tired of my seemingly-constant sense of confusion about my own place within the academy. In order to try and shake myself out of this frustrating state, I decided that,
When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in a new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year (Dillard 1990, 3).

... all that is called theoretical in my work is in reality simply a kind of halt in the movement that I execute in order to underline in a broad way what I have written... never has theory inspired my texts. (Cixous 2008, 81)

rather than attempt to present a facade of knowingness about where both my project and I stood and where it was heading, I would go public, as it were, and talk openly about where I was at in terms of my writing at an international conference.

Deleuze says that to write is to “trace lines of flight which are not imaginary and which one is indeed forced to follow, because in reality writing involves us there, draws us in there” (Deleuze 2002, 43; see also Muecke 1994, 16). I had a sense that I had been forced to trace certain lines that had led me to follow this path of uncertainty. Writing, says Muecke, is “like a machine which transforms things right out of the domain of the literary” (1994, 16). Those words, like Deleuze’s, resonated, reminding me to follow my instincts and write whatever it was I felt must be said, even if I did not quite know why it mattered. They reminded me too, that within, around, and left out of what I was working on was ‘stuff’ I already knew about writing but had not yet quite found a way to represent and articulate. I wasn’t actually sure that all of this stuff could, should, or would, be represented—but at that point it mattered that it be an option.

I say that I made a decision to talk about my uncertainty. The reality was that I had first tried to create a paper that portrayed me in a different light. I wanted to be that confident, assertive person who stood up the front of a room and held the audience in the palm of her hand. I spent weeks researching the ‘right way’ to
write a conference paper; I sought advice from a friend who
spends a considerable portion of her life presenting papers to
delегates at various conferences and think-tanks. One suggestion
she gave was not to ‘let people know how little you know, to
exude confidence, to own your presentation.’

It seemed to me that to go into a conference and tell people
that I was not discovering ‘new’ knowledge about creative
writing research (as I imagined they all would be) was
prematurely ending my future academic career before it had really
begun. I was not certain that I actually wanted a future academic
career at that point—after all, wasn’t I a writer who had elected to
work in the academy for a few years only, in order to write a
novel? But, at the same time, all too aware of how few writers
actually make a living purely from their writing, it didn’t strike
me as particularly wise to limit my future options either.

I deliberated over my friend’s advice. But to me, there
seemed no alternative—if I was to be true to myself, I had to
“trace the lines of flight” that I had been “forced to follow” and
write the paper that was asking to be written. And in writing that
paper, I would have to articulate some of the uncertainty,
frustration and confusion that I had so far experienced. I had little
choice really; there was no way I was going to be able to pull off
the illusion of an assertive persona anyway.
I’m going to start this paper with a couple of conclusions of sorts. It makes sense to me to approach it like that, as in a way it mirrors the practice, structure, and style of writing that I seem to have been forced to pursue as I continue to work on the drafting of my exegesis along with the creative component of my PhD. My PhD project, like many these days, is being undertaken in the increasingly popular form of a novel and accompanying exegesis, a form that consistently arouses much discussion and debate amongst creative arts and writing academics.

I am now officially almost two and a half years into my program, and the university paperwork tells me I am due to submit a ‘product’ in around eight months. At the beginning of a three-year program three years sounded like an endless amount of time to research and write a total of around 100 000 words. But after about the first year and a half of false stops and starts, I found myself facing yet another new beginning. A beginning connected—but at the same time separate from the conscious research work I’d undertaken over the previous eighteen months A beginning that was also connected—but at the same time separate from the life experiences I’d been immersed in.

My creative project, (or novel as I am at last allowing myself to call this strange ‘thing’ that is evolving)—some 75 000 odd words as it stands now, begins at the point that some might view as an end. It then meanders off all over the place jumping back and forth through time, dipping into moments and memories of other people’s lives and experiences. Sometimes their lives overlap; at other times they live together-but-separate, in a small town. . . (Crawford 2008)

I went on to outline details of the journey I had undertaken so far, highlighting my frustrations and the sense that I still was not sure how to speak confidently about my research and allot it the value I felt it deserved, but could not adequately articulate. I spoke too of how the characters—the “living people” (Hemingway 1966) in my fiction—could not seem to find peace with the troubling aspects of their lives, how they continued to revisit the same old dilemmas and rarely managed to resolve any of their issues. I spoke of the sense of isolation I felt, coming as I did from a university with a small base of creative arts researchers. And, I
Robert Sheppard (see Sullivan and Harper 2009, 104) in an interview with Harper, when asked what springs to mind when he hears the term ‘creative environment.’ He refers to “Concentric circles outside (and inside) the writer, of activities and support systems.”

Obvious parts include: publishing, reviews, time, peers, etc. Then there are the less obvious: “poetry readings, your Mum, bars of chocolate, mugs of coffee.” Then there are the sustaining networks of communication. Blogs etc.

He refers, too, to the “Negative circles”:
Time
Lack of appreciation of the work (by critics/peers)
Most interested though, in his comments on the loss (for a period) of his creative environment and being forced through economic necessity into teaching.

Question to consider later: Can/did undertaking writing in the academy as PhD student cause such a feeling of loss of personal creative environment? (From research notes Aug 2009)

I mentioned that if there was anybody in my university talking about the creative development of their own project, at that stage I was yet to meet them.

At some point over the conference weekend, prior to presenting my paper, it struck me that one of the problems I had not considered deeply enough in relation to my own work centred on concerns that I touched on in Part Two. How might creating a novel for a doctorate be affected by a bureaucratic structure? And how might this bureaucratic structure, impact upon my creative freedom (Krauth 2008)? I realised that I had consciously given the question little more than cursory attention until that point of my candidature, yet it was actually a major stumbling block preventing me from working in the way I needed to in order to write. As I explained in Parts Two and Three, I write down the fragments and wait until those fragments begin to fall into some kind of order before working back into the writing. Often I do not know what form this writing will take until the structure shows itself. It is not uncommon for what I think will be a short story to evolve into a long work of fiction, for a poem to become the basis for a life-writing essay, or a work of fiction to become a play. When considering Krauth’s points it occurred to me that the bureaucratic structure has the potential to affect the creation of the novel and our creative freedom in ways we cannot anticipate.
I realised it had, in fact, pervaded every aspect of my own creative practice since submitting that initial application for candidature.

My primary goal until around this time had been to write a novel with university support. But during the conference weekend I began to see myself and my work practices in a new light. Away from my home university, in North Wales surrounded by Creative Writing academics, writers and researchers from several continents, I began to recognise that I was very interested in the so-called ‘academic’ research component of my project.

. . . On a good day I imagine the journey of my creative project like that of a finished year five or six geography lesson where, with textas and coloured pencils, we mapped powerful medium-blue river systems which fed ultimately into the rich blue sea that surrounded Australia, our home—its paler soft blue tributaries flowing healthily, providing strength and nourishment along the way. . . . But being an Australian in the present, I cannot help thinking about how unhealthy our river systems actually are, how they are largely stagnant and dying, and of the awful mess generations of Australians have made of our adopted country, the place we (or our ancestors at least) largely chose to belong, and I shake that image away.

. . . At this point I more often feel as though I am wandering—sometimes alone, with my own memories and imagination—and always with those of people I am writing the ‘stories’ for. And always too, in some form or another—I am accompanied by my family, my everyday life, and the omnipresence of ‘the academy’ as I attempt to navigate my way through an eclectic collection of crazy theme park mirrors that distort and bend reality.

. . . So, at this point of reading that first conclusion I mentioned at the beginning of my paper, I discover that the beginning didn’t really end up being at the start of the paper after all—it bounced and distorted, or just maybe, meandered gently to the rightful place, depending on your viewpoint.
(Crawford 2008)

There’s an awkward moment that follows the concluding seconds
October 2009
This morning, more from curiosity than a sense that I might discover some hidden or profound knowledge—there is always that little space in my brain reserved for discussion of how I found that “significant and original contribution to knowledge” (see Murdoch Guidelines for creative production PhD made available mid 2009)—I dug though my archive boxes to find the notebook I took to the conference in 2008. A note on the bottom of the page, written after I presented—“Phew, some people seemed to have got it.”

You know, I did not want to speak at the conference as I am shy. I want to say I got a lot from your paper. I really thought I was done in feeling at sea with all this academic expectation.” (written down in notebook on the walk back to my hotel room after a dinner with conference delegates—woman speaking a novelist undertaking a PhD in the UK)

of presenting a paper. We stop, swallow, and reach for our water, and sip, hoping to find our mouth and not our chin. We try to look nonchalant as we remove our reading glasses and put them in their case. Then we wait for someone to ask a tricky question—or worse, will ourselves to disappear into the silence, as all eyes avoid ours.

I am far more comfortable with the idea of trying to express my ideas on paper to an ‘invisible’ audience. At least I am physically absent, and can pretend I don’t care about how my words are received. The only performative experience I want is that which happens in the composition and rewriting. But, it seems in the doing of writing, there is always a surprise—a doubling, a twist, a confusion or sense of the non-logical. It occurred to me then, that maybe the doing of writing happens across all mediums. Muecke talks about the becoming of writing as “its preparedness to allow for a completely different medium to infuse the texts, to take words which are supposed to function in one domain, to borrow words from this domain and let them play havoc in a new one” (1994, 16). It dawned on me that if, as Brophy (2003) states, words are the source, tools and end product of the work of the writer, then whichever medium those words are expressed in—spoken, written, listened to—it’s all part of the work of writing—a work, in essence, of communicating.

I wondered then, if by shifting our views to place more value
on the invisible work *around* the work of writing, we can collapse more walls. Previous experience had taught me that if there was to be an ideal time to ‘run away’ from the (partly self-imposed) pressure of the writing of my project then I had found it with the (possible) collapsing of that wall. Instead of fear this time, I felt open to possibilities and felt a preparedness to allow a different medium to infuse the writing in order to be able to [continue to] write.

***

It seems appropriate that when I first started writing the notes for what was to become this, the second section of Part Four, I was again away from home. By then it was September 2009 and I wanted, and felt ready to write about (metaphorically and literally) running away to Paris.

I had told myself, and others, that after my conference in June 2008, I was going to Paris to do research for my PhD. On one level, I believed it to be true, though I did not know then how my trip would influence or shape my writing. I knew the trip would somehow contribute to my “creative work” through “experimental development.” To cover my inability to articulate this as part of my “practice as research” (Murdoch 2009, 5), I joked about taking a “research trip”, making virtual quotation
June 2008
I have abandoned the Suze ‘overseas’ thread. It was contrived and was clearly a case of me trying to work my own as yet unlived experience into my fiction. It goes against the grain of everything I am trying to achieve. It is hard though, not to take advantage of the fact that soon I will experience something new.

July 2008
I've been in the apartment for almost two hours —have unpacked—freshened up—done a load of washing
Now, I have to leave the apartment, and stop being afraid.

Later:
Lounge Bar, corner in Bastille.
Across —the Opera building
To the right, across the road, signs talking about a festival, artists, musicians. I only understand fragments. If I get lost, all I need to remember is the Bastille I turn off at Boulevard Henri IV.

May 2008
I am experimenting with a thread. Suze, the person who tries hardest to eke out a place to belong, wins a prize for her poetry. I picture it as one of those prizes in a popular women’s magazine.
She will visit an overseas destination with old cathedrals and castles dating back to the thirteenth century. Upon returning to Lawson, will start to see that she does not really belong in this town, after all.

Within hours of arriving in Paris, like many others before me, I wondered (in my journal): What is it that people look for when they come to Paris? I didn’t expect to answer that. I no longer really cared about finding all the answers to all the questions. I had begun to appreciate the value of the unanswerable. I closed my journal, and for possibly the first time since beginning my PhD journey I was “. . . there, simply” (Cixous 2008, 31). Sitting in a cafe, looking toward the Bastille monument in the centre of a huge roundabout, surrounded by people speaking in a language I could not understand, feeling like a cliché and not caring one bit, I thought of Paris, Je T’aime, the movie I had seen shortly before marks in the air with my fingers. Having been raised not to grow above myself, I habitually used self-deprecation as a means of self-representation.
flying overseas. More specifically I thought of the character Carol, a single middle-aged American postal worker who travels alone to Paris. As I remembered that particular scene, the camera had been at eye-level as Carol looked out over a park eating her lunch. The voice-over was Carol’s, narrating the scene in her awkward night-school-learned French:

Sitting there, alone in a foreign country, far from my job and everyone I know, a feeling came over me. It was like remembering something I’d never known before or had always been waiting for, but I didn’t know what. Maybe it was something I’d forgotten or something I’ve been missing all my life. All I can say is that I felt, at the same time, joy and sadness. But not too much sadness, because I felt alive. Yes, alive. 
(Paris Je T’aime 2006)

***

1)

On a whim, as the bus passed close by and then stopped, I decided to get on. The rain came. There I was, sitting on the top deck of the open double-decker bus with the rubbish umbrella from Dublin—the one that kept collapsing on my head. A young woman of maybe eighteen came and asked in broken English if she could sit with me.

‘Of course,’ I said.

She said her name was Rana. She came from Iran. She did not know French, she said. We tried to read the street signs out loud as we passed them, falling about laughing at our strange
The Francophone world saved Prem from completely emptying his insides of himself by replenishing him. (Dawesar 2006, 87)

Tonight I start night one of a one week intensive class at the Alliance Française. I graduated my ten week beginners class (well, they let ANYONE pass really) and now I am onto the next level. I am determined that next time I go to France I won’t seem like such an ignoramus. After all, if just about everybody I spoke to in Paris at least attempted to speak English, I can show the some courtesy to the French next time. So far I can talk names, employment, some interests, country of birth, and order wine and beer. There’s a long way to go. Oh yeah, and I can count up to 100 very, very slowly, with lots of thinking spaces along the way.

(extract from email sent to friend two months after returning from France)

He sat there weighing what was already written half-dreamt during the day until pronunciation.

‘Now we know how to be French,’ she said.

At the end of her journey, she got out a little video camera and asked me if she could make a movie for her family. She said into the microphone; ‘This is the kind woman from the bus. She shared her broken umbrella and was French with me.’

2) As I wandered around Paris with my rubbish umbrella from Dublin collapsing on my head, sometimes people would stop me and ask for directions in stilted English. I shrugged my shoulders and pretended I could not understand one particular rude woman, who spoke to me as though I were both deaf and stupid.

3) The rain came down heavily and I stood sheltered under my rubbish umbrella, on a step outside the Louvre. A young man rode up on a bike and spoke to me in French. I shrugged my shoulders and made a face to indicate I did not understand. He apologised in English. ‘But you look French,’ he said.

I told him English-speaking people kept asking me for directions.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘You are English?’

I told him where I lived. ‘No, you don’t look Australian,’ he
he fell on a scrap of a sentence, something uncommitted, that would open a door for him. He worked for much of the night, aware of the darkness beyond his map. Only the pen and the note-books were alive, the rest of the world somewhere in the cliff-fall of his dreams.

(Onaatje 2007,93)

Since Beth and Jimmy moved out, and it is just her and Barney looking at each other over the tea table of an evening, she seems to have nothing of much substance to say. She hadn’t realised how much she’d relied on Jimmy to fill the awkward spaces, how meeting his needs and trying to keep Beth focused on her responsibilities added to her sense of purpose. . . She’d been shocked when the doctor insisted she take time off—for your nerves, like she was some highly-strung basket case. Stress-leave, he’d called it.

Surely a pill each day to give her a little lift would be more useful? Of course she was bloody stressed, wouldn’t he be in her place? But that’s just life.

(excerpt from second last draft)

said quite emphatically. ‘You look French.’

I told him that maybe I was where I was meant to be, then.

I shared my umbrella with him for a while. For some reason it had stopped collapsing. He asked what I did. I tried to explain that I was writing a PhD in Creative Writing and was doing research on the process. ‘That is impossible in France’, he said.

‘There is no such thing here.’

In each of those three experiences, I trusted myself. It did not occur to me that I should not. Even when I pretended not to understand the American tourist asking me for directions, I was living as I wanted to write—less consciously, and without inhibitions. In those moments, I had followed the path I needed to follow and I had become the person I needed to be. It was as though as Muecke had outlined in terms of the becoming of writing, I had allowed a completely different medium to infuse the text. That medium was me. I had taken words from one domain, borrowed words from it and “let them reproduce and play havoc in a new one” (1994, 16).

One night, in my little Paris apartment, I could not sleep. I emailed my family, and wrote in my journal. I thought again of what Krauth had observed about writing a novel in the academy, and of how students questioned how creating a novel for a
There are so many boundaries, and so many walls, and inside the walls, more walls (Cixous 1991,3).

Manuel Castells explains identity as a generative source of meaning, necessarily collective rather than wholly individual, and useful not only as a source of agency but also as a meaningful narrative (in Alcoff 2000, 324).

doctorate might be affected by a bureaucratic structure. Again, as in North Wales, I considered the myriad ways I felt my working practice had been affected.

I had been away from home for less than two weeks at that point, but it was long enough to allow me to see with some clarity. In taking myself out of the physical environment of the university and the research and writing I had been undertaking for several years, the knowledge that I already had acquired, but did not recognise, was becoming clearer to me.

Ernest Hemingway, frustrated by an inability to write about Paris when in Paris, wrote that “maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris as in Paris I could write about Michigan. I did not know it was too early for that because I did not know Paris well enough” (1964, 14).

Hemingway realised he needed to understand Paris in order to write about Paris. In Paris, wandering the streets surrounded by a culture and language I could not understand, I soon recognised that I too had needed to come to a deeper understanding of so many things in order to begin to write about them.

To come to that understanding, it had been necessary to get physically away, to place some distance between all the elements that combine to make up my identity—my life experiences, my family, the university, and maybe even Australia. In doing this I
was able to practise my writing in the way I knew it must be practised. As Helen Garner says, “writing isn’t like other artforms in that it’s at second remove from the physical. It has to be so conscious, writing; but there are some days when your inhibitions go away . . . I wish I could write like that more often, you know, just sit down and trust myself “(in Grenville/Woolfe 1993, 68). In Paris I discovered that I needed to get away in order to be able to once more be able to “just sit down and trust myself”.

Though I did not know then, it would take almost another year to understand that as well as getting away I had needed to stop writing (specifically on the project) in order to be able to write. Since I had begun, every word written, from the most private writing in diaries about parenting or relationship issues, to fiction and more scholarly writing, was imbued on some level with a sense of being a ‘part of a project’. On returning to Australia, in that period of not-writing, I suspended my PhD candidature and seriously considered not returning to it. I joked with friends that I was in the midst of an existential crisis. But I remained connected to the university, to language and words, through teaching in those two disciplines I had tried to separate at the beginning of my research program—Creative Writing and Literature. One day in a Literature class I engaged some of the students in a creative writing exercise in order to try and help them understand how

October 2008
Three things from today:
1) Some of my students were horrified when I told them about eavesdropping on conversations in Paris to take notes.
2) Cannot believe that several students said they never read unless they ‘have to.’ Why on earth sign up for writing if they don’t like to read?
3) I almost literally (Oh, I hate the way that word is overused) bumped into Brett today in the hallway. I said to him, “I am desperate to return to my work. I am ready to begin to cull the crap.” I didn’t even know that I felt that way until I had said it.
stream of consciousness writing ‘happens’. Not long after that, some first year Creative Writing students in a class I was tutoring declared the study of certain literature ‘irrelevant’ to writing practice. After spending the rest of the workshop defending that literature, I officially resumed work on my PhD (though arguably, it had never really stopped).

When I began to write again, I realised I had needed to get away and stop writing for another reason: getting away had allowed me the space to understand that I needed to shift my thinking from the idea of writing a complete novel—at least for PhD submission and assessment.

By then I had come to think of the novel as being something that would come later, after the PhD—and that the PhD would become ultimately one ‘thing’ in a continuum. As my writing had developed, the structure that began to develop from all those early fragments and drafts, while containing novelistic elements, did not then take the form of a conventional novel. What was evolving was something more like a collection of connected, layered fragments and stories from several people’s lives, and it seemed the practice dictated that I leave spaces and unanswered questions—just as in life there are spaces and unanswered questions.

While I had been pondering the latest questions around my
At Murdoch, a “Creative or Production-based thesis” is:

1. Research that is initiated in creative practice, and explores conceptual and theoretical questions, problems, or challenges that are identified within and formed by the needs of creative practice and practitioners;

11. Research that is carried out through both creative practice and the practice of scholarly writing (i.e. a thesis) using methods familiar to both practitioners and scholars.

(Murdoch 2009, 2)

Hi all

The revised ‘GUIDELINES FOR PhD, MPhil or RMT WITH A CREATIVE / PRODUCTION COMPONENT’ have been approved by the University, and are now available at:


Best wishes
Anne

(email correspondence dated 2/7/2009 six months after my 36 months candidature was to have originally finished).

... project—the length of the fiction, the validity of my elected approach to the exegesis, and so on, progress had been made in terms of the guidelines I had yearned for at the beginning of my candidature. It was around this time that the document I mentioned in Part Two, the ‘Guidelines for PhD, MPhil or RMT with a Creative/Production Component’ (Murdoch 2009), was formally enshrined by the university. The decision to drop my fiction word count from 80 000 words to 70 000 words when the informal new guidelines had been approved some eighteen months earlier had been relatively simple. Determining whether to submit my PhD for examination under the old system in which I had commenced or to follow the new formalised guidelines might not be so simple. I downloaded the PDF file and took a deep breath before reading them.
She fishes for the right word, at the same time trying to hold firmly to the image of Tatay building a sandcastle. *The beauty of the sandcastles is the impermanence of the sand itself.* What a strange thing to say to a little child. Then again, maybe she’d invented that whole memory and he didn’t say it at all. She’d often wondered, particularly in the early years of her marriage, what had pushed her father over the edge. The day following Catherine’s suicide, the unanswered and unanswerable question looms again. Surely it *had* to have been more than the prospect of raising his daughter alone?

Writing is like lawn mowing. All those straight lines. All that raking back and forth over your work. The fresh smell of it. And later the emergence of weeds. The work is never really done. (Brophy 2003,145)

Does the personal, the situated, move our scholarship and our pursuit of knowledge forward? . . . How does experience open certain kinds of knowing to others? How does such writing preclude others from entering it? And whose responsibility is it to make the most of personal experience—the author or the reader? (Berry and Warren 2009, 599).

**January 2010**

. . . The truth of the matter is, I no longer really believe that this project will ever end. . . I am aware that if anyone were to see these words, they might be understood to mean that I am overwhelmed by the unendingness of this project. Perhaps there is something in that. But I actually have an alternative meaning in mind. For it has become quite apparent over the duration of this journey that everything I do is inseparable from the cycles of my own life. Everything is part of a continuum.

It is only now, somewhere near what might reasonably be considered ‘the end point’ of this particular journey that I am able to pause and reflect on the almost-four years of working on my PhD project. Throughout the writing of this body of work labelled ‘exegesis’ I have gone to some lengths to ensure I regularly highlighted the value of the work of production when considering questions about what constitutes both Creative Writing research, and of ‘new knowledge’—that basic requirement of any postgraduate PhD program of study.

I currently spend my mornings working through the final edits and rewrites of sections of ‘Fingerprints: the fiction’ that I plan to submit for PhD examination, and this, what will become the last written section of ‘Fingerprints: the exegesis’, in the afternoons and evenings. As I work, I reflect constantly. Has drawing from my writing practice and from life experience been a worthwhile site from which to begin and continue my research project? Am I offering anything of any value to academic
The very notion brought a rush of excitement and she felt herself writing slowly and beautifully ‘This will be a book for . . . ’ and stopped because her own emotion was too pretentious for words (Astley 1999, 6).

November 2009
I arrived two hours before I needed to. The plan was to check in early, walk around for a while and explore. But it seems that was a bit silly. The line of people checking in—to an earlier ferry I presume, is at least one hundred people long.

I am sitting here then, and I have an urge to pull the manuscript out and examine it for clues. It has to end somehow. I need a resolution.

research and scholarly knowledge? And I cannot help but wonder, now that I have access to and am following the formal university guidelines for PhDs with a creative component, guidelines that were not finalised until late in my candidature: shouldn’t I have something more substantial to offer the reader, a profound summary, or perhaps a tidy bundle of “significant and original contribution[s] to knowledge” (Murdoch 2009, 2).

Until sitting down at the computer to begin writing this final part of the exegetical component of my project, I had anticipated that I would neatly draw together at least some of the loose threads, answered and unanswered questions that have arisen over the past four years of engagement with this project. I write, in Part One, of the exegesis being structured as a narrative using the personal voice and experience. I explain how the middle three Parts, while each marking a different phase of the PhD narrative, are linked by those other threads that wind through the entire journey, shifting and changing as I shifted and changed while grappling with the subject matter of Creative Writing research, and of the project itself. As I intimated in the journal extract opening this Part, I no longer consider that this project can come to an end as such. Rather, everything I do is inseparable from the cycles of my own life. Is it then, an (un)ending that I have almost reached?

Thus, instead of providing neat answers, I return in this Part
There is bound to be a certain amount of ‘retrospective’ discovery that comes from this whole process. For example, will I discover that my approach to writing, my values, or my quality of writing changes? Will I focus less on fiction and more on academic writing? Will I take this further—or will I walk away and never think about the creative process or academic research again?

In 1955, Albert Camus stated that “the idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded; it is fable (1955, 79). Over fifty years later that idea remains a “fable”, at least in my eyes. As highlighted throughout the exegesis, it was my desire to ground the project in my own experiences in order to emphasise the intimate link between the research and doing of creative writing—to highlight that link between ‘creator’ and ‘art’—to display, rather than conceal, the personal. In doing so, I chose to lay bare some of my insecurities and the driving forces behind my writing. My uncertainty about both my own place as a writer in the academy, and about what constituted a valid Creative Writing PhD research project accompanied me through most of the early (and indeed, many of the later) stages of development. With these thoughts weighing so heavily it made sense that if I were to follow the desire to ground the project in personal experience, and restore the human presence to scholarly work (Fleischman 1998), then I write of and from that uncertainty and insecurity. I hoped that by being open about my own (perceived)
A creative writing dissertation . . . examines the impact of all these outside influences on the writer and the writing. It is a conscious reflection of the largely unconscious act of writing (Butt, 2009, 55).

inadequacies, that the link between the experience (or life), research and doing of creative writing might be underscored. I hoped that by being (relatively) open about my own thoughts about the messy and contradictory non-linear paths of my PhD journey, alternative questions about the nature of, and approaches to the doing of Creative Writing at postgraduate level might be raised and considered by those with an interest in the discipline.

As the project progressed I further embraced the idea that engaging with questions arising from practice-led research were themselves a legitimate form of research output. And I began too placing higher value on my own creative writing as a process, not just an ability to develop a product or artefact. It was then that I began to believe more fervently that it is not only the tangible outcome that should be valued in creative writing undertaken in the university—or indeed anywhere. I came to consider as well that researchers should, if they so desired, expect that the work of, along with the doing of, writing, should be acknowledged and valued.

Obviously, the notion of presenting the work integral to the doing of writing work could be problematic. After all, how can we adequately demonstrate and measure an idea or working process? Understandably, the academy does expect a result of sorts from our research projects, the most obvious being the PhD thesis itself. The challenge for Australian researchers and writers
June 2009
Maggie Butt compared the U.K model of the PhD to a medieval apprenticeship with one of the craft guilds. She said “at the end of their ‘time’ the apprentice would produce an apprentice piece or master piece which was judged by the masters of the craft guild as of good enough quality to allow the apprentice to become a master of their craft” (2009, 53-54).

I like the idea of a PhD being a form of apprenticeship and it ties in with something I have been thinking about lately in terms of what I might gain from the overall experience. I certainly don’t anticipate coming out at the ‘other end’ of this experience an ‘expert’ but hopefully I will feel more at ease within a range of communities—scholarly, writing, etc.

working in this context, then, is to find original ways to write and present material relating to the various activities intimately related to the production of writing, and to achieve this outcome while still working within the guidelines set by individual universities.

Just this morning I opened the latest volume of one of the journals I subscribe to and saw that, in certain quarters at least, an approach like mine—dealing closely with the doing of writing and not simply the end product—might be viewed as a useful contribution to Creative Writing research. In the most recent International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing (July 2009), Harper, in his editorial ‘Creative Writing: the Human event’, observes that for the most part Creative Writing is still referred to as if its “identity as commodity is its primary identity; or as if our ability to produce Creative Writing artefacts is the primary worth of Creative Writing” (2009, 86-87). Harper asserts that it is still largely the “commodity-value” that forms the analysis of the final text. In other words, the commodity is still the starting point of any analysis, literary or otherwise. The “human actions and acts that are Creative Writing come second, and if they contain elements of worth these are endowed by the quality, or cultural quality, of the commodities being examined”(2009, 87).
I did not set out with the explicit aim of foregrounding my own human acts. Nor did I originally intend exploring the way in which writing and life mesh, or how researching and working on fiction within the university environment might be affected. Rather, over time I established that this was the right path (or ‘line of flight’) for me to follow in approaching the research and writing of my exegesis. Ultimately, it became that very imbalance Harper mentions that I sought to redress by focusing throughout on the human actions and acts central to my own writing practice.

Harper remarks, in the opening paragraph of that same editorial, that we mostly refer to the final artefacts that emerge from a creative writer or writers by “their specific artefactual names”—such as novel, script, poem, and so on. The term “Creative Writing” is more commonly reserved for those “actions and activities we engage in” rather than the “results of these actions” (2009, 85).

It strikes me now, that if we accept that Creative Writing is not necessarily the result of the “actions and activities” but the actions and activities themselves, then I may have exerted unnecessary energy worrying whether I was approaching Creative Writing (as a postgraduate student) in an appropriate way. My self-doubt returns as I wonder if I missed some fundamental understanding about working in the discipline of Creative Writing.
at this level from the very beginning stages of my research. But, at the same time, I am also relieved. For reading that editorial had several immediate impacts on me beyond those of self-doubt. It reminded me that by being open to shifting the centre of our enquiries, and by taking risks when engaging in practice, we can reveal new embodied knowledge.

That chance encounter (or chance reading) reaffirmed too the immeasurable value of the role that chance plays in our projects. On a regular basis, just when I doubted my abilities or the direction I was heading as far as my research and project were concerned, something appeared to guide, reassure, confront my thinking, or force me to consider a new approach. Exploring the paths created by those chance discoveries then became the creative writing. The editorial reiterated too, that everything, all that raw stuff of everyday life (Cixous 2008), all the activities of a day (Krauth 2006), do contribute to writing, though we cannot possibly hope to really know how, until retrospectively, if at all. But do I—do we—really want to know those answers? I actually don’t think so. I recall Cixous’s comments on how, in the making of a work of writing (and of other artforms), we are trying to reach a secret. We race toward that secret and it eludes us. The work of art, she says, “happens in the chase” (2008, 146). Might discovering the secret or finding the answers quell the desire for undertaking that chase?
Then I witnessed the torture of Sisyphus, as he tackled his huge rock with both his hands. Leaning against it with his arms and thrusting with his legs, he would contrive to push the boulder up-hill to the top. But every time, as he was going to send it toppling over the crest, its sheer weight turned it back, and the misbegotten rock came bounding down again to level ground. So once more he had to wrestle with the thing and push it up, while the sweat poured from his limbs and the dust rose high above his head (Homer 1966, 187).

The stuff of life goes on. I left the above question hanging at the end of my writing for a period of several weeks. I sit down to type again now and I am mildly amused that, instead of the response I thought I might write to that question, it is the story of Sisyphus that threatens to spill onto the page. As punishment set by the gods he had scorned, Sisyphus was condemned to an eternity of futile work, a never-ending task: rolling a rock to the top of a mountain and having it roll back down each time he reached the peak. I cannot help but wonder now whether attempting to highlight ‘what we do’ as creative artists might actually be a little like Sisyphus’s never-ending task. I sincerely hope not.

In the exegesis I have drawn attention to the subtexts that support the development of a finished piece of work. By foregrounding my own voice and experience, and detailing what I do, I am now explicitly part of that subtext. I believe that by discussing and disclosing some of that which is conventionally hidden (Fleischman 1998; Neilson 1998), questions emerge about the ways future creative research might be undertaken. For example, in separating the human presence from the scholarly and so limiting the range and depth of our discussions of creative practice and research, how might we be closing off pathways to
June 2009
The line at the post office was ridiculously long this morning. A man started talking to me. He started the conversation saying “How old do you think I am?” Of course I took twenty years off what I expected, just in case. He told me he was 65, and born in Holland. After the war there were lines for everything. Everything was bought with food stamps. Childhood to him, he said, was all about lining up. He said that one day while he was in a line he looked for something new to see and saw sunlight coming through the blinds, the dust floating in the sunlight and landing on the wooden floorboards. When he got sick of watching the dust he went outside. He was aware of people staring at him. He looked up and he was standing underneath an enormous horse.

Stories produce tacit environment of shared knowledge (scribbled in my notebook—no context provided).

broader understanding—of our practice and of ourselves as active participants in that practice?

I return to Sisyphus. I remember now, that Camus wrote differently about Sisyphus. In his essay ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ (1955) he portrays Sisyphus as the personification of the absurdity of human life. But after reading Camus’ retelling and contemplation of Sisyphus’s tale, the reader comes away thinking that perhaps it was not such a futile task that was set for Sisyphus, after all. “There is no sun without shadow” says Camus, “and it is essential to know the night” (1955, 99). Sisyphus “knows himself to be the master of his days . . . . a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling” (1955, 99). Sisyphus, suggests Camus, has created his own meaning and purpose. Perhaps as writers in academia we can learn from him as we approach our own writing and research. If we acknowledge the absurdity of seeking inherent meaning in everything, but still continue regardless, we may not come up with all the answers to our questions. But we can, if we choose, elect to focus on the work of writing and—like Sisyphus—develop meaning from the search alone.

I opened the exegesis with the epigraph: “Writing itself is always bad enough, but writing about writing is surely worse, in the futility department” (Atwood 2002, xvi). Have I come, if not
And yet it is my firm belief that each writer undertaking a PhD, must adopt the work approach best suited to his or her own personality as a writer (O’Mahony 2007, 46).

full circle, then back in circular fashion to finish in a place proximate to the starting point of my research journey? I returned to that quote regularly during my PhD candidature, reassured by the fact that Atwood overcame her sense that writing about writing might be a futile experience and went on to write a book. In a sense that word —‘futile’—a word that on first consideration seems rather bleak and hopeless, became a private talisman of sorts, reminding me that if I kept going, something positive would come from following the various paths of my exploration. In the earliest stages of my research I assumed that somewhere along the way, on one of those paths I would find an answer to a then-unformulated specific research question that would reveal itself. Instead, what emerged from that enquiry was a search involving a series of linked or cumulative open questions and issues relating to the nature of Creative Writing as discipline, practice and research, and an investigation into the ways in which the experiential shapes our approach to writing.

As I near the formal closure of this project, I consider an optimistic note about the nature of Creative Writing and where, as writers, we might choose take it in the future:

Creative Writing is an event, a set of human acts and actions. We have known this all along, and yet not fully explored what this means, how it occurs, or what these acts and actions produce, in their entirety. Recent digital technologies have highlighted this fact. It is surely up to us to decide how we wish to take forward what we know about Creative Writing, whether we wish to develop our knowledge of this highly valued human activity, and to evolve
February 2010
All week I have been thinking about the following quote: “Nancy Murrell has kept her husband’s shoes on the verandah since he died in 1990 when she was sixty years old. Metaphorically it was a way to keep him alive, and literally not allowing him to walk away (Damousi 2001, 79).”

I remember when last year Pam’s burglar alarm went off and we went over to check if she was okay. She was in a state and took us up to the bedroom to try and turn it off at the ‘box’. On her pillow was Albert’s photo, and beside the bed, his slippers. I felt that I had intruded into something intensely personal (though had been invited in).
—why do these thoughts arise again and again when I am supposed to be focused on this point — of-closure?

In any case, I do not write with an end in sight, but always for other beginnings (Cixous 2008, 56).

I take heart in the fact that in undertaking this project, after an admittedly bumpy start, I chose my own way to “take [it] forward”.

Camus finished his story of Sisyphus by asking the reader to consider that the unendingness of Sisyphus’s eternal task was, in fact, a positive outcome. Sisyphus’s rock, explains Camus, became “his thing”. He implores the reader to “imagine Sisyphus happy” (1955, 98-99). I believe (now) that Creative Writing researchers are in a privileged space in the academy. Once we navigate a path through the initial uncertainty that comes with being the new kid in school—the who is not dressed quite like the other kids and talks a bit differently—and start to own our projects, we can engage with those areas I mentioned in Part One—those passions, ideas, interests, knowledges and strengths—and be confident that our personal motivations are not only a valid but a vital basis for approaching a research project. We can take pleasure in our explorations, which might then become our own version of Sisyphus’s rock—our own things from which to develop knowledge and “evolve understanding [of] for the benefit of all” (Harper 2009).
Postscript

I named this project ‘Fingerprints: Exploration of Identity, Community and Place’, before I had begun any of the formal research. As the project evolved, I considered alternative names. But nothing seemed to work. The idea of a fingerprint, to me, suggested a permanence—an indisputable identity, a label that says this is who/what it is. I did not know it at the beginning of the search, but that fingerprint was what I sought—for myself as writer in the academy, for writing in the academy, and perhaps, in more general terms—in life. Instead of a fingerprint, I ended up with a thing. My thing, like my own identity, and like the discipline of Creative writing is complex, contradictory, transitory, evolving and unending—and so, will in some way become a part of all future writing projects. For, as in life, in my project there were no neat and tidy resolutions, no definitive answers, and no final secrets uncovered. I suspect, therefore, that after a pause to rest following the formal closure of this four-year PhD project, my desire to resume the chase will be reawakened.
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