

'PASSION DU SENS' FOR AN AUSTRALIAN NOVELLA-BILDUNGSROMAN

An Australian fiction writer's purpose-driven exploration of the novella-Bildungsroman
form

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STATEMENT

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

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The Deaths

A novella

By Nicol Ritchie

- In the fog of our solitude we grope for drama.

PART ONE
CHILDHOOD

JOSEPH STREET

Skidding through muddy puddles, darting and diving over sodden fields under driving rain, we arrived, charged, at the crest of a narrow urban hill, and stood upon the footpath, peering down. The sheerness made me queasy. The gutter, our luge track, was elevated almost thirty centimetres from the surface of the road, but the rushing water would not be contained. Plummeting and spewing, its wake rippled out two feet on either side.

Conditions such as prevailed that afternoon made too light a vessel of forty kilos of boy, but water-sliding down Joseph Street was the one stunt I was more confident with than Humphrey. So, before he could push in, I dropped into the gutter and straightened my legs. I gained speed immediately, my arse hardly touching anything, and within seconds the open run-off drain at the bottom, with its two vertical thick rusted bars, loomed. Just before collision I canted, bore right and veered deftly into the street as I scrabbled to my feet.

'Errol! Car!'

Before I could register this warning, I felt in my bones the rev of a flaccid, muffler-less engine, and nearly toppled headlong with the strain of reversing my momentum. Keeling backwards into the gutter, I dashed my temple on its edge.

Underwater, I faced out across the road, as a field of blurred white flooded my vision. Only when I felt my shins scraping against something hard did I realise I was being sucked through the opening of the drain that ran under the cross street. White turned to black as my chin, my wrists, my hands found and squeezed the bar. The force of the current was too strong. My fingers slipped over iron. I gave up when something soft hardened into muscle ... a hand's grip, tightening around my elbow. It was man's strength.

'Pull, Errol. Pull!'

Humphrey's voice was deep and resonant, as if it were travelling down a well. I can't say how, but we ended up on the footpath slumped against a wall. He groaned and it became a tension-releasing laugh. Chastened, I gripped at the bitumen with the tips of my fingers. I

felt as if the whole suburb might liquefy and carry me away. Humphrey let loose with a rapid volley of chat.

'Far *out!* How close was that? How close, Errol? Did you see that car – white ... Torana I think it was? Bastard slowed down. I thought he was going to stop but then he just turned the corner, slowly but, you know? Aw man. Look at your shins; I can full on see the bone. Hey! Whaddya reckon's under that road? Did ya get a look or what? Reckon your head'll need stitches.'

Humphrey's loquacity was shredding my nerves but I couldn't find the will to shut him up. He went on about rats and baby alligators and being spat out at Balmain Wharf, Circular Quay, The Heads. Underwater tours. Hidden treasures. And all I wanted was a bath – hot, still water. Dry pyjamas. Melted cheese on toast. I turned and pressed hard into the corner house with the flats of my hands, rose and found my feet, not entirely trusting my purchase on the concrete, doubting gravity. Looking anywhere but back into the drain, shivering like something electrified, hearing the faint cutting sound as an engine died.

Was that the moment Humphrey disappeared into?

'I'm g-go-g-going h-home,' I managed.

I leaned into my ascent of Joseph Street, hugging myself more tightly than was necessary. Humphrey, or his presence, followed, and, at the summit, pulled me back by the collar of my sodden grey school shirt. I felt a clear plastic button spring free.

'I haven't had me go yet.' He was puffing his chest. I ached to punch the side of his boxy head, should have, but all I could do was look through him to the power station, set like a medieval tower against the darkening sky. A fork of lightning spread in flashing rivulets like the veins on some giant wrist.

'Hello? *Earth to Errol.*'

I shuddered, turned, and floated home a ghost. At the gate I fought an urge to go back and find my only friend, but I'd lost my key. So I set about climbing over the house and crawled

in through the kitchen window, dripping blood into the sink. When Dad got home that night he found me in bed unconscious with a dangerously high temperature, my head stuck to the pillow. Mum was away, for the third year in a row, at Uluru. I'd refused to go with her.

I never mentioned the drain to the coppers – to go back there, even mentally, was unthinkable. Though I did disclose this: before Humphrey and I had parted company there'd been a slow-moving white Torana.

'And what about the gash on your melon?' The one cop smelled faintly of a kind of beer my Dad didn't drink.

'Aw some older kids cornered us in a lane ... and they tripped me over when I tried to bolt.'

Warming to my lies, I invented some more, hybrid names of boys who, I said, pointing in a certain direction, were from the housing estate a few streets away. They looked at each other significantly, and wanted names and descriptions. Guided *ex hypothesi*, one officer suggested there had been several people inside the car, while the other increasingly regarded me with what was either burning skepticism, or the rising nadir of his stubborn hangover. I played along, though in truth, when I closed my eyes to remember the vehicle I could only see a blurring. But that soupy whiteness did contain jags of colour, as if my face was pressed up to the spin of a front-loading washing machine.

The lucid policeman nodded with finality, as if confirming a suspicion. The two of them told me to wait while they stepped outside for a chat. I thought I could hear them saying something about one of Humphrey's older brothers, who used to complain about a copper he knew on the force that was bent and had it in for him. In actual fact, there was something big about to go down at the housing estate a few streets away that year: a massive drug bust. Whether Humphrey's brother was connected, or how, I couldn't say. But any way you sliced it the local trauma to the community of Humphrey's disappearance was drowned in the excitement of a major sting. And my child brain clung to this by some twisted emotional logic as a protective shield against the surprise attacks of my own culpability. It pissed down for two solid weeks that March.

A WORD FROM THE NARRATOR

I can't remember how I learned to lie, but it seemed to come naturally. When I was nine I hoarded twenty dollars' worth of silver change from Dad's jacket into the guts of my stuffed clown before Mum found it. I told her I wanted to keep the coins warm for a rainy day, and my Dad stepped in and said it was alright – that we'd had an agreement. She sewed up the clown's stomach. That denim was always startlingly cold, unlike my Dad's breath, which was warm and smelled of tobacco and Fosters when he came home around half past nine and grabbed me up into his beard. My most vivid dinner image is of watching him impale peas and complain of the toughness of the re-heated steak. His jacket hung over the chair with pockets so abundantly heavy, they were asking to be emptied. I tried pinching eighty cents from Mum's purse one sunny Saturday morning soon after and made the mistake of showing it to her.

'Look what I found on the street.' As if you'd find four perfect twenty-cent pieces on the street.

The look that came over her was so devastating I never stole from her again, but that night I tore the clown limb from limb, and experienced immediate pangs of remorse.

My point is that reconfiguring your life as a narrative is about as meaningful as a stuffed clown full of silver. It's thereness is undeniable, but as soon as you try to explain it, it becomes a weaker version of itself. In the mouths of others we are estranged from our quiddity and survive only by way of their verbal entanglements. Reading back over that Joseph Street recollection, which I wrote, I think, during my short stint at uni, it strikes me as factually true yet dishonest in its style. Which is to say I don't recognise myself in it. No doubt I lost my boyhood in that rainstorm but I'd really wanted to convey the dirty ache of losing contact with another soul; the soul of some body I could never again fix in reality. Do you know what I'm saying? I had wanted to fix the dead so as to get past them, but by the time I had become equipped to write them out of my mind I was powerless not to misrepresent them awfully. And this is especially true of myself. So I suppose the real missing person in this whole story is me.

I, the actual author-protagonist, find myself at the page, day after day, lying through the sheer effort of trying to be honest. It becomes a game I play with my own mortality. And it turns ever inward until I start to suspect a deficiency of the brain. Perhaps it's best that way. After all, the effects of following language are far less bewildering than the memory of the dumb throbbing of a human heart that has forever ceased to beat. So I beat this life into shape and I write and re-write and write and re-write. There's nothing organic about it.

My quest? Simple: to disappear into a web of words and never to come out the other side.

Better than disappearing down a drain, ay?

TUNNELS OF LOVE

My life at least began at the beginning, and without complications, eleven years before Joseph Street, and courtesy of the oral contraception Mum neglected to take. Following the simultaneous splitting and reconfiguration of two generational atoms 37.5 billion years in the making, I found myself in utero orbiting on a string within the warm fluid of a twenty-six-year-old womb. After nine months of being blithe flotsam, I crowned, breached, and tore through an opening. The oxygen was a fatal assault on my cosmic intelligence. But if I cried it was for the boob alone.

I was the routine family miracle spilled at last. The raw issue of two mental labourers – an X-generation baby born in the Mother Country during the heyday of casual sex when lust was running wild.

My Mum and Dad were in London when I trailed my clouds of glory, and to be honest I remember none of it. Neither being conceived, nor floating around in a womb, nor cutting my brain on the birth canal. In that greyish hospital ward in Praed Street, Paddington, I can only conjure a young, beautiful face, contorted and tomato red, each forced expulsion becoming M-o-t-h-e-r-h-o-o-d.

Looking back, my short life has been about as worthwhile as the ripple caused by the tear Dad added to his pint at the Fountains Abbey pub across the road upon the news of my arrival.

But I was a first.

Yes, the first and only, and a firstborn son. The first grandchild on either side of the line for that matter, although the line stopped with me.

GIBBERISH

According to my auntie I came to term as the result of ardour on a Greek island. Such ardour as would, if in a film, have been deemed 'tasteful and integral to the plot' by the censorship board of 1973. Around the time a verdict was delivered on Bloody Sunday and the Dalai Lama was making his first trip to Britain, I was on my Mum's hip, being urged to recognise the twenty-six letters on the wall she gestured at. Outside, unemployment was rife in London and the church bells mocked the striking air.

My auntie said that while I was being introduced to solids I was passed around by hairy-chested filmmakers, writers in cheap nylon suits and all manner of braless artists with generous armpit hair or academics with pornographic sideburns. She says Dorothy and Iain, especially Iain, were part of the freely educated liberal arts crowd, an exponentially expanding chattering class who sought to undermine conventional bourgeois reality with rigorous "dialectic" argument, whereas all they were destined to achieve was a broken home. My auntie can be extravagantly cynical after a few wines.

My earliest real memories are to do with my father and they are sore. Dada disappearing for a ten-minute eternity to fetch me a snowball; a reflected cascade of bright scarlet arterial ooze down my cheek from manning his razor; pressing my finger into the grey invisible smoulder of the car's cigarette lighter, which I had watched him use from the backseat as Mum wrested the steering wheel against the straying of the car into the oncoming lane.

Other than these founding symbols (latent ember, coveted ice, concealed blade) my inchoate period is on the authority of my guardians. But their imperfect retrievals, buttressed by the few ambient impressions I've nursed and cultivated from that blur of time, are not enough. Infanthood, more than any period, necessitates recourse to the photo albums I used to keep.

Look, my parents are hairy, supple and gorgeous. Glowing brown in all the photos of this perennially autumnal period. That's why they are so bronzed in my mind, though we spent most of my first three years going about in frigid English streets. Strange, no people in this one. During one of my parents' crisp, huddled walks through St James's Park? Yes! Dad must have put the camera in front of my face for a baby's eye view of the ubiquitous London Planes; I see them again now as if from within my pram, their dangling spiky baubles transfix. Wipe clean my mind.

But mostly it's flared and flowered twenty-somethings I peruse, smudge-able, and fading slowly in denim and in suede – on the green grass erupting with daisies, traversing a wobbly bridge. There's Dad reclining in a dishevelled bed by a smoking ashtray peering down through his jet ringlets into a copy of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* or *From Mankind to Marlowe*. Cool. Mum's in the passenger seat of a pale blue Mini Cooper circa Summer of Love. Her bosom is massive. Sweetly serene she is reading aloud from *The Golden Bowl*, her eyelashes so long and curved. I swear they're in mid flicker ... The vehicle buckets down the M1 and from the haze I glean that my father, who frames the moment while driving, has a billowing Kent dripping from his ruby lips. I surmise a vigorous glint in those eyes the colour of smoked steel. He will be commanded in the next moment, with good-natured alarm, to watch where he's driving.

And what about this photo of me with a grazed forehead chewing a Minolta lens cap on a picnic blanket? More flattened proof, another two-dimensional facsimile of something that must have happened in a certain split second beyond the thickening wall of interceding years. Like the snap of me on the cusp of bawling at the sensation in the gums of a first ice-cream cone proffered by Mamma.

But I would burn all the albums and keep only a single photo. It is of me as a three-year-old skipping effeminately down a beach. When I close my eyes and press it to my face I find I can go there. I can smell charring lamb. Strange noises are emanating from a clutch of young boys on a Greek island ahead of me and I run, naked, to join them. The sting of their collective hostile bemusement, at my confident gibberish, is probably as good an acid test as any for my innate writerliness.

ARTARMON

Now for the obligatory early days section. You'll have to endure the fact that it occurs in fits starts, and is only marginally less impressionistic than everything after the drain incident; endure it against the promise of the explicit, the shocking, the unexpected and the poignant.

Dorothy Connolly was teaching professional English to migrants when Iain Connolly, after seven years of postgraduate study with a sideline in photography, was offered tenure at a 'gumtree' university in a city intriguingly far away, with a lot of sea and light. Thus I was sent down under after my weaning. When we touched down at Mascot, Mum and I were fetched at the airport and driven to the top level of a semi-detached in Artarmon overlooking a train station. Dad'd gone on ahead to assess the lay of the land and its famed laconic mood.

According to his journals, everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. The first thing that struck him about Sydney was that all the men wore shorts, rain, hail or shine, and leaned on any available surface, or against any edifice so indisposed. Especially in the height of summer, the human flux occurred in beats so protracted they were almost surreal. It was as if the locals caught up to the idea of moving, out of the way of an approaching milk truck, say, supremely unhurried on the tail of an afterthought.

Below us were a Greek family running a Milk Bar. They were forever bringing hot, occasionally undercooked, chips up the concrete steps down the side of the house. In return we gave them figs from the tree in our back garden, which dumped the seedy sweet-

splitting fruit faster than we could eat it. The relationship soured, though, when it dawned on my parents that our neighbours' generosity may have been sponsored by the fact we were paying for their electricity. Since that tree, I associate this desert-oasis manna with cracking light-grey concrete bombed with over-available suburban rot. And the snarl of fruit bats, best witnessed in silhouetted swarms against the lit reverse spandrel arch design of the Sydney Harbour Bridge by night.

The family car was a white, dented Kingswood station wagon, soon stolen and found abandoned in Botany. One day it returned with a new bicycle in the back, a yellow Malvern Star with a long seat and no crossbar, which, I was later to learn, meant it was intended for a girl. After tantrums and scabbed knees I would spend quietly ecstatic hours circling and snaking the loose-gravelled car park across the street from the back of our place.

But it shamed me to be doubled to school on my father's Yamaha 650. I could not handle the attention of other kids and would make Dad cut the hot crackling menace of the machine's engine at the last corner and glide to stop well before the school property line. Still, the kids swarmed around me in the playground, as I grew hot with embarrassment; at their idiotic conjectures my heart hammered away in my throat. I was desperate to blend into the scenery. To be left in peace, so I could plan how to transcend my shyness. Once at an outdoor kids' party I was placed on the hub of a roundabout and all the other children came and started pushing it around like galley slaves. Somehow, to be the centre of the universe was just as natural to me as fading into the periphery.

In those early days, we frequented a nude beach called Obelisk. There was always a radio broadcasting a test match as Mum applied coconut oil to her breasts, her thighs and her flat stomach. I sloshed about in the shallows under the sting of the sun, going Paddle Pop brown. Mum's tits glistened and Dad warmed his nuts. She read *The Tyranny of Distance*. Dad listened to a commentator describe how a man called Thommo, all bouncing blonde hair and grimace, was terrorising the higher order of West Indian batsmen with a six-ounce sphere of red leather stitched over cork. Unorthodox to the core, he flung his barely visible projectiles from six yards with a muzzle velocity of a hundred miles per hour. Thommo's series proved the one that spurred the Windies into ruthless world beaters. Politically, it

was right in the middle of the Fairfax mail ban, and Gough Whitlam had recently been deposed. Dad, as part of a cohort of second-generation Marxist-oriented academics, never got to enjoy his rule. Whereas he would have to wait twenty years for Australian cricket to come right again, Government would correct itself in a mere seven when Bob Hawke got in.

I was made safe in the spaces I improvised between my father's comings and goings and my mother's wistfulness that was to dissolve into loneliness and succumb, later, to yearning. On Sunday afternoons, grace floated down in the sun-charged particles of dust in the empty rooms.

I registered her brave smile, suffered her distracted caress and studied the dark burn of Dad's glance should I manage to break his concentration. I read Dahl and Blyton while Mum re-read letters and wrote them back home to a lush leafy colonial suburb in Durban. Dad changed his typewriter ribbon and clacked out a penetratingly exact lecture series from *Oedipus Tyrannus* to *Hamlet* via *The Cherry Orchard* and *Sister Beatrice* culminating in *Comedians*, a play set in seventies Manchester about an ex-Music Hall comic who, haunted by an erection he got while visiting a concentration camp, strives with mixed results to weed racism and sexism out of the comedy of his students in an evening class at a community college.

The first Australian I loved had a dramatic skin condition. Unlike the pollution-resistant London Planes of my babyhood, with their maple-shaped leaves whose austere dry-flaking trunks were resistant to the embrace, the Melaleuca quinquenervia (or paperbark) begged to be fondled, pawed and even – if delicately – stripped. She was ensconced in thick spongy layers of skin that were forever in the comely process of splitting like a series of giant open labia in white, grey and beige.

One scorching lunchtime, I was kicking a brown plastic rugby ball into the air on the asphalt, when an Italian girl with long unctuous hair came up to me. She played with the front of her school dress and talked into the ground.

'You'll go blind if you look into the sun like that.'

'No I won't.'

'Like my Nonna.'

We lingered after the return bell and I took her to my favourite tree, where we peeled back the bark and gouged at the trunk with the ends of hardy sticks. To make a magic potion, we mixed the bouncy tree flesh with leaves, twigs and gum nuts. For me it was a love concoction, but for her it restored vision. I meant for us to stay in that liminal space forever. But the girl grew scared all of a sudden and ran back into class. The pinch of a malicious teacher's naily fingers around my trapezius brought me out of my communing and I was dragged in to the headmaster's office.

I couldn't have explained to him my susceptibility to the weird gravity field of the scattered Australian bushscape that was radiating through the playground. But the phenomenon exerted its force on me indoors too. The first school report I can remember decried my habit of gazing through the window for extended periods. I would be cast out across the playground towards the wind-shivered trees foregrounded against the smooth dark brown bricks of the adjacent school building.

A certain terror comes over you at some point in your whippersnapperhood, when your daydreaming is pathologised.

'If I don't understand, I will die' is basically what you think.

As the front end of my brain rapidly differentiated, my parents' arguments took on a blood-curdling tone. I couldn't help deconstructing them as I lay tense in my top bunk, flashing the screen of my digital watch on and off, sometimes until midnight.

I took to looking up some of the words my parents emphasised in my pocket Macquarie Dictionary and it soothed me to copy out their definitions. One early morning I thumbtacked a list to my parents' bedroom door. I still have it: 'marital', 'affair', 'infidelity', 'condone', 'hypocrite', 'divorce', 'turn on'. They looked at me sidelong after that with the same expressions, spontaneously united in their concern, and a few days later we drove six hours north for our only family holiday, a camping trip. Dad taught me to bodysurf and warned me about rips. I'd already been told I was a natural swimmer with my grandfather's broad shoulders, so I regarded the sea and deemed it masterable. In seconds,

I was cut adrift beyond the breakers, treading water and being dragged from the beach by an undercurrent way too strong for nine-year-old limbs. My father stroked out, and towed me back to shore where I was cast down upon the dry sand. It was an hour before Mum consented to speak to me.

I also learned to build a fire and use a tin opener, and Dad told me stories, riffs on *Treasure Island*. Around the flames, in the elements, under the weight of night, the fragrant bush's conspiratorial sonic arrangements – the clacks and whirring, the crack and thudding, the screeches, creaking and primal thrumming –re-arranged our atoms.

Sunburnt, happy, we played I Spy and sang songs and laughed and zoned out the whole drive home, stopping for fresh oysters somewhere near The Entrance. I watched a distant squall come in from beneath a giant rainbow that straddled the whole Pacific. My parents' love washed back. I craned forward on the edge of my seat with my salt and vinegar crisps and wedged my head between their shoulders.

PETRARCH

Without saying anything at first, my Mum had gone back to uni and announced soon after our adventure that she was going into the central desert to take part in an Indigenous ceremony to bring her closer to the land. It was a rare opportunity for her, she said, and I would have been welcomed if not for school.

The day she left I came down with a fever. It began with a tickle in my throat but the energy ebbed out of me as the day wore on. I found my way home, head pounding viciously, and fell asleep on the verandah since I'd forgotten my key. Around dinner time a strange woman showed up. She brandished a plastic bag laden with hamburgers and chips. In her other hand were two bottles of red. My temples throbbed and the waft of her strange perfume made me dizzy.

'You're in bad shape aren't you mate?' We need to get you inside, on the double. Don't you have a key?'

'Are you a friend of my Mum's?'

'Your Dad's actually.'

'Cause she's away.'

'I'm a bit early. Busting for a wee as it happens.'

'I can get us inside.'

I tried climbing over the side door, but was too weak.

'I'll give it a go, ay?'

As she lifted her one leg over, her white skirt rode up past her hips.

By the time she'd got into the kitchen Dad was pulling up in his old Volvo. He stuck a thermometer in my mouth, gave a whistle, and fed me a teaspoon of crushed Disprin and honey. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, I managed to get down half my hamburger.

'Let's get you to bed Errol.'

'Dad?'

'Yes'

'How come your friend's not wearing undies?'

Their laughter both shocked and delighted me.

The sound of the currawongs drilled into my skull as I drifted off.

I woke saturated and delirious and staggered through into the kitchen to behold a naked woman. Who was she? Her teeth flashed and her gums were stained purple. A violin concerto was playing, probably Schubert. Our ancient white cat, Petrarch, was draped over the woman's neck like a fur, and she was keeping him there by stroking his skull with the knuckles of her free hand; the other loosely held a near-empty wine glass. My father

worked assiduously in front of an easel with a thin piece of charcoal. My eyes traced down past a pair of small paper-white breasts with eminent areolas and asymmetrically protuberant nipples. The thatch of pubic hair was generous and richly hued, something close to the orange of a setting sun. Her left leg was open and propped on an adjacent chair, affording a livid glimpse of vulva. I vomited copiously onto the kitchen floor.

A week later, after my Mum got back, glowing, from Uluru, the episode, which I'd effectively forgotten, was reanimated via a lacerating argument I overheard from my top bunk. Mum was saying a neighbour had witnessed a redhead arrive in a yellow convertible, which remained parked in the same spot, level with the frangipani tree, the next morning.

In hindsight, it isn't the nudity that gets me about this woman so much as her presumption of absolute propriety in our home.

And so my mother must have thought because my father was banished with one of those cardboard-boxy old suitcases the next morning. That afternoon Mum and me ate white bread cheese sandwiches with dangling lettuce, cut in triangles. It was in one of those old-style Milk Bars we hip Sydneysiders would one day come to abandon for the café revolution.

Mum waxed lyrical about her sojourn in the desert.

'What about the dingoes?'

'The thing is not to feed them.'

'Have you ever had an affair, Mum?' I ventured sheepishly.

She blushed with something like pleasure, and I resumed staring at my warped reflection in a big dented silver cup.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Revenge? Curiosity? Self-protection really. We both love you, Errol, more than anything. You know that, don't you.'

'Yeah.'

She rubbed her belly, as the traffic trundled and roared up and down Parramatta Road. I suppressed an upsurge of emotion in my chest, which wanted to spurt out of me like that blowhole at McKenzies beach. It was impeding the enjoyment of my milkshake as I tried to suck a gob of ice cream through my straw.

That evening I heard muffled sobs emanating from the locked bathroom. Mum didn't come out for an hour; when she did she was carrying a bunch of towels.

I didn't let her explain.

'I know how babies are made.'

'I know you know that.'

'You told me, remember?'

'Yes.'

An older boy had come to play in the toyroom and kept jabbing his finger through a tight circle he'd made with his other hand while raising his eyebrows, and Mum had supplied me the scientific version.

'So aren't I getting a brother or sister now?'

Mum made, unsteadily, for the French doors, and I followed her out guilty and confused. In the back garden we lay together on the trampoline looking through the upper branches of the gum tree. The deep blue blanket of pre-evening spread over us.

When it was fully dark, Mum told me to do my homework while she ran herself a bath.

I kept myself awake until the turn of the key heralded my father's arrival, but remembered, hours later, that he was holed up in a motel. I had planned to go and watch him eat. I thought of the lady in the kitchen and played with myself until a burning between my legs took the life out of me and I tumbled headlong into sleep, pretty certain I would never wake up.

Dad came back a few days later with a scrabble set, and Mum made some Turkish coffee and we played until late. It was a good night, but I can't say I felt secure in the world. The distances between us across the dining room table seemed to have expanded beyond our reach.

HUMPHREY

Everything up to here is a long way of explaining why I took to the streets with Humphrey, the boy who was seated next to me in fourth class. I suppose I was filling some kind of continuity vacuum. During the next two years, we were inseparable. He had seen his mother beaten black and blue, often visited his one brother at the Big House with her, and had been subjected to the sort of psychological torture by the other brother, Jimmy, that would gratify even the most seasoned sadist. Yet Humphrey was irrepressibly cheerful.

We collected aluminium cans, scrounged for cigarette butts, explored the disused train tracks and the dungeons that once had been for the lunatics at Callan Park, and occasionally shoplifted. As per the script, he was the charming whip-smart boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Deviating from the script, he was never going to enjoy pubescence.

The morning of the day Humphrey disappeared, Jimmy had tracked us down on our way to school and pegged us with lemons from the top of a lane. The lemon that caught Humphrey in the side of his head sealed his fate. I think it perforated his eardrum. Insisting he was all right, Humphrey convinced me to wag school with him, and we walked over to Birkenhead Point with the ten dollars he'd pinched from his old lady's sock drawer.

Everything, not just the truancy, was out of the ordinary about that day – the fact that I'd been sleeping over at his place on a weeknight, that it was his birthday and his old lady had taken us to Luna Park and Timezone the afternoon before, the driving rain and hail, the stolen cash.

On the way back over the Iron Cove Bridge, when the skies opened up, I had to stop Humphrey from jumping off it.

See, Joseph Street was my idea. And because of it Humphrey fell out of time and I turned eleven with the residual of him eddying around inside my head.

ORANGE GROVE

My hair darkened and became wavy; my limbs sprung and my collarbones started to protrude. I became fond of mirrors. Dad's word for it was narcissism. For my tenth birthday he'd bought me two posters – he was making a sly point, but he probably also hoped I would go into medicine – both were anatomically detailed and copiously labelled. One was a standing skinless body, which revealed the muscular system, and the other was a prismatic face. I pinned the face up in the dunny, and absorbed, daily, all the precise terminology for my features.

In summer, I turned the colour of caramel. Girls started passing me notes and, with what I suppose now was my 'negative capability', I somehow amassed six girlfriends.

But my harem was more of a hit squad, and I was accosted by it during the breaks. According to their paper games I had to poke a petal with a number between one and ten so they could work the flower open and closed so many times, and repeat, until the core revealed the three words: I love you. I found this interactive origami devastating in a way I couldn't articulate. I suppose that under it I yearned for the love of the Italian by the paperbark. They bailed me up on the wall out the back of the main building and coated me with slobbery kisses. They giggled and taunted me and, eventually, decided I was frigid. And one by one I was 'dropped'.

Meanwhile, being adored by the girls had also made me anathema to a similarly forward group of boys, who harangued me mercilessly with promises of violence. It was hell. After school, a large crowd one day had gathered near a hillock known as a site for fighting to watch the toughest kid in the year, Shane Westwood, 'start' Errol Connolly. I snapped and punched him as hard as I could in the head. He fell to the ground he and stayed there a while. I'd connected with his temple.

This confused his gang, and I slipped home unmolested, but they had regrouped by the next morning and they shoved and taunted me in front of the whole playground until I begged off, weeping. But they were intent on chasing me, and I evaded them until colliding head to head with a semi-retarded kid. We fell to the asphalt together and in the confusion, he became the locus for the mob's blood lust, and though it grieved me to see him being trailed and assaulted by the jeering pack, the relief of no longer being prey was more palpable than my empathy. To reflect on, I'm amazed at how little monitoring of such victimization there was by the teachers; the classroom was a somewhat different story, but out in the playground – and this too was the case outside of the home in the streets – kids, many of whom came from violent homes, were left to run their own show.

To survive, I took my comfortable humiliation as deep into the periphery as was possible, and practised avoidance, found solitude.

Without the distractions of a wayward best friend, I did my homework and won admission to a selective high school, a boon for my parents at the time, but, looking back, it was possibly only a quota-filling exercise. Half the students at my primary school in the mid eighties were semi-illiterate.

PART TWO
JUVENALIA

WORDS

Mum had acquired a Masters in political science and had things going on in Canberra and elsewhere to do with Indigenous Affairs, while Dad was artistic director of a well-established experimental theatre group on top of his day job as a lecturer in Drama. Mum held subdued cocktail parties at which a lot of World Music was played and the odd discreet joint circulated; after a certain hour there would run vigorous, but respectful, arguments around all the big issues of the day – uranium mining, land rights, unemployment, multiculturalism, Americanisation.

When Mum was away, Dad would throw parties of a more Dionysian bent. There were impromptu performances – folk songs, poems, even scenes. The arguments were feral, though in a rarefied, elusive discourse, and on increasingly arcane topics. But I was under the spell of language. I hung in there for the salty terms deployed during the spittle-inflected perorations. I loved the life-and-death passion and the erudite aggression of liberal-arts academics. And I was vindicated when my father brought down the thesis of his interlocutor with an antithesis, paused, and then set the room at a roar with an acerbic double entendre I'd get him to explain later. I also preferred Dad's parties because I could hoard cigarettes, slink away and clamber up onto the roof with cans of Foster's. Up there I watched the city skyline through the chubby branches of the frangipani tree in the front yard. Eventually in twos and threes the guests would stagger out, laughing or crying or whooping, and fumble for an age with their keys. They drove off, lurchingly, into the suburban night, and the next morning I'd bring Dad Disprin, and both of us a Coke from the corner shop, and we'd play Bob Dylan and Eric Bogle LPs.

I told him about the hippy, rosy-cheeked girl with freckles and jutting ears – the daughter of some divorced professor who'd come out of the closet and had co-written an influential book to do with postcolonialism. He seemed delighted. Sally was brought along to Iain's dos only very occasionally, so each time we ventured onto the roof together something about our bodies was different. Since she was two years my senior, her sexuality was already secretly erupting the first time we entwined on the peaked corrugated iron. She taught me how to 'tongue kiss' and once I got it, we went non-stop for an hour until our faces were raw. Later on she tried, unsuccessfully, to show me how to unstrap her bra. The last time I

saw her – before the parties stopped forever – she counselled me through the scalding squirt of disgrace that was my spontaneous ejaculation. If it wasn't for the severe angle of the roof I might've lost my virginity.

At high school, I'd fallen in with a cloud formation of like-minded dreamers, and from within it glided forth Matilda. Her smile coated me entirely with a permanent and slow-acting poison. She wore fine-filigreed silver jewellery and donned embroidered cardigans over her uniform. Her undergarments' license to be proximate with her skin struck me as a great injustice. To be the elastic of the purple underpants biting into her hip flesh, or the ample bra cup her breasts warmed through over the course of her days was a vision of paradise so impossible it hurt. I was anaemic with envy for her dumb garments.

Fortunately, she was in love with someone else. This saved me the torture of having to make small talk and the humiliation of certain rejection.

From an LSD casualty in Rozelle, who had a fat joint constantly on the burn and brewed loose-leaf tea, I learned to wield a steel-string acoustic guitar. My repertoire was severely limited – mainly 12-bar blues – but my playing was poignantly adept within its narrow musicological band. Music lubricated my fraught nervous system, which in the presence of more than two people prevented me from coherent verbal communication. With all nine of my peer group gathered at lunch, my ears burned and I fell to practising my looks and gestures. When alluded to, I raised a quizzical eyebrow, or pulled a theatrical facial expression.

But if the stars lined up I got off a one-liner before someone else dived into the lull. People's observations often seemed banal against what I'd intended to say, so to compensate for the pathological failure of my contributory voice, I strained to cast myself in the role of the strong and silent type, and became chronically unexpressed in the process. Dope, which made an extended hilarious joke of the universe at first, soon came to amplify my paranoia. But after a couple of longnecks of Cooper's beer I was ebullient, effusive and for everyone.

THE GAP

Adolescence self-centred me by degrees. The more my friends consumed my attention, the more obsolete became my mother and father. Yet some of the stuff we talked about resonated with my home situation. Practically all the other kids in my group seemed to have separated or divorced parents, or ones that didn't communicate. Most had step-mums and dads they called by their first names. It twigged during a drunken deep-and-meaningful in Jubilee Park that I was part of a 'dysfunctional' family. My oldies had been graduating from an open toxicity to a perpetual détente. In 'dysfunctional family' I had latched onto an official idea, psychological substantiation for my disaffected image.

This, combined with the fact I was about to turn fifteen and a dedicated binge drinker, rendered parental control an intractable annoyance, an embarrassing obstacle to my bliss. Mum travelled a lot for work now but was always home on weekends and had been exercising an unfortunate knack for imposing curfews with guilt trips. I reasoned that if Iain and Dorothy split up, I could stay at my Dad's place of exile on Fridays and Saturdays and, under his lawless rule, devote each night to my own sensual carnage. My friend Hamish, for one, took the smoking carriage to Katoomba, where his old man lived, every other weekend, with the wind of just such a freedom at his back.

But all this was at odds with a countervailing desire that forced its way into my consciousness on Sunday afternoons. To be the light on the hill to their blindly labouring marriage.

According to tradition, we met at a local Chinese on birthdays, which occasions were among the few that could be depended on for a family get-together. After they'd presented me with my presents, a Swiss Army Knife and Parker Pen, I came out with it.

'Are you guys in an open relationship now, or what?'

My father sprayed fried rice and ribbons of egg into my Diet Coke.

'Thanks Dad. Brilliant.'

'Sorry 'bout *that*! Excuse me, can we get another Diet Coke over here please – my son has taken up comedy.'

'Are those love bites on your neck?' my mother inquired with a mixture of scandal and intense interest.

'Hickeys, yeah.' I massaged my neck reflexively.

'Well? Who are they from?'

'Oh. Just ... someone. You don't know her.'

'So sullen.'

It was a girl from our group I'd got with a few times, who'd consented to my 'feeling her up' in the park the weekend before. I was secretly proud of the hickeys but they also reminded me of failure. Hamish had already lost his virginity, and James and I were on a mission.

My father and I exchanged a look.

'Are you, but? Being *open*.'

'Though,' my father corrected. 'Selective school, mind you. Are we what, Errol?'

Dorothy licked a napkin and wiped at an encrusted bit of oyster sauce on my cheek. I flinched violently.

'Who said anything to you about open relationships?' she asked.

'Define *open relationship*, Errol, since you seem to be an authority on the complexities of adult cohabitation.'

My father's tone was icy. His blue eyes went everywhere as he worked a toothpick around in his mouth.

'You know ...' I struggled for the words. 'I wasn't ... bloody hell ... You guys ...' There was a horrible catch in my throat as my voice wavered and capitulated. I'd wanted them to admit

their marriage was a farce, but now realised I was pathetically invested in it. Worse than that – I was the obstacle to *their* bliss. A long silence ensued.

‘Pinteresque,’ my father decided eventually.

Dorothy looked for something non-existent in her handbag while Iain fiddled with his old watch and pressed it periodically to his ear. He had a pea lodged in his moustache. Mum and I caught each other looking at it. It was awkward and surreal.

‘Do you have a boyfriend Mum? Out there in the desert?’

‘Well ...’ my Mum began.

‘That’s enough Errol.’ My father’s tone was hotter now.

‘Why can’t we talk about this?’ With the back of my hand, I wiped at the side of my face and was astonished to find it wet with tears.

‘Because our marriage is none of your fucking business.’ He measured out the words like a lesson.

‘Prick,’ I whispered out of the side of my mouth.

‘WHAT DID YOU SAY?’

I scanned the restaurant. Eyes on our table, and morsels hanging suspended momentarily, or partially masticated from inside agape jaws.

‘I said you’re a prick.’ My father’s eyes registered an honest disappointment. I looked to Dorothy and she extended her hand towards me, but I batted it away.

In signalling for the bill, Iain’s arm knocked over the fresh middy of Diet Coke from the hand of the waitress as she was trying to land it between my parents on the table.

My hatred, now expressed, or my love, now disavowed reversed the flow of my blood. Its chemical constituency was somehow radically altered in those moments, and my marrow was infected with something newly toxic.

‘Apologise to your father Errol.’ The hurt in Iain’s eyes was in Dorothy’s voice.

So I was my own man now. I stood up, and tried to look tough, but I was shaky on my feet, and the stone which had formed in my chest hurt; I felt the murderous power of shamed vulnerability rise up from my heels and tingle in my scalp.

I don’t remember saying anything, or even leaving the restaurant, only that I was running up Darling Street past the mental hospital and down through the fields and hills and sandstone buildings and quaint lanes of Callan Park. I didn’t stop until I got to the water’s edge where I bawled with a force that shook my entire frame.

I clambered up onto the Aboriginal rock, lit a smoke, looked out at the cove and took in the sad little scene – the wet slapping sound of the jostling dinghies, sloops and tinnies. Beyond them the silhouette of Iron Cove Bridge; that robust iron-clad skeleton looked pathetically small, a squat poorer cousin of the Harbour Bridge. Many older kids had jumped off it before, but I doubted a teenager had done it at night. I’d do it for Humphrey and have a story to tell at school the next day. If they didn’t believe me I’d bring the whole group down next Friday night and prove it for a case of beer, and then dry myself by the fire and drink away my inhibitions, and have sex.

I lit a smoke, dismissed these thoughts, and I felt into the world without my parents. The idea of being orphaned exhilarated me. Then I heard the unmistakable drone of the Yamaha 650.

‘Errol? Are you there?’

‘Leave me alone.’

‘Thank God you’re all right.’

‘I’m never coming home.’

'Fair enough.'

'Go away.'

'Okay.'

'How'd you know I'd be here?'

'You told me what you all get up to on weekends. Lighting fires and rolling around in the sand.'

'How'd you find this spot?'

'Instinct? I was fifteen once.'

He threw me the spare helmet and I mounted the bike.

I closed my eyes the whole way, leaning completely into the turns, oblivious to when we might have gone onto Pyrmont Bridge, passed through the CBD, or rounded the last stretch of Old South Head into Watsons Bay. When we came finally to rest and my father cut the motor, I could feel his heart beating into my palm and my own against his scapula. The saddle was hot between my legs. A warm wind carried us along the path. We stopped to relieve ourselves off the edge of the cliff.

'James Johnson.' Dad gestured to the night with a sweep of his hand. The whole of the Pacific spread blackly before us towards the jutting sentinels of Sydney Heads.

Johnson was the only survivor on the Dunbar, a ship that had crashed against the outcrop below us in 1857.

'But then you think how many people have ... you know ...'

'Yeah?'

My Dad went on to explain that the Gap was a classic spot for suicides.

We both grabbed the railing and leaned out over the edge a bit. Spectres of foam reared up a hundred metres down.

My Dad pulled me back from the railing.

'Come on, let's go. It's getting cold, and your mother will be worried.'

We picked up gelato from Bar Italia and the three of us played Scrabble and drank Turkish coffee until midnight. It was all very grown up.

I was woken at 3 a.m. to the sounds of their screaming.

TRAFFIC

B was sassy, confident, worldly, and lacerating when the mood took her. I filled her in on the family drama on Monday after school as we waited to cross the road.

I followed the trajectory of her thick smoke rings and watched them wobble and dissolve while we waited for the little green man on the traffic light to appear. Without warning, B stepped close into me.

'What do you think of this? Not my cleavage, you perv – the locket.'

'Nice.'

'It's sterling silver.'

'I was gonna say. It looks expensive.' It was a cheap looking thing.

'Yeah *right*. If Trent thinks I'm going to open me legs for shitty silver, he can keep pulling his pud. Know what I'm saying?'

I never quite knew where B was coming from. Sometimes I thought she was in love with me, or wanted to make love to me, and at other times I was sure she thought I was pathetic. The din of the traffic intensified.

'So?' B moved even closer. Her confidence disconcerted me. With effort, I swallowed.

'You could just send them on a romantic getaway.'

'SORRY?' I was trying to be heard above the clamour of a semi-trailer bearing down one of the city bound lanes of the Western Distributor.

'Send who?'

She cupped her hands and breathed into my ear. 'Your oldies! Who are we talking about?' I went woozy. The traffic slowed, stopped, and the little green man started bleeping. B ran two fingernails down my shirt front.

'You need a whole new wardrobe, man, if you're going to get in Matilda Nafte's pants.'

'That is so crass, B.' I shook my head with what I hoped was a superior air but my cheeks were on fire and my heart hammered desperately. B was stroking a purple stretch of cartilage under her upper earfold; she was deriving pleasure from turning and tugging at a gold sleeper pierced through it.

'Just tell your parents all their bullshit is affecting your studies. That if they don't get it together you'll go off the rails?'

'Hey? Oh ... Na, I already tried guilt-tripping them; it just made it worse. Like I explained.'

'I'm not talking about guilt tripping; I'm talking about manipulation.'

'I dunno.'

B shrugged and flicked her cigarette into the road; the sparks trailed like a miniature comet and I began to walk after it. B, hanging back to touch up her brown lipstick, called me back mid-stride.

'Are you sure you actually want to intervene?'

'Hey?'

'I mean, parents are much more fucked up than us, you know – they've been going at it so long they don't even realise.'

Mentally thrown, I swivelled back into the road. A car horn sounded repeatedly followed by a Jurassic groan of machinery.

FISSION

I moved at speed continuously through a red speckled darkness. When I opened my eyes I was in a hospital room with a tube running out of my inner elbow, and there was a bruise around it. My left leg was in traction and I wore a neck brace. I recognised my hands, but I couldn't squeeze them.

'Errol?'

'You a nurse?' My voice was hoarse and sore, barely audible.

'That's right. How're you feeling mate? Voice not working so well. Try and have a sip of this. No, it's alright, don't try and talk just yet. Here. Write it down.'

I could barely get my hands to work, but I needed some purchase on reality. There was a numbness, in the shape of a deep crack, that seemed to have torn across the grain of my mind. I didn't have purchase on my thoughts. The writing was like an anchor, which stopped me from drifting out of the window.

What happened?

'You've had a car accident Errol.'

Am I dead? The nurse laughed reflexively.

'No Errol, not in my professional opinion.' She laid a hand on my thigh.

'But you've got your Mum and Dad worried half to death.'

Broken leg?

'Yep. Bad break too.'

Please keep your hand there.

Thanks.

What's wrong with my head exactly?

'I'll let the surgeon explain that, ay. You're oldies should be here any minute.'

Old beige Valiant!

'Hey? Oh yeah. Maybe. All I know is the old biddy was doing sixty. So you're bloody lucky it wasn't some Fangio out on the road, coz, believe me, we get far too many of them.'

And with that I fell back into the velocity of the red speckled darkness.

Some days later, two adults, a man and a woman, who I only knew were my parents because they took me back to my house and installed me in my bedroom, took me into their care. I endured the affection of the woman and the haggard presence of the man until it became stifling. My strength returned with an anger that brought blood to my brain, and gave direction to my actions. To deflect their constant attention, I stretched the boundaries of their tolerance. I became mercilessly critical – demanding eggs, tea, toast remade – and flew into rages. Couldn't these people see my nerves were on fire, that my entire body was a sense organ? I had the man fix a lock to my door and I masturbated obsessively with the full force of my concentration. The rage subsided as I started to disentangle the jumble of my thoughts in a 264-page exercise book. The effort it took to be civil to my guardians led to capitulations of confusion and horniness, but I found that a sort of magic force field surrounded me as I wrote, so long as I could be a writer, and not a son.

A girl phoned and said she was Matilda. She'd procured my number from a guy called James and wanted to express her condolences. Something in the timbre of her voice started a

painfully gentle ringing my ears, like Dorothy's Tibetan prayer bell. I suppose it was a familiarity, a kind of love not of blood.

The man gave me a copy of the collected works of Walter Benjamin. One night the woman found me asleep on the roof of the tin garden shed, using it as a pillow, my face covered with mosquito bites.

'Errol. Errol? What are you doing up there?'

The truth is, the identities' of my parents, the complex bundles of their familiarity to me as their only progeny *had* reconstituted before my eyes some days before. I just decided, so as to preserve the magic of the intermediary realm the coma had presented me with, to do a very strange and cruel thing – pretend I didn't recognise them. You might go all Freudian and suppose I was exploding the primal scene, but really I was clearing the way, though I didn't know it, for a far more sui generic escape, into a promised land I had to construct with words. It was something that could only be done alone. Hadn't Walter Benjamin built such a universe by traversing the byways of the great metropolis's, tilting, all the while, the singular mesh of his stranded mind full on at the urban maelstrom?

I took the welling of emotion, the remorse a person feels when they disavow the natural love of their family, and subverted its energy onto the page. Finally their equanimity faltered, and it was announced one morning, from the foot of my bed, that they'd decided to take a camping trip together.

'Without me?' I was stunned.

'We've arranged for Neville to watch over you.'

'Oh. Your mystery man, ay Dorothy?' I winked at my father.

'He's not a mystery man, I'm interviewing him for my thesis,' my mother explained. 'I told you this, Errol.' Mum at her edge.

'No you didn't.'

My mother went on. 'Actually, Neville was going to be down in Sydney anyway. From Alice Springs for a few months. He knocks about between places, doing pub gigs.'

'So he's a pub Muso,' I said dismissively.

'Wait 'til you hear him sing,' Dad said.

'Neville will look out for you.' The look of resignation on my Mum's face was agony to behold. I physically tried to pick myself up of the bed and go and give her a hug, but I was suddenly too weak to move. I would wait until they returned, and make amends.

'Yeah no, actually when I've spoken to him on the phone I got a pretty good ... vibe.'

'Really?' Mum was dubious.

'We'll only be gone four nights.'

'Three,' Mum corrected.

'So when's he lobbing up?'

My parents swapped looks and Dad tapped hard on his watch face three times with an index finger.

'He should be here later tonight. Are you sure you'll be okay?' Mum was having second thoughts, but my father was anxious to leave. He was clearly stir-crazy.

Everything blurred and objects lurched and were suddenly withdrawn and my fingers tingled. My parents were talking. Their faces, lined with concern, came in and out of focus.

And there was a whiteness flashing on and off across my vision.

I assume I'd been subjected to an MRI while I was in the coma, but if we talked about the nature of my acquired brain injury I can't remember. My father was fond of saying that the brain was the organ they knew least about. That may be true, but how would we know? I

would say that, on the contrary, the function of a man's brain, a thinking man's anyway, is rudimentary. It's to prove the heart, that most terrifying of hunters, wrong.

I reached for my scar, a livid protrusion that, according to the surgeon, ran from the temporal bone to the mastoid process of my skull. I ran my fingers along it and looked into my Mum's eyes (large, gum-leaf green), and then searched out my father's, but before I could fix his look the room spun out of control so I screwed my eyes shut.

When I opened my eyes I had to focus on the mirror of the dressing table beyond them. I found my reflection. And I felt calm.

'I promise I'll be fine. I like the sound of Neville. He might even teach me some songs, ay?' I said, and my voice sounded like a stranger's.

Then I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A quick caveat at this juncture: I can't guarantee that what happens next didn't occur at some immediately earlier stage. Trauma's a funny thing.

WRITE-OFF

An insistent, loose rapping on glass woke me. I made my way down the passage, trying to guess at the identity of the heavily pixelated figure on the other side.

'Is that Neville? Sorry, the bell's busted.' I opened the door. 'Oh. Hi.'

Without returning my greeting, B shoved past me and almost ran down the passage. When I caught up, she was bent over the sink in the kitchen, slaking a deep thirst from her cupped hands. She spun around as if shot in the back, and slid down the cupboard along her spine, pooling into the worn floorboards, and she sobbed; between gasps, she asked where the toilet was and extended an arm to me. I pulled her to her feet and, hopping, guided her into the laundry. While she was gone, I closed off the cold-water tap and circled on my crutches

until hitting on the idea of making tea. A glassy-eyed, red-nosed B reappeared to the climactic bubbling of the kettle. I motioned her into the backyard.

On the cane chairs we smoked and blew on our tea and flicked the stink-bugs across the plastic table onto the sunken paving bricks. B seemed to dispel the remnants of her grief with the force of her sighs until, finally, she was laughing. The gusto of her mirth and its utter pointlessness were comforting.

‘What? Why are you smiling?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know.’

I wanted to describe a fullness, a feeling of being elevated and enjoined with every particle of the universe. B pulled out some textas from her bag and began to illustrate on my propped cast – in red, black and yellow – a rose, whose petals were being blasted apart by the projectile of a bullet.

‘Cool. More tea?’

B shook her head and leaned into me, pressing the heels of her palms over my eyes as she touched her lips against mine. My body started to shake as if I’d been exposed to an open electrical current. I thought of Humphrey on the Iron Cove Bridge. This was the same sense of danger, the same jolt, which was, when I was eleven, superfluous to my needs but which now was like a sort of deliverance, an antidote to torpor, to spiritual death. If I lived in my head, B lived where life was most intense. It’s the exact quality I try and chase by getting these words together right, but I can’t meet it head on, in the world, like I did with B. With words it’s always around the back of you, at your shoulder, no matter how quickly and how often you shuffle your story around.

We moved the surfaces of our faces together with a delicacy that made my blood boil in its course. B’s last few tears ran down into the runnels between my bottom teeth and gums.

When the light had faded us into the shadows and the air stiffened, we moved to the telly room and she produced a VHS rental copy of *About Last Night* from her bag.

I regarded the object with scepticism but when B assured me it was full of sex and nudity I relented, and we watched it through in separate chairs. As the credits rolled, she stretched out a bare leg and depressed the stop button with her big toe. Secretly I'd found the film philosophically disturbing. All B could say was that the sex looked fake. She stood, stretched indulgently and perched herself on the pouffe my broken leg was resting on.

'So?'

'What?'

'I suppose we better go and fuck now?'

I nodded.

'Look at your ears!'

'Ay?'

'Bright red.' At this B rose and pirouetted. She'd obviously had ballet training.

'Your oldies got any grog?'

The cicadas thrummed with psychotic force as we smoked and made our way through two bottles of warm Chablis from my mother's stash. My hand, which had been resting on B's knee, was sliding slowly up her inner thigh. She clamped her legs shut and stood.

'Sorry.'

'It's all right.'

'Where are you going?'

B disappeared for long enough that I feared she'd left, but returned with a tea towel full of ice and had me apply the ice-pack to my left earlobe while she trained a flame on a needle. I watched as it turned black. As she pierced the lobe through, I was surprised by how easily the flesh yielded and how little it hurt. She twisted one of her own studs into the new hole. I

wincing, and she sucked tenderly at the fresh blood. It gets blurry around this point but I remember playing strip poker down to our underwear in the kitchen and finding each other beneath the doona of my single bed where the only sound was our breathing, and the dull thrumming of our ancient fridge.

'How mad's our body heat?' B's breath was moist and sweet.

I tugged at a bra strap until she could take it no longer.

The secret of B's much-discussed breasts spilled out; I explored the surface area of each, testing the shape and pliancy of her nipples.

She laughed.

'What?'

'I feel like I'm being scientifically examined.'

'Sorry.'

B flattened her chest to my own. Their silken texture and the warmth of our connecting flesh was a miracle. Our stomachs expanded each into the other with our mutual inhalations. Seconds later we were possessed by a ferocious need to devour and be devoured, but at the slick burning precipice we went stock-still, holding off in an exquisite torsion, before falling into the fire again and repeating the pattern until our poise was exhausted and we ceded, with a sense of exaggerated fatalism, to total intimacy.

I came in the time it took me to have the thought 'I'm actually having sex'. The second time I kept it in until her brazen urgings undid me. The third time I passed out and was awoken by a deep gouging of nails into my back flesh as B orgasmed. Enmeshed, hot and musty we fell asleep with the first stirrings of the birds.

I woke bursting to piss and with a throbbing in my earlobe. B was gone. In the kitchen on the far side of the table sat an enormous Aboriginal bloke. A triangle of Vegemite toast dangled from his lips, as he softly tuned his guitar. He strummed a full-bodied E major,

pressed in the rest of the toast and gestured with an upward lift of his beard to the near side of the table, where a yellow bit of paper torn from a diary had my name written across it in capital letters. He moved deftly through a six-chord progression, and stopped to sip carefully at his tea and rinse down the rest of his toast.

'You'd be Errol.'

Neville wore a suede jacket and a cowboy hat. He was well over six foot tall and his presence filled up the entire kitchen.

'I'm Neville.'

I felt like I needed permission to breathe.

'You going to read that letter, young fella? Left by that sad lady?'

He extended the word 'sad', as if to catch hold of the feeling B had left with.

'Yeah ... um, maybe later. Now, I mean. Should I?'

Neville tipped his head right back and laughed, showing a lot of white teeth, and the whole table, with all Mum's crystals and trinkets, rattled and shook.

'Maybe after you git a good breakfast down y'ay?'

At about that moment a shrill constipated blast rent the air and awakened a lurking headache. Glad of the opportunity, I got up and made the three hops necessary to answer the phone. It was a male voice on the line that I thought, for a moment, I recognised.

'Dad?'

'Am I speaking to Errol?'

'Yes.'

'It's not your Dad, Errol. Are you the son of Iain and Dorothy Connolly?'

'Mum and Dad have gone away. Camping.'

The voice resumed after a breath.

'But listen, Errol ...'

'Yeah?'

'Are you ...'

'Yeah, those are my parents' names. Sorry ... how do you know them?'

'Is there an adult at home with you?'

'Are you sure it's not you, Dad? Are you doing a voice? Put Mum on.'

'No, it's Constable Baker here. Look ... I'm afraid there's been an accident involving your parents.'

I laughed.

'Good one, Dad.'

A new voice, female, came on the line.

'Mum?'

'No.'

I was getting a sinking feeling, and asked to be excused, but the woman was insistent I stay on the line. A burst of muffled exchanges continued in the background, interspersed by a series of clicks and the scrunching interruptions of white noise. The receiver dropped from my hand and clattered around on the floorboards, twisting on its coil. Neville had risen and was standing just back from the door frame. I bounced off his hard round stomach and, propelled onwards, hopped down the hall to withdraw a photo album from the bookshelf.

From my spot in the garden, I could feel the antennae of Neville's attention through the open French doors. In one of the cane chairs, I'd swung my leg up on the table and was smoking a cigarette, my face wet with tears. I removed from the album and held up, to the formless wisps of clouds scudding by, a photo of Iain and Dorothy Connolly, circa 1966, seven years prior to my birth.

Black and white, it had been professionally taken in a fancy-looking restaurant with brocaded tablecloths. The young bride's head rested on the suited shoulder of the scurrilous groom; his eyes gleamed while her whole face beamed and radiated love and contentment. A cigarette floated between the tips of Iain's fingers as if it were a paintbrush; Dorothy cupped in both hands a highball glass full of something clear.

I dabbed a hole through each face with the glowing ember of the cigarette and put it out into my palm and noticed that I'd pissed my pants.

Here's the police report:

'A navy blue 1979 model Alfa Romeo collided with a paperbark tree on the Hume Highway ... Apparently the vehicle, travelling – it is estimated – at 140 kilometres per hour had swerved to avoid a semi-trailer, which was veering into its lane. The driver of the vehicle and the passenger were dead on arrival.'

The end of my penis itched, and I could smell B on my fingers.

WINDOW PERIOD

Neville stayed on for the remainder of the Christmas holidays and taught me minor, seventh, fifth and diminished chords and folk songs to go with them. Dorothy's sisters – 'Youngest Gene' and the middle sister, 'Polly' – flew in from London. Polly was a battle-scarred social worker retreating from a brutal divorce. Via letters and phone calls to my surviving grandparents, in Edinburgh and Durban, it was decided that she would step in as my official guardian.

In the crematorium I watched avidly as the curtains closed on Iain and Dorothy's coffins to allow for the ministrations of the furnace. Beside me was a large full-lipped, misty-eyed woman, with a heavy draping of gemstone and coral.

I took from the pocket of my jeans the missing person's ad of Humphrey. Just before everyone was about to leave I climbed up onto the podium and was trying to get behind the curtains to where the fire was when Neville caught up with me and led me outside for a turn amongst the tombstones.

Back at the house, I grabbed a six-pack of VB and my Discman and pulled myself up on top of the fridge, working myself into a cross-legged position where I could watch the wake from on high. I must have looked strange with my Mum's yellow scarf tied around my head, and my father's Omega Seamaster strapped around the crook of my elbow, nodding rhythmically, changing the CD, smoking rollies, but no one paid me much mind. I set fire to the missing person's ad of Humphrey and watched his faded face curl away into weightless shards of carbon that dissolved at the touch. Every now and then Neville or my auntie Polly would offer me some guacamole, or a toothpick speared with cubed cheddar and pickle, or empty my ashtray. Late into the soirée, Iain's other sisters started wailing and had to be restrained, and when I dropped down from the fridge my leg seized up so I was howling too, at which instant two didgeridoos thundered in. Their sound riveted everyone and induced in us a deep state of wary calm. Some time before sunrise I stood at the front door as the tail end of the last of the party filtered out, a slow stream of red eyes and tired faces.

More than ever now, my loins tingled for B.

The note she left from the month before read:

OFF TO GET THE MORNING-AFTER PILL ☺

GEE UP!

ACTUALLY GOING UP THE COAST WITH MY OLD MAN. SEE YOU IN SCHOOL

B x

PS SUCKED IN! ;-)

I searched for B's residence in the White Pages and worked up the nerve to call her, but I mostly got her mother's answering machine, or, if her mother picked up, I was told curtly that B was in the bath, or had gone to the shops, or was with a friend, or was 'God only knows where'.

'Would you like to leave a message this time, Errol?'

'No, it's alright thanks. I'll call back.'

The memory of B's body hounded me all day and routed me from sleep. I hurt for her horribly, and went around half-winded. Then my genitalia started to burn in a whole new way. The urethra had grown inflamed and was emitting vivid yellow-green phlegm. The sensation of ejaculating was heightened by the acute pain, but it had become unbearably sore to urinate. This and my bulging gonads scared me into an official confession.

I needed to visit my GP for more prescription painkillers anyway, and after the standard forty-five minutes of leafing through *New Ideas* and *Woman's Weeklys* in the perennially dated waiting room, I learned inside a minute that I had contracted Chlamydial urethritis. The doctor snapped off her surgical gloves as I zipped up my jeans, she chafed her palms and lowered herself into the frayed synthetic seat of her revolving chair. Her desk, as usual, was a shambles I would try to reconcile with the specialist paradigm of her mind, which apparently contained a medical degree. Taking a pen, she peered at me over rimless spectacles, told me how handsome I was becoming, and asked me a question, but I was distracted beyond the pinned tuft of her black frizzy hair, to the shelf on the wall behind her, where an enormous glass jar with a few inches of jellybeans stood. I'd once picked out some red ones and saved them for Iain after a booster shot one grey afternoon many years before; the sky had been rumbling with intent, and Dorothy and I screamed at the shock of a dramatic crack of thunder as we hurried to the car. But the rain held itself in overnight until the downpour of the following afternoon on Joseph Street that would endure for a fortnight. Dorothy had tried to convince me to go to Alice Springs on that third trip she took, but I knew Dad was going to let me stay at Humphrey's on a week night, which was far more tempting than a desert.

'Errol?'

'Sorry. Yes?'

'I asked if you were sexually active.'

My face went hot.

'Have you had sex? A girl from school?'

'Yes. B.'

'B? That's her name?'

I nodded.

'And are you still seeing B?'

'No.'

I immediately thought of Trent, her supposed boyfriend. I'd heard a rumour he injected speed.

'How are you, Errol?'

'Good.'

'I really wish you'd agree to some therapy.'

'What for?'

'I mean you must be going through hell.'

'You mean being an orphan?'

'It must hurt.'

'My head hurts.'

She leaned forward. 'What do you mean?'

'I feel like it's got a funnel-web inside it.'

'Which is why I want you to have another MRI.'

'No thanks. Just more painkillers please, doctor,' I said, standing to leave.

She passed me two pieces of paper. 'A script for antibiotics. For the Chlamydia.'

'And this one?'

'This you must take to the pathologists.'

'What for?'

'They're going to test you for Hep C and HIV.'

I saw swirling dust particles in a beam of morning sunlight trained on the wet patch of my ruffled mattress.

I could only describe the three months after the initial blood test as a pallourscape of dread. We'd once been shown a short warning movie in the cavernous school hall on a large projector screen that billowed occasionally in the draft from the quadrangle. The ill-fated protagonist, a Lothario played by a gym-muscular local soap star, was, by the end of the film, in a hospital gown contemplating the unspeakable fate of his narcissistic hubris.

But he looked nothing like the actual guy I'd witnessed die across the road from me: a man emerging onto his veranda in a dazzle of brilliant sunshine with a face covered in lesions. It was his face that I saw, after they drew the decisive vial of blood from my arm, in every transition between classes, while waiting for the bus, or for my dinner to warm up. At bedtime it felt as if hell had rolled into my psyche for a carnival. It partied on deep into the night until, physically exhausted and mentally rent, I skimmed jerkily over a version of sleep manic with the energy of frustrated escape.

But the test came back negative.

BECAUSE A FIRE WAS IN MY HEAD

Up until after the make-up exams I had my work cut out catching up on all of the missed content at school, and, to rehabilitate my leg, swimming laps, and going to physio. Then after my homework I would obsess over the fact that my penis was too small. To remedy this I subjected myself to a regimen of stretching and pulsing exercises James's older stepbrother had taught him. On weekend evenings, once the relief and elation, the new lease on life afforded me by the AIDS scare, had waned and dissolved, I found that underneath it was a bottomless loneliness. I would pretend to be staying at a friend's and go wandering. I took a 470 bus into George Street and wandered through the city. I just wanted something, or someone, to happen to me. But no one seemed to notice I was there. So I drifted, and because it saddened me to look at the homeless, I found myself drawn to lovers. Through windows I watched as they shared bottles of wine in candlelit restaurants, promenaded hand in hand, or curled up on park benches. I drew closer and closer, until finally I approached a pair kissing outside a bottle shop one night in Kings Cross with tongues and wide-open mouths – the woman's hair was blue-black and came down to her hips, and the guy's head was shaven. I came within inches of their faces before they noticed me. The candid way they looked into my eyes broke me open, and I sort of collapsed into them, sobbing, and my hair got caught in the woman's earrings as they held me up. She smelled like sandalwood and must have been in her mid twenties, he was quite a bit older. She embraced me with incredible warmth as the guy held my hips from behind and let me kiss her. A police car with its siren blaring came squealing around the corner, and a red-headed bloke with a bloody face and a torn shirt came sprinting the other way down Darlinghurst Road.

The bald guy, who, I now noticed, was in a singlet, had bulging arm veins and a tattoo of a spider down the side of his neck said, 'Heavy shit. Let's nick round the corner, ay.'

I was led into a back lane and the woman asked, in a glazed way, if I wanted to get on. Then I felt a blade at my throat. So this is it. I would have gone willingly in that moment, but the woman put her hands down my pants and brought me to an orgasm while the guy fumbled around in my pockets. When I woke up some time later in the gutter, the loneliness was

gone along with my wallet and my birthday Swiss Army Knife. Perverse as it may sound the episode restored my faith in the kindness of strangers, and during the long walk home I opened myself to the possibility of falling in love.

Then, one afternoon a few weeks later, over a game of pool, James said, 'You know Matilda's refusing to sleep with Gary.'

'Bullshit.'

'No. He's threatened to break up with her. And cop this, Gary had sex with a student teacher from another high school.'

Gary was captain of the Union team and nearly topped the year in all the hard subjects. He wore a lot of Country Road and yacht wear and his parents were wealthy lawyers with a waterfront terrace in Birchgrove.

'Does Matilda know?'

'Not yet. It only just happened on the weekend. This is your moment, mate.'

'Isn't she a haemophiliac?'

'Hey? No it's something similar women get. Von something ... Von Willebrand?'

'But it's a bleeding disease right? B was explaining it to me. The blood doesn't clot properly.'

'Why are you going on about it man?'

'I dunno I'm nervous I suppose; it helps me to think of her as mortal.'

'I know what *you're* worried about.'

'What?'

'Errol, you fucken arsehole ...'

'Fuck you!'

'You're afraid you'll take her virginity then be up for murder. Is that it?'

'Yeah, that's right, James. You read my mind, man.' I said, my voice thick with sarcasm.

What I was really trying to do was stop my legs from giving out from under me. James threw his cue on the table. He'd always been as besotted with Matilda as me, and was devastated to learn he – pale-skinned and blonde – wasn't her type.

'I'm only fucking with you man. Everyone one reckons you'd make an adorable couple.'

He passed me a bit of paper with her phone number on it.

'In like Flynn, ay?' I thought I detected resentment in his voice but he looked genuinely happy for me.

A bomb of serotonin detonated in my thorax; the internal ooze was balm to my ravaged nerves. I wanted to dance with gratitude or happiness.

What did I know about Matilda then, apart from the fact that her parents were divorced? There were her physical defects and endearing genetic quirks: small hands, weak ankles, myopia and acne. Her faint cacao smell, and the navicular streaks of pitch velvet that adorned each forearm. I'd made a thorough account when we were put together on an art project and we rendered a papier mâché sculpture of Munch's *The Scream*. During those happy weeks I'd also begun to see the joins in her self-possession, where a sort of deep aimlessness in her got through. Our love began to seem less impossible, and I came almost to pity her. I cultivated a fantasy that Matilda lacked the surety of my brooding gravitas; my brave-bleak vision alone could transfigure her suffering. Not that I could have articulated this vision; I was just sure she could feel it. Alas, the art project ended and all that remained of it was that silent wail. When we passed each other at school I went weak with defeat and insecurity. My romantic optimism *apropos* Matilda congealed into a sort of cold and distant infatuation.

But now the parameters had been re-defined by the situation with Gary. The day James gave me Matilda's number, it was the Melbourne Cup, the horse race that 'stops a nation'. I sat there in front of the telly that evening with a piece of paper in my hand and watched a documentary about the rise of equine professionalism in Australia. I reflected that if B was a hotblood filly, wild and roguish, Matilda was a warmblood destined for dressage.

And I dared to imagine Matilda had turned skittish. In the onyx of her eyes, a gleam was detectable – a faint animal hunger shone from inside, latent carnality betrayed itself in moments. I was in the habit of embellishing these on paper from my voyeur's redoubt. She flushed spontaneously, she surrendered herself to a lengthy distracted look – here, was a languid contortion of the spine, there a heavy brush of the nails across the cleavage, her eyes rolled up inside her head as she bit on her lower lip ...

The moment of truth. Matilda answered after two rings, and I was on the back foot.

'Hey. It's Errol.'

'Why are *you* phoning me?'

I reminded her that she'd phoned me during my convalescence.

'Yes that sounds like something a decent person would do.' Her tone was almost haughty.

'Have I done something to offend you?'

'Oh, you're going to deny it? That figures.'

'Deny what?'

'Look Errol, I know you've been through a lot, but I can't handle dishonesty okay. I've seen what it does to people.'

'I honestly don't know why you're so upset.'

'Oh come on! "Sex with her would be murder."'

A great vault of silence expanded around the crackle of the line; my pulse thudded like tap on a live microphone in my Adam's apple. Strains of another conversation broke in, as if to reinforce our estrangement. I didn't even hear the click when she hung up.

I followed after Matilda between classes like a starved and beaten dog. When James told me to leave her alone I shirt-fronted him, and when he smiled at me I started to choke him. Something hit me in the back of the head. I turned to see Gary wielding a set square.

'C'mon cunt,' I said, but, as I tried to grapple with him, he bent my wrists back like pipe cleaning wire.

The bus I was waiting for at the end of Norton Street swung into the kerb, and I stepped out in front of it as it lurched headlong towards me, like a fallen skyscraper from the future. With a great hissing sound, in an all-systems effort to brake, the big blue Mercedes wobbled sluggishly on its drive train. I was inches from the driver's face, which, through the enormous windscreen, was pale and disbelieving.

FABULATION

It was disheartening at first to look back on all this – the loosely stitched together journal entries of my early twenties that recounted my infancy, childhood and adolescence up to the point my heart was broken. They read like a shapeless and claustrophobic round of wistfulness and angst shot through with major traumas. But after crafting and embellishing and polishing the prose, and with judicious inflection here and there of humour and ironic distance, I hope I have achieved a sense of a young life the resilience of which was sorely tested but, if only barely, held together. Should it seem implausible that I would lose a best friend, be knocked into a coma and have both parents perish in a tragic accident, this cannot be helped, and is the fault of the writing. But swathes of happenstance don't always come with a sense of narrative proportion built on the law of reasonable averages.

Emotional cataclysms can arrive in clusters. Matilda's rejection of me was certainly a turning point. I was astonished, however, to find that rather than being a fatal blow to my spirit, it carried the force of liberation. Above the rock bottom I fell to, a part of me, the part

of ourselves no-one and no thing can get to, I suppose, was suspended, poetically, like a butterfly in the open jaw of a lion. I had landed up, in a place where I neither hurt nor was numb. Not hurting, nor disassociated. It was as if the part of me susceptible to externally inflicted damage danced beyond the reach of the real world. And in this way I was invincible.

My delicate features, sharply delineated eyebrows and moodily expressive eyes, the blush of carmine under the sharp ridge of my cheekbones – these would rot and dissolve, or so the mirrors seemed to say, and I sensed that my increasing obsession with them was a waste of time. I decided to leave a record of myself more enduring, a kind of twisted love letter to my generation through which my peers could vicariously watch youth flare up spectacularly, and burn out.

I would make a sort of graphic novel of myself.

The conviction of this decision must have resonated out a fair way, because B came back on the scene as if summoned. We'd been ignoring each other since the beginning of the school year, but, reaching into my school bag one recess for a caramel Space Bar, my fingers touched fleece, and I removed an expensive-looking yellow garment with red lining and a black hood. Pressing it into my face to inhale the new-fabric smell, I recoiled in pain. A note had been stuck to the inside of the hood with a safety pin that had sprung open. I was to meet B at Bar Italia after school. Somewhere we wouldn't be seen.

She sat waiting on a wrought-iron chair in front of a passion-fruit-choked trellis in the back courtyard; the heat of the early afternoon sun pressed down through the green corrugated fibreglass awning. It was really bright. I sat opposite her and felt into the front compartment of my bag.

'So here we are, ay?'

'Yeah. I suppose.'

'Are they prescription?'

'Yeah. I get these headaches.'

'Do you think you've been affected?'

'By what?'

'Nothing. Here, give us a couple of those bad boys.'

We had painkillers and very strong cappuccinos, and, though I had given up smoking and hated menthol, we went through a whole packet of Alpines.

As the last notes of 'Reckless' by Australian Crawl decayed, the putrescent smell that rose intermittently from the drain by the outside toilets could no longer be ignored. My legs went out from under me going past the espresso machine.

'Are you all right, Errol?'

With my arm in the grip of her hands, B led me back to Lilyfield.

'It's weird I don't know the way to my own house.'

'I'll get you there.'

We covered a lot of territory during the walk down Norton Street, through the park, past the bus depot, over the Western Distributor and up Trevor Street to the end of my own, and by the end of it we had discussed everything, it seemed, of B's life – the death of her real father whom she never knew; Trent; her Mum's incredible proclivities; the people she hated at school; that she intended to become a doctor, but a specialist, after she'd 'done Europe'. We discussed everything bar her chlamydia.

The taste and redolence of B, the hectic quickening of our blood, the sense of outlaw union as we held onto each other as if to a slippery millstone plummeting through a forbidden sea, was gone now. We had long since been disinfected, the trace elements of our intimate ensnaring subsumed by the ammonia of time, expunged by antibiotics and erased by countless ablutions. B had rematerialised as a familiar stranger.

'Everything we do fades, ay?' I said.

We slumped onto the nature strip at the bottom of my street in a patch of sun and fell into a tired easy silence. I picked at the grass, and B made me a daisy chain. I noticed her locket was now gold.

'Present from my step dad.'

The sun leached from the grass, and B stretched and removed her maroon blazer as if against the heat, even as a late-afternoon chill was coming in the form of a southerly, and the day phased into early dusk. I noticed two small hard protuberances forced against the white cotton of B's shirt and a flash of red in the space between two of the buttons. A gust of wind ruffled B's fringe and she remembered something.

'Shit, I gotta go. Walk us to the bus stop?'

I stood and took in her features as she applied Lip-Ice and touched up her mascara before a small silver compact engraved with a rose. Her make-up seemed thick and badly applied, and her features, although compact (gently angled nose, tiny flat ears, square chin aligned with lips neither full nor thin) disappointed me. Her forehead seemed too big, and the mole on her left cheek was raw like a new scar; from it sprung an insolent bow of hair.

'Thinking about Matilda?'

'No.'

'I better get back to Glebe. I'm going out to dinner tonight.'

'Special occasion?'

'It's my birthday.'

'Why didn't you say something?'

'I just did.'

'Happy birthday, B.'

'Sweet sixteen and never been impregnated.'

'Okay ...'

'You can join us if you like. Come on, Vicky'd love to see you in the flesh, Errol.'

'Who's Vicky?'

'My old lady.'

'Oh. No, I don't think your mother likes me very much.'

'What makes you say that?'

'It's in her voice, I suppose.'

B shrugged, slipped back into her blazer and gathered up her things. As she walked off it struck me how in her body she was. The broad musculature of her calves was accentuated in the half-light. I wanted to walk her to the bus stop but she was heading to the left, towards Joseph Street.

'Don't go that way, B. Go back down Trevor Street.'

B emitted a short bark of a laugh, which tripped into a coughing fit. She recovered and, without looking back, raised a fist in victory.

'Wait.'

B turned on her heels.

'Follow me down. What are you afraid of?'

I must have blanked at this juncture, because I found myself standing at the top of Joseph Street at twilight. The street was empty and a cold wind snaked between my thighs. It was the first time, since Humphrey disappeared, that I'd ventured here. My tracksuit pants were

down around my ankles. Bending over to retrieve them, I noticed something obscuring the drain at the bottom. Or someone.

It was Humphrey.

He had his head through the bar and was screaming with no sound. I jogged down to him and removed the torn lid of a cardboard fruit box from the two rusted bars. From then on I left offerings at the drain on Sundays – lollies and soft drinks, mainly – and I talked about what I'd done that week.

That afternoon when B and me became friends, or so I thought, I had a chemistry exam to study for. Up on the roof I tried to visualise the periodic table, but the pop of our street's lights cut against the black and I went into a dream state. Through the branches of the frangipani tree, the city skyline was a-shimmer in the distance. It looked like a space station. The turret at the top of the steel-cabled stem of Centre Point Tower was splendid. In the daylight, this building's exterior had the cheap appearance of bad gold. At night, however, Centre Point's crown, with its tonnage of interior light, sparkled like something worthy of a display cushion in a jeweler's private chamber. Thus I wanted the magic of my mind to emerge as a response to the darkness that had come first for Humphrey, and then for my parents. It was crucial that I generate light.

But since the afternoon with B my journals were filling up with fantastic scenarios of another spontaneous seduction, and in trying to study I found myself staring blankly at the same French vocabulary list. I realised, eventually, it was four years old, one from my first year of high school. Dorothy had helped me memorise it. I lined up my notes by subject, but couldn't find a relevant starting point. Undifferentiated stacks of papers amongst old hardcover textbooks with impregnable chapters emitted an assault of blurred typography that rose up from the page and glanced off the front of my brain. Where were all the relevant facts and concepts, and how was I to get them in? All I could think of was B. I removed Iain's old faded-to-orange motorbike helmet and looked across at my single bed.

Everything went white.

VIOLET

B and I chose each other because we were cooked, and cooked each other because there wasn't a choice. We were never 'going out' *per se*. It was simpler than that, and a hell of a lot more complicated. The older boyfriend, for example. The only physical evidence of Trent was a tattoo of his name on B's big left toe. And although B assured me the bloke's claims on her were real, I couldn't help thinking the threat of his presence was a psychological buffer. Something that suited B's designs on me. But I took satisfaction in my role as cuckold. Of being used for regular sex by the supposed girlfriend of a twenty-two-year-old who was hard and enjoyed outlaw status. Only the suicidal looked askance at Trent, let alone repeatedly fucked his girlfriend. He burned up the streets of the Inner West on a Kawasaki Ninja, but the proximate danger that formed the ambience of our rendezvous was based, it would seem on reflection, on an empty threat. To this day, I have no idea what her deal was with him during our time.

Occasionally, after a lovemaking session, B would joke. 'What would you do if The Man walked in right now?'

'Bloody hell ... I dunno. Belt him over the head with your Mum's candelabra?'

'You wouldn't use me as a human shield?'

'No ways, I'd run at him, see, let you escape ... And then ball up like this, covering me vitals.'

'You don't need both hands for those.'

'Piss off.'

'What would you do with the other one?'

'Protect the nose. In fact, I'd probably put two hands over the nose.'

'Yeah, that'd be right.'

The whole routine would crack B up, especially when I did the actions.

'He's not really coming, though, is he?'

'Tonight? Doubt it. Maybe. Probably not. Then again ...'

Vicky, B's mother, had finally abandoned her novel to write hotel reviews, which meant there were sustained periods when she was away. The big rambling Glebe terrace B lived in with her mother sat second from the bottom of a steep cul-de-sac at the end of which was a mossy sneer of disused canal. Unlike my Federation, 'Violet' was a house built for a much bigger family. It got bugger-all light and was adorned with dusty Persian rugs, dark wooden furniture, uneven Gothic finishings, hanging cooking utensils and a handful of unnerving prints. Mostly German Expressionist, they hid around corners; my favourite was 'Fighting Forms' by Franz Marc, an intense depiction that seemed to capture the frenzied entangled collision of a matador and a bull.

My auntie didn't drive, I'd failed my Learner's test three times, and Neville was on tour for most of that year. So I would jog over to B's.

'When are you going to introduce me to this girl?' my auntie asked once.

'It's not like that. We're study buddies. Her room's more set up for it.'

'So long as it's constructive. Mind yourself on the streets, though. I do worry.'

'I will, Polly. Oh, could you possibly spot us a lobster until my Austudy comes through on Thursday?'

'Only if you swear on your immortal soul not to spend it on stationery,' she quipped, reaching into her purse for a crumpled twenty-dollar note.

'Hard drugs only, I promise. What's this?' My auntie had pressed three condoms into my palm.

'Always use them ... always ... et cetera.'

My auntie was unshockable, and wry. She loved her wine and her Tori Amos and smoked Café Crème cigarillos. She left books about serial killers and scientific journals lying around.

There were also long spells of palpable desperation I preferred to steer clear of. If her condition was genetic, as she claimed everything was, I wanted no part of it. I'd decided to be an original and die optimistic, and I'd put her bouts of misery down to drinking, the habit of which I'd fallen out of now that I'd discovered sex and second sight.

If B left one of her notes in my bag, the protocol was to get to her no earlier than 8:30 p.m. I ran the three kilometres with my schoolbag jostling and knocking painfully against my back through some pretty scary urban terrain – over the pass-over above the old train tracks, and out along The Crescent where the dog tracks are.

But I'm jumbling up the order here. The first time I went to 'Violet', I stepped out of my house into a warm current of wind. The perfume of the frangipani was exquisite and I picked one of the silken-fleshed flowers to give to B. Running, I felt exhilarated, sweetly doomed, and jumpy. The area had a violent streak in those days. Also, there was something about cars at night – the way their headlights distorted with diaphanous unpredictability as they drew nearer. I was especially jittery out along the old boatyard and the dog track where there were stretches of unlit road, and, after 8 p.m., few cars. But I was sixteen. Did free weights. Had taken up karate. The blandishments I self-applied, and being 'on the promise', mitigated my fear.

I arrived that first night panting heavily. Before me was a sagging anonymous edifice emptied of light. The name was screwed to the brickwork, set behind wavy milk-glass, in a rotting wooden frame. I reread it several times and said it out loud. Squinting, I triple-checked the house number against the biro version on my wrist. Sucking down some air, I ascended the four steps and worked the heavy brass knocker. It was disconcertingly loud but there was no response. I rapped on the windows of the front room and swore in fright at the vehement growling and barks of a nearby dog. I banged on the wood of the door until my knuckles were sore. The crushed frangipani petals dropped into the darkness. My heart leapt when I heard the sweet rustling of a set of keys ... but not from within 'Violet'.

I turned into the gleam of a sputtering porch light; a large figure shuffled out, illuminated from the waist down. His beer gut was showing through the bottom of a white singlet and

drooped over black suit pants. He looked around, coughed, fired up the cigar dangling from his lips, puffed on it, and turned towards me. I couldn't make out his features with the light trained as it was, but there was something threatening about him. My gaze fell to his crotch, which he'd started to rub in slow circles.

'Errol?' someone whispered with force, and I turned in the direction of "Violet". Or was it the wind?

I spun back around and saw that the neighbour had gone to the far side of the veranda. His broad, meaty back tremored with the constraint of his chuckling as his piss drove into the soil. I looked away and was just about to abandon my mission when there came the definite clink of a heavy lock. The door opened and a flame revealed the under-glow of half a face; my eyes struggled to adjust, until the ghoul resolved itself into a girl. She stood in an oversized, hooded gown, holding a candle to her chin.

'B?'

'What do you think?'

'I'm spinning out here', I said, gesturing to the pissing man, but he'd gone.

I followed her up three flights of stairs to her mother's bedroom. Usually the attic in these places was reserved for the teenager, but Vicky – I had learned – liked the skylight, had a thing for tracking the phases of the moon, and didn't want anyone just wandering in. I was edgy as hell once we'd ascended to it, and the first thing I did was to fumble for a light switch. Blinking, I saw the robe B wore was green and white satin. A boxer's.

'What's with the darkness?' I said testily.

'What's wrong with darkness?'

I was not in the mood for more tests.

'I came here to *see* you.'

'Why?'

B enjoyed getting you off balance.

'What do you mean why?'

She snorted. My humiliating phone call with Matilda returned and with it came the same sense of groundlessness; to keep myself from turning over in space, I concentrated on the mole on B's cheek.

'I'm losing ...' I began, feeling for an object to hang my mind on, 'I need ... need something.'

What was it? Love. My throat constricted and swelled.

There was an Escher print above the centre of the queen-sized bed and I started counting the steps. The ache in my larynx subsided.

'You want my body?'

I breathed deeply. 'Depends. Let's have a look at it first.'

'Look into my eyes, Errol?'

I couldn't. Not since Iain and Dorothy's last drive.

B started singing 'Ohhhh Errol ... I would do anything, just to be like him,' and gestured for me to undress.

I was wearing the right clothes now, down to the underpants, and took a small measure of pride in this as I removed the yellow hoody, my T-shirt, my designer sneakers and stonewashed jeans.

'Undies too.'

I covered my genitals because I didn't want to appear to have a little boy's dick. 'Now you.' My voice wavered.

B dropped the robe. The muscles of her thighs bulged against each other.

'What?' she said indignantly.

'No. I just didn't think you'd be ... blonde ... down there.'

'Like honeycomb,' she drawled.

I let my hands fall to my side.

We stood a few moments, awkward, motionless until B pouted, which we both understood as a sign, and the next thing we were tripping over each other's legs. Our lips connected as we collapsed onto the mattress. With the impact, my front teeth punctured the inside of her bottom lip.

'It's okay,' she said and wriggled underneath me and sucked on her wound; gripping the underside of my skull with both hands she yanked me towards her; the metallic tang of the blood in our mouths spurred us on and we kissed angrily until B clamped down on my tongue with her front teeth.

I felt my mouth filling up. Her bite was so trenchant I couldn't scream or lash out. The pain was lacerating, fiery, and pulsed thick and hard along the full length of my tongue – from the glossoepiglottic fold to the apex. My eyes, overflowing, found B's through the haze; the speckles of pigment comprising the irises swirled and spun, each a universe unto itself, and the contracting apertures drew in all of my pain.

B released my tongue and tickled it tenderly with her own. The pain rushed back in, and I held her tightly towards me as her knees brushed out across the surface of my thighs.

'Have you got something?' I asked.

B growled. I resisted.

'Um ... nup. Have you?'

'I didn't want to be presumptuous ...'

'Here. Can't you see how much I want you. I'm dripping.'

I remembered the condoms. 'Gimme a sec, I'll get my wallet.'

'Don't move. It's so much better without rubber. I want to feel you inside me.'

Yielding by degree to an intimation of suction, I noticed that a bubble of saliva in the corner of B's mouth was tinged with pink. With a great heave of resolve, my groin aching with restraint, I rolled away and sat on the edge of the bed.

'You could get preggers,' I commented, in a falsely bright voice.

'I'm on the pill.'

'Oh ...'

'So we've got free reign.'

'But there's ..'

'What?'

'You know ...'

She sat up and licked inside my ear.

'STDs?'

'Mm hm.'

'I've been tested,' she said, reaching between my legs.

'For what? What tests did you get.' I looked her in the eyes as I said this and felt my disdain hit home. B shuffled half a space away from me.

'You know ... The *killers*. The big two.'

'None of the other stuff?'

'Eugh, this is shitting me to tears. Talk about killjoy.' B fell back onto the mattress and stretched to the full length of her nakedness. 'I had chlamydia once recently, if you must know.'

'Well der.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I mean so did I ... Funnily enough.'

'Well, fuck, Errol, how do you know you didn't give it me?'

'Because you were the first person I'd ever slept with!'

'As if.'

'You don't believe me, but it's the truth.'

'It's not what I heard.'

'And you? What about Mad Max?'

'Who?'

'The Man.'

'Get real, baby boy, and get a fucken life. If you're too naive to read between the lines, it's not my problem.'

B started playing with herself, and taunting me with her eyes.

'Sorry B. But you've lost me. I ...'

My head started to pound. I reached into the front of my bag and dry-swallowed two painkillers. B coughed deliberately, lit up a smoke, and lit me one with its ember. Neither of us had spoken again by time we'd stubbed the butts into the metal ashtray which B had pulled out from under her mother's bed. The atmosphere was frosty and tense.

'My tongue's really fucken sore', I said, because it was, and to break the silence.

B seemed not to have heard me, and yawned. Something about her pointed boredom was making me feel insignificant. Without deciding to speak I asked her if she was a prossie or something.

Her whole being flashed. 'What did you just say to me?'

'Are you a slut? Like they say.'

B shook her head in disbelief.

'You're just ... such a fucken piss weak dog, Errol. I thought you were different.'

She said this with an adult voice I hadn't heard before, but it rose at the end. She was about to cry, and the prospect of breaking her only inflamed my cruelty.

'There's rumours you pulled off one of the footy heads one night for a bottle of Sambuca', I said, matter-of-factly, enjoying the sense of control.

B's lips began to tremble. I recalled that afternoon in the back garden over tea and sympathy. A tug of remorse gave over to a welt of compassion and I reached my hand towards her face to swipe at a tear, whereupon she rose to her full height and a fisted blow caught me square on the face. The uppercut had harnessed the velocity of every ounce of B's thick-boned frame. Astounded, I felt around inside my mouth and removed a tooth.

'Get out of my house, you dickless poofter.'

B was pacing between a wardrobe and the skylight window, which was set into the angle of the roof. 'Get out! Get out!' She was shredding her voice. 'No wonder your old man drove himself and your old lady off the road. Imagine giving birth to a fricken loser like you.'

B stopped in her tracks. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Shit-shit-shit sorry Errol. I didn't mean that.'

'It's okay. I'm sorry for ... You know I don't really believe that shit about you.'

B looked at me like she was about to tell me some big secret, but then thought better of it. 'Look at your face. Poor baby.'

There was a terrifying moment somewhere here in which the two of us might have surrendered our hearts simultaneously. I can't say for sure now if it was me or her that killed it, but knowing it was lost I felt into my mouth and pressed my finger into the hole where my tooth had been, and laughed. B seemed freaked out and in the ringing silence suggested I'd better go.

But as she gathered up her robe, the withdrawal of B's intimacy was unconscionable and I went to embrace her, but she ducked under my arms and hurried past me. Equal to it, I intercepted my lover and pinned her by the shoulders to the wardrobe, and, sensing some violent reprieve, thrust my hand between her legs.

'No,' she breathed.

I let her go and she went for the stairs, but I shepherded her towards the bed and fixed her to the mattress with my body.

I kissed her tenderly all the way down beneath her stomach, and she opened her legs wide by raising her knees and drew me back up her body by the ears.

We kissed.

Very slowly this time.

SLAP ECHO

Crossing 'Violet's' threshold and climbing its many stairs, I came to feel the boyish attitude of my adolescent self recede with every step only to vanish once in the attic room.

Increasingly, our rituals were a wilful disavowal of innocent pleasure.

The whole thing with B lasted a year. The sicker the sex got, the more utilitarian our encounters became and the further we drifted apart. I had planned to skip over the details

of my affair with B, but, in putting this period to paper, I find it still holds a power over my attention. In revisiting that room I'm trying to relive some crucial frame of experience that might offer a kind of catharsis.

After the first month, B was anxious to get the lovemaking out of the way and she encouraged me to come inside her, not for the closeness, I don't reckon, so much as to dissuade me from fetishising her vagina. Then, one Thursday night, just a couple of weeks before our final exams, she stopped me from unbuckling her jeans, and asked if I was ready to try something different. Before I could answer, B was down inside the tall wardrobe, foraging around under her mother's dresses. She came back to the bed with a battered walnut-brown chest with brass corners and metal catches. It was the size of a small esky, and from it B produced an A4 ring-binder journal, full of sketches and notes in her mother's hand, a small bottle of clear liquid, two connected rubber rings of varied diameters, some expensive-looking rope, a comically large dildo and a tub of Vaseline.

Being presented with all this outré paraphernalia at once made me nervous. I readied to object, as B dispensed with her jeans and an oversized T-shirt of her Dad's. Her large breasts had come to take on an engorged appearance, as if ready to spill milk. With one hand, she tickled her areola and began to twist and stretch the nipple.

'Lube it up.'

I caught the dildo before it hit me in the face.

'Quick. With the vaso. I'm so wet, Errol.' She had those swimming eyes again.

'This?' It wangled idiotically in my hand.

'Come on, I want to show you something mad.'

My horniness was now cutting against my trepidation, and I did as I was told. B took the bottle of amyl nitrate, unscrewed the cap and climbed onto the bed on all fours.

Imagine the sound of a camera bulb exploding, and a sustained suffusion of bright light.

A few weeks before Humphrey had disappeared, I was staying over at his place one Friday watching *Ghostbusters*. His brother Jimmy had come home that night in a really good mood, like he was tipsy. Humphrey's old man was snoring to raise the roof, and his old lady was pulling a night shift at St Vincent's Hospital. When Jimmy stood over us I held my breath. Humphrey was never fazed.

'Get out of the way, you're blocking the screen, dickhead,' he whined.

That was the night Jimmy taught us to Space Jump. You bent down between your legs and panted. The idea was to expel more oxygen than you were taking in, to hyperventilate. After thirty seconds or so of this priming, you started seeing little red flecks, and then it was time to stick your thumb in your mouth and blow out really hard. After a couple of seconds the pressure took your consciousness.

Coming back was where it was at. Your whole body would be tingling and you'd be looking up at a gallery of perfect strangers who reassembled themselves as your best friends with the returning oxygen. It was an unbelievable rush. The sounds of the world dropped back in on a warm electric wind. The homecoming of oxygen was like love through your brain. You'd try to express your amazement but the words came out fizzy, with a syrupy resonance, like a warping tape.

'Oh Maaaaan ... I was looking at you guys ... and I fully didn't even know who you *were*.'

Not so with amyl nitrate. You stayed 'awake' for the whole journey. And this was a good thing because B and I were up there on the same tightrope, with no safety net. No scrum of mates to catch our fall.

Way down there on the bed B's buttocks glistened. I held the bottle to my nostril and inhaled again.

Pop!

After the second round, the world spun with nauseating speed. I gripped B tight into me in case I fell off the bed.

I ran my fingers through her matted hair.

Much of the rest is blurry, like Rimbaud's 'The Drunken Boat'. I get images, being whacked with a paddle – I think it's called ballbusting – or of B's face, dark purple, her veins distended and pulsing, almost wriggling from her temples like witchetty grubs. In English I'd learned a creative writing technique called 'synaesthesia', the point of which was to disorder the senses so as to describe stuff in a radically different way. For example, a cup of coffee could sound like a baroque harmony, or 'Like a Rolling Stone' could give off the stench of unwashed denim infused with mouldering paperback. But with the amyl I started to get the real deal, a somatic version of synaesthesia – 'mirror touch'. At first, the etherising heightened physical sensation and increased my threshold for pain, but then I noticed, with subdued terror, that whatever was happening to B's body was being referred into the corresponding region of my own. I dripped wax onto her and my own nipples burned, and during sex I had the feeling of being penetrated by myself, which was where I drew the line. As a solution, B brought up a full-length mirror and suggested we fuck in front of it, but this only made it worse. For cessation of the amyl usage I had to agree to different experiments, which I won't go into here.

The white-outs, versions of which you may have been noticing, went into a new phase at about this time. They happened most frequently in class. My auntie was called in to speak with the principal.

'Errol seems to pass out with his eyes open. For minutes at a stretch sometimes. His schoolwork is suffering. Quite radically in fact. Is there ... I don't know, a condition perhaps, something we should know about? Obviously, we're aware of how much he's been through. Is everything okay at home, Ms Connolly?'

'Polly.'

'Yeah yeah. It's all ... No worries. My aunt's a good guardian.'

I agreed to return to the neurologist but refused to have a CT scan. To be honest, I needed the white-outs. That tear in the fabric of my consciousness was my lifeline. In it I was

apprenticing myself to take that last step through to the other side. We all worshipped Jimi Hendrix and were avid appreciators of Janice Joplin and The Doors. I was personally fascinated by the fact Hendrix had died when he was still in his twenties. Then when Hamish, the only one I still really spoke to from time to time, lent me a book about this phenomenon called the 27 Club, where creative genius rages spectacularly and capitulates just as abruptly, with uncanny regularity, on this particular year, something cohered for me.

Those nights over the Turkish coffee, Iain and Dorothy had shared with me their philosophies. For her, people were enigmas to themselves, which they illuminated with the lies of the culture, but so long as they knew they were lying, their illuminations could help others more than they hurt them. Iain was less optimistic about human relations in the domestic plane. For him the world was a stage and music was the food of love. His favourite philosopher was Schopenhauer. If I told him I was bored, he'd say that boredom was a failure of the imagination and that I should pick up a book.

But that night he played a violin piece from Schubert, and the three of us were lost in it as if for a century.

'It's as if ... music makes time ... more feelable.'

'Exactly, Errol. Our pendulum swings from desire to boredom, and back again, over and over. It tics and tocs between the human drives. Our will to live. And our will to *make life*. Music is the only way to annihilate the pendulum.'

'There are other ways,' said Dorothy.

'No. Take sexual desire, once sated, it is exposed as just another desire: ordinary, tawdry, sordid.'

'Tantra?'

'What's tantra?', I asked.

Iain just continued on his train of thought. 'If language and sex are the root causes of suffering, music has this immediacy. It hits us directly. It's pure knowing. Music lets us be the thing itself.'

In the 27 Club, I began to see a way of bringing my parents' philosophies – at least as I have reconstructed them as remembered – together. As my parents made me, so, *in memoriam*, would I represent a version of them, a synthesis of their legacy.

Not directly as a musician, or in worthy deeds like a good person, but as a book. Somehow as a book.

BREAKING UP

The archives confirm that it was an implacable winter's night in May when Trent lost control of his bike. I imagine roads slick with rain, traffic lights reflected in them like wobbly coloured spears, and blade-like winds. The Man had been fleeing from the cops with a backpack full of watches – Benetton, Armani, Gucci. I'd had my father's old Omega Seamaster fixed three times to no avail, and, dismayed by my Casio, B had given me a Christian Dior three months into our affair. The knowledge of Trent's haul cast a retrospective light of dubious provenance on all B's gifts. My aunt had pointed out the story of Trent's accident to me in *The Glebe*, our local paper. He'd come off his bike on a bend of The Crescent, the route she knew I'd taken innumerable times. After the accident, I didn't get the call from B for over three weeks, so I went around early one evening, taking note of the ominous skid mark left by the tires. That was the first time I went uninvited to 'Violet'. Vicky herself answered the door and tried to conceal a sly grin. She looked nothing like B at all; she was tall, flat-chested and fine-boned.

Sitting in the kitchen opposite B was the guy from next door I'd seen peeing from the veranda on the first night, a year before. The walnut chest from within Vicky's wardrobe was on the table. I'd walked in on some kind of moment. Without getting up, the man put out a fat hand and introduced himself as Stanislav Hadjiev, Bogolima's father. The resemblance was uncanny – same eyes, same chin, same ears. He even had the red mole.

'I thought your father was dead,' I blurted, but no one seemed to hear this.

Stanislav had a shiftiness to him, a dubious haze rather than an aura, and an ancient scar running down from the end of his left eyebrow. His nose was a pock-marked slab of a thing.

'Well, now that we're all here ...' began Vicky.

In terms of comportment, B's mother was the antithesis of Stan – she had a clear-eyed stare and was folded carefully like origami, whereas Stan had a loose berserker feel. I watched the rings on his hairy fingers very carefully. At first I thought Vicky was some sort of a rich bitch, but the more she spoke that cultured Australian, the more strained the careful enunciation of multisyllabic words seemed; she was putting it on but couldn't decide how hard to bother, and so made a sort of performance of it. And in this she was no different than most Australians, I suppose. I like to imagine that maybe she'd left Dapto, had got off to a running start at Sydney University in the swinging Sixties and was on her way to being a feminist intellectual novelist, but smoked too much dope and ran smack bang into Stanislav with all his ready cash, then got up the duff with B.

When Stan cut in with some small talk, Vicky redoubled her efforts to get our eyes together, and, like her daughter, seemed to know how. Our eyes met and lingered. Under her ironic veneer Vicky's dream was lost. I saw this and held her to it and her face dropped away. I was beginning to become aware of a power in me, and I realised in that moment it had the capacity to hurt people.

Then I looked back at B and felt my newfound confidence collapse. That girl had direction. I would be lying prostrate on the bed, drifting in and out of sleep, and she would be downstairs with a large coffee plunger until 1 a.m. studying for a physics exam or something. At dawn I'd go down and pinch her notes.

I was made to understand by Stanislav that Bogolima was to be taken out of our school and enrolled at Kincoppal-Rose Bay.

'Of the Sacred Heart,' Vicky said drily.

This was an all-girls sandstone castle with sweeping crystal harbour views, halfway up Heartbreak Hill.

'We're wanting your assurance that you no longer associate with Bogolima,' he said.

I assumed he was Russian.

'We've got nothing against you personally, Errol,' drawled her mother, with accidental sarcasm. Stanislav glared distractedly at Vicky, who reached for her neck. He crack-pulled each of his knuckles in turn as he continued. 'You're a lovely face, yes? But have no fucking ambition, kid, 'fraid to say.'

'Perhaps Errol is possessed of talents other than academic?' Vicky.

'Bogolima says you're doing poofter subjects ...'

B put a finger to her temple and made a bang sound for my benefit, but I didn't acknowledge it.

'... failing exams and so on ... What do you say?'

'Well Mr ...'

'Call me Stan.'

'I haven't actually ...'

'I say my daughter is not to going to marry a teacher or a nurse.' At this witticism, Stan winked lecherously at no one in particular but at the same time presented his body to me in such a way as to show that to contradict his edict would be to risk serious physical damage. Vicky rearranged plastic fruit in the wooden bowl. At the front door Stan actually stuffed some cash into the pocket of my jeans.

'If you have daughter like Bogolima you will one day understand.'

I sensed from his tone that he felt genuinely sorry for me. Stan disappeared into No. 51 and I stole a last look back at 'Violet'. Vicky was staring out from between the curtains of the front room.

Dark energy draws likeness unto itself and then, with the burden of the extra mass, comes apart. It was like that with B and me, but in all likelihood I was the more affected by the experience. She was made of superior stuff, and probably told from a mile away I was headed nowhere. Yet despite her irrepressible brilliance – last I heard she was studying to become a trauma surgeon – the romantic in me believed that B did have a sacred heart.

I walked out of 'Violet' that night in a lyrical mood. Rounding the bend to The Crescent, it was the first time in a long time I allowed myself to indulge a missing of Dorothy and Iain. I wanted to sit with them in the kitchen once more over Turkish coffee and breathe in some parental radiance, but then, looking up at the stars, I felt that this radiance was unreachable now, that it had got sucked up into the celestial womb. And thus I would be torn from time, suspended eternally as a piece of night-blue fruit. But in whose mind? Neville's? My auntie's? Surely not Matilda's. As I sloped along under the railway bridge, a car slowed and pulled up beside me. Instinctively, I broke into a run but it sped ahead, before slowing again. It was, inevitably somehow, a white Torana.

When I came to, I was on my front porch, my cheek pressed onto the cold tiles. The Dior watch had been stripped from my wrist and the seven dollars or so I had in my wallet was gone. Stan's fifty-dollar note was still in my pocket.

My auntie was in the darkened lounge room by the glow of the telly with her feet up, reading and half-watching the silver-haired man who was animating the screen. I was still woozy and couldn't pull focus, but I heard the catch in the man's voice, which was familiar, though I couldn't match it to a personage.

'Why's he weeping?'

My auntie took a generous gulp of wine and said: 'You know what your parents paid for this place back in the Seventies?'

'No. What?'

'Next to nothing. Think what it's worth now.'

'Can you be specific?'

'A bit offy to talk about property money under your Dad and Mum's roof. Now your roof. What someone could do with that sort of money.'

'What would you do?'

'Disappear. Whereas you could become a professional flâneur.'

'Me? Someone who sits in cafes and writes. Like Baudelaire? Sounds alright.'

She sighed meaningfully and looked around at me. 'Bloody hell Errol, what happened to your face?'

I touched the bridge of my nose to test whether the aqualinity of my anterior nasal spine had been preserved. It had.

'Are my lips okay?'

'What? No they've blown up something fierce. I thought you'd been drinking again.'

'I'm worried about the symmetry of the peaks ... the vermilion border...'

'Vain bastard. What the fuck happened, Errol?!'

'I tripped over a shoelace when my hands were in my pockets.'

'Poor boy. Always in the firing line. I'll get some ice.'

'Who is that man, and why's he crying?' I asked.

'It's your Prime Minister, Errol. Got caught with his pants down.'

PART THREE

YOUTH

WINTERLUDE

Days later, I turned seventeen, and my auntie announced that we were going to the UK after the school year was out. So I was to visit my birthplace. This promise of escape, and the mention of flâneurie inspired me. I took a systematic approach to my journal entries and got a good study routine going. My marks climbed above sixty per cent on average and I even managed seventy per cent in English and Biology. Each morning I would rise at 6 a.m. and, for an hour, write out my life story from the very beginning in as minute detail as my memory would allow.

We got off to a bad start. Polly's homesickness for Greenock was cured instantly after a showdown outside an Italian restaurant with Youngest Gene. The mental state of their brother Iain at the time of the car crash seemed to inflame some ancient ember of sororal contention. My Aunt Polly had told me on more than one occasion that Gene Connolly was the pretty one, Iain the wild one and she the black sheep. Gene was now well married to a successful engineer who commuted to Glasgow, and had three rosy-cheeked daughters, second cousins I suppose, each with a horse. What Polly hadn't mentioned was that her ex-husband, a philandering sometime journalist for *The Scotsman*, had been desperately in love with Gene, and would have had her if she'd not opted against dark and wayward passions in crabbed circumstances in favour of plush domestic bliss.

My aunt put her Greenock flatlet on the market, and we caught a train back to London where we stayed, awkwardly, in a granny flat at the back of her ex-husband's place in Brixton. The homecoming had put my auntie in a deep funk she may never have come out of. She complained bitterly about the weather and slept in. Her lunchtimes and evenings were watched closely in the Dogstar Hotel, or other less comely pubs in that bristly area of south London. But there were three weeks yet to kill, and so I set off. The near sub-zero temperatures added to the exhilaration of my initial sojourns, which were wholly unoriginal: Buckingham Palace, St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Leicester and Trafalgar Squares, Harrods. The Cabinet War Rooms followed by St James's Park. In Soho, I was nearly coaxed into a low doorway by a prostitute. It was an intensely novelistic vignette, and for the first time I came to experience myself as a protagonist; the sense that I

was being written made me giggle, which incensed the woman who attempted to clobber me with a cherry red imitation leather handbag.

I wandered until my legs ached.

And in between peregrinations, I found cafés to write in. After a few hours of feverish scribbling into my Moleskine, I'd get on a Tube down the Victoria line and find my auntie somewhere muted and airless, beneath a cloying brain of smoke. Her elbows would be on the bar, and she'd be nursing a glass and the cryptic crossword. Towards the end of our stay, she was in the pubs by 11 a.m. and had started chasing her Chardonnays with vodka. When I refused to drink with her, she became verbally abusive and ultimately incoherent. But as I exited the pub for what was to be the last time she called me back.

'I was supposed to be a Mary Hepburn you know!'

'Sorry? You mean the actress, but she's Audrey ...'

'I was supposed to be a surgeon!', she said with deep feeling.

'Here, have drink with me. We're on vacation.'

'It's all right.'

'Right you are, you puritanical little snot. Well, sit down at least. There are some things you should know, Errol.'

I waited.

'Follow your dreams. There's one.'

'So yours was medicine?'

'Gynaecology. I was following in the footsteps of your fuckin' grandfather, wasn't I, the great Frank Connolly.'

'Yeah, he was a doctor, wasn't he?'

'Not just a doctor. A gynaecological surgeon.'

'Okay. What happened?'

'Sophia Jex-Blake, Elsie Inglis, Margaret Fairlie ... Gertrude Herzfeld? Names mean anything to you?'

I shook my head.

'Of course not. But these women are legends. It's a man's world, Errol.'

'So you're giving up?'

'It's too late for me. For a family ... for a career change ...'

'So grandpa didn't let you become a doctor? Is that what you're saying?'

'No. He did want me to. That's just it.'

Polly's eyes filled with tears. But I could tell there was something else that was tormenting her. She signalled for another drink, then shot me a fierce look. I watched with distaste as she downed her wine without touching it to the bar, ordered a chaser, and another glass. I made to leave but my auntie continued carefully.

'When I was fifteen,' she said, lighting a cigarillo, 'there was this very dashing welder chappie. He rode a motorbike.' She chuckled. 'Like your old man.' Then she seemed to be falling asleep.

'And?'

'Well, fill in the gaps, sweetheart. I fell in love.'

She made a shape with her hand in front of her stomach.

'Pregnant? But you ...' I searched my memory. 'You don't have a kid?'

'Somewhere I imagine I do ...'

I thought about this.

'Oh.'

'He sent me to a "home", Errol – my own parents. I had ... this little girl ... and then I came back ...'

'Without your own baby?'

She nodded. 'And that was that. Never spoken of again. "As you were", so to speak. My father and I didn't say anything beyond pleasantries after that. And I lost my taste for medicine. His kind anyway.' My auntie smiled. 'Life's a shit sandwich for some.'

I was indignant.

'But what did granny say about all this?'

Polly held her hand up, like a kid in school who knew the answer. 'Yes, that's what I'd meant to tell you! You know ...' She whispered this: 'I was diagnosed as schizophrenic when I was seventeen.'

'Like split personality?'

'Bollocks if you ask me. You give away your own child, something that fed on you from the inside. See if *that* doesn't divide you against yourself.'

Her voice grew thickly conspiratorial.

'But there is something in our genes, Errol. Mum ... I mean your granny ... was a dark horse. In and out of sanatoriums, where they trepanned her skull on more than one occasion. I used to blame Frank's brand of Godless Calvinism ... told myself it was a straitjacket on her spirit, but I don't see it that way now. She wasn't made to be domesticated. It was rumoured she was a Roma ... she had no history to speak of ... Gypsy blood. She sung these strange songs to us.'

'Why did they get married?'

'Your grandfather picked her up on a roadside between bombing missions during the war. They got drunk on brandy. Your father was the result. She seduced Frank with those dark eyes and her siren songs at a time when his life expectancy, as a Mosquito pilot, was three months.'

Fragments of this story were falling into place.

'Didn't she leave him?'

'Vanished!'

Polly gave a full-throated laugh.

'I came back to Greenock after my first year of uni and she was gone.' My aunt pulled me closer. 'Look at me, Errol.'

Her eyes were drowning in anguish.

'Thing is, I see it in you too. That tendency. The way you go off. Perhaps it's your gift, if you choose to see it that way, but it's dangerous. So ...'

I pushed myself free of Polly. Something was steeling up within me. I was enthralled by these revelations about my lineage, but I found all this history suffocating too. I wanted to disassociate entirely from my bloodline. Polly's maudlin ramblings were complicating my story; they were too far outside my own line of action. They were other people's stories. I needed to happen according to the rules of my own unfolding design.

But my aunt grabbed hold of my arm and continued: 'Okay, here's a thought experiment. What's your dream job?'

I was impatient to leave by now.

'I dunno.'

'Not what you really want to do! But what you might've done. In another life? Humour me. Close your eyes.'

When I closed my eyes, I saw the painting in B's house by Franz Marc: 'Fighting Forms'.
'Become a bullfighter?'

'Why?'

'I don't know. It just came to mind.'

Maybe it was because the matador epitomised the beautiful, arrogant psychosis of youth – a dance with death. The matador's steps were determined to incite and then evade fatal attacks.

'Goodbye auntie Polly. I'll see you tomorrow.'

I went back to the house in Brixton to find the granny flat locked and an envelope thumbtacked to the door. A scrawled message in the hand of Polly's ex-husband said he had taken his family to Corsica for the weekend, would be back on Monday, and requested that my auntie clear out before then, since her behaviour was upsetting his girlfriend and making her kid restless; and, in any event, they had to get the room ready for a lodger. I was feebly attempting to break into the granny flat, which was barred, when an octogenarian Jamaican woman peered through a gap in the fence and promised to call the police.

I had 147 pounds, my Moleskines, the passport I always kept on me as my auntie had advised, and a full set of clothes. I had no phone numbers written down, was seventeen but felt forty. The cramped sky was darkening and I could smell rain. I headed for Central London, and found a hostel in Bayswater on a street lined with trees. I hugged one. A dustman asked me if I was okay, and informed me they were London Planes. The houses around there amazed me, so unlike the hunkered architectural pell-mell of my childhood suburbs, they had a uniform grandeur: generously dimensioned and freshly painted, fitted with brass and beautiful big doors.

I bought more gear, including fingerless gloves, some Chesterfield cigarettes, and a full-length army jacket. I visited second-hand bookstores, set up my offices in parks, where I read and edited and rewrote, and fed pigeons. Sometimes I would get so cold my bad leg

froze up, so I purchased some long johns and a Biggles-style flyer's hat. I'd managed to grow a wispy beard and was beginning to feel genuinely homeless. But I was the opposite of lonely: with a flagon of coffee, some oranges, bread and biscuits, with the birds and squirrels, and the people-watching. The worlds within worlds within worlds on the page kept me content and orientated. I was disappearing into a psychic safety net, a web of unreality.

I finished the second draft of my story. My project was to document my youth, but with ten years still to live before my youth was up, my life was chasing its own tail. There was nothing left to do other than write about what I saw, and what I saw, increasingly, was decay. The mounting downward pressure of an internal mental tangle gave over to a kind manic restlessness, as, every day, the present and the future died on the fingertips of my writing hand.

My loins began to tingle again.

I started loitering around wine bars, nursing Lemon, Lime and Bitters. Early one evening, as a feeble citrusy light was draining from one such street-side establishment near my hostel, I beheld a vision through a yucca plant. The insidious ambient strains of Sade dissolved as I met with the large bistre eyes of a Spanish beauty. I fell head over heels into the folds of her bright cable-knit sweater the colour of fresh blood.

She bore a resemblance to Matilda, and rested her empty glass upon a worn paperback, which turned out to be an Oxford Anthology of Romantic poetry. I approached, serenading her with a rendition of 'The Loving Tongue' that Neville used to belt out to clear his throat. My ludicrous hat, the unkempt goatee, being lost in a major metropolis, orphaned, horny, at a loose end; it all conspired in those moments to unburden me of my habitual shyness.

'Can I offer you a drink?' I asked, swaying sensually from one heel to the other.

'Por qué no?', the young woman responded with frank amusement.

'Sorry. Drink?', I mimed. 'Do you speak English?'

'I'll have a draught of vintage.'

'A what?'

'Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth.'

My rare composure was faltering.

'A Stella Artois?'

'Is that a beer?'

'Yes. It's a lager.'

Relief flooded in.

'I'm Errol, by the way.'

'By which way are you Errol?'

'Every which way.'

She laughed.

'Gabriela.'

Her hand was warm, slender and long-fingered.

Having disclosed my name, I couldn't think of a witty rejoinder, and realised, wincingly, that she was trying to free her hand from my grip without seeming rude. Her name would slip continuously from my working memory during the course of the evening. Yet by the next evening I was in love with her. I even remember the exchange that confirmed this. I'd asked why she buried her head so deeply in the book as she read, and learned that she was going blind.

Our conversations wound on for hours. She had a way of drawing me out, of making me feel like I knew more than I did, and that my opinions had poetic potential. Gleaning that she

was eight years older than me, I told her I was twenty-four, a published writer in Australia, and in London researching a new novel. She smiled from behind the chocolatey film of her Spanishness, a kind of haze which endowed her facial expressions, even those relaying the most banal notion, with delicious mystique. This and her ethnographic lisp was my first real revelation of the erotic.

My rapture was total when I caught her unguarded sadness. I took it for the realisation that the world was fading before her eyes. On our last meeting, we got a train to Hampstead Heath. She wanted to locate the plum tree under which Keats composed 'Ode to a Nightingale', but we found ourselves hopelessly lost, and collapsed at the edge of one of the heath's many ponds, where she allowed me to kiss her dusty lips and feel around the outside of her jumper. She kept her legs closed and her adductors, strong from horse riding, were hard as a marble. My balls ached unbearably.

'Will you marry me?'

She laughed at this with a force that struck me as vindictive. 'You can't even remember my name.'

'Gabrielle.'

'Gabriela. So what is your next novel about?'

'Life and death? Youth.'

'Dying young?'

I turned away, and shifted the crotch of my jeans. She reached for her anthology.

'Read to me, Errol.'

'Which poem?'

'Just open it at random.' The book came apart at its most well-thumbed page.

'Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

*Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies ...'*

This guy's going out with whimper, ay?'

A breeze ribbed the surface of the pond.

'He was twenty-four when he died.'

'No ways.'

'But Rimbaud was seventeen.'

Gabriela leant over me, pinned me down by the shoulders and put her hands over my face.

'Your face will make a nice mask. Errol? Errol?'

'Sorry.'

'What was *that*?'

'I go off sometimes. It's nothing. Should we go for a farewell curry tonight?'

She rose to her knees.

'Yes, but first I will take my lasting impression.'

From her bag she produced a roll of bandage, a tub of petroleum jelly and a jar of white powder.

'Lie back, Errol, and be a good corpse.'

I watched as she chafed her hands warm and applied a thick layer of the jelly to my face. She used the pond water and a Tupperware container to form a paste of the powder. As the cast was drying, she massaged my feet and hummed unfamiliar tunes. When I woke it was night and I was shivering as she applied cream to my face and rubbed it away with cotton wool.

After our butter chicken, I walked her home and asked, as usual, if I could come up to her room.

‘Sorry, Errol, like I say, my landlady has very strict rules.’

We exchanged addresses and home numbers, ‘Promise me you will come to Spain. When my studies are completed in May.’

‘What for?’, I asked, not managing to conceal my disappointment, which was significant.

‘To collect your mask. I’ll have it painted by that time. And if for nothing else you must come to learn what it was that Hemingway fell in love with.’

I didn’t tell her that I would be deep in the first round of assessment tasks for my Higher School Certificate by then. I went back to my perpetually riotous hostel, up to my room with its eight bunks, and imagined myself, dancing, in a bullring until I fell asleep.

Upon my return from England, we corresponded by letter only, obeying some tacit agreement. The remove offered by paper compelled me to come clean, and I admitted my age, and that my writing credentials had been a lie. She understood, and convinced me to send her copies of my journals. I was certain she’d be disgusted by some of the contents but she just posted the journals back with extensive notes, redactions and suggestions in red pen. Looking so deeply into my affairs seemed to affect her, and Gabriela’s penmanship grew hectic with smothered lust. In Fuente Vaqueros I was to inhale the fertile vega of her homeland! About three months in, her letters stopped arriving. Sensing rejection, I phoned the number she had given for London. An impatient male voice came over the line. The accent was southern Irish. Gabriela had stepped out in front of a double-decker bus near Marble Arch.

RE-ENTRY

I drew in the abstract a great deal of aesthetic satisfaction from the image of Gabriela's fate. Somehow it wasn't a death, but a fate. I here reconstruct a passage from my journal at the time:

'... and so Gabriela Lorca's endless night pitilessly descended. It was announced to me, as such news had been before, through a cruel metallic horn. One of our last conversations was to do with great tragic endings in novels. We envisaged Iain and Dorothy's last drive through the lens of Milan Kundera, as Tomas and Tereza's in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. A fervent Dostoyevsky fan, Gabriela claimed to have been unmoved by Tolstoy, but I can't help thinking she was doing an *Anna Karenina*.'

With no *in loco parentis* to prod me, high school loomed as vague and optional. After living as a free agent in London, I supposed I'd earned the right to be forever desultory. Upon returning, I turned the volume on the house phone all the way down. Since the call from the police, the unanticipated stridency of this particular machine's robotic skirl set my teeth on edge. My auntie filled the tape with messages that were panicked, admonitory and contrite by turn. To this day, I don't know if she became a kneaded clod face-first on a sticky bar, or sobered up. I hope she found those hot white stones of Navagio Beach she used to pine for. It soothed me to imagine Polly prostrate, toes pointing cliffward, the crown of her head being lapped against by a turquoise sea.

Neville must have got word, because he showed up in my kitchen on New Year's Eve morning.

'No bloody Vegemite?' he said and resumed blowing on his tea.

'Haven't been shoppin'.'

I told him about my plan to quit school and go Walkabout.

'Not gonna finish high school?'

'I want to see the country.'

'Which parts?'

'Up the coast, down the coast ... '

'Skirting around the edges, ay? What's say after high school's over, we go into the red centre of this joint – hit the interior? Sort your melon out, real quick.'

'I dunno, I'm more of a city slicker, Nev. And I like the sea.'

He reminded me that, being a city slicker, I was no more nomadic than him; he suggested I at least improve my guitar playing before committing to something like that. He couldn't imagine me being happy picking fruit in 40-degree heat. He had a good point there. I'd never worked a day in my life. You needed money to live.

So with Neville moving back in, I was, effectively, obliged to finish high school. It felt like a stupid place. I had the feeling of circling back on the redundant. I bided my time and gathered my thoughts as a lone wolf, ever on the periphery. The seasons came and went, and I ticked off the year according to the calendar above my desk, day by day, month by month. I studied like a man possessed by the fear of his unsolicited thoughts, surviving on plunger coffee, cheddar cheese, baguettes, Kalamata olives and fruit. Once in a rhythm, I decided that a tertiary education, basically free, would be the best way to knock over the handful of years remaining before my twenty-seventh birthday.

At the end of that year we drove out to Nielsen Park in Neville's Datsun 180B and sat on a crumbly yellow rock in front of a cave at Shark Beach with fish and chips and a big bottle of Diet Coke, to see the light of the last evening of the 1980s. I asked Neville how come he didn't drink, and he told me the story of his father who'd he'd been a singer too, but got cirrhosis of the liver and died before fifty.

The sun was low, and the yachts were gently incandescent as they passed.

Neville sang a slow song in his tribal tongue about a cold wind blowing across the desert and I got this funny inkling Gabriela might still be alive.

Night seeped in, and swallowed the land up beneath us.

I stretched out my hands but couldn't see or feel them.

'Are we bloody real or what, Nev? Feels like I'm disintegrating or something.'

'Fair dinkum.'

He drew me under one of his arms. The body warmth and the faint smell of his sweat was pleasant and reassuring, but a violent tugging started up around my heart muscle. I made myself stiff and twisted out from under Neville's affection, found a stone and tried to skim it, but I heard a plop, and a sucking sound, as it went straight through the water.

'Like you say, we should go out to the desert some time. Clear our systems.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'No worries.' I could tell he didn't believe me. I requested we drive over to the Gap.

There, I arched and slung back my arm like Thommo, and delivered, one by one, the four full Moleskine journals containing my life story. The idea of their wind milling over the edge of the country was appealing.

After my last exam, I went, for the first time, with Neville, back to the same Chinese restaurant where I'd had the fight with Dorothy and Iain. It had been changed into a café, so we opted for a cheap pasta at Bar Italia.

'Why am I such a miserable bastard, Neville? I can't bear being in my own skin most of the time.'

'Maybe you don't know how to get back home.'

'Yeah. Whatever that is. I need to get away, anyway.'

'But you should see someone about the white-outs. You gotta be careful with those neurological things.'

'No. I need them. They've become like a security blanket. It's a peaceful place I go to.'

Neville looked at me a while, but I didn't know how to include him. Aloneness is habit forming. Finally he announced he had an offer to go as back-up on an incognito tour Midnight Oil were doing, and after that he needed to be based in Newcastle.

'Me nephew Charlie's gone off the bloody rails. He's a smart fella too, like you. You'd get on.'
He pushed the last crust of garlic bread towards me.

'I'll be right, Nev. You should go for it. I don't know how to be with people.'

'But what are you going to do, Ez?'

'When I finish high school? Reckon I'll get a motorbike licence. Go to uni I suppose.'

I felt more blood draining out of me with the expression of each idea. A major depression was coming in for me. I'd lost my sense of active direction – and that vision I had for synthesising Dorothy and Iain's philosophies went with it.

'Course I'll stay for the exams', Neville said, putting away the untouched remainder of garlic bread.

I rallied.

'No mate, it's fine. Honestly. I'm ready for my independence. No offence intended.'

'None taken.'

The next morning, by Neville's yellow Datsun, we shook hands and talked over the top of each other in an awkward mesh of platitudes. He handed me a scrunched bit of paper with an address and phone number, and sputtered off. I pressed a frangipani flower to my face – it was cool, silken, fragrant. The street was dazzlingly bright, and there seemed to be twice the usual number of cars parked on it.

Later, I took a walk at dusk. The spillage of the jacarandas' brilliant purples was best experienced in the fading light.

HEROIN

While waiting for my HSC results, I bought a second-hand Honda 750 with the Austudy money I'd saved, and obtained a motorbike licence. Riding came naturally to me, with all the experience of being doubled by Iain, and I tried to apply what he said about it all being in the hands. I wore Iain's old helmet and reached Byron Bay within eight hours. There, I encountered a Thai girl with translucent blue-white skin and chiselled features. She was doing medicine at Sydney University and was in a pub playing the poker machines when I caught the ash of her cigarette on my palm, walking past with my Lemon, Lime and Bitters. I wouldn't say we hit it off, or that sparks flew, but there was a certain chemistry, and I'd never met anyone with a drier sense of humour. This, along with her complexion and her bone structure, kept me engaged.

We smeared each other with foul-smelling mud at the tea tree lakes, took long walks on the endless orange beach, went snorkelling, got henna tattoos and attended a fire-twirling 'workshop'. I remember eating mangos, drinking repulsive wheatgrass shots, gorging on fish and chips, and one hash-inspired night of sex in my tent. The next morning I was in the sea and something tapped me on the temple. I turned to stare into the eye of a dolphin. After a fortnight in Byron, I bought my girlfriend a shiny new black helmet. She tried to get me to replace Iain's faded old thing and we had our first fight about this and I threw the helmet into a public bin. I doubled her back to Sydney bareheaded, and she egged me on to go faster all the way. En route we scored some coke and spent three sleepless nights in a cheap motel in Coffs Harbour, and it became obvious that I'd hooked up with a version of B.

My exam results were just good enough to get me into a Bachelor of Arts programme, so I enrolled at Sydney Uni to be near my girlfriend. We agreed that we were in a 'relationship'. I surely needed the company. Although, to be with her, at times, was as good as being alone. The charge had dissipated by the time the seasonal sap was rising. Yet we remained, somehow, stuck to each other.

It turned out I was as shithouse at university as I was at relationships. I possessed neither the 'hard competence' nor the entrepreneurial drive to seriously contemplate a *bona fide* profession. And as the son of highly educated lefties, I had the pedigree but not, in the

event, the stomach for the rigours of tertiary study. University to me was nothing but an enervating architectural complex. I did get really into some of the lectures and the readings, but I never went beyond the assignment questions. The light in my brain was guttering, and I was readying to start some other kind of fire. I approached an older woman at the Manning Bar, who'd winked at me. She was doing International Relations, and I plied her with Campari while she told me about her failing marriage. I performed cunnilingus on her by the light of a full moon to the scrunching of leaves between the roots of a giant Moreton Bay fig. In this I had, for the first time, been unfaithful, and I was surprised to find the experience all the sweeter for it.

My relationship time had come to consist of taking root at café tables, where my girlfriend would study and I'd read uni books. I started to fill up journals again, though my handwriting was growing spidery, like a kid's. My girlfriend didn't seem to notice my white-outs, which were becoming more frequent.

I dealt with my depression by cultivating a conviction that an artist's mental and emotional life could be elevated to the status of commodity. Ambition came, like the taste of blood in the mouth. I wanted my howl to ring out. I sought a readership.

One afternoon I attempted to explain my calling.

'Us introspective artist types are useless in many important ways – socially crippled, can't get projects off the ground, not motivated enough to fight for causes ...'

'Can't make money.'

'Well ...'

'Are you admitting you have no purpose, Errol?'

'You see, I do have a purpose. But it has to be guarded ... against the quicksand ...' I wrung my hands and twisted my entire body, searching for the next thought.

'What quicksand?'

'The quicksand of spiritual enervation!'

'Okay, so what is your purpose?'

'I'm a flâneur.'

'Meaning?'

'I sit and watch life go by, filter it through the fine mesh of my mind, with a pen in my hand.'

'But where's your infrastructure?'

'Infrastructure? I'm not a fucking building? My *infrastructure* is rhetorical. I exist outside of the economy.'

'So you are achieve your purpose already.'

'Are achieving, have achieved ... But no I haven't, you see. Well only partly ... because no one knows who I am, do they? And if I remain anonymous ... Well, then I at least want to experience the ultimate living power before I cark it... Like what Goethe was on about. Do you know what I mean by that?'

'The ultimate living power. Yes, I do.'

'Really? I'm working towards the jolt of deliverance that comes from ... here, I've written it down ... *from disseminating a new kind of energy.*'

'You gonna make a bomb? Uh oh.'

I kept reading. 'I'm a block of raw nuclear material, which, once ignited, will explode a thunderbolt of original language. The after-current of my message will crackle with guilt in the neuro-transmitters of my enemies. I want to perforate the eardrums of those whose minds are set hardest against what it is I have to say.'

'Who are these lucky people?'

'My readership. Especially my peers who judged and ostracised and generally looked down on me. Matilda. B. My ex-friends. As a writer you have to commune with the dead. The difficulty is in conveying the full weight of what it is the dead have got to teach us. It's beyond words, but demands to be written.'

'It's normal, Errol.'

'Normal? What's normal?!'

'A failing artist, as such like unpublished writer ... you know, "no one caring about my words, boo hoo". Normal for them having suicidal tendency.' She smiled and her riot of white, crooked teeth burst through her satiny lip flesh, the tiny creases of which disappeared as they were stretched to the extent of her amusement.

I'd drunk way too much coffee. I was jittery as hell. My heart muscle laboured and an army of cicadas thrummed in the marrow of my skull. I could feel a white-out coming on, but wanted to stay in this world because this was the closest I'd ever come to the shape of my story.

'I'm not suicidal. I'm going on a journey. It's about the imagination. How many times do I have to tell you? You're missing ...'

'And you're LAZY TOO!' She cackled. 'So your situation likely never going to change.'

'I agree. You're right. My problem is I have it too easy. A nice place to live. Though my parents' money will run out soon, and the Austudy is like scraps ... But still ... There's nothing at stake. Not really.'

She yawned indulgently.

'Fuck it, I'm not going to uni anymore. I'm dropping out.' I shook two fists, then touched the fingertips of both hands lightly on the wrought-iron table to consolidate this decision.

'So what will you do?'

'Be an autodidact.'

'Huh?'

'Self-taught.'

She gave a snort. 'What can you learn from yourself when you are so ignorant?'

'*Life* teaches me. I'll sign up for a short writing course. The basic parameters are all I need. The rest is talent.'

'Whatever, Errol.'

'Whatever? I hate that expression.'

'Really, you should finish BA and study literature postgrad. You're not smart enough to be an auto-dickhead.'

'Thanks.'

'My mother died forty-four years old.'

'I know. But you've still got your dad, who you hate. How is this relevant?'

'I don't hate my father; he's dead to me.'

'I really need a friend from a happy family. Maybe that's where I'm going wrong.'

'My mother got a brain tumour. Her doctor didn't pick it up. So I think myself – become a neurosurgeon. But you know what life *taught* me? I'm not sufficient smart to be a specialist. So I will only ever be a bloody GP! So what's the use? I hate old people. Know your limits.'

'Limitations', I corrected.

I'd failed to see until this point how she could be studying medicine, a prestige degree, with such ambivalence. She took a bite out of my focaccia and started another cigarette. 'Under the Bridge', by the Chili Peppers, was playing in the internal courtyard of Badde Manors that afternoon and it was, though 2 p.m., almost dark outside. Rain pummelled the windows of the aviary-like enclosure with the vibratory force of a thousand drums. My

balls tightened and I shuddered, in the grip of an ecstasy of consciousness. Time stopped. The elemental and the urbane had intersected at the threshold of my writerly identity. On the dust jacket of my book I would ensure that my portrait achieved this symbiotic tension of the cosmopolitan and the wild, which I was at this very moment so alive to.

As a writer you come eventually to treat such false epiphanies with the right dilution of retrospective contempt. But, at the time, the mood dip was brutal, as I wondered what meaningful discursive developments such short-lived bliss could engender. I started writing it out. And, in turn, I wrote of the hollow sense of accomplishment at having done so, and then the deflation of spirit that would last the evening through. My thoughts tended towards the abyss. Of course they did. What is life anyway, after the immortality of infancy, but the suck of the gravity well leading us back to the void? Some homecoming. If I could only reconcile myself to this truth. Maybe then I could see my depression for what it was – an unnatural remoteness, a critical failure to be in the centre of any weather. Perhaps I did need creditors to be hounding me, the kind of deprivation of the Paris set, the Lost Generation of the 1920s ...

My pen ran out of ink. The rain eased.

‘You know this song is about taking heroin?’ I commented idly, removing a dangle of lettuce from my girlfriend’s teeth and adjusting her scarf to better conceal the ligature marks on her throat.

‘So?’

Her velvety-full, mauve-coloured lips pursed to a frigid blue, and rimmed with an anaemic streak of white. I stared into the filigree of cobweb on the inside of my latte glass and clutched my chest with both hands. ‘Don’t you ever want to *feel* more?’ I exhorted her with the full force my convictions.

She looked at me inscrutably and asked if I’d like to try heroin.

‘What? No ways. Are you insane? Did you miss the news item about Kurt Cobain?’

'He had stomach problems.'

'Dancing with Mr Brownstone's bad, man. I'm going out lucid. With full consciousness.'

'Heroin is derived from organic substance.'

'Isn't everything? You told me cyanide was in plants, didn't you?'

I thought about all our unprotected sex, and hammered out my cigarette into the pyre the metal ashtray had become.

She shrugged her bony shoulders and said 'Whatever', and got back to her epidemiology. I reached under the table and slid my hands between her thighs, which were as silky and fragrant as the frangipani petal. While she read and took notes through the stages of her climax, I knew it was over between us and was correct in assuming that her indifference would be complete. How could I be with someone who didn't see the lightning in me?

Three weeks later she overdosed. It hadn't been her first time. You may wonder how I'd missed the signs, but everyone has a genius for concealment, and not least for concealing their own suspicions from themselves, if it's something they'd rather not countenance. She'd explained away the needles I found in the medicine cabinet of her studio in Surry Hills as being for insulin shots, and even produced some medicine emblazoned with Thai characters as corroborating evidence.

Her body was discovered by a jogger under the old tram bridge at Wentworth Park opposite the Fish Markets in Pyrmont. I was questioned by the police and told them, selectively, what I knew. I also discovered things I hadn't known – she had a chronic gambling problem, and was in a significant amount of debt. Her cousin contacted me to come and collect some of her personal effects and disclosed that, after she'd failed an important exam, her father had cut her off financially and demanded she go back to Bangkok to work at his tiling company. Soon after, I recognised one of her fellow med students outside Badde Manors. I introduced myself, and was regarded with an offishness that verged on distaste.

'If I were you I'd get yourself tested, mate.'

My heart stuck in my throat. 'Why?' She stood silent. 'I didn't bloody use. Look, if there's something you're not telling me ...'

'How do you think your girlfriend was buying her books in the end ... feeding herself ... supporting her habit?'

I didn't want to know.

She must have had a birth name. And I know she had an English one she'd given herself, but, because I referred to her in my entries as 'Girlfriend', whatever she went by is lost to me now. Was it a gemstone, possibly, or a flower ... An attributive adjective?

LITERARY POSTURING

It was around this time I started bolstering my life story, which I'd begun again from scratch, with historical omniscience. This is one of the authorly tricks I learned at the short writing course. But it would be years before I edited the following to its current level, so don't assume it just rolled off the mind in my early twenties:

In the Inner West of Sydney in the Seventies, houses were still affordable and Dorothy and Iain were able to get what would become a choice cut of market meat. Even by the mid 1980s, our neighbourhood was still a volatile admixture of the working and lower middle classes. Its unruly nature strips – hastily unrolled verdant rugs alongside swathes of cracked and buckling pavement – were landmined with dog turds. These twin tracks in turn offset the line-ups of cheek- by-jowl domiciles – woebegone red-bricks, weather boards, semi-detacheds, crumbling Federations and the odd sagging terrace. The existence of one beige-bricked 'mini-mansion' double-storey on our street had been the anomaly; it was referred to as the 'rich house', with awe and contempt. And a few streets away, blocks of council flats with nebulous spaces neither indoors nor outside, were, perhaps apocryphally, purported to have been harbouring more drugs than King's Cross. I walked

around them on my way to school, and a good portion of our student body was fed by their inhabitants, grubby, hungry-looking kids with foul and fast running mouths.

New skyscrapers, which had been sprouting continuously throughout the construction boom of the 1970s, now choked the city skyline, the better to make way for the ascendancy of the technocratic professional class. Nationally, a flood of speculative foreign investment was followed hard upon by the floating of the Aussie dollar, which exposed our economy forever to international markets and our souls to cosmopolitanism. The tired cement was replaced and the public spaces landscaped to allow for the kempt efflorescence of free-market capitalism, rendered exponential by multi-sector economic advancement.

Then came the great gentrification. Laconicism became an affectation as Sydney residents hastened to obtain an immediate future with nicer and nicer stuff. In suburbs like mine, from about the mid Nineties on, the homeowners who'd spent thirty years slowly shrinking their mortgages were practically millionaires overnight, which had come to mean they'd done alright. They still had to downsize their way to comfortable retirement, or likewise disappear up the coast somewhere to die in clean air, while pining for a real city: trendy restaurants, cafes on busy streets where their most abysmal yearnings could be reflected as art and generally counterbalanced by a progressively urban cultural mindset. Alas, the under-monied renters were elbowed into outer-rim suburbs like Ashfield, or even as far as Arncliffe, the worst of both worlds.

During the exodus and demographic transmogrification, I marvelled at how the vacuum was filled with a sudden arrival of fully realised wealth. As the millennium loomed, the new breed of good earners, the professionals who were young and single, rented the recently built townhouses. The unsmiling buyers had the vacated eyesores tamed and extended. The terraces and Federations were gutted, revamped and repainted with the latest colours from the Dulux ads. The worst of the worst abodes were razed, and spanking 'architecturalised' McMansions appeared in their place: statement houses with a lot of glass and steel, conspicuous vents, and audacious curves extruding from flat roofs. The power families stepped outside these million-dollar-plus homes and ran the gauntlet with Maclaren super prams. They drove to the Balmain markets in gleaming space-gluttonous four-by-fours,

which now had to be parked rear to kerb on the wider streets. If a chassis wore a few surreptitious dents, it could only have been bombarded by the sky itself, with meteorological projectiles during Sydney's periodic hail storms. Street cricket was dead.

The nature strips were faecally disarmed as we became solicitous about the effluvium of our animals. We also grew more mindful of our speech. Leichhardt Pool decided it was an 'aquatic centre'. The pubs got prettied up and acquired sophisticated menus described by accomplished chalk artists. The young affluent urban professionals (yuppies, or 'fucking yuppies', as Iain had referred to them) no longer lived only in Paddington, or Double Bay, or Mosman. The aspirational spirit had permeated the Inner West; we were now the them.

For the soulful vacillating Gen-Xers – earth tones and floppy haircuts obscured our vision like wet leaves falling in fine rain as grunge reigned in the mosh pit. The irony of our rebellion was sweetened by bongos and, more often, the bitter pill of ecstasy. We were reprogrammed for the disintegrated velocity of post-modernity by strobes and house music. All of our love discharged chemically as tangy mist across the dance floor. As we came down, the haze and our the First-World comforts kept the global horror show at bay. It was something to be exposed by investigative journalists, who in some countries tested their mortality amidst crossfire, or in others, fell to governmentally sanctioned murder. Large-scale environmental degradation and inequity, anonymous strangers living hand to mouth two reality paradigms away... *Doof-doof-doof-doof* ... What was there to do about the socio-economic hell realms of the unfortunate, with their dictatorial regimes nourished on the sly by voracious superpowers? It wasn't our fault that our Western secular democracies were so prosperous, safe and plush, places where you could say what you thought. And although, as far as I could tell, none of my ancestors took physical part in the theft of land from the indigenous peoples here, I was fully aware that the easy opportunities afforded to my upbringing had their roots in the brutal subjugation by a colonising force. *Doof-doof* ... I was in favour of the Mabo judgement; I believed, since Dorothy explained it to me, that Australia's spiritual sterility was historically entwined in our collective unconscious acceptance of the concept: *terra nullius*.

Their ears ringing, done with high school and not ready for uni, my kind saved up for its version of the Grand Tour – jet-fuelled self-discovery – , the most expedient way to do this being to live with your parents and wait tables or work bars in establishments with touchscreen ordering panels. And as we bided our time between shifts, we lay around on the beach; we indulged in mostly safe sex with multiple partners; the Garys amongst us did the same, only to more obvious music, while attaining Commerce degrees with which to penetrate futures markets.

CRITICAL DISJUNCTURE

I really did want to live outside the economy, but the only material I had to work with was me. A sickening heaviness born of self-indulgence grew and set in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't bring myself to write it down. It rose and gathered like a caul around my throat. My dream – to disappear forever into a web of words – had become a nightmare of my own devising. Sentences were pythons. My elected vocation condemned me to rehearse over and over what had already been until I got to a present for which no desirable future could be engineered. I went out to the Gap for some air and tried to see a way forward, willing a miracle, but a cloud wall had formed which obscured the entire horizon. I went home. But it wasn't my home, just this cluttered, filthy house into which the world kept jamming me back. I crawled under my parents' bed. As an only child I'd inherited everything. What was real in it, though, had been annihilated. Looking up the word 'suicide' in the dictionary, I chanced upon 'solipsistic': *adjective*: focused on one's own needs, interests, etc., to the exclusion of all others.

What was it 'Girlfriend' had called me – a hungry ghost?

There had to be a way out. My aunt's disclosure of the strain of madness in the family rounded on me with surprising force. Yet the more I thought about it, the more it seemed that the one thing I'd been trying to avoid – falling apart – was everyone's natural destiny, no less than the biological contingency. The finite process of unravelling against the incessant crush of adult experience was just more rapid in some people. And each one of us,

by our conclusion, was bound to get tangled up in the capitulating mess of our life-long encounter with language. Only in the moment we broke off with the central thread of our jumble of interlocking stories would we know, in our dying seconds, absolute freedom.

I induced white-outs at will now. The accompanying sound as I slipped through the rent in the fabric of my consciousness was something like putting a seashell to your ear, or a jet engine. There was, though, a banality to this lately; it was a safe oblivion. Perhaps fully committed razing of the young brain was more the remit of the trail-blazing musician (Hendrix, Janice Joplin, Kurt Cobain) than of writers.

I took ice baths, reconsidered my strategy, and whittled everything down to a simple choice. I could experience my last years passively inhaling the paralytic dust of the end days of youth, or I could actively go after experience.

The million tonnes of light was not going to release itself, not under the weight of so much torpor. Somehow I needed to sabotage my reactor.

EXPLODING THE NEST

I sat in a café opposite a real estate agent and made up my mind to sell the house. As Polly had implied, Dorothy and Iain had bought it in 1976 for what now looked a beggarly sum. And thanks to an inheritance Dorothy received from a wealthy spinster aunt – whose brother had made a bundle in the sugar business in Durban but had been bitten fatally in the cheek by a black mamba as he slept off a hangover in a cane field – the mortgage had been paid off in 1981. I pocketed \$800,000 by accepting the first offer that was made and rented a new one-bedroom flat in Glebe, overlooking Blackwattle Bay. The year was 1995.

I purchased a German stereo system, a futon, minimalist furniture and all the necessary appliances. I went Zen, with a palette of white, black and grey, the pops of colour being the tulips and the fruit I kept on the kitchen table. The one design statement was a centrepiece affixed to the wall above my bed – an ornate black china bull's head with sheeny emerald horns and imperial yellow saucer eyes inset with onyx spheres of glass. I called it Ernest.

Ernest looked up askance at you from the dirt floor of the bullring, with a sulky expression of latent murder. Below him I pinned a cheap cherry-red kimono from Paddy's Markets.

Money gives you a lot of delicious choice. My new wardrobe ran into the tens of thousands: piles of Calvin Klein underpants, cashmere jumpers, black or blue designer jeans, and tight \$150 T-shirts in mustard, pistachio, teal and coal black; three jackets (two leather and one suede) from the top floor of David Jones; a designer watch for each weekday and one for the weekend; a pair of imported sneakers for every month of the year.

There was visual poetry in this, but no hidden meanings. The spoils of my shopping junkets made me feel amazingly good about myself. Materially derived ego inflation was the least complicated emotion I'd ever experienced.

But then the urge arose, always stronger, to buy more, and aware of heading towards spending \$200,000 in the first year, I decided to cap it after one last spree. I bought a Kawasaki Ninja motorbike and went for a tattoo, not one of those lamentable faux-Polynesian tribal armbands, but an Om symbol on my left arse cheek; the pain of the juddering ink needle was satisfying, as I looked through a guitar magazine and decided on a Gibson Les Paul and a compact Fender amp. At Glebe Markets one Saturday morning, I realised I didn't have any belts. As a belated and disingenuous nod to my Calvinistic inheritance, I bought a hand-hewn one of thick, supple leather embossed with Celtic patterns.

INNER-WEST EGG

My mid-twenties were a time of reading for pleasure and having sex to control it.

I skimmed over concepts that were meant to make you happier, and mulled over philosophies designed to break down the certainty of any feeling – a ragtag of New Age aphorisms with a steady vein of Camus and his notions of the absurd man. These were leavened with Joseph Heller and F. Scott Fitzgerald. I reread *Catch 22* and sympathised with Yossarian's lament regarding all the beautiful women he would never get to sleep with, but,

a man of dubious means, I cast myself as a kind of sexually incontinent Jay Gatsby. I knew my money would run out, and that when it did I would be not only destitute but unemployable. With my newfound confidence, however, forcing the high hand of fate was thrilling. I resolved to acquire carnal knowledge of as many women as I could before my third Saturn Return.

Who were these women? I found them alone in cafes. What I recognised and exploited was the strain in their quality of waiting. They were busy divining from the world, as if it were in the ether, a recognition of the value in their peculiarities. They drew Centrelink payments and worked part-time for cash in hand, contemplative types whose skill sets weren't yet calibrated for the spirit of the age. They were disaffected uni students, nominally aspiring writers or artists, or some vague combination of the three. They were probably all damaged too, and cut adrift, as I had once been. I slid in, shamelessly, through that most expedient route of seduction, the insecurity gap.

I came across as a hip young guy whose self-possession belied his tender years. I'd grown out my hair and kept it in a ponytail. I mastered meaningful eye contact, and invented stories about what I did, where I'd come from and why I had so much, careful to thread them through with strands of truth. And in turning the light of my attention back on my interlocutor, I encouraged emotional intimacy.

I kept my conscience amidst rose quartz and essential oils, and lifted the sags in dying conversation with positive affirmations or existentialist in-jokes. I dispensed with smoking, and prohibited consumption of intoxicants, other than caffeine, to transpire in the bachelor pad I had dubbed 'Inner-West Egg'. I was lean and lithesome, living on Japanese takeaway and exotic fruit, running three times a week over the Iron Cove Bridge to swim laps at Drummoyne Pool and then back. I smelled perennially of *Insense* by Givenchy. I did yoga, had a copy of the *Kama Sutra* close at hand, as well as several books on massage and tantric sex, all of which deliberately littered an unsmudged glass-and-steel coffee table.

I had resolved, some years before, to dispense with the burden of growing old, but only now had I found the wherewithal to uphold this resolution. Beholden to no one, exonerated

from failure, I became the one who knew. The man whose green eyes glimmered with cosmic amusement, for whom life can be deeply considered but never taken seriously. Like all originals, I was a shameless plagiarist. Having underlined a passage from *The Great Gatsby*, I spent many moments in front of the mirror each morning perfecting a smile 'with the quality of eternal reassurance'.

As my prospective paramour sashayed, or slunk, or tiptoed, always barefoot, across the threshold of my exclusive flat, her arm flesh goosed from the vicarious rush of entitlement.

'Can I offer you some plunger coffee? A kiwi fruit?'

'Your view is amazing.'

'Behold Glebe Island Bridge. While it's still there, of course.'

'When can I move in?'

'I know, it's all there, isn't it. The CBD and beyond it the coast. Westward to the bush and on into the desert. Take a seat on the lounge here. Make yourself at home.'

'It's being demolished, isn't it?'

'Yeah. I read somewhere that the new Anzac Bridge ... Honey? Brown sugar?'

'No ... All right, honey please.'

'The Anzac Bridge will be aligned, according to the wisdom of the Chinese, with the sexual chakra.'

'Okay ...'

'So there you go. Here's your tea.'

'Ta. Hmm ... Well I take it you're into massage then ...'

'Oh, the books. Yes, amongst other things ...'

I slept with dozens of women on my futon but never encountered anyone remotely like B. Perhaps she'd exposed me to the simple secret of real power – allure. Its preconditions are money and independence, but what guarantees its authentic erotic trajectory is a confidence somehow married to an absence of any scruples that might delimit sexual curiosity.

Many of my lovers brandished recent tattoos, often on their sacrum, and belly-button rings. As the mood deepened to whale sounds, or Mozart, or acid jazz, or whatever the woman chose to play – and there was a wide, if circumscribed, range, which I would expand according to feedback, I was meditative. If she quoted aloud from my self-help books I would show, earnestly, that I'd given that particular precept long shrift. When they read my palms or my tarots the spirit might move me and I'd grab my Gibson Les Paul, flick on the little amp and break into a verse of, say, 'Spanish Harlem Incident':

'Gypsy gal, the hands of Harlem
Cannot hold you to its heat
Your temperature's too hot for tamin'
Your flaming feet burn up the street'

'Wow. You've got a good voice.'

'I wouldn't go that far. I've got pretty good pitch apparently though ...'

'Keep singing.'

I whispered the pressure points – heart, liver, spleen – as I rubbed their feet with organic sesame oil.

By the time these women lay prostrate before me, awaiting the reiki healing or tantric massage I had manoeuvred them into requesting, I gave dominion to silence. If I did speak in those moments it was to unpick persistent knots of thoughtful resistance that detain a lover at the threshold of yielding to physical intimacy with a virtual stranger. As one palm ran two inches above the surface of the navel the other scanned the yoni.

'Feel the electric weave spread over your scalp, and allow it to permeate between the tight cinches of the loosening folds of your brain.'

I generated build-ups of libidinous heat without skin-to-skin contact, and de-escalated them with abrupt forays into light observation ...

'Hey, I think the rain has stopped ...'

... whereupon I would resume the process again, repeatedly, for an hour or more. I had it down to so fine an art that I could anticipate the tremulous second inside which I would be forcibly drawn towards her.

Some wailed, others bared their teeth, a few wept. I watched the limpid transformation of the eyes B had so bewitched me with once in Vicky's bedroom.

Making the act itself last for hours was a manly affectation. I got drunk on my own narcissism and watched myself having sex. It was a technique of dissociating from my loins, of rising above the watery flames of the sexual inferno into a Platonic antechamber. I ran a cool, impervious energy of pleasure-giving intention. When its seal was threatened, to stop myself from ejaculating, I stared into the bridge of the china bull's nose, and ministered to the slithering form underneath or astride me until she had attained however so many orgasms as were required.

Post coitus, frail and quivering in sex's after-sheen, I was immediately fastidious not to countenance the notion of commitment.

'I don't do one-night stands.'

'No, me neither. I don't see this as a one-night stand, though. Why, do you?'

'No.'

'But I'm not ready for a relationship either.'

Each successive encounter with the same woman eroded my conviction.

'Please don't cry.'

'What are you afraid of, Errol?'

'You don't want to go there. Trust me.'

Increasingly, the routine of seduction became stale, seedy and, occasionally, psychologically violent. The preferred establishment became the 24-hour pub, where my potential lovers were less sober and proved to be somewhat more unhinged. I was bypassing the massages and bringing out bags of cocaine.

And during the extrication process, which I was now scrambling to get through moments after the event, I struggled even to stay congenial.

'I've actually got some people coming in to look at the flat first thing, so it's better if you cab it home.'

'Now?'

'Yeah. I'll give you some dosh.'

'It's five-thirty in the morning.'

'I know.'

'So is this your modus operandi.'

'I snore something chronic too.'

'Nice. Great, yeah, sweet, so I'll just take the twenty like a good little whore!'

'What is wrong with you?'

'So this is a one-night-stand, is it?'

'Yes. As agreed.'

'So let me spend the night.'

'The night's over. Just take the money and fuck off, alright.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Sorry. I'm sorry, I just don't want to come down with you, okay, and make nice with the whole morning after nightmare. I need to wake up alone. I have a delicate psyche.'

'No worries. Maybe I'll walk home. Spend my earnings on a gelding knife.'

'Hey?'

'Come and castrate you in your sleep.'

'You're actually being insane.'

'Put you out of your misery you sad bastard! Hooroo arsehole.'

After several such, albeit less extreme, door slamming encounters I cut off and cauterized, withdrew from the world of foreign bodies entirely.

But soon enough I felt horny and lonely again and, lacking the motivation to organise any kind of mating ritual, I ordered my sex in from an escort agency with pizza and Dom Perignon. I reconstructed the contents of Vicky's secret walnut chest including the imported Japanese rope and amyl nitrate, and woke with a throbbing head and little recollection of the previous evening's proceedings. Out on the balcony, a hand blotting out the thrust of the mid-morning sunlight, the smile beneath my designer sunglasses was a crack of pain. I took cold showers to rid myself of the stench of latex, lube and excessively applied perfume. I stared into the mirror for long whiles. The spirits of Jay Gatsby and Yossarin had left me, and in the glass I was vacant beyond my waxen complexion, no sparkle was discernable from within my bloodshot eyeballs. I was a haunted thing, with a chorus of ghosts.

'Come, oh Dithyramb,' he said to me, over and over again.

'Who? Oh, *The Bacchae*. You rippa dese trousers, you menda these trousers. He-he-he. Is that you Iain?'

And then came the true epiphany.

At that moment a CD played of its own accord, and it was loud; the German speakers, which I had suspended on house bricks, tremored as if to drive home the point. It was Barbara Hendricks, circa 1995, who, as an African American vocal phenomenon belted out a rendition of Schubert's 'Das Wandern'. Iain had explained to me that it was strophic, as opposed to through composed. In *The Bacchae*, he'd said, like all classical Greek tragedies, the strophe progresses across the stage from the east to west. It's a kind of profound leading statement, from one side of the imagination. And Iain would quote:

'... when Zeus, his sire, snatched him from the undying flame and hid the child in his own thigh, shouting out "Go Dithyrambus, enter this male womb of mine ... Bacchic child ... you shall be called Dithyrambus ..."'

... as Barbara, through Schubert, concluded, with the precise lively, heart pummeling, melodic progression of the previous four stanzas:

'O Wandern, Wandern, meine Lust,

O Wandern!

Herr Meister und Frau Meisterin,

Last mich in Frieden weiterzieh'n

Und wandern.'

I had, if only for two minutes and forty-one seconds, transcended emotional gibberish. The tears rehydrated my complexion and the colour returned to my face.

ANTISTROPHE

I decided on a sea change and went coastal to be reborn. To explore other galaxies as the millennium fizzed ahead with its promise of virtual reality.

But mainly I went to work on the revisions of my life story with a view to disseminating it. I bought a PC and a printer. It surprised me how much of the guiding spirit of Gabriela's editing I was able to re-apply. And my writing had matured; I was self-applying editorial control as I took the story forward. I finished my memoir and printed it out. In what I would now see as a sort of mental half-light, I convinced myself I had something edgy and publishable between my fingers, save of course, for an ending. I was confident that all I needed was another editor to help me pull it all together.

I hunted down a creative writing professor at the University of New South Wales, walked though the open door of her office, and slid my manuscript across her desk. A slight, neurasthenic woman, she said, assuming I was a student, that she was on her way out, and had a heavy end-of-semester workload. Could I make an appointment? I fell back into a leather-covered chair with armrests.

'Are you okay?'

'I think it's your phone ...'

'Sorry?'

The pain was unbearable. I pressed my palms hard into my ears, grimacing. 'It's making this high-pitched ... Can you not hear it?'

She tinkered momentarily with her mobile and seemed to make some rapid calculations as she held my gaze a second. Checking the time on a wall clock behind her, she stood.

'Well ...'

'Humphrey.'

The ringing subsided.

'Well, Humph ...

'I mean Errol. Humphrey's a good friend of mine. Was. Today's his birthday. He's in the manuscript too. But actually, he's the only fake character. In the sense that I killed him off, even though he saved my life. The real Humphrey is a mate of mine I lost touch with after high school. He's taken a pretty deadly path though, from what I've heard. I'd put it down to his family, but where can you really point the blame? I ask you.'

'Are you okay Errol? Do you need to lie down?'

'I'm fine.'

The woman was growing anxious.

'You're shaking.'

This was new. I felt like I was about to throw a fit.

'Do you have any coffee?'

'Err ... Plunger.'

'Perfect. I find coffee usually helps, for most things.'

'I think I should call a bloody ambulance, personally.'

'No. Useless vehicles. I'll come right. Just give me a couple of minutes', I reasoned, rising to my feet.

I staggered towards the bay window and collapsed into an oldish couch with a plaid slipcover, where I concentrated all my energy on becalming my nervous system. After some deep breaths and a few hits of coffee, my mood brightened. This lady's presence was very close to nurturing. It inspired me.

'Sadly I'm a 40 watt incandescent bulb with delusions of lighting a whole city. The weight of electrical current that needs to come through me is too much for my filament to withstand.'

These days, most people are like those new fluros ... you know, the little ones that they've managed to eliminate the buzzing from, but I can't seem to adapt. Our chemical inheritance extends way beyond this eco-system; we're the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff.'

'You really believe that?'

'It's hard science, apparently. Carl Sagen said it, and he was a multiple scientist. But I don't see myself as a star.'

'No?'

'They're too far away. Nice to look at but you can't reach them. They emit no warmth, and it doesn't help to constellate them patriotically either. Land of the Southern Cross? Does nothing for me.'

'But you don't want to be a bog-standard light globe, either, I take it.'

At some point the woman had taken hold of my hand.

'No. The best I can hope for is to be one of those HIDs.'

'I'm not familiar.'

'Like at a day-nighter, a one day cricket match. High-intensity discharge lamps. You can see those bastards from blocks away. They take ages to come on, but then swoosh. They bring out a whole stadium.'

'Well, you certainly have a flair for metaphorical description. I would suggest you enrol in a postgraduate coursework Masters in Creative Writing. Here, I'll give you the handbook.'

She handed the manuscript back with it, and gestured to the door. I stood and we walked towards it.

'But I haven't actually completed my BA', I confessed.

'Oh. Well, that would be a logical first step. If you're serious about it.'

'Please just read it. If it's boring you can stop.'

She gave a few rapid nods as we left her office together. Three weeks later we met for a coffee on campus.

'Do you mind if I record our conversation?'

'Not at all. So this is a memoir, I take it?'

'Pretty much. I was going for the "write what you know" thing.'

Her eyebrows wrinkled and she pincered her temples with her index fingers. 'Look, there's ...'

'I realise it doesn't have an ending.'

'No, but there's some great detail in it. And it's quite poignant in parts.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes ...'

'But?'

'Well, memoirs are generally written from a perspective of greater maturity, I suppose, but not always ... if you'd classify *Puberty Blues* as a memoir.'

'You mean old people should only write them?'

She laughed. 'I mean, define "old". But also, Errol, how can I say this? At the moment it reads like a series of often very candid, sometimes testingly repetitive, diary entries.'

'I've got more candid detail,' I offered.

'No.' She looked skyward and reflected before continuing. 'I mean to say there's little in the way of structure, and it's not always rendered in compelling terms.'

'So how do I fix that?'

'Well, for starters you have to decide on a more suitable genre. And your protagonist needs an arc, which means happenings need to be judiciously selected and expounded on to serve the major motif. Similarly, most peripheral details must be telling; if they don't contribute to the big themes they should be elided or summarised. With extended lyrical passages, the writer must continuously ask how its rhetoric echoes an earlier scene, or pre-empts something that is to come later in the story.' She reached into an attaché case. 'I've brought you some literature. Here.'

'Thank you.'

'With this level of confession, its lyrical qualities, the solipsism, you might want to look at a coming of age ...'

'So the major motif would be coming of age?'

'Exactly. It's known technically as Bildungsroman, or more specifically a Künstlerroman – an artist's novel, in your case. I've provided a reading list as well.'

'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, The Vivisector...'

'Yes, you could start with those. You could even benefit from reading *Puberty Blues*, or *The Body* by Stephen King ... *Johnno* by David Malouf ... You seem disappointed.'

I found I couldn't speak.

'It's a very long process this, Errol, and I'm just being frank – this work, as it stands, is a long way from publishable. I strongly urge you do your undergrad – also, that will afford you other options.'

My throat was horribly constricted.

'Look, however bruising this might come across, rejection, constant rejection, is part of life. Certainly of an artist's.'

EPODE

My features were subtly tarnished, my hair wild, almost dreadlocked by the surf and salt, I had an uneven five-day shadow and dark rings had formed under my eyes. I took to wearing a shark's-tooth necklace and going around in flannel shirts, cut-off jeans and bare feet.

I was twenty-seven years old and felt forty.

Concentration, let alone studying, was out of the question now, and the prospect of bidding my time until my writing voice matured was unbearable. I was deteriorating rapidly. I could feel my brain eating away at itself.

I couldn't look people in the eye my shame ran so deep. I bodysurfed for hours or likewise 'surfed the Web' and researched Gap suicides. It was Autumn and I was running out of money. My time had come. But I was no longer forcing fate's high hand, simply being drawn into the vast desolate random universe with its billions of remote watchful eyes. The white-outs were vengeful now and accompanied by migraines. My concentration was dissolving and my short-term memory flailing. Bills piled up unpaid. I lived on milk and oranges and kebabs. As if obeying an old reflex, I wrote sporadically, but my thoughts, when I read them back, were drifty, jumbled, hopelessly tangential.

In that top-floor flat on Campbell Parade, my isolation was absolute. I went through my effects over and over again and found a crumpled bit of paper with a name – Neville – and a series of numbers and words. I held my guitar and strained like buggery to make sense of them.

Sometimes in the morning I'd lie back on my futon for what seemed like an hour, but when I dragged myself to the window to pull aside the curtain, the afterglow of the retreating dusk had saturated the beach and coastal architecture of Bondi in dulcet oranges. The sea brooded and the impending blanket of salt-velvet night beckoned. I was, before I knew it, drifting one way and the other down the sandy echoing stairwell like a falling leaf.

Outside, I ensconced myself within the folds of a paperbark, only to be stung on the abdomen by a bull ant. I reeled back from the trunk and wandered without thought for direction or destination.

Lurking around with my blackened feet and knotted hair, my patchy beard, yellowed fingers and dirty broken nails, I must have cut a sinister figure: a freak. I stunk of old fish; maybe I was a dying mullet, tossed around by the nightmare memory, the jig of a fatal lure.

As I wended my way down to the beach, the earth pitched and spun. I struck out towards a huge breaking wave with everything I had. I ducked deep under the monster and bobbed over the rest of the set as Iain had taught me at Tamarama in '81. I bodysurfed into shore with one fist arm thrust forward and became conscious of a painful tingling sensation I assumed to be a bluebottle. An agony spread rapidly over my skin and a horrible gravity descended though a single point in my head. My arms went limp, as I tried to see over a towering wall of water, which buckled and bore down over the top of me.

I churned forever.

In an interstice of calm I floated upwards into a liquid shimmer of moonlight, and another wave drained its tonnage over me with even greater elemental disdain. As I emerged, light seemed to blow my head apart. It was like being shot point-blank with a star. Then I was spinning again, spiralling down to the bottom as warm as blood. The full velocity of the Pacific sucked me in and vomited me forth onto the land. A frigid bar of wind slammed my face and I gagged on shards of oxygen. The distinctive, fawn-yellow sand of Bondi was lit up with the floodlight of a surf rescue vehicle.

I dove into a dreamless sleep.

When I woke in my hospital bed, the first thing I noticed was that my brain had regained its spacious and spongy quality. The acute cranial pressure I'd been living with had gone. Everything I'd been holding seemed to have flooded down into my chest. A brain surgeon and a neurologist materialised and, after conducting some tests to their satisfaction,

explained that a scan had revealed a fragment of bone exerting pressure upon my frontal lobe. I'd been out for two days.

I had no form of identification on me.

'Who's your next of kin, mate?'

I feigned a sudden weariness and professed the need to sleep. After they'd left I removed the drip, dressed, and released myself.

THE END

To: Matilda.Nafte@hotmail.com

From: humphbogs@hotmail.com

Dear Matilda

See, people like me do physically flee the nest.

I write this from an internet café on Charing Cross Road. Brave new technological world! I've gone the way of those sorry sods on that fleet of tall ships, those dark infested vessels which bore the designated scum of Georgian society and spewed it out onto the sand of the Kiora. It's funny to think that some 200-odd years later, we Gen-Xers, like the Boomers before us, are harnessing our first yen for cosmopolitan wisdom to a high-velocity tube of winged tin. My jumbo went into a holding pattern for twenty-five minutes so that I might contemplate the absurd faintness of impression I would make on the metropolis of my birth.

After a long look down, I wished the slow gyrating machine back, but the Qantas 747 straightened out and aimed the cockpit for terra firma. It was a heavy white-blind descent through the cloudscape. As the landing gear clunked and the tires squealed noiselessly in unseen blackening of the tarmac, I realised I was homeless.

At length, the plane's pent-up velocity was broken by inertia, and the part of me tethered to Mum and Dad died forever. I bet our nominal ancestors also willed their wet wooden behemoths to avert their bows! How must those tyrannical briny distances have been? We jetsetters complain but we have it easy. Still, whether we're slipping our moorings from Portsmouth in 1788, or – after hours spent 30,000 feet above the ground – touching down at Heathrow International as the new millennium is dawning, the sense of the absurd uprootedness is the same.

I alighted jetlagged, hobbled and threaded my backpacked path of abject self-discovery through a city where misery, always free, seems the only plentiful thing. Not a few dark satanic mills are to be found amidst this maze of suburbs, suburbs greyer, sootier and more endlessly uniform than I'd have believed possible. The perpetual flurry of chafing shoulders against my own, the rustling, clacking swarm of flitting humanity beating the pavements of the high streets, has me, at times, desperate for room to move. I am hyperconscious of my own absence of coordinates, which I suppose is the whole point of travelling.

I'm not saying my heart is hard to London's parks or that, outside the Ring Road, England's pleasant fields aren't maidenly, scented and golden green. Most of the city, however, is vaguely redolent of warm piss, monoxide and sulphur; the expressions on the Tubes are fathomless. Such large-scale urbanity delivers a true sense of how bleak and labyrinthine is the sullied undergirding of the long-industrialised mind.

A callow Aussie yokel, I ache for a cleaner-smelling sadness – not so much for the melancholic bush but for the presence of it behind me as I contemplate the azure Pacific rollers from, say, a café in Bronte. But I'll never go back. My wanderlust is permanent.

London is a city of cheerless pints, MDMA-soaked nightclubs, anonymous sex, and wise glances from children. I feel like I'm getting a PhD in sarcasm or something. All this and four pounds an hour affords me a heavily ironic enthusiasm for traded-down simple pleasures. I inhale sublime architecture, misplace countless weekends, seek solace in these internet cafés, and feel the rumblings of global terror under impossibly low skies.

Last month I came down with the worst flu I've ever had. Here they call it a cold.

Instead of 'How're you goin', they chime 'All right?', which is a bit disconcerting at first. You're going 'All right what? Who told you I wasn't alright? What am I doing wrong?'

By the way, I got your email address from James. I ran into him, and Hamish, would you believe, at The Walkabout pub (hideous place) the first week I was here. The novelty of running into Australians is one that wears thin very quickly, but it was good to see Hamo and Boo after so much 'water under the bridge'. That said, high school still feels like a bit of a house of horrors to me.

Anyway, they said you were doing Arts Law at Sydney. Or have you finished? I'd be really interested to hear how that went/is going.

As you can probably tell from the above (worked on that evocation for weeks!), I really want to give the writing thing a go. I plan on 'doing' Europe proper for a couple more years. I've still got to visit my surviving grandparents. I have a British passport so I'll probably try and do an Arts degree in Edinburgh, then a postgrad in literature.

I've got the Heathrow injection, I'm afraid. Ninety kilograms! I should start running again. The city must be going off with the Olympics?

I'm thinking of doing a CELTA so I can teach English as a second language while I'm travelling. I read an article about how if you don't bend to the trope of the information economy you'll be basically unemployable in ten or fifteen years' time. I can't work in bars for the next however many years; it's below my station.

Sorry I write such long emails.

It just feels good to write to you. And to be honest there's a deeper reason for this email too. To make amends.

Matilda, I'm truly sorry for what I said and if I hurt you in the past, or threatened you in any way. I felt/feel terrible about it, and can only plead shame and insecurity. Immaturity, in a word.

Dante was in love with a girl called Beatrice. He had a vision of a child asleep in a crimson cloth in the hands of Providence. Matilda, I'm asking you to take off your crimson cloth. The one you sleep in. Why? Because it makes you impervious to my affections! Just kidding.

Behold my heart.

Here: I hold it now towards you now.

Taste it.

And please don't be afraid!

It's on fire for you, but its flames don't burn.

With love from
Errol xo

PS I'm off to Pamplona next week. For the Running of the Bulls.

To: humphbogs@hotmail.com

From: Matilda.Nafte@hotmail.com

Dear Errol

Really good to hear from you. Sorry for the delayed response. You'll have run with the bulls by now. I haven't read all of your *very long* (!) email, but I thought it would be rude not to respond. Yes, I helped Gary set up one of his IT businesses after high school, and I'm currently in litigation with him about company shares (long story), so I put off uni for a while but, yes, Arts Law, and I have big exams coming up. I'm so glad you're well. Everyone got quite worried about you towards the end there. Maybe we can do coffee when you get back to Sydney? Oh, but you said you're never coming back. Never's a long time. C'est la vie!

Matilda

P.s I ran into B at Badde Manners the other day. She spoke a lot about you. I think you should try and get in touch with her. Just a feeling.

EDITORIAL NOTE

Errol Conolly was unable to write the ending he wanted, which, I think is ultimately the point of *The Deaths*. How can we, really? I've patched together his story with some fairly major editorial interventions (my revisions from a few years back seem naïve to me now). Nevertheless, nothing of substance has been changed. Errol's prose, if not his sense of organic narrative structure, had improved considerably since our London episode, when he was a mere seventeen. I heard of his death on the radio and took a coach to Pamplona to identify the body, which of course, I had to do by feel as I am now completely blind. The horn of the bull had pierced Errol's left temple and gone deep into his brain. He died instantly on a hot day with a cloudless sky.

There was no contactable next of kin, so I kept the journals I found in his backpack. I'm sure he would have wanted them 'immortalised'. It saddens me to think that he came looking for me under some romantic delusion. There was definitely an attraction there, but Errol is not the sort of guy you'd throw away your life for. So I should point out that his version of those few weeks in London is somewhat distorted. I told him from the outset I was married to Liam, and I never promised Errol my love, or any version of a future together.

Aside from the Australian editors, I must also thank Liam for transcribing the manuscript with me, and his understanding in doing so, given the first London section.

I think the strength of this piece, at least formally, is that Errol really has achieved what he set out to do, and has left no trace of himself, other than his "web of words." So despite the fact that he was never able to fully mature as a writer, and realise his greater potential, he has, if nothing else, given a pretty thorough performance of a purely fictional character.

Gabriela Lorca
Barcelona – 2002

“PASSION DU SENS” FOR AN AUSTRALIAN NOVELLA- BILDUNGSROMAN

1. PRAXIS APPROACH
2. SPIRALLING GENERIC COMPLEXITY
3. AVOIDING LITERARY MEMOIR
4. “ORIGINATING” A BILDUNGSROMAN
5. ASSERTING A NOVELLA’S RHETORICAL FORCE ON A BILDUNGSROMAN
6. TECHNICAL LESSONS: DISTANCE, POINT OF VIEW, PACE AND TRACE

1. PRAXIS APPROACH

This exegesis is intended primarily as a self-reflection on my creative practice in writing the novella *The Deaths*, and may also be of relevance to other creative writers. It is researched and written in conjunction with that novella, and intended to be read in parallel with it. The term “passion du sens” is taken from Roland Barthes,¹ and can be translated as “desire for meaning.” Sustaining curiosity, and hence motivation, throughout the story-making process has been essential. In this regard, critical exploration of the literary target genres was a crucial complement to the creative writing process. Also, because the originating idea for *The Deaths* sprung from my own upbringing, the narratological concepts *fabula* and *suzet* have been pivotal throughout. According to Peter Brooks (1984), raw story material (*fabula*) cannot be accorded primacy in the interpretation of fictional narrative because of its fundamentally illusory and mimetic nature. Similarly, Richard Walsh (2007) suggests that because readers will tend to construct their own version of a text’s *fabula*, their most reliable recourse to interpretation is through the *suzet* (plot) as manifested in the text.² However, from this writer’s point of view, the interpretive dynamic has operated in reverse. This is to say that, especially in the first phase of the creative writing process, my raw, autobiographical story material fed significantly and saliently into the moulding of *The Deaths*, which was both expedient and challenging creatively.

While I came to the formal learning context with much of the raw material that bears upon *The Deaths*, shaping its controlling idea over the last two years has been a parallel process of recursive encounters: literary-critical encounters, and encounters with primary texts – works of fiction, mostly novellas and novels, but also short stories. The project has also involved interpersonal encounters with a specialist reader (my supervisor). However, the central – and ever-present – encounter has been with the unfolding text of *The Deaths* itself. The fictional text has been central because as a creative writing practitioner, all other dialogue, whether internal, interpersonal or directed towards literature, is geared back

¹ Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit, “On Narrative and Narratives.” *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975), 271.

² Cited in Paul Dawson, “Style, the Narrating Instance, and the ‘Trace’ of Writing.” *Style* 47, no. 4 (2013), 484.

towards the fictional text's ongoing development. I think of *The Deaths* as a hybrid – novella-Bildungsroman – because, as will be shown, it utilises various modal (i.e. topical and thematic) and structural (i.e. abstract and formal) features of each genre. Its development can be charted diachronically as five textual iterations. Each iteration corresponds with major draft versions, upon which specialist reader feedback, subsequent discussion and further research have been brought to bear. In this way the writing process was periodically re-directed. For clarity during the discussion, it is useful first to characterise each draft according to word length, distinguishing features and feedback received.

Draft one was unique in that the working title, for what was to be a novel at that stage, was “Humphrey”, and because, unlike all subsequent versions, it was written in the third person. “Humphrey” was 4,500 words long and constituted a heavily worked first chapter consisting of one lengthy episode covering a morning's events as seen from the perspective of two characters. The main problems identified in this draft related to interior narrative architecture; the chapter's details were seen to be “unmotivated” in the sense that they were either superfluous or did not suggest a narrative that would extend beyond a short story unit.

The second draft (12,000 words) was written in the first person, as were all subsequent drafts, and the narrator was also the protagonist. This meant that Errol Conolly not only participated in the action of the story being told but was also central to its telling. I had decided on the permanent title, *The Deaths*, by this stage. My supervisor suggested that there should be a stronger justification of the title via textual allusions to the major theme, death, as it pertained to plot and character. *The Deaths (1)* was deemed by my supervisor to have made significant progress with respect to having found a narrating voice that was both compelling and distinctive. This voice demonstrated a range of tone, idiom, syntactic pacing and evocation of memory, and used prolepsis to suggest an extension of the plot beyond its own summaries or scenes. However, there were still issues with achieving the right balance between excessive style and narratively unmotivated detail (as opposed to detail that was important to the overall plot). One of the main issues with this draft was

that the novella switched to a completely new narrative voice halfway through, which proved confusing for the reader, so for subsequent drafts I stuck to the one narrator, Errol. *The Deaths (1)* was usefully divided into subsections that suggested a partial, event-ordered *fabula*: 1973-1976 (0-3 years old); 1976-1982 (4-9 years old); 1983-1986 (9-12 years old); 1987-1990 (13-16 years old). However, it was loosely structured around a series of impressions from these earlier periods in the participating narrator's life interspersed with scenes and summaries, rather than being unified by a driving, central action. Structurally, then, it was organised in a form that tended towards Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, without the same centrifugal command of narrative control.

The Deaths (2), 28,000 words in length, still suffered from dilatory and unmotivated detail, particularly in relation to what had come to be identified by my supervisor as an overemphasis on the school era (primary and high school) reminiscence genre. However, this draft had a central, driving action that encompassed a small and circumscribed group of characters. This was achieved, in part, by structuring the story around three major events that foregrounded the theme suggested by the title – the death of protagonist Errol's best friend, Humphrey; Errol's own accident and consequent coma, and the death of Errol's parents Dorothy and Iain in a car accident. *The Deaths (2)* also dramatised Errol's sexual initiation and introduced the novella's themes of excess, a propensity for flânerie, and infidelity as being integral to the protagonist's trajectory. This draft also suggested that Errol was perhaps in some important ways an unreliable narrator. This ambiguity was achieved by iteration through self-directed allusions to Errol's tenuous grasp on reality or manipulation of it, and with the inclusion of non-realistic passages that implied, albeit more obliquely, a cognitive deficit in the aftermath of Errol's accident and/or the loss of those close to him.

The Deaths (3) (43,000 words) was the first structurally complete text, because I had previously drafted several endings and had now committed to one. The key issues in this draft were the specificity of the narrating voice and the provenance of the manuscript. That is to say I was unclear in my mind at this stage how the text that represents the fictional world came to be as it is, nor was I sure what fictional personage, or combination of

fictional personages, had constructed it – to what extent and under what circumstances. Therefore, developing a temporally specific and spatially grounded framing device was necessary. To distinguish between the completed actions of the story being told, and the narration of them, became a major focus for *The Deaths (4)*. Also, a new theme was emerging in this draft; namely the idea of Errol as aspiring memoirist, writing out his life story with a view to inducting himself into the “27 club”. The “27 club” references the twentieth century mythological phenomenon of an uncanny correlation between musical celebrity and premature death at the age of twenty-seven. Obviously, Errol’s status as a member of this cohort would necessitate his early death as coextensive with the end of his youth. This would also constitute an apotheosis of the novella’s title. Still, the writing in this draft was thought to be more powerful as it progressed, which suggested that the earlier material elaborating the eras of primary and high school was where edits were needed in order to reduce the word length so the final manuscript would comply with the requirements of the degree programme and sit at 35,000 words.

The strengths of *The Deaths (4)* (35,000 words), according my supervisor, were local detail, idiomatic intensity of language, impact and poignancy of episodes, and the manuscript’s evocation of extreme states of consciousness and experience. On the other hand, it was difficult for the reader to sympathise with the protagonist on the whole, because he was solipsistic, narcissistic and at times rendered as an unsympathetic character. It therefore became important to effect a distinction between the younger Errol and his more mature, ironic and objective narrating self. Stylistically, the perceived tendency was to overwrite and obfuscate. Paring back the prose became essential as a general principle of style. Yet, in the case of the ending and the narrative voice alike, the biggest challenge became twofold: to foreground the manner of Errol’s eventual death (this was achieved by way of his own explicit references to a demise of this nature throughout the narrative), and to situate the manuscript more resolutely in the fictional world by indicating that Errol himself is creating the story as he goes along.

The key artistic challenges I have been working through as an apprentice novellaist correspond to the state of each manuscript draft as described above. However, what

follows is not a close reading or comprehensive textual analysis of each, or of any, draft version of *The Deaths*. Rather, aspects of each draft will occasionally provide a locus for technical analysis. Useful, or compelling critical concepts that arose during different developmental stages of the creative process will be contextualised from a creative writer's perspective. I will not attempt, on the whole, to revisit my state of critical awareness at some earlier stage; the predominant perspective will be retrospective. The completed version of *The Deaths* will be the one kept in mind, and this exegesis operates on an assumption that the reader is familiar with it. This critique is an expression of the most recent insights, understandings and conjectures regarding my writing during one specific project, and of their broader implications for creative writing practices.

The key literary-critical concepts under discussion are not mutually exclusive, but have been applied in combination. They are primarily drawn from generic, rhetorical, cultural or narrative theories. I have found it essential to cultivate a deeper awareness of the following complex literary genres and their modifications by subgeneric modalities: the novella, the Bildungsroman (and by extension, the Künstlerroman and the "coming-of-age" novel), and – to a lesser extent – tragedy. Cognisance of the subgeneric elements has, at times, combined with recourse to narrative and cultural theories. In turn, such awareness raised more global issues around the unfolding text of *The Deaths*.

With a developing knowledge of narratological principles and the cultural implications of genres in mind, I have been better equipped to identify the fictional worldview of the narrator, and the "reality" parameters of the fictional world (its representation of time, its story context, and the structuration of its events). For the challenges of avoiding an overly solipsistic protagonist, Bildungsroman theory and novella theory supplemented by theories of literary modernity helped underpin my editorial control of the developing fictional text, especially in the latter stages. All of this exposure has allowed for better-informed revision for general readability around issues such as unintended opacity, ideological blindspots and narrative obfuscation.

2. SPIRALLING GENERIC COMPLEXITY

The manuscript length of 35,000 words stipulated by the degree programme for the creative component of my submission forced me to conceive of *The Deaths* as a novella rather than a novel as initially planned. However, I found that word length in modern fiction is enormously varied amongst short stories, novellas and novels – and that a literary text’s expansion, to an extent, is concomitant with discursive complexity. The differentiating discursive features of modern fictional prose become harder to ascertain once the text expands beyond a certain length. I found it useful, therefore, to consider the demarcation points and narrative content at the lower end of word-count. The Neo-Aristotelian critic Norman Friedman established a hierarchy of word length, progressing from scene to speech to episode. A complex plot with a longer narrative, contended Friedman, would contain dynamic actions, multiple episodes, major changes, and multiple reversals. Friedman’s model suggests that the shorter a story, the less that can happen of importance.³

However, as narrative theorist William Nelles points out, even “fables often depict powerful desires and grave consequences.”⁴ The qualitative distinction operating in stories *below* 700 words, argues Nelles, is one in which there is no space for “psychologically nuanced three-dimensional characters with individual histories.”⁵ Under this word-count threshold, Nelles explains, it is *circumstances* that dominate, so that action prevails over agency and representative condition of character over individuality. Nelles’s findings are consistent with the genealogical development of Renaissance novellas. Giovanni Boccaccio’s seminal important novella collection, *The Decameron* (1351), for example, consists of very brief, event-based story units dominated by a psychology of outward action, whereas as Robert Clements claims, “by Cervantes, characterization and psychological justifications of

³ Norman Friedman, “What Makes a Short Story Short?” *Modern Fiction Studies* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1958): 103-117.

⁴ William Nelles, “Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?” *Narrative* 20, no. 1 (January 2012), 91.

⁵ Nelles, “Microfiction”, 93.

behaviour increase wordage.”⁶ Thomas Pavel elaborates on this idea by suggesting that the extended length of Cervantes’s later novellas can be attributed to “Heliodorus-inspired idealism,” their status as “origin stories” necessitating their beginning *in medias res*, injections of long dialogue and description, and the increased number of narrative moves required by “stories involving hidden adversity.”⁷

In light of these findings, a novella as long as *The Deaths* was likely to consist of numerous episodes containing multiple scenes in which the psychology of the characters and their histories would be elaborated, but not necessarily in a straightforward sequence of unfolding. Structurally, I figured that my timeframes should extend backwards with analepses (either to flesh out histories or to reveal key plot points), and forward with prolepses, which would expand the sense of future by suggestion, thus drawing the reader on.

However, the greatest research challenge in writing *The Deaths*, which is set in the late-twentieth century, has been to reconcile the most enduring and compelling structural and rhetorical features of the novella and the Bildungsroman with the inherent complexity of contemporary fiction. As Pavel asserts, prior to Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), novelistic subgenres tended to operate so distinctly that each could be seen as responsible for a defined area of human experience.⁸ Pavel argues that even *Don Quixote* (1605; 1615), granted by Hegel the status of a protomodern novel,⁹ can be read as a collection of isolated subgenres that began in the vein of a comic novella. Pavel thus alerts us to Cervantes’s extraordinary facility with pastoral stories and a range of novella types (serious, idealist, tragic, comic). On the other hand, in *Pamela*:

Richardson merges his novel’s episodes into a single, highly dramatic line of action, he zooms in on a myriad of details—sensory, behavioural, and psychological—and he conceives a gallery of characters,

⁶ Robert J. Clements, “Anatomy of the Novella.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1972), 9-10.

⁷ Thomas G. Pavel, *The Lives of the Novel: A History*. 1st ed. (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 82-83.

⁸ Pavel, *Lives*, 119.

⁹ *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume 2*. Translated by T. M. Knox. (1835; Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1975.

each with her or his own peculiar physiognomy. In terms of already existing subgenres, Richardson's *Pamela* thus achieved an unprecedented synthesis of the moral splendour of the idealist novel, the inner tremors described by the pastoral and the elegiac story, the picaresque's closeness to everyday life, and the unity of action perfected in the novella.¹⁰

From this excerpt, a tendency in fictional prose becomes clear: as the novel has modernised, its thematic and structural variations and generic complexity have amalgamated. Already, Pavel's descriptions of *Pamela* and *Don Quixote* strongly suggest that there is a complex synthesis of subgeneric elements operating in the novel well before the rise of literary modernism in the late-nineteenth century. This presupposes the legacy of a certain level of heteroglossic complexity in contemporary fiction. I worked on the assumption that such increasing generic complexity was equally applicable to the novella, in large part because my research emphasised the Renaissance novella's seminal role in establishing the formal basis for modern prose fiction; this will be discussed further in section 5.

That novellas became longer and more intricate, though no less varied in word length, over time was borne out by my reading experiences. Although they had been as brief as 400 words in the classic novella collection *The Decameron*, from the Renaissance onwards the wordage of novellas steadily increased. Cervantes's collection, *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613), for example, contains *The Force of Blood*, which at 7,000 words is as long as Edgar Allen Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter* (1844). Similarly, *The Lady Cornelia* in *Novelas Ejemplares* is 17,000 words, which is slightly longer than Melville's *Bartelby the Scrivener* (1853) and James Joyce's *The Dead* (1914), both of which might today be classified as long-short stories. The novellas I examined in the most detail were Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810), *Bartelby the Scrivener*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912). While *The Deaths* is 35,000 words, these novellas I read ranged from approximately 12,000 to just over 40,000 words. At the level of "passages of text," the discursive characteristics (when the different eras and individual writing styles are accounted for) are difficult to differentiate from those in contemporaneous novels.

¹⁰ Pavel, *Lives*, 124.

It has been argued that the *sine qua non* of the novel – as opposed to the novella – is its “digestive capacity,” or rather its unbounded ability to extend material,¹¹ often by incorporating other verbal mediums such as letters and songs. However, it might be more accurate to say that the capacity to extend narrative in this way is inherent in the very language of modern prose fiction itself. This would explain why there is such enormous variation in the word lengths of what today are loosely considered short stories, novellas and novels. In the modern novella samples I read, I identified content-swelling techniques such as character development, beginning *in media res*, milieu elaboration, plot complication, landscape evocation, and other general digressions such as philosophical excurses. This suggested to me that *The Deaths*, as a contemporary novella, had licence to incorporate such passages into its discourse.

The Bildungsroman, at first glance, is a literary form with a clearly circumscribed field of experience – that is, the “coming of age” of its protagonist. Several theorists, however, have problematised this conceptualisation. As noted by Franco Moretti, there is a lack of critical consensus regarding the genealogy and key features of this genre. The Bildungsroman had traditionally sought to symbolically constrain the experience of burgeoning modernity via the trope of youth. In the aftermath of World War One, however, this endeavour was proving increasingly futile, with the Bildungsroman rendered, in Moretti’s view, all but impotent as a form.¹² Some theorists go even further – Marc Redfield in *Phantom Formations*, for instance – and problematise the very notion of the Bildungsroman, casting doubt over its legitimacy as a classification at all.¹³ In terms of guiding the writing process, however, “coming of age” as a trope or general concept is useful, because it strongly suggests a focus on a defined range of experience. In my own work, the main challenges in reconciling the Bildungsroman-as-genre to my ideas for a story centred not so much on defining the range of experience, but on the rhetorical treatment of its content and themes.

¹¹ Graham Good, “Notes on the Novella.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 197-211.

¹² Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The ‘Bildungsroman’ in European Culture*. 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2000), 230.

¹³ Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*. 1st ed. New York: Cornell University Press, 1996.

Conversely, applying novella-as-framework raised challenges that arose around structure and word length.

Gaining an insight into the history, form and function of the novella and the Bildungsroman has at once instructed and inhibited my writing process. For one thing, recuperating generic elements from supposedly bygone literary epochs generated the creative challenge of contemporary interpretation and recontextualisation. For another, invoking generic conventions that conspicuously belong to the earlier historical epoch of the novel/novella has allowed for the possibility of creating a dissonance in the mind of the reader. This tension can engender a self-consciousness in the reader in terms of the relationship between generic conventions and historical context. The impulse for this self-conscious kind of writing might also be understood as a feature of the natural – which is to say contemporary to me – postmodernity operating within my own sensibility. To paraphrase Fredric Jameson, the citational quality of the postmodern world is characterised by a recycling of earlier styles with the effect that history collapses into the present.¹⁴ Moreover, this postmodern sensibility is obviously also applicable to the protagonist of my novella, who enters adulthood in the 1990s.

Indeed, themes and structures of earlier or more “traditional” novellas and Bildungsromane have actually provided abundant material (both structural and ideational) for me to emulate. For instance, I have found that narrative discipline provides a check against an aimless tendency in my writing where structure dissolves, characters are hard to identify and remain underdeveloped, and the information they convey proliferates, digresses and refracts. James Wood has identified an “excessively centripetal” propensity in some late twentieth-century fiction – that is, a complex web of largely conceptual connectivity in which “[c]haracters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels.” Wood describes this style as “hysterical realism.”¹⁵ The lengthy information-age novels posited by Wood as exemplars of this trend are Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997), Don

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

¹⁵ James Wood, “Hysterical Realism”, *New Republic*, 24 July, 2000.

DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). As an apprentice novellaist, I was seeking models with more easily identifiable structures, and fewer (yet more grounded) characters. Being cognisant of the aforementioned novels, however, has been useful as a background concern throughout the writing process; for to ignore their citational discourses is, in a sense, to deny the literary Geist of the millennium.

3. AVOIDING LITERARY MEMOIR

Because contemporary literary fiction is so generically heterogeneous, it has often been clarifying to infer from Derrida's concept of *différance*, and to conceptually orient my writing in terms of what it is *not*, but also in terms of which it can be usefully compared. For example, *The Deaths*, as described above, can be distinguished structurally, though less so stylistically, by its departure from "hysterical realism". The autobiographical tendency, however, was an impulse more difficult to suppress.

Born in 1973, I was 42 at the time I began developing the project that was to become *The Deaths*. In my initial proposal for the postgraduate programme, the thesis title was "Australian Cultural History and the Novel since 1973," and the intention had been to write my own accompanying novel that charted the friendship of two boys, one middle class and the other working class, who came of age in Sydney's Inner West in the 1980s and 1990s. The most direct fictional model for me was Tim Winton's Miles Franklin Literary Award winning novel *Breath*.¹⁶ The academic research component of my project, as suggested by the initial thesis title, was to mirror the generational experience of the protagonists in my novel, and hence my own experience. As in *Breath*, my novel would be narrated from the retrospective vantage point of a man in his forties. Although *Breath* is fiction, its coming-of-age tale is situated in the 1960s and 1970s, which is contemporaneous to Winton's life (he was born in 1960). Similarly, my novel would explore the theme of coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s.

¹⁶ Tim Winton, *Breath* (Victoria: Penguin, 2007).

Prior to my enrolment in the master's programme, I had filled up about twenty moleskin journals with "free writing" – mostly stream-of-consciousness in the form of thoughts, feelings, philosophical speculation and real-time observation. I had also written out a rough version of my life story and had just spent three years attempting, sporadically, to compose a novel. With an undergraduate degree in drama, and partly out of frustration at the stalling of my literary project, I wrote and directed three full-length plays, which are to date unpublished. There was no plan for genre with the plays, but in composing the programme notes I found myself describing the pieces as "darkly comic, psychological thrillers." The last of these plays centred on a frustrated experimental writer who employs extreme measures to acquire material for a novel.

The above autobiographical information is critically and creatively relevant. The medium of theatre had allowed me to tell a story through characters who – although they came to embody many of my concerns about life and creativity – remained abstract, external and somewhat removed in space and time from my own formative experiences. On the other hand, a novel seemed like a freer medium in terms of the latitude it afforded to represent a more personally detailed, historically specific story that spanned different epochs. As with my last play, autobiographical detail has been prefigurative in the way it neatly encapsulates the broad themes of *The Deaths* – e.g. the link between creative frustration, and rendering that creative frustration as narrative. The distinction is a question of degree; with *The Deaths*, autobiographical detail has also been prefigurative in terms of the novella's setting and central characters. As such, it presented significant challenges in rendering the manuscript as fiction rather than memoir.

Errol, the protagonist of *The Deaths*, is an aspiring writer who grows up in the Inner West of Sydney in the 1980s and comes of age in the 1990s. Among the most obvious recent differentiating models here are Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) and Karl Ove Knausgard's six-volume series *My Struggle* (2009-2011), both of which are literary memoirs. However, I had committed to apprenticing myself to the purely fictional novel form, despite the fact that *The Deaths* was inspired by and based on my own life experiences.

To avoid memoir, it was helpful, in a general sense, to consider the relationship between reality per se and reality reconfigured as fiction. To understand this distinction, a nuanced grasp of mimesis needs to be entertained. A strictly mimetic standpoint “assumes or insists that literary works reflect reality.”¹⁷ This intuitive assumption felt like an imperative for a coming-of-age story whose protagonist so closely mirrored my own passage of youth. However, as Jerome Bruner points out, Vygotsky has convincingly shown that “cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality.”¹⁸ For my novella to achieve the desired effect of being fictionally “realistic” in that “ordinary people in unremarkable circumstances are rendered with close attention to the details of physical setting and to the complexities of social life,”¹⁹ I would need to sustain the illusion of probable truth, or *vraisemblance*. Simultaneously, though, I would need to disengage from “empirically verifiable” reality, especially when it came to the more personal dimensions my own *fabula*. This was particularly important as my intention was to write something deeply confessional, candid and explicit.

The notion that “raw” autobiographical material is itself a representation or reconfiguration of “reality” is a good starting point. Pam Morris seems to support this view when she observes that, despite their possible intentions to the contrary, “[r]ealist novels *never* give us a slice of life nor do they reflect reality ... Writing has to select and order ...” and “ ... entail the values and perspective of the describer ...”²⁰ (emphasis in original). Such shaping was pertinent to my work, since I was experiencing a certain self-imposed pressure to remain faithful to empirically verifiable autobiographical facts. The full implications of an anti-mimetic standpoint with respect to crafting fiction are actually more far-reaching, however. Further research revealed that my journal-writing was also suggestive of an urbanised literary trope of modernity dating back to the oeuvres of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. In this paradigm, the figure of the *flâneur* personifies the trajectory of modernity itself:

¹⁷ Chris Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), entry reference: “mimesis”.

¹⁸ Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality.” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 1-21, 3.

¹⁹ Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, entry reference: “realism.”

²⁰ Pam Morris, *Realism*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), loc 216 of 348. (Kindle edition)

The flâneur's relationship to the city and its crowds is essentially a dialectical one where he at once desires and abhors immersion with the urban maelstrom. Suffering the alienation of the oppressive metropolis, he nonetheless delights in the perambulation (solitary yet connected) afforded by his anonymity. Despite his essentially public existence, the flâneur was an alienated figure, and his brief and fortuitous encounters with strangers were characterised by ephemerality, and marked by a sense of transience, loss and trauma, all of which combine to produce an acute and often unbearable sense of shock and alienation.²¹

Adjectives attributed to the modern subject such as regressive, solipsistic, narcissistic, cynical, perverted, abject, fetishistic, interiorly focused, aimless and distracted have been critically explained as symptomatic of the putatively specific features of twentieth-century urban experience – automation, the crowd, rootlessness, alienation, atomisation, excessive stimuli, transience, surface appearances, consumerism, spectacle, fragmentation, trauma, and increased estrangement from the preceding generation. Petra Nolan, for example, considers cultural theories of flânerie such as those developed in Benjamin's writing. She also engages with the influence of psychoanalysis and Marxist theory, and considers the work of other cultural theorists who explored modern, urbanised consciousness, including Henri-Louis Bergson and Siegfried Kracauer.²²

These features of modernity are also apparent in much early twentieth-century fiction, and coexist alongside this literary epoch's themes of generational severance, a sense of futile (unless purely aesthetic) rebellion, and the rise of depersonalising institutions that systematically extinguish any possibility of personal development. For Moretti, this transition into a post-WWI consciousness is reflected in the Bildungsromane of the period. Moretti proposes two late "Bildungsnovelles" – Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* (1903) and Joseph Conrad's *Youth* (1898) – as exemplary, and pits these against James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (1916; published posthumously in 1927). Whereas the former pair are seen by Moretti as late Bildungsromane in the classical sense, although decidedly modern, the latter display a marked breaking down of the idea of positively progressive social development. Moretti also maintains that Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) succeeds as a

²¹ Petra D. Nolan, "The Cinematic Flâneur: Manifestations of Modernity in the Male Protagonist of 1940s Film Noir." PhD thesis, School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology, University of Melbourne, 2007, 65.

²² Nolan, "The Cinematic Flâneur", 2007.

“*bildung*” not because it complies with classical principles, but rather because it is purely lyrical (i.e. not structured diachronically).²³

These twentieth-century ideas about the impact of modernity – on an individual’s behaviour, and on the narrative treatment of coming-of-age tales – have proven useful. Through them I was able to contextualise conspicuous tendencies in Errol’s character sociohistorically, rather than have to justify them personally. This afforded me some much-needed distance from the protagonist. Thus, I could substantiate and ideationally refine my protagonist’s interior; his preoccupations (perhaps particularly the more abject and unsavoury ones) could be narratively embedded with recourse to cultural theory about modernity.

Similarly, throughout the re-editing process for *The Deaths*, there has been the opportunity to further fictionalise the close-to-the-bone “reality” of my protagonist’s proclivities and musings by considering character and point of view in a fiction-writing context. James Wood’s tracing of certain literary-historical developments in the genealogy of the novel jettisons notions of “type” and moves towards an increasing “characterological relativity.”²⁴

I found Woods’s survey useful late in the writing process as a means of pitting the conception of my own characters against seminal canonical examples. It presented the opportunity to further refine my characters with dialogic, or metafictional, awareness. Wood argues that the eponymous protagonist of Diderot’s “conversation” novel *Rameau’s Nephew* (1760-1784) put a twist on the idea of “a sophisticated cynic, a man who sees through society.”²⁵ Transcending fixity of type, this nephew is characterised by a largely knowing and ambivalent complexity. He resents his dependence on his famous uncle and cruelly parodies him, but is defined by an ingeniously concealed hypocrisy which is counterveiled by Diderot’s “subtle suggestions that he [the nephew] may be a kind of frustrated genius.”²⁶ From here, contends Wood, we get Julien Sorel, protagonist of

²³ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 2000.

²⁴ James Wood. *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2008), 116.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830) who "seethes with satiric callousness, self-interested impropriety and gratuitous resentments," yet is oblivious to how he is perceived and unaware of his own deeper psychological layers. Julien is less the "fearsome truth-teller" he imagines himself to be, because under the gaze of upper-class society, his traits are curdled into crude romantic provincialism, with the result that his passions are chronically misdirected – he is in denial about his love for Madame de Renal, while "blurting out his heart to people when he should keep it closed."²⁷

According to Wood, it was Dostoyevsky – influenced by Rousseau, Stendhal and Diderot – who took character to yet another level of psychological complexity via subjects who ultimately "want to reveal the dark shamefulness of their souls," and who thus commit base acts conspicuously.²⁸ These base acts, such as murder, manifest as uncanny inversions of extreme emotional impulses, which the characters rationalise even as they secretly yearn to be humiliated by exposure. Wood argues that it was later Proust who offered the insight that we project socially derived identities onto others. For Wood, Proust's work actively engages with this phenomenon, showing how the full force of a singular humanity can explode into the gaze of the sensitive observer who is ready to "adjust the optic lens."²⁹

I found an examination of these canonical pre-modern and modern characters instructive as it provided an excellent model against which to delineate Errol's, and my characters', traits. These figures provided a basis from which to recontextualise Errol in his socio-historical moment, and to gauge the relative stereotypicality or complexity of the other characters in *The Deaths*. Furthermore, the abject and creatively/socially frustrated strains in Diderot, Stendhal and Dostoevsky's characters serve as prototypical traits of the artistic outsider, of which Errol is a latter-day incarnation. With respect to Proust, the projecting tendency can be problematised as part of Errol's *flânerie*: in other words, just how reliable are his observations?

²⁷ Ibid., 118-119.

²⁸ Ibid., 122.

²⁹ Ibid., 124.

4. "ORIGINATING" A BILDUNGSROMAN

Baudelaire and Benjamin's flâneuristic evocations of the nineteenth and twentieth-century city prefigure certain dimensions of my protagonist's adult consciousness – that is, the oeuvres of these documentarians of modernity constitute records of personalised urban experience; at once poetic and investigative. As a work of fiction, however, *The Deaths* has required a more formalised structure that traverses a circumscribed range of experience – youth. Additionally, the fact that Errol is an aspiring writer warranted a consideration of a subgenre of *Bildung* known as the *Künstlerroman*, or "artist's novel." Although I had read Patrick White's seminal *The Vivisector* (1970), the writing that was foremost in my mind when I conceived of my project was, again, Winton's *Breath*. This served as a structural model for me. The trajectory of youth portrayed in Winton's novel is so clearly delineated that it presents an exemplar of how to render a coming-of-age tale as an engaging and compelling narrative. *Breath* also represented the right balance of remove from and proximity to my own story. The period and milieu evoked by Winton (hippie era; small town) diverges from that of *The Deaths* (information age; big city). On the other hand, both tales are Australian and coastal, and both explore themes of youthful excess, formative trauma and danger. In this way, I found that the two texts were at times in dialogue, only to part company at other points. This delicate balance proved crucial in ensuring that I resisted the trap of imitation.

Recounted retrospectively through a lens of adult maturity, *Breath* echoes the traditional Bildungsroman in key ways. Its diachronic formal structure is generically typical with its passage through stages of maturity interspersed with interpolations of "adult wisdom," and the protagonist remains at all times central to the represented action. Despite these generic dimensions, however, *Breath* may more accurately be interpreted as a coming-of-age novel, which is the English "approximate equivalent"³⁰ – and arguably less developed version – of the German Bildungsroman. *Breath* qualifies for the status of coming-of-age novel insofar as it is "devoted entirely to the crises of late adolescence involving courtship, sexual

³⁰ Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, entry reference: "coming-of-age-novel".

initiation, separation from parents, and choice of vocation or spouse.”³¹ In fact, the main narrated action of *Breath* is intensively focused on adolescence. Yet Winton’s novel also reads like a thriller with modern themes such as the pursuit of adrenaline junkie activities including extreme sports and autoerotic asphyxiation. The novel presents graphic, psychologically nuanced and minutely depicted scenes portraying disaffected characters who are deeply and often fatally flawed. *Breath* recounts the traumatic trajectory of narrator-protagonist Pikelet’s coming of age as a self-styled extreme surfer in 1960s and 1970s Western Australia. Central to the story is Pikelet’s dysfunctional friendship with Loony, and his equally dysfunctional sexual initiation by an older woman, Eva. In *The Deaths*, I too wanted to write about sex, but also to capture an emotional and narrative intensity similar to that evoked through Pikelet and Loony’s adrenalin-fuelled exploits, during which they are relentlessly brought to brink of their own mortality.

My supervisor suggested I also read David Malouf’s first (and semi-autobiographical) novel *Johnno* (1975),³² a Bildungsroman which, like *Breath*, evokes the relationship between two boys from different socioeconomic backgrounds who share much of their adolescence. In both novels, the boys are possessed of contrasting, though initially compatible, temperaments that are partially and obliquely attributed to their diametrically opposed family backgrounds (stable versus instable). Malouf’s Dante, who is the narrator-protagonist of *Johnno*, can be likened to Winton’s Pikelet; both seem to represent the middle-class, poetic sensibility of the implied author. Conversely, Loony in *Breath* and Johnno, the eponymous character in Malouf’s novel, represent a wilder, less stable and, by implication, more working-class outlook. It should be noted, however, that Pikelet is a sensitive, reflective loner with a *working-class* albeit stable family background. He tries out university, but at the time of narration has become an “ambo” (a paramedic). Dante, on the other hand, embodies a more typical bourgeois trajectory in the sense that he trains as a teacher. In *Johnno*, both characters read literature and philosophy extensively, and Johnno himself is actually highly literary in his tastes. A key difference between Johnno and Dante is in the relationship they have to their own imaginations. Johnno wholeheartedly takes on

³¹ Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, entry reference: “coming-of-age-novel”.

³² David Malouf, *Johnno*. (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975).

other personas, is physically adventurous and lives on the “cutting edge” of experience, whereas Dante is bookish, seeks security and is mostly content to confine ideas to a conventionally poetic role of cultivating the mind.

Pikelet, Loony, Dante and Johnno were all helpful models in the sense that I was able to import, recontextualise, transmute and distribute some of their attributes into the main characters of *The Deaths* (e.g. Dante’s hypersensitivity and safe bookishness, Loony’s extreme livewire danger, and Johnno’s psychological imbalance). These attributes were incorporated into my delineation of Errol, and also informed the creation of Humphrey and “B”, Errol’s love interest. There are also parallels to be drawn between “B” and Winton’s Eva, who sexually initiates Pikelet.

The original title for my novel was “Humphrey.” Although I had not read *Johnno* at that stage, I was conscious that the character of Humphrey performed a role similar to that of Winton’s Loony. I had in fact planned to write a novel based on my relationship with my own best friend while growing up. In my proposal, I discussed wanting to use a friendship analogous to that portrayed in *Breath* as a metaphor for the “third wave,” a term that denotes the ongoing gentrification of the Inner West of Sydney. With its roots in the 1980s, the third wave had seen the suburbs of my childhood and adolescence become increasingly affluent by the 1990s.³³ The ultimate irreconcilability of the friendship that had begun as an inseparable union between the two boys would be metonymically reflected in the changing demographic of the area. Humphrey’s downfall, or at least his marginalisation, would therefore be echoed in the neighbourhood’s decriminalisation, the smoothing of its rough edges and the stripping of its character.

It is interesting to note that both Loony and Johnno are portrayed as somehow brilliant yet mentally unstable,³⁴ and both are given premature deaths. Being from a middle-class family, I had recognised a similarly variegated “best friend” trope at work in my own

³³ Cf. for example, Michael Bounds, “Second Wave Gentrification in Inner-city Sydney.” *Cities* 23, no. 2 (2006): 99-108.

³⁴ A possible contemporary medical interpretation would be that they suffer from Bipolar Disorder or Attention Deficit Disorder.

adolescent experience. In fact, this may have been what attracted me to *Breath* as a model in the first place. That I ultimately chose to kill off Humphrey even earlier in *The Deaths* and thus dispense with the trope of enduring friendship can be attributed to two factors in the creative writing process. First, this choice enabled me to further differentiate my own work from the aforementioned fictional models – much of both *Breath* and *Johnno* is spent dramatising the relationship between the narrator-participants and their best friends – indeed, *Johnno* comes to dominate Malouf’s story. Eliminating the best friend early helped to position Errol as more of a loner-artist in the vein of Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* – thus moving *The Deaths* further into the literary realm of the *Künstlerroman*. Consequently, some of the more extreme psychological material that I had originally earmarked for Humphrey was ultimately incorporated into the characters of Errol and “B” instead. Secondly, as with several other major choices I made regarding *The Deaths’s fabula*, narrative expediency was a major factor. This will be discussed in the exegesis’s next section that focuses on the novella form.

As mentioned, the ideological implications of writing a *Bildungsroman* have been important to bear in mind. This emphasis is possibly related to Errol’s own identity as a writer-artist who would be practised in deconstructing his cultural inheritance. In recontextualising the *Bildungsroman* in this way, I have been conscious of aligning the idea of a solipsistic subject with an historico-political dimension – a dimension that reflects ideationally in the protagonist and in terms of my novella’s structure. As a genre, the *Bildungsroman* can loosely be understood as a novel of individual education or formation. As Marc Redfield points out, however, *Bildungsroman* was in fact a retroactively applied term. Redfield argues that this term has increasingly enabled literary critics, rather than novelists, to discuss aesthetics as heavily impacted by ideology.³⁵ My understanding of this is that in a postmodern context, aesthetics have become inherently politicised. Any coming-of-age story associated with the metropolis (as the locus of modernity) must thus keep ideological implications at the forefront in order to be considered “up to date.” The term *Bildungsroman* gained widespread currency around 1906, with the publication of Dilthey’s

³⁵ Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*. 1st ed. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), vii.

Experience and Poetry. By then, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795), widely regarded as the proto-Bildungsroman, was over a century old. As discussed earlier in this exegesis, by the early-twentieth century, the Bildungsroman was arguably an exhausted genre, with Moretti declaring its obsolescence due to its inability to reconcile positive human individual development with early twentieth-century modernity. By way of contrast, from Redfield's deconstructionist standpoint, the sensibility of a classical Bildungsroman protagonist was ideologically loaded from the start: he can be presupposed as a composite figure of post-Enlightenment thinking in possession of pure Kantian (i.e. sensory) aesthetic judgement – a character whose superior transcendent and poetic discernment is, in the Romantic sense, representative of universal artistic genius. In other words, what Redfield alerts us to is a tacit essentialising of a privileged social group – that is, the European, white, middle-class male, as being the high point (in the inevitable Hegelian sense) of history. There is an implication here too regarding language, which can be seen as a version of Moretti's idea that when literary consciousness interfaces with "natural reality" (economic forces, for example), a modern humanist is powerless to effect change. The idea that aesthetics have been pragmatically coopted as a product of global historical forces, thus becoming subsumed into the system of commodity exchange, is developed in the cultural theory of the Frankfurt School of which Walter Benjamin was a key thinker.

Being conversant with Marxist interpretation, and the fact of growing up in the wake of postcolonial discourse, has rendered me acutely self-conscious of the commercial status of a work of art, and of my status as a white, middle-class, Australian male. While politics, notions of cultural distance and Eurocentricity are not central to *The Deaths*, the aforementioned ideas as they pertain to the history of the Bildungsroman did help me to critically contextualise my work. The latent presumptions of privilege embodied in my protagonist could be teased out more deliberately. Beyond this, there was a structural implication that chimed with a feature of the novella form – and that is the issue of teleological focus. Specifically, the "inevitable" trajectory of Errol's development could be "problematized" insofar as it is historically contingent, demographically representative and suitable to him as a writer-artist. Errol *literally* becomes the product of his own

imagination, since he writes the story of himself, the ending of which is coextensive with his physical death.

This literary conceit is perhaps more consonant with a postmodern perspective. According to Bruner, by the middle of the twentieth century, normative narrative interpretation could be characterised as an “apparatus of scepticism ... applied not only to doubting the legitimacy of received social realities but also to questions of the very ways in which we come to know or construct reality.”³⁶ Thus, the postmodern world is one in which threat is not necessarily external or bound by physical events. By according primacy to pure representation (i.e. Errol’s representation of himself as text) the purported actual individual is disembodied and replaced by words – epistemic force supplants, or at least calls into question, the life force that generates the knowledge.

5. ASSERTING A NOVELLA’S STRUCTURAL FORCES ON A BILDUNGSROMAN

The general historical trend towards heteroglossic complexity in the modernisation of novels and novellas implied by Pavel’s examples meant that by the late-twentieth century, the period in which *The Deaths* is set, the novella as a contemporary form had lost much of its functional distinctiveness. Because of this, the question of generic choice became, from a writing perspective, at once more difficult and more important. My supervisor suggested that my earlier manuscript of “Humphrey” was problematic in terms of its closed “interior architecture.” Armed with insight into the relationship between word length and narrative principles such as prolepsis and analepsis, I began to conceive of *The Deaths* as a more immanently expansive piece with respect to structure. Also, mapping out the basic building blocks of the plot provided me with a framework within which I could later flesh out the detail. However, the complexity and variation inherent in modern prose fiction suggested to me that recourse to more circumscribed generic dimensions of the novella form would be instructive. Structural and thematic principles of both the Renaissance novella and German novella theory proved useful in this regard. Ultimately, though, it was an

³⁶ Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” 16.

understanding of modern novella subtypes defined by rhetorical force that proved most fruitful in the final edits of *The Deaths*.

In her study on the Renaissance novella, Nancy Reale explores the concept of desire – the desire of the characters in the real world, and the narrator’s desire to make sense of a story – and proposes it as a central driving force for the narrative. Arguing that the characters of Renaissance novellas are driven by a series of externally realised “passionate effects,” Reale explicates a structure in which plot is synonymised with character, thus creating a “peculiar conflict born as individuals try to reconcile the world with their private and public motivations”:

Uncontrolled desire is a threat to order, and the manner in which it is satisfied, disguised, and/or suppressed is a topic that pervades novella literature ... authors are experimenting with prose in an effort to see what it reveals about concepts of narration that are centuries old in quest of a meaning for experience itself, a way of shaping the structure of their lives so as to provide a sort of closure needed for coherence.³⁷

I saw resonances here in the internal dynamics of Errol’s psyche. Errol seeks to externalise, and thus reconcile as meaningful, his private thoughts and inner conflicts through the shaping action of his narration.

There was also a continuity to be found between the socioeconomic context of Renaissance novellas and the context in which Errol narrates *The Deaths* several hundred years later. During the Renaissance, novellaists observed contemporary reality in the vernacular,³⁸ and Graham Good points out that the original precondition for a novella is a frame setting in which urbane discourse can occur.³⁹ Echoing this, Robert Clements and Joseph Gibaldi show that the bourgeoisie and mercantile class were the first mass readers of *The*

³⁷ Nancy M. Reale, “The Feigning Voice: A Comparative Study of Narrative Intention and the Development of Style in the Renaissance Novella.” (PhD thesis, Department of Comparative Literature, New York University: 1986), 6.

³⁸ Robert J. Clements, “Anatomy of the Novella.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1972): 3-16.

³⁹ Graham Good, “Notes on the Novella.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 197-211.

Decameron.⁴⁰ As a member of the late twentieth-century bourgeoisie, then, Errol's "urbanity" has an historical precedent. This was a consideration during the writing process, and I aimed to effect a tension between the various idioms with which my narrator-protagonist engages. Errol may wish to play to an urbane, educated "reader." At the same time, however, as a lower-middle class person from a neighbourhood whose affluence only really establishes itself by his early twenties, he is anxious to display his working-class credentials and to avoid being labeled elitist.

The idea of a frame setting or "cornice" through which the story is related by a narrator, is often discussed as a centrally important feature of the novella no matter in which period it is written. In *The Decameron*, the 100 tales as presented in Boccaccio's collection are "orally performed" in turn by a small gathering of people. Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe narrates his quest to find Kurtz to fellow sailors on a boat docked on the Thames. I found the inclusion of a frame persistently problematic during the writing process, mainly because of the word length of *The Deaths*. Because the novellas in *The Decameron* are so short, the telling of them in a single sitting can be easily kept in mind. However, in *Heart of Darkness*, which is a longish novella even by modern standards, I observed a sense of the narrating act disappearing into the background of the story being narrated. In fact, even in *The Decameron*, once the novella stories begin the influence of the narrating voice seems to dissolve. I wasn't sure how to avoid this in a text as long as 35,000 words, but I decided that if I was going to include a framing device, I wanted to foreground its functionality – to make it central to the novella's rhetorical force. The pressure I felt to include a frame forced me to consider the possibilities of the narrating voice of *The Deaths* more deeply than I otherwise might have.

Though useful in principle, I found that the characteristics and narrative axioms of Renaissance novellas, even Cervantes's later ones, were, on the whole, too removed in time to be specifically instructive, and so I looked to more recent examples. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, German critics and novellaists, taking as their starting point

⁴⁰ Robert J. Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella*, New York: New York University Press, 1977.

copious translations of Boccaccio and Cervantes, began what was to become two centuries of novella criticism. This indirectly reinforces the idea that the novella evolved contemporaneously with broader trends in the fiction of modernity. For my purposes, the key formal features and devices that were codified in the nineteenth-century novella include a differentiating symbol; *Wendepunkt* (a turning point) either leading to redevelopment or a final resolution; *Unerhorte Begebenheit* (an extraordinary occurrence grounded in everyday reality); a teleological focus (action directed inevitably towards a final purpose) and the establishment of a “new order” as it pertains to the novella’s cumulative narrative effect.

The idea of a potent symbol which binds the events of a novella together to give it a *sui generis* impact comes from the German novellaist and critic Paul Heyse who was struck by Boccaccio’s use of a falcon to symbolise male romantic love. Although I found it impractical to frame *The Deaths* around one particular overriding symbol, Heyse’s theory made me more conscious of the functional potential of the recurrent symbols I was employing. For example, the paperbark tree in my novella comes to symbolise a point of contrast between London and Sydney (when set against the London planes). The paperbark also signifies the hypnotic effect of the Australian bush, the female sexual organ, a source of magical power for Errol as a boy and the literal site of death for his parents whose car crashes into such a tree. I also found interesting resonances in the tale in *The Decameron* (Day 5, Story 9), which is the text from which Heyse derived his theory. Here is Boccaccio’s summary of the story in question, as narrated by “the Queen” in *The Decameron*:

In love with a lady who does not return his affection, Federigo degli Ablerighi consumes his fortune, spending it all on courting her, until the only thing he has left is a single falcon. When she comes to call on him at his house, he serves it to her to eat because he has nothing left to offer her. Upon discovering what he has done, she has a change of heart, takes him as her husband, and makes him a rich man.⁴¹

The apotheosis of Errol’s unrequited love for Matilda occurs in *The Deaths*’s penultimate section. Having squandered his “fortune” (i.e. his inheritance) in a manner not dissimilar to Ablerighi, Errol invokes a dream that Dante was supposed to have had. He then sends Matilda an email in which he offers his heart as “food” before going off to meet his fate.

⁴¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (translated by Wayne A. Rebhorn 2013), 452.

As for *Wendepunkt*, the distinction between a *structural* and a *novella* turning point was useful. I took it to mean that during the course of my novella there should be an event that irrevocably and radically changes the course of the protagonist's life, and then another event in the novella's denouement that dramatises or even radically inverts the significance of all of the preceding story elements. The manner of Errol's death was easy to see as the novella turning point. However, as will be discussed, I found that there were several significant structural turning points in *The Deaths*, all of which rendered this codification problematic.

According to German Romantic critic August Wilhelm Schlegel, the *Unerhorte Begebenheit* that occurs "behind the back of bourgeois situations and orders" of a novella must be plausible enough to assure that the novella "always be at home in the real world."⁴² Echoing this, German critic Henry Remak argues that it is the unprecedented event being grounded in the reality of everyday experience that confers credibility and authenticity on the text.⁴³ With this in mind, I was particularly conscious when writing *The Deaths* to render the circumstances and settings in which the extraordinary circumstances occur in as detailed and plausible a manner as possible.

As a guiding principle, the "new order" that the novella was supposed to achieve was compelling but vague. The critic Arnold Hirsch seems to allude to it when he speaks of the novella's obligation to achieve through its protagonist "a universally stirring articulation and structuring of the inner self."⁴⁴ Bearing this in mind, along with Schlegel's "bourgeois situations and orders," I became conscious in the writing process that my protagonist should strive to radically redefine or recreate himself in a relationship of tension with conventional reality. This was especially apposite given Errol's status as an outsider and artist.

⁴² Cited in Carol J. Herrmann, "The Art of the Novella: 1800-1855." PhD thesis, Department of Comparative Literature, Brown University, 1988, 7.

⁴³ Cited in Siegfried Weing, *The German Novella: Two Centuries of Criticism*. 1st ed. (Columbia: Camden House, Inc., 1994), 154.

⁴⁴ Cited Herrmann, "The Art of the Novella", 1988, 12.

I came to see the teleological focus component as complementary to the widely held view that novellas are structurally amenable to a “unity of action” (as alluded to earlier with reference to Pavel). This idea is derived from an Aristotelian conception of a feature of drama. In its extreme form, a story with a unity of action would take place in a single setting and transpire in “real time.” In fact, very few modern novellas adhere to a strict unity of action (except with regards to the action of narrator in some cases), but the sense that novellas are somehow bound up with a single conflict, rather than spinning out myriad subplots, helped me to simplify *The Deaths*. To think of my novella in this way was particularly important because the timespan covered by it was so extended. In her study of German novella theory, Judeth Leibowitz maintains that a novella plot accommodates itself to intensive treatment of a subject rather than progressive sequential development. It is this very intensity, she argues, that expands the material.⁴⁵ However, my aim *was* to convey progressive sequential development – that is to say, the evolution of a life (or at least youth).

When considered together, the above codifications seemed to suggest a scope inherent in the novella form to incorporate the surreal and extreme – but a scope that nonetheless remained faithful to the imperatives of structural economy and narrative plausibility. The conundrum thus became how to fuse a long passage of time with highly dramatic, fateful moments that converged on an “extraordinary event” – an event that derived its authenticity from being grounded in realistically (i.e. metonymically) described contemporary “reality” (both in terms of physical setting and psychological plausibility).

Thomas Mann achieves all this with *Death in Venice* in 25,000 words. Mann’s protagonist Aschenbach gravitates inexorably towards one major extraordinary event; his obsession with a beautiful young boy culminates in Aschenbach eating a cholera-contaminated strawberry and dying as he gazes into the boy’s eyes from his deckchair on a beach. While Mann’s objective, non-participating, narrator employs extensive analepses to flesh out biographical detail, the action of the story takes place over a mere few weeks. In *The*

⁴⁵ Judeth Leibowitz, “Narrative Purpose in the Novella.” PhD thesis, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Southern California, 1971.

Deaths, I had 35,000 words with which to cover twenty-seven years of action. Georg Lukács's comparison of the novel and the short story asserts that the former represents "the evolution of an entire life," while the latter turns on "isolated events" and hinges on "a fateful moment."⁴⁶ This argument supports the aforementioned ideas that novellas treat their subjects in an intensive manner; however it still left open my problem of how to represent Errol's life developmentally.

I needed a strategy that would enable me to reconcile the multiple structural turning points and extended timespan of *The Deaths* with a teleological focus and a sense of unified action. In this respect, an investigation into Seymour Chatman's distinction between story kernels versus story satellites, also taken up by Roland Barthes, proved instructive.⁴⁷ Kernels, which are a strong feature of epics and tragic drama, can be said to operate when abrupt, usually external events affect a character irreversibly. On the other hand, satellites are what occur in between these major structural turning points – they are characterised by quotidian, background events that evoke a sense of the socialisation of characters, the ramifications of their choices and the events that have unfolded around them. However, as Moretti notes, "[f]rom the eighteenth century onwards ... at one with the growing regularity and interdependence of social life, novels start to bridge the gap between background and foreground."⁴⁸ Therefore, the satellite "experience" of characters becomes sufficient for plot development in and of itself, with the result that the mundane and 'peripheral' possess opportunities for meaning and become narratively relevant enough to be considered a kernel. I decided that the multiple extraordinary events of *The Deaths* would have to make sense within the framework of the novella-Bildungsroman, and could do so if temporally situated to coincide with the major developmental stages of youth. *The Deaths*'s first irreversible kernel occurs when Errol is nine years old and his best friend, Humphrey, apparently disappears down a drain. The second is actually two events which occur subsequently: in his mid-adolescence, Errol falls into a coma after being hit by a car, and sees his parents killed in a car crash shortly afterwards. For the final kernel and the

⁴⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) (trans. Anna Bostock, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971).

⁴⁷ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

⁴⁸ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 233.

novella's denouement/"novella turning point," Errol is gored to death by a bull in Pamplona at the age of twenty-seven. Childhood, adolescence, and youth.

By the completion of the draft of *The Deaths (1)*, I had found a distinctive narrating voice but had not mapped out an event structure in its entirety. The effect was therefore a series of involuntary recollections that did not cohere around a driving line of action. It was only by *The Deaths (3)*, once the entire arc of the story was known, that I could conceive of the satellites as the narrative connective tissue – subjectively derived – permeating the whole story. I saw this dynamic operating in *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Death in Venice*, in which Bartleby's and Aschenbach's respective thought processes are articulated as progressively degenerative; the changing interpretive quality of their minds and their consequent "choices," amidst their respective milieux (the alienating corporate world of Wall Street and exotic plague-ridden Venice), conspire to shape their satellite trajectories and patently draw them deeper into their fate (semi-comatose insanity and reckless rapturous obsession, both resulting in death).

I reflected that it was perhaps this intense, often malevolent, quality inscribed into the quotidian that could, for my purposes, distinguish the novella from the novel. Therefore, in later draftings I pushed and refined the sense of everyday circumstances propelling my protagonist via an intensifying psychological maelstrom toward a mortal precipice. In doing so, I hoped to generate the illusion of unity of action that is so often spoken of *apropos* the novella. Despite the dramatised story actions in my novella charting many years, I sought to bring everything into a conceptually narrow band of awareness emanating from the protagonist's subjectivity.

The finessing that occurred at the stage of *The Deaths (3)* was largely a question of making the kernels and the satellites cohere and interpenetrate. This was a challenging process given the 35,000 words restriction within which a progressive dramatisation had to occur over a timeframe spanning many years. Structurally, the tendency was towards disjointedness at worst, and, at best, an episodic patterning. It is telling that *Bartleby the Scrivener* is only 12,500 words, because the source of the protagonist's madness has to be

explained retrospectively by the participating narrator and in summary form. *Death in Venice*, conversely, is longer, and we witness the unfolding of Aschenbach's entire mental decline from its inception.

In *The Deaths*, I wanted an especial type of connectivity not only for the kernels but also for the satellite events – the knowledge of Errol's father's infidelity, Errol's own sexual exploits, his decision to drop out of university, the circumstance of him not having to work because he sells his parents' house, and his general relationship with the conventional world. It was my aim to portray a kind of warped agency operating within Errol. I wanted a suggestion of a life shaped through Errol's thought processes in a way that was reminiscent of Aschenbach and Bartleby. To this end, apart from the narrative device of having Errol pen his own life, and the fact that he was designated as an outsider, a latter-day flâneur of sorts, I have also tried to foreground an ambiguity around the effect of a brain injury sustained after Errol's car accident versus the hint of an incipient self-destructive drive within him. By *The Deaths (3)*, Errol's fate had crystallised as being part of the "27 club," a term, as previously mentioned, that references a modern myth deriving from the belief that there is a disproportionately high number of brilliant musicians throughout the second half of the twentieth century who have met spectacular ends by drug overdose, suicide or other misadventure at the tender age of twenty-seven.⁴⁹ For me, the paradigmatic examples were Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain, and particularly the latter, since he committed suicide in the early 1990s.

During the final stages of the writing process, the overall rhetorical effect I was trying to achieve with the novella was at the forefront of my mind. Mary Doyle Springer's study of the modern novella was pertinent in this respect, and helped me to conceptualise *The Deaths* as geared towards a singular rhetorical impact within a family of modern novella types. Springer follows Sheldon Sacks' Chicago School approach, which is essentially Aristotelian in its philosophy. It seeks to understand the *dynamis* of a particular literary work as a constellation of formal features arranged in a dynamic part-whole relationship.

⁴⁹ Cf. Martin Wolkewitz, Arthur Allignol, & Nicholas Graves, "Does the 27 Club Exist?" *British Medical Journal*, 343, no. 7837 (December 2011): 1284-1286.

According to Sachs, fiction is primarily concerned with characters in conflict, while novels can be classified according to three mutually exclusive rhetorical designs: apologue, satire and action.⁵⁰ Springer, who was a student of Sacks, references a corpus of 100 novellas in order to differentiate and classify modern novella types based on their deduced rhetorical intention. In doing this, she seeks to explain the predominant rhetorical effect, the singular “power” operating in any one novella relative to other modern novella types. The main types she identifies are “apologue-novella” (e. g. Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*; 1886); “example-novella” (e. g. Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*; 1962); “novella-satire” (e. g. Orwell’s *Animal Farm*; 1945, although this is seen as a hybrid – apologue-satire); “degenerative-tragedy” (e. g. Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*; 1915); “serious plot of character revelation” (e. g. James’s *Turn of the Screw*; 1898); and “serious plot of learning/failed learning” (e. g. Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).⁵¹ Although I did not treat these sub-distinctions of the novella as ironclad rules of demarcation, they were nonetheless helpful because they compelled me to reexamine the shaping forces of *The Deaths* while editing the last draft.

For example, I was able to clarify the fact that *The Deaths* was not a satire – it was neither loosely episodic nor predominantly concerned with “the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies.”⁵² Alternatively, if my novella were an apologue, by Springer’s reasoning, the fate of Errol would be explicated at the outset (as more or less predetermined) in order to create an emotional distance from the protagonist in the reader’s mind, which has the effect of drawing conspicuous attention to the plot as it will come to relate the author’s final statement. Thus, unlike the case of the protagonist in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, I did not seek to harness Errol’s fate, and the way he lived, to a moral argument for which I was seeking the reader’s ultimate agreement. Although novellas, on the whole, do draw attention to their techniques of artistic production through the frame, too much emotional distance between the reader and the protagonist of *The Deaths* would in fact be inimical to my desired effect.

⁵⁰ Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief: a Study of Henry Fielding; with Glances at Swift, Johnson and Richardson*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

⁵¹ Mary Doyle Springer, *Forms of the Modern Novella*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1976.

⁵² Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, entry reference: “satire”.

I came to see *The Deaths* predominantly as a novella of *serious* action, perhaps a blend of “plot of character revelation” and “plot of learning/failed learning,” inflected with intimations of “degenerative tragedy.” How to defend this to myself? If *The Deaths* was tragic in the pure Aristotelian sense, the fate of Errol would be deliberately withheld from the reader until at or near the novella’s ending – which it is – but then revealed as *preordained* (cf. Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannous*, which was Aristotle’s main model for interpretation), which it is not. Nor after Errol’s fate is known, are the previously “unstable” relations between Errol’s choices and the main events of the story fully resolved as tragic via *peripeteia*, in possible conjunction with *anagnorisis*. Granted, the sense of an impoverished agency in Errol as pitted against forces greater than himself (i.e. chance) are somewhat foregrounded. However, the true tragedy in *The Deaths* (the deaths of Errol’s parents) has already occurred roughly halfway through the story, and functions as *The Deaths*’s major structural turning point. So, while *The Deaths* has intensely tragic elements, my novella is arguably more closely aligned with the novella sub-type degenerative tragedy (I interpreted both *Bartleby* and *Death in Venice* in this way). As a writer-artist protagonist, Errol’s mind functions as the ultimate source of creation and destruction. The question of Errol’s degeneration as inevitable (i.e. Is he insane? Is he a fabulist? Does he have an acquired brain injury?) is not directly answered in the story; instead, it remains ambiguous.

Regarding the serious action novella plot, the trope of “learning/failed learning” is strongly suggestive of the Bildungsroman, which as discussed earlier was the generic target at the outset of the writing process. Novelist and novellaist Tony Whedon believes that modern novellas share a central trope with classical Bildungsromane in that they often interpret the experience of the artist who tries to reconcile her or his development into maturity with her/his own obsessive vision, counterposed by bourgeois conventions such as professional security and marriage.⁵³ Whedon also argues that novella protagonists tend not to display development *per se*. There are resonances of this in the other Springer novella subtype of action that emphasises “character *revelation*” as opposed to “character *development*.” This resonance granted license in the final edit to enhance the dissonance of

⁵³ Tony Whedon, “Notes on the Novella.” *Southwest Review* 96, no. 4 (2011): 1-5.

Errol's trajectory as being one of either formational development and learning (as implied by the very etymology of the term *Bildung*-), or a peeling back of a fixed quality that was always there, in Errol's nature.

Ultimately, because I wanted the ending to be deeply ambiguous, I came to see *The Deaths* as a mixed "serious action" novella. By this – to extend Springer's definition – I mean that Errol's tightly plotted choices, experiences, actions and reactions should be sufficiently rooted in their context in order to validate their extraordinariness. Furthermore, insofar as *The Deaths's* plot relations, or satellites and kernels, remain unstable, "unresolvable" and open to several interpretations, they should be suggestive of a difficult inevitability (difficult in the sense of the hermeneutic demands placed upon the reader). To put it differently, what should be open to question is the extent to which the "new order" that Errol's trajectory represents is a product of his imagination, is part of a conventional learning process for someone of his generation, or whether it prosecutes, by exaggeration, a case against the subtle peculiar pressures that millennium age Western society exerts on the innocence of youth.

6. TECHNICAL LESSONS: DISTANCE, POINT OF VIEW, PACE AND TRACE

Because Errol is so directly an outgrowth of my own tastes, frustrations and desires, and since the spatiotemporal context of his trajectory so precisely mirrors my own, the management and calibration of authorial distance was a recurring issue in terms of resolutely disavowing *The Deaths* as autobiography. At times during my work on *The Deaths*, it seemed that I had set myself something of a "perspective trap." Not only was there no distinction between the narrator and the central character in my novella, but also the narrator/protagonist shared many analogues of my own experience. Errol's perspective, my own and the action of the story are conflated. Imposing fictitious events, hence inventing biography, went a long way in terms of *creating* Errol as a character. A solid understanding of distance and point of view was also essential for the fiction-making process.

Mitchell Leaska reveals point of view in modern fiction as largely a question of “focalisation,” how a narrator positions a character in relation to the action.⁵⁴ To achieve what I thought would be an unmediated intensity of personal experience, I had chosen to narrate *The Deaths* in the first person. In doing so, I had essentially placed the protagonist at the centre of the action. I also assigned him almost full responsibility for the telling of the entire story. Thus, ostensibly, there is no part of the novella where the reader is not inhabiting Errol’s mind. The attendant risk here is excessive solipsism. This was only partly kept in check by situating Errol’s more subjectively intense language in the historico-poetic context of *flânerie*, largely during the editing of *The Deaths (3)*. At that stage, my supervisor also alerted me to a successful canonical model for first person in *Jane Eyre (1847)*.

According to Sara Lyons, Bronte’s novel:

... has ... this almost aggressive “I” voice and yet people don’t tend to experience the “I” of narration as claustrophobic, we go along with it for some reason, we’re seduced by it, although notably some people like ... Virginia Woolf, kind of bristled at the intensity ... the interpenetration of the realistic and the romantic novel has this persuasive force too. There’s no way to stand outside Jane; there’s no room for ironic distance, or questioning her. We ... love who she loves and hate who she hates all the way through, and she also has a kind of rationality in her too, although she’s prone to certain kinds of hallucinations; that’s also I think what makes, or gives a kind of persuasive force.⁵⁵

Broadly, this interpretive paradigm suggests a cross-fertilisation of confidence, rationality and the unhinged as a successful strategy for creating a convincing “I”.

Antithetically, Wayne Booth questions the extent to which a first-person perspective can be said to be unmediated in the first place. To demonstrate his point, Booth cites the vivid quality of the first-person narration of Sterne’s eponymous protagonist Tristram Shandy (1759 ; 1767), Mann’s Serenus Zeitblom in *Dr Faustus (1947)* and the narrator-agent in *Remembrance of Things Past (1913)*. All of these, contends Booth, offer a counterpoint to Henry James’s third-person “centres of consciousness.” Of James’s third-person writing, Booth speaks of “reflectors,” which he describes as “turbid, sense-bound camera eyes.” This

⁵⁴ Mitchell Leaska, “Point of View.” In *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. 2nd ed., edited by Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996): 200-214.

⁵⁵ Sara Lyons. Transcribed from podcast: “Jane Eyre (1847)”, *In Our Time with Melvyn Bragg*, Producer: Simon Tillotson; 18 June 2015.

modality, contends Booth, is a defining feature of twentieth-century fiction.⁵⁶ Booth alerts us to the paradoxical effect in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which James Joyce – like James and Austen before him – employs this flexible version of omniscient narration, or what is now referred to as Free Indirect Style. The impact, as Booth sees it, is that the reader receives a “mental record of everything that happens” within the protagonist in a manner of dramatic relationship reminiscent of Elizabethan soliloquy. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus’s consciousness is aimed directly at the reader in a rhetorico-lyrical mode.⁵⁷ Furthermore, by Booth’s reasoning, the outcome of such omniscient narration is that the implied author (the wiser, more perceptive and sensitive version of the actual author, or the force behind the narrator) becomes blurred with the narrator.

With Booth’s distinction in mind, by foregrounding Errol’s role as narrator – as someone who palpably creates the world of the story – I was able to accentuate the mediated nature of first-person storytelling and achieve distance.

Also, throughout the rewriting process, I became more conscious of the sections of my manuscript in which the emphasis was placed on lyricism (passages where the reader inhabits Errol’s mind as he relates purely to himself); drama (scenes where a character’s will – usually Errol’s – contends with that of others); or epic (passages where Errol relates summarised or durative versions of external events and evaluates them against a more global context). In light of this, I was able more confidently to exploit the inherently interpretive nature of the “claustrophobic” “I” voice. By looking for points in Errol’s discourse where he was predominantly in epic mode (emotionally removed from the events he recounted), in dramatic mode (making his characters interact) and lyrical mode (trapped in a solipsistic conversation with himself), it was possible to reflect on the extent to which the mode suited the narrative intention: whether it was preferable to keep the plot moving through summary and ellipsis, to expose the reader to the performance of an

⁵⁶ Wayne C. Booth, “Distance and Point of View; an Essay in Classification.” In *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. 2nd ed., edited by Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy, 116-133. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996): 123-134, 122.

⁵⁷ Booth, “Distance and Point of View”, 130.

interpersonal scene, or to draw the reader into the recesses of Errol's psyche. The choice, thus, became available in later drafts to either embellish or streamline the story, or to provide relief from protagonist's interior life where appropriate. As a general editing principle, I found that in the aftermath of a kernel, it was helpful to ensure transitions through the three modes to establish a variegated sense of satellite connectivity.

Another technical issue in the final editing stages concerned the pacing of language as it related to timespan. A recurrent piece of advice from my supervisor, who thought the writing in the last couple of drafts became more powerful as it progressed, was to shorten the earlier sections which dealt with Errol's boyhood because they tended too much towards the "schoolboy" genre and suffered from an excess of unmotivated detail. Recalibrating the manuscript in accordance with these suggestions necessitated implementing variations in temporal and syntactic rhythm. As Paul Dawson explains, "[r]hythm, for Genette, is the alteration between the narrative movements of scene, summary, pause and ellipsis. However, if we address syntactic rhythm, which is produced by style, we can see that it establishes the tempo of the reading experience independent of narrative speed."⁵⁸ I had been struck by this phenomenon while reading Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810). Although covering a timespan of several years, featuring numerous events, and being in the upper-range of novella length at 36,500 words, *Michael Kohlhaas* seemed to progress with remarkable rapidity. For Carol Herrmann, this effect is achieved via a form of narrative truncation; she refers to "the accelerated pace of Heinrich von Kleist's prose, in which a complicated series of events may be related in a single sentence".⁵⁹

For the earlier sections of *The Deaths*, I achieved a similar outcome by utilising a combination of eliding temporal periods, summary, and reduction of syntactic complexity (minimising lyrical embellishment and milieu elaboration, for instance). In so doing, I recalibrated the pace of the story such that the overall emphasis rests with Errol's

⁵⁸ Dawson, "Style", 481

⁵⁹ Carol J. Herrmann, "The Art of the Novella: 1800-1855." (PhD thesis, Department of Comparative Literature, Brown University, 1988), 27-28.

adolescence and young adulthood. In terms of the satellite sections, I ensured that there was significantly less primary school material than high school material, and more satellite detail in the articulation of Errol's twenties than in the novella's preceding sections. One exception to this rule can be seen in the sections that depict Errol's sexual exploits with "B". Although a satellite occurring in his mid teens, these events are given intensive and extensive treatment.

Trace is another useful concept to apply in the final editing process because it helps to weed out derivativeness and to tease out a distinctive voice. Trace is prefigured by T. S. Eliot as a kind of negative evidence of the writer's "critical labour," and is defined by Dawson as "evidence in an individual work of absent alternatives."⁶⁰ In this way, trace is an invisible counterpoint to direct textual evidence. For example, reading over the penultimate draft of *The Deaths*, I discerned language that was, though not plagiarised, nevertheless conspicuously Nabokovian; this should not have been surprising since I had at that time been listening to Jeremy Irons's narration of *Lolita* on Audible. Actually, during the writing process entire I have at times consciously emulated the language (e.g. turns of phrase, vocabulary and register) and the distinctive feel of the narration of the fictional models at the forefront of my mind while I was writing. During the editing and rewriting process, I identified similarly derivative detail, clumsily applied, from, for example, Winton, Malouf and Borges. This instinct to "try on a style" – to mimic the prose of others – is, in a sense, how we learn. Ideally, though, the writer wants to absorb, synthesise, recontextualise and reinvigorate the style of those admired, rather than unwittingly appropriate it. Textual echoes of other authors' styles are, unless deliberate, disjunctive and jarring to the flow of narration. Consciousness of trace presents the opportunity to expunge, rewrite and/or reinterpret material as required.

The *inverse* of the trace concept also applies to maintaining narrative intelligibility. In other words, what is left out can also work against the narrative. If a writer harbours unexamined assumptions about a reader's cultural literacy, the rhetorical purpose of the

⁶⁰ Dawson, "Style", 482.

text as a whole is compromised. For example, my supervisor did not pick up on the idea of the “27 club” being pivotal to Errol’s fate. This was attributable to two compounding facts: he wasn’t conversant with the concept, and I had not explicated it textually. With respect to the latter, I was in effect presenting my own trace absence as evidence; I had assumed that the reader would intuit the fact that Errol was destined to be part of the “27 club” simply because I had made a passing reference in one scene to Kurt Cobain’s suicide, combined with the fact that Errol dies at the age of twenty-seven. Bruner observes that “[n]arratives are about people acting in a setting and the happenings that befall them must be relevant to their intentional states while so engaged – to their beliefs, desires, theories and values.” Bruner further notes that “[t]he events themselves need to be *constituted* in light of the overall narrative.”⁶¹ (emphasis in original). Therefore, if Errol’s conscious intention or unconscious desire was to join the “27 club”, I could not depend on unarticulated, non-textual implication alone. The meaning attributed to a narrative is gauged by the relation of the parts in the fictional world to their whole; if a part is to be deemed necessary to the narrative, it must feature in the text. To rectify this oversight, I included a definition of the “27 club” in the body of the text, as well as adding textual evidence of it throughout the manuscript.

Another way to deal with the question of distance is to consider the frame, or cornice. Novellas that feature a frame create an interpretive distance that the frameless “I” voice patently lacks. As Walter Benjamin speculated, “if a novel, like a maelstrom, draws the reader irresistibly into its interior, the novella strives toward distance, pushing every living creature out of its magic circle.”⁶² Similarly for Frow, the novella is characterised by “a visible exertion of narrative control” that is located in an “obvious narratorial presence.”⁶³ Indeed, by drawing attention to the story as a self-contained unit antecedent to the circumstance of its narration, the narrator becomes a personage distinct from the protagonist, or at least removed from the world of the narrated story. This narrative structuration can be seen operating in novellas such as *Bartleby the Scrivener*. The scene of

⁶¹ Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality”, 7-8.

⁶² Cited in John Frow, *Genre*. 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 131.

⁶³ Frow, *Genre*, 131.

the “telling” (the narrator seated at a desk with pen in hand) is structured by Melville in such a way that it conjures for the reader the image of the story being operative in another, spatially distinct yet more lucid (due to hindsight) realm.

Thus, my final problem with *The Deaths* was that the “magic circle” was inextricably conflated with the frame. This created a tail-chasing phenomenon where the completed version of Errol’s life story, right until the moment he dies, is in a race against itself. For the purposes of narrative expediency, I had chosen to constrain the events of the story so as to be coextensive with Errol’s lifespan (twenty-seven years). In solving one creative problem (i.e. reducing the need for further textual development), however, I created a seemingly insoluble paradox: that is, what is the narrating instance? I couldn’t, as in *Breath*, have the narrator-agent retrospectively recount the story from a mature, temporally removed vantage point. Neither could Errol have written the end of his own story if the end of that story is his death.

However, I would argue that it is beneficial to have at least one seemingly intractable problem, since it forces the writer to harness all of her or his interpretive powers to arrive at a solution of narrative necessity. In the case of *The Deaths*, it is the putative impossibility of the manuscript Errol has written being complete and, to a lesser extent, the polished quality of the writing he has produced.

An example of a temporary solution to my paradox lay in Booth’s concept of “aesthetic distance.” That is, the manuscript’s essential “impossibility” could thus be “explained away” by signalling its status as a work of fiction – a “story” that has been arbitrarily shaped via mysterious editorial control. This sort of aesthetic distance, however, proved compromising to the manuscript’s truth effects. I did not want the retrospective jolt the reader experiences when Errol dies to be inversely proportional to *The Deaths’s* “real-world impact.” In other words, as a serious action novella, too much aesthetic distance in relation to the story’s kernels would ultimately constitute a failure of the form.

To address the issue of the manuscript's "polished quality" I decided to construct plausible situations throughout the action of the story wherein Errol's manuscript is subject to revision (in two cases by personages other than Errol who are specialist readers). To achieve emotional (as opposed to purely aesthetic) impact in the denouement, I designed the final scene in such a way that another character other than Errol plausibly retrieves Errol's journals and "completes" Errol's story after his death.

CONCLUSION

The Bildungsroman is perhaps the most "natural" genre for an apprentice writer in that autobiography supplies the raw material, the *fabula*, for a story. However, if the aim is to write fiction in the strict sense, the alternative to memoir might necessitate, as in my case, a deeper historical exploration of the genre of the Bildungsroman. By gaining a solid understanding of how this genre fits into the broader picture of literary history, I have been able to identify the ways in which it could be appropriated, reconceptualised and reconfigured to suit my purposes. Key aims in this regard were to disentangle *The Deaths* from literary memoir, and to "problematise" the protagonist as a typical representative of the traditional Bildungsroman – a white, western, middle class, male – in a postmodern context.

Owing to the word length stipulation of the master's programme, I was obliged to consider another genre, the novella. Researching the history of the novella has allowed me to consider the very complex nature of modern (and postmodern) fictional prose, which tends to resist clear generic distinctions. This reflection has been compounded by my practical efforts to realise the novella's distinctiveness in a discursively complex environment. By considering the novella's genealogy, thematic focus and formal features, I have been able to clarify exactly what I wanted to write, and to delimit the possibilities. I needed to decide on my work's rhetorical distinctiveness within a constellation of purported modern novella types. Thus, during the final editing it was helpful to consider *The Deaths* in terms of how all of its satellites and kernels fit together with respect to its ending (the "novella turning

point”) in order to give it a central rhetorical force. Being able to regard *The Deaths* as a “serious action” novella with elements of “degenerative tragedy” was useful in this regard.

In writing *The Deaths*, the structural tension of uniting novella and Bildungsroman was perhaps most keenly felt when multiple narrative kernels, as opposed to one, had to be made to coexist over an extended time span. Reconciling the Bildungsroman-as-genre to *The Deaths* centred on issues of content, themes and ideology. Conversely, with the novella-as-genre, issues of structure and word length were more important.

The explanatory apparatus of rhetorical theory, narrative theory and literary theories in general were vital for me as a creative writing practitioner. In the various stages of developing *The Deaths*, recourse to them has helped me to enhance readability, to implement more powerful truth effects, and to ensure greater structural control and coherence from draft to draft. I have continually grappled with overlapping ideas about voice, character, point of view, trace, the narrative frame and creating distance from an overly solipsistic protagonist.

In addition, a dialogic awareness of compelling canonical exemplars of fiction I was seeking, in part, to emulate has been crucial. This has come into play especially with those of the target genres (e.g. *Breath* as a Bildungsroman, and *Death in Venice* as a novella whose protagonist is a writer-artist). However, awareness of those fictional genres from which I was seeking to differentiate my own creative work has also guided the writing process. Often my mission was as much defined by what it was not – a novel, short story, literary biography or hysterical realism.

Ideally, the research-writing cycle becomes organically integrated – the theory feeds into the fiction and vice versa. I see research now not as distinct from the writing process, but rather as an extension of it. *Passion du sens* wanes for a writer when the desire to write a story has nothing to latch onto that will take her or him conceptually deeper. I think the value of a praxis-oriented degree programme where the creative writing project is married to research is that the academic imperative and the “audience” of a supervisor forces one to

apply “literary” rigour to the writing process. Moreover, the reflection that accompanies the process of conducting research in this way is continually gauged for its immediate practical value to the unfolding of the fictional text.

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