

MANACLES

Robert Whyte



Manacles

a novel by Robert Whyte

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Manacles is the third part of the Robert Whyte's *Undivine Comedy*, the first two parts being *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.

Also by Robert Whyte

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ROBERT WHYTE

1972-2020

PREFACE

Plato said we are but shadows cast on the wall of a cave by the light of a fire, our lives no more than wisps of smoke drifting in the wind, our hearts hot coals in the night, the soles of our feet poking from the mouth of the cave into the cold morning, being nibbled by hungry wombats.

What Plato really meant by this, as far as we are concerned, is even if reality did exist, we have no access to it and we are all just watching movies in our heads. There is no way to know for sure we are not just dreaming, imagining things, off our heads hallucinating or characters in a book, written by some past or future self, or someone else.

But if there is no such thing as reality, apart from the wombats a) what is this place b) how did we get here and c) is there a way out? The answers to these three questions are a) nowhere b) we didn't and c) not likely.

Everything, including nothing, existence, skepticism, belief, particles, strings, knots and those stains in the carpet you can't seem to get rid of no matter how hard you scrub is all just a very bad joke at your expense.

What about time and space, you ask. That's easy. Time is an invisible, infinite nothing with no start and no end and space is everything else, including not only pins and needles, but also that goeey muck known as dark matter which does nothing more than make it obvious you need new prescription for your reading glasses. All of which is irrelevant, because we are stuck here in this cave while time and space are outside with the wombats.

On the upside, you still have your imagination, which is a

magical playground where all the good stuff happens, mostly to a shaggy dog named Dougal, an angry snail, a hippy rabbit, a pink cow, a real girl named Florence, a jack in the box who goes boing and Mr Rusty, the maintenance guy.

You are skeptical? As you should be. Doubt, as opposed to tomcat spray, or the top of a mountain, is in fact the underlying force which controls your existence. If properly handled, can be built into the particular thing that interests you most, the pursuit of love, for example, or one of the numerous other delusions behind visible things. If you engage in pursuits of this kind you will soon realise there is, after all, a world in which words are more than black and white dots on a frayed curtain.

2.1 JAMES

James was flying. Charles, a little to the left and a floor below, was watching him fly past. Both were young men in their early twenties. James the taller, possessing a floating profusion of red hair, a body more likely than a camel to fit through the eye of a needle and a parched, sandy complexion badly in need of rain. Even at this early stage in their relationship they resembled Alain Delon and Jean-Paul Belmondo in reverse.

Charles was powerfully-built with a boyish expression, black eyes, red cheeks, curly black hair and a friendly smile. He could crush a raw potato in his bare hand and hundreds of children could play paddy whack against his backside if he was inclined to let them, which he was not. Having the Scots-Irish charm of a Gaul in Germanic clothing, he was overdressed in a large, tan-coloured coat, the inside of which was lined with lambswool. There were clothes beneath it suitable for insulating oneself against a frosty Brisbane morning, but a little on the warm side for this time of night. He carried a sketch pad in his pocket and in his head something unheard of these days, a brain capable of original thought.

Charles made a last-minute attempt to catch the elongated, red-headed body, hoping to prevent it from crashing into a group of young women who were dancing at the foot of the stairs to Marvin Gaye's *Let's get it on*. They were more likely to cuddle up with each other than get it on with Marvin Gaye, Kris Kristoffersen, Mick Jagger or any of the many thick-necked pillocks at the party whose beer goggles made them think otherwise. He was entirely unsuccessful, not even

grabbing hold of an ankle, perhaps for the best.

James landed in a crumpled heap on the floor, his arrival greeted with silvery shrieks of laughter, to which he responded with a charming smile. It seemed nothing was broken, or if that's going too far, his body was intact. The young women who had seen him coming had drawn back like a school of startled baitfish, avoiding a fate worse than the one which had actually happened. He managed to stand up, buoyed by a volatile cloud of alcoholic vapour, with only a mild case of incense-patchouli staggers. Leaving the grove of discontinued dancers with the impression he would be engaging each one alone in deep and meaningful sympathetic listening, upon his return from his lofty quest, he extracted himself from the pleasure of their larrikin interrogations and headed once more up the stairs.

Charles had been watching all this, while fishing around in a torn pack of *Lucky Strike* cigarettes rescued from a nearby table groaning under its burden of alcohol. James crawled past him and entered a smoky room at the top of the stairs, still on his hands and knees.

Charles trimmed off the ragged edge of half a cigarette and lit it. Unlucky strike. There was not enough tobacco left to raise a law suit. He tossed the butt into a pot plant and looked around. On one side of the room there was a large upholstered bench seat, a leftover from the Ottoman empire. He manoeuvred this to the bottom of the stairs.

A few moments later the door at the top of the stairs burst open and James again flew out, sailing in more or less the same trajectory as before and therefore landing, with surprising comfort, on the soft cushions of the Ottoman. He

sat up, rubbed his face with astonishment and then looked determinedly at the stairs.

Charles sidled over, sat beside James and offered him a *Lucky Strike* cigarette, whistling the tune *I'd walk a mile for a Camel. One hump or two?* James accepted the cigarette and tried to light it with a gas lighter in the shape of a miniature pistol which Charles held up to his nose. The cigarette failed to ignite properly because of a gaping hole in the paper which meant he was inhaling air from the wide world between the butt and the tip. James took the remnant out of his mouth, knocked off the charred end and put the remainder behind his ear, taking from his pocket as he did so a packet of *Gauloises* one of which he absent-mindedly offered Charles, another of which he lit and puffed at angrily.

Charles accepted the cigarette with thanks and manoeuvred himself into the skinny red-head's line of vision, therefore obscuring the tall Belmondo's view of the upstairs doorway.

"It looks like a private party," he said. "Is there something you you left up there?"

James allowed his eyes to focus on the red-cheeked face.

"My drink," he said.

"What was it? We are awash with the booze of all nations down here. I'll get you another," said Charles.

"I think it may have been a Methuselah, possibly a Jeroboam. I can never remember those bottle sizes."

"So, a voluminous bottle and a fair bit more than a magnum," said Charles. "Of what bubbling brand, may I ask?"

"*Veuve Clicquot*," said James

"*Sacré bleu!* It must have cost a fortune."

“You’d think so, but my Dad and I grabbed the bottle second hand in a Bastille Day boot sale at the French embassy.”

“Full?” said Charles

James laughed, “No, empty. We filled it up with Seaview Brut, topped up with half a bottle of Staggers brandy and rewired the cork. Party trick.”

“Staggers. I know it well. Angoves. Not very superior, old or pale, but a nice palate cleanser with a kick like a mullet.”

“That’s the one.”

While James spoke, Charles listened intently, savouring the *Caporal* punishment of the *Gauloises*, the closest he had got to fond memories of Paris for several weeks, reminding him of Matisse *bleu* and Gainsborough serge.

One thing led to another and the conversation rambled, weaving in and out of intoxicants, dress regulations, false impressionism and good pointillism.

Distraction being the better part of attention deficit disorder, Charles convinced James to forget the prospect of retrieving the behemoth of champagne from the eleven or so rugby players who were upstairs and instead partake of the evening air.

Together they walked towards the front door and the world beyond, negotiating a path between various obstacles including couples in lip-lock and a great many apparently unconscious bodies, some on the furniture, some on the floor. Leaving behind them the warp of young hormones and the weft of fresh vomit, they were greeted by the night air ruffling its feathers in the darkness under trees. James paused and bent over, feeling the alcohol he had already

drunk, cycling it twice through his liver for detoxification before straightening up again, refreshed by the cold wind on his face.

It transpired Charles owned a mobile wine cellar in the form of a light-blue 1963 Volkswagen beetle, to which he now invited James for a drink. Gladly, James accepted.

From the glove compartment of the car, Charles procured a jar of black olives, some *Cabanossi* sausage and a bottle of *Metala*. This red wine was the colour of old sump oil and from the moment James sampled a liquid inhalation of its inky depths in a chipped apple-green enamel mug offered without apology by his new friend and provider, his voice began slipping fluidly about in his wine-dark mouth with a sense of hatless intrigue, causing him to wonder why he felt unencumbered by headgear in a midget spy novel when he hadn't been wearing any anyway.

It had become obvious by now these two *sort-of* knew of each other through a serious series of incidental mutual friends and foes. James mentioned he was thinking of writing a novel. Charles admitted he too was seriously interested in all forms of literary experiment, including painting and music. He proposed they celebrate this remarkable coincidence with the consumption of more of the *Metala* which, having breathed in the bottle, was improving immensely, reaching unparalleled and hitherto unexperienced excellence with regard to its fulsome flavour, something which called for banging together the enamel in a toast to the grapes of Ostrogoths, whoever they were. James began expounding his theories of poetic images and wilful hallucinations, illustrating his theory by saying, perhaps entranced by the

apple-green of his enamel, “what if the car was filled with apples, the green ones, you know, Granny Smiths?” This image seemed inordinately apt to Charles forcing him blurt out a semantic game he invented on the spot.

“Name two things which are equal but not opposite,” he said.

James could not. He slapped his face to stop the buzzing of the ideas swarming in his head like mental insects, then stopped hitting himself, realising the ideas, of course, were on the inside. He confessed to Charles, who he as yet hardly knew but trusted implicitly, that he was constantly obsessed with the image of the night as a black cat, not a black cat in the night, but the whole of the night having an animus, or abacus, or calculus, you know, like an actual identity, the way cats are aloof, kind of disapproving, sort of snooty, not the night though, which is a combination of stealth and disinterest, but always there, watching, it might be just its eyes like the Cheshire cat except the Cheshire cat wasn't black.

Charles nodded and said he thought James was definitely getting in touch with his felines and apropos of nothing at all why not sample some of the prosciutto he had found maturing under the back seat.

“Delicious,” said James. “No sign of independent movement, always a good sign in a vintage cold cut. It has a certain rearguard air, as though whatever ailment it had, is now well and truly cured.”

His speech had become considerably more clipped now he had allowed the fumes of the red wine to fully envelop his cerebral cortex.

“Green eyes,” he said. “That cat. Like revenge, prosciutto

is a dish best served cold on a rifle range.”

His open eyes were now wet.

“A fist pummels in this wine,” he said. “It’s like having liquid Tourette’s. Loquacity. That’s a word. More than a mouthful is a waste of good drinking time.”

He laughed.

“Filled to the bream with dark fish winking at the rays.”

James paused for a moment, noticing he was becoming rather too pleased with the sound of his own voice. He was well versed in tumble-skinned bromances and this was not the first time amphibious éclairs and other inhabitants of stagnant waters had commenced to devour his liver, a liver of great availability, truth be told. His voice filled the air around him and while he was delighted to be ensconced within its arena, he felt he was about to say something stupid. He drew into his moulded lungs a breath of the apple-green air swirling within the small blue car.

“The prowess of suggestion,” he blurted out, recoiling from his now babbling self with a look of horror and dread.

Charles wound down the window a little way and the resulting rush of cold air sobered them both while the apples evaporated in a mathematical formula derived from the fractal rhythms of Spanish Dancers, marine gastropod molluscs with no shells and naked gills. James quite earnestly began explaining in detail his plans for a literary composition. A string of consecutive moments were pleasantly tied up with the resulting conversation.

The next break came when James and Charles made a foray together into the ruins of the party in search of more to drink. Amongst the wreckage and bodies they found and

bagged up a bottle of dark rum, a bottle of Dimple Scotch, three-quarters of a bottle of Tullamore Dew and a bottle of Smirnoff Vodka which they poured into the petrol tank of the VeeDub. They left all the white rum, Bourbon, wine and beer, six bottles of Vickers gin, two bottles of Johnnie Walker and four bottles of various after-dinner liqueurs topped up with the remains of a bottle of Advocaat for the sake of neatness.

In a coffee shop deep in the suburbs, where all the cutlery and crockery was made of soft plastic so as not to disturb sleeping schoolchildren and their grandparents, James and Charles began to discuss the dentistry of lungs, which Charles asserted were the imprints of the body in the mind. James said he felt completely toothless. He had no sense of touch in his legs.

“Lungs I mean,” he corrected quickly.

The addition of dark rum to the pale coffee diverted their discussion into the areas of all-seeing eye-teeth and ghastly x-ray portraits of stone circles, which they both assumed were the strewn thoughts dentists left after removing teeth.

“Stonehenge is a tooth circle,” said James. “It was all done with Velcro you know.”

“Which had the hooky bits and which had the woolly bits?” asked Charles.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” said James. “Tooth-wise, my favourites are the incisors.”

“Good points,” said Charles. “Cutting edge.”

“Tongue gets in the way.”

“Always. What’s it good for?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

Hugging himself and biting down on his bottom lip to stop from laughing aloud, James felt like he was going to explode, which would surely set off the decibelliphone and get them kicked out of the coffee shop.

Charles maintained superior control, hiding his face in a handkerchief the size of a doona, mopping up the sniggers as they snorted from his nostrils. Composing himself, something he usually only did when alone, he wiped his face dry and rearranged his cherubic features into the mournful frown of an undertaker's horse.

The night was still young. They were both in a fine mood. James was all the more surprised when he walked into the wall instead of through the door when leaving the coffee shop. He managed to find the portal on his second attempt. Something must have anaesthetised his brain muscles at this point for we are lacking his point of view for the time being, while Charles drove out of the city, James snoring in the back seat, the grey clouds of the morning drifting up from behind the horizon.

James became aware, gradually, of the susurrous sound of swimming. His elbows were sore. His mouth felt like an armpit after a night of arm wrestling. His tongue was trying hard to find somewhere to lie down between prickly cushions which felt like they had been re-stuffed with cactus plants and gramophone needles. He hitched up his legs and looked out of the car window. Casuarinas and bottlebrush lined a lake above a weir with floodgates. He felt his throat. Thick-skinned. No sense, no feeling. He tried to yell out "Cooee!" but it came out *Hoot!* like the squawk of a sick duck. Charles,

floating on buoyancy, looked up. "Come on in!" he shouted.

James managed to get to the water's edge by marching his legs in six-eight time, a remarkable feat for limbs suffering from arrhythmia. He wasn't entirely hung over. It was true he had a good headful of angry wasps fighting it out with monstrous, metallic grasshoppers, but there were pleasant parts of his mental apparatus which were singing Van Morrison songs, obviously still drunk. He picked up speed, took a tab, and ran along the weir until he reached half way, springing spread-eagled into the air over the deep dark water.

Breaking free of the surface of the water, his eyes were clear and instantly sober. He struggled out his wet clothes, wrung them out above his head and laid them to dry on the weir. He kicked off the stone wall, launching himself strokelessly backwards across the water, looking at the rippled surface left behind him, thinking of a wrinkling iron.

That afternoon Charles drove into an ex-industrial wasteland and stopped outside a three storey building which had a FOR SALE sign stuck over a TO LET notice in the window.

"I pay rent here," said Charles. "Very little, but it gets me a key."

The building had been a milliner's, now bankrupt. The new owner was thinking of turning it into a brothel if people ever got brave enough to re-enter the precinct. In the meantime Charles had rented the roof as a studio, but so far nothing had happened with the rest of it. "I haven't explored the place very thoroughly," said Charles. "There's a café next door. Do you want to share the rent?"

"What with? I'm expecting some pay from two week's

work I did at the medical school last Christmas holidays. I could collect it. But it's only seventy-five dollars."

He moved in that afternoon. He assumed his family had not yet discovered the missing Methuselah because when he called in for some furniture and books, things at home were quiet. He took the room at the back of the third floor. Hats, yards of raw yellow silk, black wool and dust half an inch thick lay on top of the cupboards. James was too tired to notice he was tired. He threw himself into this dusty wreckage and emerged about six hours later, more than two-thirds of the top floor now habitable. Half an hour later still, Charles got back from his night job cleaning at the hospital with six bottles of *Guinness*, 20 kilos of shiny red potatoes, a litre of white wine vinegar and four litres of golden Greek olive oil.

"We won't starve," he said. "We might have to eat possum for protein, but there's enough starch here to start up a laundry. Plenty of vitamin B in the stout."

Machines, left by the departed milliners, were now covered with yellow coloured cloth in tasteful arrays. A clean white stove, a major achievement, stood in the corner winking conspiratorially. Odd grilles, probably for weaving thread, were stacked up one on top of the other like mating echidnas.

Charles boiled in salty water a couple of kilos of potatoes cut two ways into quarters, drained them, then poured them into a large, blue-black Moroccan serving bowl decorated with white lightning bolts. He added a handful of cracked pepper, a cup of olive oil and a big splash of vinegar, garnishing the lot with torn parsley leaves from the plants growing rampant in pots on the windowsill. It smelled so good James could feel his stomach trying to grow hands to reach out of

his throat to grab some.

They ate well that night talking and listening to *Traffic* albums. At about half past one in the morning James fell asleep in his bed reading Flann O'Brien and dreamed, no doubt due to shiny pontiacs distending his satisfied stomach, of a Joycean stream-of-consciousness character to be, his Leopoldian Bloomsday boy. A man mountain resembling a gargantuan potato, kind of warty and shiny at the same time, deep red, eight eyes, a gigantic, knobbly pontiac potato with legs. This seems unlikely but that's dream logic for you. Maybe it's only his head and chest that looks like a potato. No, the whole man, a potato in a three-piece suit, no neck, a monster, highly appropriate for a man who is wandering his whole life in a single day around Brisbane's burning streets and ultimately boiled alive.

He woke and wrote on the inside cover of *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

Huge character, Finn McCoolish, Bloom the Wanderer, Brobdignagian, more potato than man, the scourge and salvation of Irish feast and famine, dug from the earth fresh this very morning begorra, the only day of his life, at the age of 55.

then immediately went back to sleep.

3.1

I typed the words:

Bloom the Wanderer, Brobdignagian, more potato than man, the scourge and salvation of the Irish feast and famine, dug from the earth fresh this very morning begorra, the only day of his life, at the age of 55.

and rolled the last page out over the satisfying ratchety clack of the platen and put it with the pile of pages Charles was nearly through reading.

It was a Saturday. We had rigged up a red wine supply in his loft studio in Oxford Park, a sun-blasted suburb in the north where he inhabited a disused lighthouse built as a gimmick by a petrol station which had since turned into an art supplies shop where he worked occasionally and got all his art supplies free. It was run by an aging artist-philanthropist, two parts Mervyn Moriarty, one part Vida Lahey, one part Daphne Mayo—at odds with the other parts because she kept ordering in sandstone blocks each the size of a beach house which no one could afford to buy, let alone sculpt.

The wine was our own blend of Clare Valley *Cabernet* and Barossa *Shiraz* with a good bolt of Mudgee *Malbec*, making it the grand cru of cask wines, refillable because we had rigged up and filled three wine bladders from long since consumed casks, adding precision in-line taps, adjustable to alter the blend as the mood took you. The quality was not cask, it was vintage bottled, wine rescued from the ignorance and neglect of the cellar behind the drive-thought at the CITY VIEW HOTEL which we had pointed out to them was

pretty much unsellable since it was covered with dust and you could hardly read the typewritten labels. We took the whole lot off them as a favour for \$400 which I could well afford now I was considered a living literary treasure and was receiving large cheques from the Literature Board to prove it. The studio smelled of oil paint, ideas and pencil shavings, a good combination.

“Splendid,” said Charles, handing me back the pages of my masterpiece-to-be. “It reminds me of us, only much younger, with our innocent young enthusiasms being distorted by an autistic maniac on magic mushrooms. Let me apply a blowtorch to my corn cob and you apply a match to your magnificent meerschaum, then we can pass the hours dribbling on about your great whyte hope for Australia’s literary future.” He produced the western six-shooter lighter I had utilised in my first chapter, fired up the cram-packed bowl of single-malt flavoured *Davidoff Scottish Mixture* and produced a manly smoke ring which hovered in the air long enough for a sprightly leprechaun to win the Olympic gold medal in smoke ring tumbling, while I struck a reliable red-heads extra long and got the *Mac Barena*s combustion going nicely in my meerschaum. Charles charged his glass with the red wine on tap, pointed the moistened stem of his pipe at me and asked, “What’s the title?”

“*Manacles*,” I said, ventilating the louvred atmosphere with vanilla flavoured molecules and dialling up the *Malbec* on my top-up.

“Apart from our own adventures,” said Charles, beginning to add silver nitrate to the wart-like tubercles in his nine-panelled painting he was finishing for the stock room

at Phillip Pigstick's industrial Gibson-designed *Gallery of Expensive Art* in Fortitude Valley, "what's it about?"

"The title, or the book?"

"Both," he said.

I thought about this for a while. No one had ever asked me that. The title was universally hated, people saying a book about handcuffs would never sell, that is was too *negative* or *hub?*

"It's about freedom, I suppose," I said eventually. "Or the illusion of it. All the bonds that tie you into routines of daily life, the restraints you willingly or unconsciously wear, sort of like everyone's Helsinki syndrome relationship with reality. You just get used it. Not that there's any alternative, of course."

"How does that make you feel?" Charles asked in his most mellifluous tone.

I laughed. "Are you shrinking me?"

"Not at all," he said.

"None of that's explicit," I said. "It would send you to sleep quicker than *A Primer on Curing Limes, Mortars and Cements with a Focus on Pore Structure and Capillary Porosity.*"

"Zzzzznngngnzzzz..."

"Exactly," I said. "It's the grant-writing answer, the plausible deniability when you're accused of just scribbling any old self-indulgent rubbish,"

"Nae, ye wouldna dae thart wouldja nae, yang Jammie?"

"Everyone does it," I said. "That's what makes it literature."

"Literature, now you tell me, ain't we mighty fine folk with tickets on ourselves, then bedab," said Charles.

"Bedab?"

“Sorry,” he said. Mixing Bedouin with me Gaelic there.”

I learned forward, ostensibly to rehydrate myself with fermented grape juice, but in reality to impart some closely guarded observations and analyses which I was pretty sure would be received with scepticism, cynicism and gales of laughter.

Charles cut me off with a wave of his talons, saying, “Before you unburden your soul Jimmy, let me defenestrate the old bladder and let out this gallon of effluent over the baby lemon trees in the back yard.”

He motivated his limbs and moved with surprising grace for a big man, tiptoeing down the stairs, across the roof, down the ladder and into the garden, all under the cover of darkness which had crept across the landscape like squid ink spreading in a bucket.

I pushed the pause button and went into a state of suspended animation. Clearly time passed but since I was on pause, for me it wasn't significant. A billion things may have happened in these few minutes and I may have felt deeply about them if I had been there, but I wasn't and I didn't.

The soft sound of footsteps on the stairs alerted me to his return. I pressed play. Charles returned with the same light-footed grace he had shown when taking his leave. He recharged his glass, twice, tossing down the first refill to whet his whistle prior to settling into the azure embrace of his blue hammock, re-firing his corn-cob and opening his mind.

“I have nothing to declare except my genius,” I began, “as Oscar Wilde was supposed to have said on January 3 1882, stepping off the ship that brought him from England to New York. He wouldn't have said it there, but he might

have said it in the New York Customs House, where government agents asked him if he anything to declare. There's no evidence he actually said it. You'd think someone would have commented on it at the time, or punch him in the face, but it sounds like something Wilde would have said. I know what you're going to say you're no Oscar Wilde and who am I to declare my own genius, but anyone who was later proclaimed a genius first said it themselves, Joyce, Proust, Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Baudelaire, Jarry, Plato, Freud, Shelley, Keats, not Shakespeare of course but he didn't have to he actually was a genius. What have all these duffers got that I haven't? Or put it this way, what have I got that they haven't? Eh? I'll tell you. I've read all their books but they haven't read mine. Ipso, dipso, rattle and hum. It seems my brilliant work here is done."

Pleased with myself I drained my glass, refilled it, and peered across at my friend's gently swaying hammock. Hmmm. The subtle criticism of snores. The fucker was asleep.

Probably for the best, I thought. Writing *Manacles* was harmless enough, but explaining it could get me into plenty, heap-big trouble. All my life, except for those times when I was the centre of attention, when golden rays of life-giving sunshine were pouring forth from my arse, my eyes, my mouth, my nose, my fingertips and every pore of my heavenly body, I had been aware of a desire to go unnoticed, to be overlooked, to step outside, an observer, on the outside looking in. Writing *Manacles* made it easy. I could see the social structures and simply step around them. Only one disinterested deviant could get away with it because humanity will always detect disobedience when more than one person

does it. The sole operator is the dancing gorilla on the Mah-jong table of life.

“Apart from you and me,” said Charles, startling me from my musings, “who else is in it?”

“I thought you were asleep,” I said.

“You know what thought did.”

“He didn’t do anything, he just thought he did.”

“Exactly. And the raven spake, no more snore!”

I laughed. “OK, there’s me and you and Maria.”

“Have you asked her?”

“What for?”

“I’m just saying...” he let his right hand wave airily in the air.

“Objection noted. I shall consult the oracle with all due speed.”

“Very wise.”

“Then there’s Dad, an archetypal older bloke. He and Ted, an archetypal younger bloke, look after the chlorination machines that keep the ocean from going off. They were your suggestion, actually.”

“That’s funny, I don’t recall proposing such a thing.”

“You do in the book,” I said. “I haven’t written that yet.”

“Of course, how precocious of me,” said Charles.

“Hold up there. Just to be clear, they aren’t in the book James, my autobiographical main character, is writing, which is a short novel concerning one day in Dublin, or Brisbane, or Melbourne. Melbourne people think every book is set in Melbourne even when it’s not. I’m in it, Stephen Dedalus with a red bucket. George McIntyre is top potato, he’s the Bloom character. Tom Ryan is the Lord Mayor. He’s

in a wheelchair.”

“Nice twist. This book the character James is writing, what’s it called?”

“*Manacles*,” I said.

“So you are writing about yourself being a writer in a book called *Manacles* with me and Maria in it and you are in it as a writer writing a book called *Manacles*, set in the same place on one day, sort of based on *Ulysses* by James Joyce, which is set in Dublin on one day, June 16 if I remember rightly, the day Nora popped his cherry, his book being based on Homer’s *Odyssey*.”

“Yes.”

“Who is writing us?”

“What do you mean, us?” I asked.

“I mean us, us. Here, now, talking about all this.”

“I still don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“Who is the real writer, writing this scene we are in now?”

“No-one is writing us,” I said. “This is real. Don’t say shit like that, it’s scary, it’s hard enough as it is. Something has to be real.” I rapped my knuckles hard on the side of my head. “Ow! See? Real.”

Charles’s eyes sparkled and he pointed his pipe stem at me again. In a slow drawl, he said, “Are you sure?”

I looked at him with the are-you-fucking-kidding-me? look, feeling my eyes spinning around in my head, my mouth open like a spread-eagled spatchcock.

Charles showed his teeth in a widening grin, then opened his mouth further and began gasping out hoots, turning quite red in the face, attempting to clutch his chest while still holding his wine, appearing to almost choke at regular

intervals before hauling in a gigantic gasping wheelbarrows of air into his chest and repeating the noises coming from his mouth and nose. He was laughing!

He couldn't stop. His chest and stomach heaved and hoots were interspersed with sprawling, wracking coughs, as snot streamed from his nose and tears from his eyes. His face was now a colour which made rhodamine red seem like a pastel.

Perhaps he would laugh himself to death. Serves him right. Bastard. It was funny though. I must have looked like Wile E. Coyote in his tiger trap with an actual burmese tiger.

The laughing was getting to me. You had to laugh, as the saying goes when you shoot your nipple off with a potato gun. Ow! I rubbed my head where I had rapped it with my knuckles. I had given it a hefty whack. It was growing a lump. Who's writing us? Ha ha. It was infectious. Maybe it really was infectious. A laughing flu. Worse. A laughing plague. Jumping from human to human. What for, what did laughing get from us? Life? Like a giggleoparasite? Did that mean someone somewhere was always laughing or laughter would die? That's funny. The day the laughter died. On the levy in my Chevy. Cracking up, like a worn out shoe. Cracking up. This is too real and there ain't no escape. Oh fuck! There goes my wine, full crotch shot. And in my pipe, fuck it. How does he do that gimbal arm? The hammock's contorting like crazy and that glass is hardly moving, everything else is earthquake. It's like a chook-head steady-cam.

Charles blinked through whirling tears and flying snot looked across to me and my crotch-shot wet pipe and yelled a hyper-laugh which started him off again at double strength. The hammock came off the bottom hook and he

slid to the couch underneath, what is this thing with safety couches. Even then he doesn't spill a drop. This man is a gimbal genius. My own chest was heaving and I was now snot covered, tear drenched, wine soaked, wet pipe but fuck it if I was going lose the hammock grip! Then it popped and I landed in downy leather like a sack of dog bones.

Charles thought this was especially hilarious. Could it get any worse? I too was now a laughing, dribbling fool with no end in sight. At least this confirmed my thesis. This was real. People don't laugh in books, not like this. The reader is supposed to laugh, not the characters. Laughing is not funny.

Charles was slowing down. Either that or piss his pants. I was just about to go double incontinent myself, wine crotch was bad enough but at least it didn't smell like an old people's home. Or did it?

He was getting himself under control. I stood up to air my wine crotch, empty my pipe and toss down a couple of quick wines. After bolting these horses well after the gate had slammed shut, I didn't feel safe with the glass in hand. I was certainly no gimbal genius. I was already fully occupied being a literary one. I put my glass for safekeeping on the bookshelf in front of copy of Brillat-Savarin's *Transcendental Gastronomy*, translated by Fayette Robinson. I repacked my pipe and rehooked my hammock. I didn't look in the direction of Charles's intermittent spluttering.

Charles rehooked his hammock and climbed into it. He didn't need a top up as he still had wine in his glass which he drank delicately with a little finger outrageously overstretched, stifling snorts between sips. His pipe was still

going. Bastard.

Charles looked towards me and caught my eye. He shrugged his hardly apologetic shoulders.

“Sorry,” he said. It came out like wheezing squeak. He wiped his nose and eyes with a handkerchief no bigger than the state of Texas.

I waved his apology away, smearing snot along my forearm.

“Ah,” he said at last, “That’s put the sinus operation off for a couple of years at least. The great cheekbone caverns are once more empty.”

I let that one go.

Feeling capable of basic balancing, I retrieved my glass, refilled it, refilling the Malbec bladder while I was at it, empty now due to the thrashing I had given it. Charles nodded approvingly and drew off an entire glass of Malbec for himself. I climbed into my hammock, got my pipe lit and sent a plume of smoke towards the far-off ceiling, rimmed with a 360 degree panopticon of glass, not really a panopticon as the fake lighthouse windows were high up near the ceiling and there wasn’t any way to look out of of them.

Scrunching back into the hammock and stretching, Charles said, “I’m glad that’s over. Now we are back travelling stability street, Jimmie, can I ask you a question?”

I nodded assent.

“Why?” he asked.

My head jerked. I looked at him with the face of a dead fish.

“Why what?” I said.

“Why are you writing this book? I mean apart from the fact you can’t help yourself, being a mad scribbler. It’s

entertaining and all that, but what is the point?”

Oh. I knew the answer to that one.

“Joyce didn’t leave anything else,” I said. “He was a realist. He never did the dream within a dream stuff, even though *Finnegans Wake* is a dream. He read Flann O’Brien *Swim-Two-Birds*, so we know he got it. He liked it. He said it was a ‘really funny book’ and let them put that on the back cover.”

“If Flann O’Brien’s done it, why do it again?” Charles asked.

“*At Swim-Two-Birds* is a comedy, a fantasy,” I said. Mine is realist.”

“A gigantic potato?”

“Not that, obviously, but that’s metaphorical. No, for James the character, and his character James. The setting is not real, but they know that, therefore they are real.”

“A realist approach to obvious fiction? I like it.”

“The book James has written, the little one in the middle, seems too weird to the James character in it, obviously because you can’t really have all the Ulysses stuff like Lotus Eaters, Sirens, and Cyclops and stay totally real. He realises he is in a book and wants to escape. I have to kill him off.”

“How did you manage that.”

“Death by marauding council bus.”

“Realist?”

“Those fucking things are dangerous. The underneath is like swarming cockroach legs, they can rear up while travelling at speed, silent except for the gnashing and whumph. He’s gone. Empty street and tail lights disappearing round the bend.”

“I’d be taking a tour of the Toowong bus depot, just to

check on that, if I were you.”

“No way, just one of them is bad enough. Hundreds of them would be like taking the lid off the compost bin. But let’s not be distracted. No one has really done this seriously, this Russian dolls book thing, they leave bits out and it’s always an obvious fantasy. It has to be credible. It’s got to portray how a book might look to a character, especially one who knows it is a book and not real. That’s easy for the James in the little book, not that it matters because that world burns up and is flooded by the sea. No-one survives. It’s harder for my James, the James in the book I have written. He kind of catches on in glimpses. I’m worried if he starts to realise too much he’ll get bolshie and lead some sort of rebellion or just refuse to play any part in the book at all.”

“So he starts off thinking he’s real?”

“You’ve read that part,” I said. “The party scene. It’s as real as it gets because it actually happened.”

“So what tips him off?”

“Everything is fairly plausible up until the middle section with the novel within the novel, then things get a bit weird. The main character inside that one starts to suspect, then it leaks out into the next novel up. Other characters look at what the main character is writing and find out they are in it. He’s been writing stuff describing them. It gets worse when he finds a big hole burnt in the manuscript, and there’s a part where he fucks up meeting Maria and he crosses some of that out, going back to before he fucked up.”

“Do Charles and Maria know they are characters?”

“I think so. It’s harder for me to tell what they’re thinking. But they know about the chlorination works for the ocean

which are in both worlds and they kind of escape.”

“How?”

“Not really clear, it’s kind of atmospheric. They escape to the country, or the island, both places are outside the book.”

“They can just walk off the edge of the book like the Flat Earth Society?”

“Sort of. Not literally. They are not very rounded characters, just foils for James. He knows he must have a physical resemblance to the author of the book he is in, because after all, he’s a writer and his character is obviously based on the author, in other words me. He reasons he has power to alter things in the book, by introducing his own writing. His basic plan is to write himself a way out. Charles and Maria are sleeping in a worker’s tent on the city square, near the eternal traffic lights. Their sleeping arrangements haven’t really been explained. James finds them and explains his plan. They go to the café to discuss it. Maria’s keen, she’s always wanted to be a resistance leader. Charles isn’t so sure. He wants to know whether the Writer’s Cafe is just a chance locale, or whether in some real life somewhere there is an author who is sitting in a cafe, writing about them and using the cafe as some guide to the description and furthermore since this cafe where they were sitting now was filled with writers, it was obviously possible that the author was one of these writers, here, in this very cafe, right now!”

“Atta boy Charles.”

“True to type, apparently,” I said, grimacing. “James is shitting himself, but Charles just laughs and tells him not to take everything so seriously. ‘Just enjoy yourself’, he says. ‘You’re in a book, you’re a writer, so write something’.”

“I’m liking this Charles character,” said Charles.

“You would,” I said.

In the pregnant pause following my marathon synopsis, Charles adjusted his head back onto his spinal column as a mark of true respect.

“Have you written any of this yet?” he said.

“Not much,” I said.

“How much?”

“None, really,” I admitted.

“On your bike, sunshine,” said Charles.

2.2 JAMES

The following week passed swiftly with James restoring the factory and developing George McIntyre.

Easy does it, chum. Stay clear of those love handles, that's where he stores his starch. You could lay waste to a decent-sized town with that mass of matter. *Solanum tuberosum*, a tetraploid with 48 chromosomes, you say potato I say patata, that's where the word comes from, it's Spanish you know. His big body. His everybody, if you insist. Eyes of fibrous origin, the man's a spud, dressed to the nines. Attired? The man's asleep! Man date of all seasons. Better quick than dead. Slow as a wet week. As big as a barge. Rolling ripples in three piece apparel. This woven blanket of a man, a giant among giants, a tunnel of lava, soft and warm, a soft embrace, flotsam buoyantly aloft on the city heat to drift.

"He's sleepwalking," said James. "He says reality is over-rated. Should I let him sleep or wake him up? He thinks it's all a dream, but it's not. For him, everything he imagines actually happens."

He looked up. Charles wasn't there. Strange. He went into the next room. Not there either. He noticed a strange smell. It's me, he thought. I must get these pants into some hot soapy water quick, I'm growing mould. Later. He picked up his manuscript and went up to the roof. The night was brilliant with stars in the dark blue sky over the city. It was a pretty effect, but expensive. Charles was painting in the dark. James walked over and stood beside him.

"I was thinking of driving up the coast," Charles said.

James knew instantly he wasn't invited.

Charles knocked the ash out of his pipe and began scraping the bowl with a spoon.

"Have you been sleeping?" he asked James, without looking up.

"Not since that first night," James said.

"I need to get some sleep," said Charles.

"Do you want to read what I've written?"

"No thanks. I'll take a look when I get back."

"Are you planning to be away long?"

Charles looked at him sharply, then went back to cleaning his pipe.

"I'll be back in a couple of days."

Returning below, James realised he could wash his clothes in the shower. He put his manuscript in the fridge with his typewriter. It was cold enough to stop them getting up to mischief.

As he showered in the dark, the sun rose up in the east. Bright yellow rays entered the bathroom striking the white-tiled wall, falling to the terrazzo floor. Some jabbed his wet skin and melted, spreading into a thin film.

He looked at himself in the mirror. His skin was glowing. After dressing, he gathered some of the rays which had fallen to the terrazzo floor. He placed them carefully in his coat pocket and returned to the roof. In the early morning light it all looked a bit dismal. The easel and painting gear were packed away neatly. Charles wasn't there. He wasn't downstairs either. Wherever he's gone, he'd better get back quick, James thought. He was needed in the next chapter.

2.3 CHARLES

Charles looked over the city from the back of the CITY VIEW HOTEL, vaguely sketched in beyond the borders of Love Street, Water Street and Park Street, along which he had walked to get to the City View. In the distance was the estuary, chlorinated to limit the growth of bacteria. The need for chlorination was only one of the many short-comings fiction suffered in relation to reality. When conditions like this prevailed it was little wonder television was taking over.

Painting in the dark? Yes, art was more than a simply retinal experience, but really? The locale could do with a bit of work. A few streets run down streets around an abandoned warehouse. Potatoes and *Guinness*. Where's the red wine? A diet like that will get you to the moon on a jet of farts but it's not what I would call cave-man. You're going to need some of that paleo-protein if you want your brain to fire.

James was another kettle of crap altogether. He had written himself the best part, while the rest of us have to put up with rather poor conditions and very little chance of improvement. About 20 kilometres out the influence of the author petered out and things got interesting. There was a world out there after all. After the threadbare patchwork James had written, the real stuff was a revelation. Cliffs, beaches, mountains, farmland, rainforest, waterfalls, surf. You could live there in an instant.

Leaving the early morning drinking crowd to their pots and pints, Charles made his way down Leichardt St, through Fortitude Valley, to the bad lands where his warehouse nestled in amongst the surrounding desolation, doing a fine

job of fitting in. He walked over barbed wire, syringes, dead dogs, used condoms, partly-used pizzas, vomit and blood. A small café occupied the ground floor and basement of the building next door. A pungent odour of burnt coffee tingled his nostrils.

It's odd nothing has happened in that café, he thought. It seemed unlikely it would be there without a good reason. He pushed the multicoloured, plastic fly-guard strips to one side and peered in, as though from a great height due to the step down into the darkness, where tables and chairs shuffled nervously like deckchairs on the *Titanic*. The smell of bad, burnt coffee was intense. From a darkness he thought was complete, a woman's voice spoke.

"Dad's not in," it said.

Charles pulled back from the doorway to see what was causing the commotion behind him in the street. It was James, crossing the street towards the café, wearing an *Alfoil* hat, causing traffic in the street to swerve and honk as drivers were blinded by the glare.

"You're attracting a great deal of attention," Charles said, when James came nearer. "Did you get up early?"

"I did," said James.

"What's on the agenda?" asked Charles.

"I'm going to burn the city."

"Have you warned the Fire Chief?"

"I sent him a note."

"That's manly of you."

"Not entirely, he'll have to translate it. It's written in Mongolian."

Charles laughed. “What happens after that?”

“I want to introduce some new characters. Any ideas?”

“What about the guys who chlorinate the sea?”

James laughed, but with a hint of suspicion.

“What were you doing in the café?” he said.

“I don’t know,” answered Charles. He turned sideways in the doorway so that they could enter the café together. He had a feeling this was important but not especially significant. They descended into the half basement-level gloom and found a table. James spread his papers out, while Charles sat opposite. They ordered coffee. Dad had returned. The girl was no longer there.

Later that night under the yellow gaze of the lamp James toyed with the idea of introducing the chlorinators, as Charles had suggested.

Dad trudged wearily towards the chlorination works built into a tunnel by the sea. He and Ted, who also had to polish the teeth of the fish, with industrial-strength toothpaste, took alternate shifts in the lonely grey room at the end of the tunnel. There wasn’t anything else at the end of the tunnel and certainly no light, hope or expectation of a better world. What with having to run the café, do this night job and carry out daily prophylactic fish dentistry, Dad’s life was a joke, but not a funny one. He was so tired he could have slept through Krakatau. When he arrived at the entrance to the gloom at the tunnel’s end, the door opened and Ted emerged, periwinkles, limpets, lichen and seaweed dripping from his wet hair.

“Reality’s sprung another leak?” asked Dad.

Ted nodded, big splashy tears forming in the corners of his eyes. “A big one,” he said. “I patched it with a sand dune. It needs something stronger, like a Nothophagus forest but we won’t be able to grow one soon enough. Normally it takes a thousand years.”

“What about the double-time boiler?” said Dad.

“Busted trying to regrow the reef,” said Ted.

“Oh yeah,” said Dad.

“I think we’re beginning to see the beginning of the end,” said Ted.

“Why do you say that?”

“We’re well past the end of the beginning and it looks like there isn’t going to be a middle,” said Dad.

“I’m going to have to give up this business with the fish,” said Dad. “Who’s going to notice a few fish with bad breath?”

“Other fish?”

“Yeah I suppose you’re right. I’ll alternate, half and half on consecutive days.”

“I’d help you if I could, but I seem to have developed a drinking problem,” said Ted.

“A drinking problem? What’s that?” said Dad.

“I know, how can drinking be a problem? But apparently you can drink so much you start speaking Mongolian.”

“That sounds bad.”

“Nothing compared to the massive limpet attack we had.”

“Don’t remind me,” said Dad. “A wet dream with knobs on.”

“What’s that whistling?” said Ted.

“Chlorine atoms trying to hook up with sodium atoms. Kids just want to have fun.”

“Sounds bad?”

“Night, Ted. Take care.”

“Night, Dad,” said Ted.

It was very quiet in Charles’s room. Apart from the deafening roar of absolute silence, there was nothing to be heard, not even the sound of sleep.

The reason Charles could not be heard in his room was simple. He wasn’t there. He was drinking at the CITY VIEW which opened at daybreak for shiftworkers. . There was no proof of occupation required, they simply flung the doors open at a time most people were still maxing out their boring beauty sleep, dreaming their boring dreams before getting up to play out their tiresome existences.

You would have thought a pub for shift workers might be a dreary affair, but shifters were surprisingly sprightly and there was something about finishing work at dawn that put them in the mood to celebrate, not only with the odd libation or six but also furthering the grand philosophical tradition of LINKING THINKING WITH DRINKING.

There was a fairly large and fervent faction who argued that everything after and including the pre-Socratic ancient Greeks was a huge steaming pile of bollocks and a total waste of time. No argument here. Before Thales of Miletus, who thought that magnets had souls and that the world was floating on water like a lump of wood, human knowledge was accurate, useful and sensible. This is because before

the ancient Grecian nitwits, codification of knowledge was the language of myth, a language bound up with popular religious ceremonies from the Stone Age. This all went bad in late Minoan times when invading Central Asian blokey blokes rejected myth as the explanation of the seasons, the plants, animal and fungi, bacteria and all other greebles. This was a really big mistake and it took about 2000 years to get European thinking back on track with the Age of Reason and the Age of Enlightenment, gradually progressing from there (albeit with a great many relapses into stupidity, like the Queensland electoral gerrymander).

The shift workers lounge, known as *Plato's Cave*, specialised in spirits, not in the oogley-boogley sense, but in the flavoured distilled ethanol sense. It was a sporting gesture to line up a dozen shot glasses of different brands, about the amount sufficient to render the drinker just past the point of paralytic and scoff the lot. It had been found by careful variation, notwithstanding some regrettable failures, that certain combinations of carefully chosen liquors ushered in a new and better normal, featuring complete lucidity, improved hand-eye coordination, a susceptibility to blinding insights and perfect recall, the only down side being a subtle but lingering contempt for humanity. Charles's standard dozen usually included Absinthe, Cognac, Cointreau, Gin, Grand Marnier, Mezcal, Ouzo, Slivovitz, Rum, Tequila, Vodka and Irish whiskey.

Ted came in and sat down next to Charles.

“Hi Ted. You look like crap. What's the problem?”

Ted looked at the 12 spirits lined up in front of Charles

with some concern.

“Are you going to drink those?” he said.

“Certainly. It’s time to drink myself sober.”

“Is it possible to drink oneself Mongolian?” asked Ted.

“It is, but it is not risk free.”

“Nothing is,” said Ted.

“That’s the spirit, if you’ll pardon the shocking pun. Bartender, same again in doubles.”

When the same distillations were lined up in front of Ted in double quantities, Charles commenced proceedings by removing the sugar cube strainer from the Absinthe, clinked glasses with Ted and began to savour the wormwood, anise and fennel flavours.

“The key is to treat each concoction with true respect and disregard the alcohol content. The mind can aspire to greatness, while the blood alcohol content looks after itself.”

Ted’s eyes were translucent green shallows over black depths. His skin was yellow. A pinched expression marred an otherwise bearded face. His thoughts, as he regarded Charles full of health and vigour, were particularly vague. I hope this works, he thought, as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Some hours later in the bright mid-morning, Charles was walking in the general direction of his warehouse, his legs carrying him unerringly towards his destination despite their tendency to head off in opposite directions. The morning sun streamed down on his head and the sky, apparently impervious to heat, sparkled like asbestos. The worn-out buildings in this area of town were strangely bitten down to the quick. They looked thwarted and sore. A row of crippled brick fences

imprisoned their red yards.

Charles passed the cafe. Dad wasn't there. The girl was in the window, polishing the glass like the stern of a ship disappearing out of sight.

3.2

I opened my eyes. While lying on my bed trying to think out the structure of my book I had been suffering from the curious sensation that the far end of the bed was floating upwards. Worried, I looked at my feet. All normal. The bed was horizontal. I closed my eyes once more and returned to contemplate my thoughts.

Gradually I became aware that even though my eyes were closed I was staring at the second hand of an electric clock on the wall nearby the window. Every 60 seconds the minute hand moved forward silently. It was nine o'clock in the morning.

Last night, returning home via the mail box, I had found a letter announcing I was to get a writer's grant, a one-year young writer's fellowship from the literature board. Everyone should get a writer's grant, I thought, regardless of the human race. I finally had the chance at last to have red hot go at my book. This is serious, mum. With intent, I had entered the confines of my room, assumed the supine position, expecting thought would prevail.

It hadn't and now it was half past morning. Getting out of bed, I took my water jug to the desk, sat in the chair and drank it slowly. A dull aching pain in my head gradually subsided. I pulled back the curtain and pushed the window open. The valley was green and grey in the grey light. Bright-yellow shoots of the melaleuca were vivid against the darker greens. The valley was quiet, apparently asleep.

I listened intently for noise in the house. I didn't hear any. While I listened, I traced with my fingertip the creases

and wrinkles on my side where I had lain heavily against the scrunched-up sheet on the narrow bed.

I dressed and went through the house quietly, room by room. The house was tidy and empty, except for me. For some reason this made me cheerful. I smiled to myself. It felt strange, this waxy, meaningless grin in an empty house. The kitchen was very tidy. The washing up from last night had been done. Breakfast dishes were in the drying rack. I touched the surface of a white *Corningware* plate. It was cold. That didn't mean much. I didn't know how long it took a *Corningware* plate to cool down after it had been put in a dish rack.

The back landing was at the top of a long flight of stairs which led down to another landing and then after turning left, to the sloping ground covered with soft brown mulch under a Silky Oak. Flat concrete steps led from there to the front yard, theoretically, but I wasn't going that way so I couldn't be sure.

The allotment was on the steep side of a ridge. The back yard fell away in terraces retained with black, creosoted house stumps, filled with ash over rocky schist and covered with topsoil.

I looked up and saw blue sky and white clouds. The sun was hot. My skin prickled and the mat of grass and weeds on the lawns seemed to steam. Lorikeets, red and green, sprawled and shrieked over the red and green bottlebrush flowers on the melaleuca, with a shrill, drunken soundtrack.

The laundry was a slab of concrete and head-high fibro walls. I stamped my feet on the concrete, knocking off the wet leaves which had stuck to my feet. I took a spade and

a rake from the laundry and took them to the overgrown garden beds on the upper terrace. I chipped at the weeds, turned over the moist black soil and raked it smooth around the clumps of lemongrass, basil and chilli bushes which had survived neglect.

I worked in the garden, digging out Chinese elm saplings and clumps of guinea grass until I was hot and beginning to get an ache of hunger in my gut and a dry sick feeling in the back of my throat. I put the tools away in the laundry, wiped my feet with a torn half-towel and went back upstairs to the kitchen. On the landing I looked down at the black soil against the green lawn. Soon it would grey in the drying sun.

A twelve-cup glass percolator was on the bench next to the kitchen window. It was about quarter full of coffee left over from last night. I put it on the stove, on a triangular piece of wire that kept the glass from touching the hotplate. I looked out of the kitchen window until the coffee simmered noisily. I poured some into a cup. I took that and an open pack of *Camel* cigarettes to the breakfast room.

This room was a sun room, an enclosed veranda along the back of the house and high above the sloping back yard. If you looked down over the valley you looked down on the tops of trees.

I took a cigarette from the pack and struck a match. It spluttered as the flame devoured the red phosphorous tip. I was hungry. The cigarette and coffee on an empty stomach didn't help.

I made some toast. The sliced wholemeal bread was in the freezer. I put frozen slices directly into the toaster after splitting them apart with a kitchen knife. The toaster thawed

the bread and toasted it until it popped. The butter was hard from the fridge. It tore the toast as I spread it.

As I ate and had more coffee I could feel it taking effect. I turned the radio on. It played KINDERGARTEN OF THE AIR. I left it on. It was noise to fill up the emptiness of the house.

I moved to the sink to get a sponge to wipe the bench. Crumbs which had gathered on my blue dressing gown spilled onto the floor. I brushed them under the stove and saw as I did so that I had left footprints on the grey linoleum of the kitchen. I thought about mopping them up. Instead, I walked a towel over the floor, covering my tracks.

KINDERGARTEN OF THE AIR gave way to the 10 o'clock news. I turned it off. My hangover had returned with a vengeance. The only effective cure was sleep, but I could never sleep with a hangover, not without help.

In the sun room there was a medicine cabinet flush against the wall, built into it by enclosing a space about 10 centimetres deep with cross beams between two projecting uprights. The cupboard was about a metre across and the same distance high. Inside, glass shelves were resting on half-dowelling supports.

I searched among half empty bottles, flasks, measuring flutes, tabs of plastic-encased capsules on foil-backed cards, eye cups, eye droppers, band-aids, lineaments, sun-tan lotion, thermometers, worm tablets and suppositories until I found a bottle of *Nembutal* sleeping pills in capsule form. I shook two out into my cupped hand and tossed them into my mouth. I put the bottle back on its shelf, closed and snibbed the cabinet and went to the fridge with the capsules still in my mouth. I uncorked the sherry bottle and drank

from the neck. Carrying the bottle with me, its cold green glass beginning to dew with moisture, I went out to the room at the far end of the house and lay down on the camp bed, every now and again taking a drink from the bottle every now and again.

This room was cold after the warmth of the sun room. As the sun went in behind a cloud I began to shiver. I was edgy, not tired at all. The sherry wasn't washing away the bitter taste of coffee.

Rather than lying there shivering I got up again. I felt very alert. Focus was very sharp on the walls of the hall as I made my way back into the kitchen.

I opened the medicine cabinet again, found the sleeping pills and washed down another half a dozen with some more sherry. I went out to the back landing and sat on the top step.

Soon the sun came back out and the warmth began to soak into me. I watched the hairs on my arm, each one in sharp focus, lie down slowly as the warmth smoothed the goose-pimples out. The sherry bottle slipped from my fingers and I watched it fall and smash on the path below. It made no sound.

Through a warm yellow haze, I heard a harsh clanging sound. I tried to open my eyes, only succeeding in turning the world from yellow to red. The noise, like an angry fire bell, repeated inside my head, insistently. It was penetrating the warm red liquid I was floating in, from somewhere far away on the surface. It wasn't the sound of a fire bell. Something else. I jerked my eyes open.

The telephone! I was lying almost upside down at the foot of the stairs, completely unhurt as far as I could tell. Upstairs the phone was ringing.

My ribs spasmed a little as I unwound myself and got to my hands and knees. The phone kept ringing all the time I was on the stairs and stopped when I was half way across the kitchen. I stopped too. I was still on my hands and knees. A few minutes passed like this, both of us in suspended animation. The phone started again. I continued towards it across the kitchen floor. It kept ringing for a long time and I thought it had to stop but I reached it and pulled the phone down off the top of the laundry chute by the cord. The phone crashed to the floor. I picked up the receiver and tried to say my name into it.

It was Maria.

“Were you downstairs?”

“Nearly.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sound terrible.”

“You woke me up.”

“Have you had any breakfast?”

“I had some toast.”

“You should cook yourself something substantial.”

“Like what?”

“There’s food in the fridge.”

“I’m not that hungry.”

“You can’t live on toast.”

I went back to bed. Several hours, days, weeks or months

later, I woke up. The afternoon sun was throwing a latticed shadow onto the wall by my typewriter. The world should be three dimensional for the reader, I thought, but only two dimensional for the characters themselves, at least from their point of view. It should be like a lattice, not only two dimensional, but bits of it missing as well.

What would sleep be like for a character? How would they deal with dreams? Questions like this were crowding in, but for the moment I should be getting on with the job in hand, of planning a plot and presenting myself with some sort of schedule, enough to satisfy the literature board, at least, if they ask me what I'm working on. What time is it, by the way? I looked out through the shifting panes of glass at my left and discovered, to my surprise, that it had been raining. It must be about 6:00 pm, judging by the light. Dripping strands of rain, singled to threads, joined and separated in the dark afternoon.

3.3

Maria was flying solo from London to Brisbane. I was there with thousands of others at Eagle Farm when it was the old Brisbane Airport, watching her Gipsy Moth following the escort planes before coming in to land. Something wasn't right. The engine was whirling faster instead of slower and Maria hit the ground with alarming speed on the Nundah side of the Qantas hangar then careered on, hitting the boundary fence and somersaulting over it into a cornfield, shredding the corn and smashing the plane's wings.

I picked my way through the freeze-frame crowd, fixed mid-dismay in a three-dimensional photograph of suspended animation. There were some pretty crazy getups people were wearing. I climbed over the fence into the cornfield and approached the wreckage. Maria had already scrambled out and was kicking the side of the plane with her sensible, not very pointed, lace-up shoes, overlapped at the ankle by some fetching woollen knitted gaiters saying, "You fucking prick of a plane, why didn't you do that landing in some fucking uninhabited desert in the middle of Whoop Whoop, you prick? Oh no, you had to wait for a landing in Brisbane, with a fucking crowd of 50,000 people waiting, you fucking prick of a thing."

As I came near she wheeled around, her eyes flashing. When she saw who it was her face broke into a huge grin and she ran full tilt towards me and leapt onto me, smothering my face with kisses, smashing her teeth against mine and laughing, kissing me and hugging tight, her legs up around the small of my back. I kissed her, tasting her mouth, her

face brown as a nut from the sun and wind of 12,000 miles. I waited for her to take a breath, leaning back in my arms. She weighed no more than a pillowcase full of rocks. She was looking at me, smiling with her eyes.

“Do I know you?” I asked.

She laughed. “Not yet,” she said, “but you will later.”

She arched her back and sprang back to earth, her head at about the height which would nicely nestle into my shoulder.

“I have to go do a bit of business now,” she said, “let’s meet later, about nine pm, outside the City Hall.”

The scene flickered and came back to life as I melted into the background. People were rushing over and leaping the fence, putting Maria up on their shoulders and carrying her back through the crowd.

She was there at nine pm, outside the City Hall, between the lions, with Daphne’s crazy tympanum above her. A drifting crowd parted to leave space around her on all sides. I walked to her side, took her hand and we drifted off, in the crowd but not part of it.

She had taken off her trademark flying cap and goggles and now was wearing her hair stretched back and tied into a circle. Or pinned there. To me she looked like she was breathing high-altitude air and clouds. We walked along a cliff-bordered path, the cliff hanging close and shadowy.

We had our arms around each other, stopping in the shadows between the street lights to kiss and press together. We walked on the path through the park and found a spot away from it to lie down. We lay there. I looked up into the dark, through the soft pine needles. Grass clippings and dead

leaves were stuck in my clothes. It felt like Autumn. She was far away.

I asked her what she was thinking about.

She said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “it’s a stupid question”

“Not at all,” she said. “I really was thinking of nothing.”

“What’s it like?” I asked.

She looked at me strangely.

“Don’t you ever stop thinking?” she asked.

“I didn’t know you could.”

She stood up. I stood up beside her. We walked back over the top of the park. She made me stop and look out over the city.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Don’t worry. Nothing matters.”

She smiled warmly.

“Not that it matters, whether nothing matters, or everything matters,” she said.

“Everything is nothing with stuff in it,” I said.

We both laughed.

The City Square was now overflowing with revellers and a band was playing. We walked towards the river, kissing in the shadow of the courthouse, kissing in the long shadows under the hanging riverside trees. The river was quiet and smooth. We walked out on a boat ramp.

I stood with my back to the water. She could see over the river. I could hear its sucking, slapping wash. Her dress was up and between us. Her face was hot when our cheeks touched and her ears were perfectly shaped. Her hands were moving along my back with her fingernails tight and sharp

against my skin. The echoes of my breath were coming from far away.

A crashing rolling moaning came from the other side of a boat shed, a crashing, rolling, skidding moan that ended in a large splash. We stood there, statue still. I felt her fingernails sharp in my back. She started moving again. It built up inside me and I moved with her, breathy and shaky. We heard the drunkard moan again as he climbed back onto the bank, slipping and clawing up the slope, up to the footpath to wander moaningly away. My head was over her shoulder, my eyes tight shut. Her body was archingly slender. I couldn't feel my own body. My breath shuddered. My chest was tight as though my shoulders were being pulled back.

I kissed her, pulling up my trousers.

She smoothed her dress.

The bus was glaringly bright and empty, slithering through the dark. We sat in the back seat.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked me.

“Nothing,” I said. She turned and looked out into the dark. When we came to her stop and we both got off, I tried to kiss her.

“Not here,” she said. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

2.4 MARIA

“Do you think he knows about us?”

She and Charles were sitting at a table in a pool of darkness at the back of the cafe, only the light from their eyes visible. Charles was reading *The Gambler* by Dostoevsky. Maria was reading both *The Waves* and *The Years*, a page from one book followed by a page from the other. In other words, alternate sequential pages from two books interleaved. She had come to the conclusion neither of them made sense individually but did together.

“I can’t see how he could,” said Charles. “I’ve read what he’s written so far. He just leaves it lying about, I think he wants me to read it. Anyway, I have. We’re in it, you’re in this cafe, cleaning the windows, I’m wandering about after drinking a breakfast of champions, though I wish it were that, it was much more alcoholic than beer and had some devastating effects on my navigation systems which luckily cancelled each other out.”

“Rum,” said Maria, “I can smell it coming out of your pores.”

“You should try it on the inside,” said Charles. “It didn’t aid the powers of concentration for me and Ted in our attempts to translate Mongolian. We were going from Mongolian to German and then German to English because there was no English-Mongolian dictionary and all we got out of it was *Ignore prank calls and false alarms*, which we thought would do more harm than good, so we gave up.”

“Nothing about me?” asked Maria.

“Not yet. As far as I know we’re not even in the

novel-in-the-novel thing he's written. That's finished. Now he's writing about writing it."

"Sounds complicated."

"It's a mind fuck, but he's got no choice. The original novel has those old-fashion chapter introduction summaries like in Cervantes, you know, "*Herein is Related the Droll Way in which Don Quixote had Himself Dubbed a Knight*" as if they gave you some clue about what was going on and why. The problem is it's slight, bordering on twee. It has a red bucket and an innocent bystander drawn into some hideous hallucinatory apocalypse and a conflagration and that's it."

"No killer bus?"

"Nope."

"And us?"

"We're not in it," said Charles.

"So we are in the book about the writing of the book."

"Yes but only minimally. So far. He's kind of self obsessed. I don't think he cares about us."

3.4

I floated towards the surface and towards the light, buoyed by large, shape-shifting bubbles of muted far-off conversations, images, tastes and smells. My elbows were sinking into the surface of my writing table, an experiment in axe-work and wood from a fallen jacaranda. My typewriter came into view, distorted and fragmented, as if viewed through a hall of mirrors. I remembered the repertoire of words it was possible to type on the top row of the qwerty keyboard included *typewriter*. It was a vintage manual Royal with a cast iron frame. It weighed about 15 kilograms, the equivalent of about 200,000 bees, half a Dalmatian, a tenth of a reindeer or 12 human brains.

My eyes swam back into focus and ruptured the surface of conscious thought. I needed to know what time it was but my brain kept singing *Does anybody really know what time it is, does anybody really care, if so I can't imagine why, we've all got time enough to cry* which caused my eyes to tear up just a bit as my gaze wandered across a small, grey, undescribed room, travelling aimlessly before settling, finally, on a white clock face.

1:45 pm! Only a few minutes remained before I was due to leave for work. I scabbled for my keys. The night shift at the library began at 2.00 pm. I could eat at the cafeteria or later at the pizza place. There was money in the ash tray in the car. I collected the manuscript pages together and shoved them into a canvas bag. I had made considerable progress with my novel but now I was encountering serious problems. More of that later. First, I had to find the front door. I moved through

the house, pausing momentarily to curse at my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

I arrived at the library at 2:10 pm, officially ten minutes late. Sounds of study, laughter and enforced quiet echoed off the stone pillars, absorbed with quiet grace by the wood panelling and books.

The afternoon passed slowly. Occasional glimpses of the world intruded my otherwise preoccupied eyes as I worked through a file of loan cards and a trolley load of books. There was a constant and frankly rather disturbing sound of ruffled feathers, cloth being wet, faces being wiped, and faces being frowned at in a mirror. A smell of dust floated lightly on warm air, buoyed by afternoon sunlight.

I was thinly dressed in red trousers and a white shirt, an apparel which was not intended to, nor did it, conceal five weeks stubble, it could not yet be called a beard, which I had allowed to grow on my face. This red growth was crowned by an unruly red mass, composed of the same protein as the beard, which was arranged over the top of my head in an absent-minded disarray reminiscent of the after-effects of nitroglycerine. My face was an indeterminate grey-blue-green, with a whimsical expression and an upturned nose, all of which rendered the whole thing fairly disagreeable to look at. My body, painfully elongated, extended for a distance of about 6' 3", with very little development of pectoral, or any other musculature, resulting in a weight of about 65 kg.

Over the previous twelve months, I had been getting bi-monthly cheques from the Australian government

department of Treasury, gradually whittling away at the amount I had been bequested in the form of a young writer's fellowship, awarded to me in honour of my status as a token Queenslander after a posse of Queensland politicians had kicked up a stink about southern bias.

The fellowship had funded a year of debauchery, procrastination, thumb-twiddling, brilliant but instantly-forgotten ideas, a series of false starts and solid farts, reams of turgid, self-indulgent prose, a substantial cellar, then steady consumption of fine red wines, beers, spirits and liqueurs, inspirational trips to the countryside which had nothing at all to do with the plot, characters, or locale of the project, a finely contoured and plushly upholstered white 1966 Hillman Superminx with a wooden dash and a flat battery, a three-piece suit bought from a student who couldn't afford to get married, miscellaneous foodstuffs and other consumables, including a kilo of vanilla beans, shares in a pine-nut factory, fresh Portuguese pilchards, a packet of gold-plated staples, a crocodile skin umbrella, a bag of white truffles, some Russian fish eggs, a ylang-ylang plantation, half a bucket of saffron stamens, a rhodium nose ring, a peck of pickled plutonium and an unknown quantity of antimatter. All these and more were sedulously inscribed into my expense accounts.

The funding, with an emphasis on the first three letters, enabled me to contemplate the authorship of an autobiographical novel titled *Manacles*, initially based on my experiences as a labourer, potting-shed-staff-member then fully-fledged gardener at the university-botanical gardens, a conflation of the St Lucia and the George Street campuses. One of my tasks was to water the pot-plants in the library, the same

library where I now worked as a librarian's assistant, walking around with my red bucket and a charming smile, observing the rich tapestry of life woven from threads of the social fabric which became the material for my novel. My plan for the novel was to allow its characters to become aware they existed in a book. This plan had so far met with only limited success, although I had managed to write the novel which the writer character named James, a Joycean homage, himself wrote about his experiences in the same job and situation, also called *Manacles*, which was meant to allude to the constraining chains of social and cultural bonds and routines one could discern in ordinary life. It could be said, I suppose, these manacles represented life itself, not a limiting set of restraints, but let's not go too far down that track, or eyes will glaze over faster than a speeding ticket.

Immediately following the period in which these experiments in fiction were funded by the more-than-generous Australian Government, two simultaneous realities descended upon me like seagulls on a bucket of fish guts. Firstly, I was broke, and secondly I really hadn't written very much at all and certainly not enough to satisfy the ghoulish daemons of the literature board's auditing department.

Wearing a blonde wig, a pair of falsies, high heels and a miniskirt, I visited the library and asked if they needed staff. They hired me on the spot. They knew I had ruined their carpet when I was a gardener overwatering the pot plants, but they couldn't care less, they just loved the red bucket.

Lacking offspring and being a bit cavalier with social niceties like having a lot of needy friends, I soon took on the unpopular shifts like nights and holidays. On these occasions

I had the library to myself and very little responsibility other than stamping out the occasional book, sorting the leftover returns, filing a few loan cards and clearing the return bins. This took about an hour all up. Night shift was seven and a half hours. It was even better over Easter as the amount paid on public holidays was double time and a half.

I worked on my book like a demon. Sometimes, when it got the better of me, I needed to grab some fresh air at the not-to-be-opened windows where I was now.

Quiet lawns outside in the white conical throws of the street lights were wet. It had rained during the afternoon. I felt a little sleepy and cosy, looking out into the rain. That made me think of Heraclitus who said you could not stand in the same river twice, a statement of such blistering stupidity it had confused everyone since, causing the regrettable rise of philosophy departments. I could make out a bright red umbrella held above a blue check shirt. I supposed humans were involved. The horizon had disappeared behind the misty rain and the gutters were carrying scraps of litter on the currents of rainwater flowing down-gravity.

A traffic jam, the result of a collision at the intersection in front of the City Hall, extended down each of the five streets leading to the city centre. Drivers sealed up in their cars in the rain were producing, apparently for the pleasure of the inhabitants of the surrounding buildings, a contrapuntal fugue of a modern, free-form construction with their car horns, in which the theme, although often repeated, was indistinguishable from the intervening passages.

The library had taken on the quiet air of absence. The few students who remained upstairs seemed to hover like clouds

on their way to the horizon, in a state of fatigued silence.

There were plenty of spare typewriters. I rotated freely through the different models, enjoying the changing typefaces and the distinctive sounds of each kind.

“Excuse me.”

I quickly drew a file of loan cards over my open manuscript.

A large, hook-nosed woman of about 40 years of age, with blazing black eyes and a sallow, bad-tempered look was approaching the night desk. I leant forward, half standing, with questioning smile decorating my countenance.

“Someone’s taken the fucking Ms” the woman said angrily.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Volume M,” she snapped, “from Mammals to Managua.”

“Perhaps it is being used somewhere in the library,” I said sweetly, “if you wish I can file a request for reservation.”

“Do that.”

“Please fill out this card and I will place it on the notice-board as soon as the volume is available.”

She handed over the card. I saw that she had written her name as Susan Sontag then scratched it out and replaced it with Cleopatra VII Philopator.

I smiled and filed the card with several others of the same sort. Ms Philopator lurked at the counter for some time in a menacing manner, but finally returned to the study area by way of the staircase to the right.

I waited for another five minutes, just to be safe. Peering about, I judged the coast was clear and uncovered the manuscript.

2.5 JAMES

For a would-be writer, everything in life was swallowed up by the need for a credible back story and a serious, smiling-eyes, deep-thinking, ready-for-action photo. Of course, to write a bio, you first have to have lived one. Sort of.

Before he became a best-selling author James the writer worked a number of odd jobs including librarian, truck driver, bodyguard, private investigator, dental products salesman, apothecary's assistant, high-school janitor, bartender, forester and formula one mechanic.

Some of these you can get away with, others, uh-uh. Quick wit, a bag of smoke and two boxes of mirrors can get you only so far. Librarian is an easy one, everyone has been in a library, and if you need to add spice you can launch into I remember the time I had to go to Kalgoorlie to get a book that was 854 days overdue.

Douglas Adams actually had been a bodyguard for a rich London family—or so he says. But how would you know for sure? You're safe with private investigator, barrister, police detective or spy. *I'm sorry that part of my life is strictly confidential.* Don't forget to accompany this with nervous darting glances while sweeping the room for surveillance devices.

Stephen King actually was a high-school janitor. Or was that just a convenient back story for *Carrie* so that he didn't have to explain why he knew so much about girls' locker rooms? Agatha Christie really was an apothecary's assistant, and James the writer really had been a truck driver. Even without a driver's licence. He had worked for a narcoleptic removalist in Townsville who fell asleep any time they had to

drive further than three suburbs, or anytime James explained the relationships between *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

The job out to Charters Towers, with a delivery of cattle yard panels, happened to satisfy both conditions. They barely avoided crash-test-dummy disaster, narrowly missing three emus and a golden rain tree after James had noticed his boss slumped over the wheel, snoring while supposedly driving down the highway. He was hard to wake up even after the truck fishtailed along the road reserve, ending up facing back the way they had come, James's white knuckles clenching the handbrake and the steering wheel.

"You better take over, I forgot to mention I'm narcoleptic."

Sure. I better not mention the no-licence thing. There's a little diagram on the gear stick knob surely. Crunch. Oh, clutch! No matter, he's nodded off. Just keep saying it's all about *Anna Livia the tattooed Plurabelle and three quarks for Muster Mark!* Quiet now. Don't wake him.

Some jobs you had better not mention, like the stint at the anatomy department cutting off noses and 13 weeks as an undertaker's assistant in Townsville. They weren't jobs for the bio, unless you wanted to attract a following among serial-killer goths.

Forester and formula one mechanic were a bit too easy to be caught out on. What's your opinion of the bar-length-to-power-ratio calculation? No amount of life in the pits jokes were going to get you out of holes you dig yourself.

He once had a paper run, more interesting than most. Three in the morning at Townsville airport then trucking all the way up to Cardwell and back before breakfast. If you add standing in line waiting to be picked by the bloke who

chose the casuals for inserting the *Sydney Morning Herald* supplements you could say you had a career in newspapers.

An author's writing credentials are a big deal. The biggest, really. Hard to get, of course, because of Schrödinger's Chicken and the Curate's Egg paradox. To put it bluntly, how could you cite your published works if there weren't any? This is where having half a brain and not being asleep on the job called life comes in.

If you wanted to be published, become a publisher!

Yeah, why didn't anyone else think of that, besides Margaret Atwood, Jane Austen, William Blake, e.e. cummings, Alexander Dumas, Zane Grey, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Anais Nin, Edgar Allen Poe, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, George Bernard Shaw, Gertrude Stein, Leo Tolstoi, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Virginia Woolf?

As a publisher James had published many notable tomes especially for listing in his author bio, including, *Things I can't remember when I was drunk*, *A Peony for your thoughts (the life and works of a perennial horticulturist)*, and *A list of the books I have written for publishers everywhere*. Just kidding. He had actually published small books of prose which had appeared without fanfare and disappeared without a murmur, either laudatory or damning.

At one time he had thought knowing a lot of words might be important. What a mistake. He memorised a *Gem Pocket Dictionary*, thinking a vocabulary of over 40,000 words would be taken as a sign of towering intellect worthy of a hefty advance and a farmhouse on Crete but so far it had only resulted in a punch to the neck by a short petrol station attendant who thought he was being insulted; a gesture

displaying a repeated back and forth motion of a hand lightly gripping a section of lubricated garden hose; and being stalked by a young man wearing coke bottle glasses, a pocket protector, a tongue with a blistered tip from licking pencil leads and body odour like dead maggots boiled in vomit. Apart from that, multisyllabic verbosity had been met with unamused disinterest. People simply are not impressed when you tell them pogonophobia is an aversion to beards or arachibutyrophobia is the fear of peanut butter sticking to roof of your mouth.

There's safety in a crowd. Pretend to be interested in other people's work. If you are the editor and publisher of a quality literary magazine you completely bypass those pesky things like evaluation for your own work. No annoying questions of literary merit, relevance to humanity, ability to be understood by anyone at all, even your own mother. Not to mention dubious allocation of page space.

"James, why is your prose poem on dreaming under seaweed fourteen times as long as any other piece in the magazine?"

"I guess it just happened that way. Do you think it's too long? We could reduce the type size."

Dragging the huge mound of yellow milliner's fabric down the stairs was a twofold stroke of genius. It got rid of several thousand metres of yellow leftovers and it dusted the stairs at the same time. Who would have thought hat-makers could use so much yellow? Better to be rid of the awful stuff. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Covering the third floor of your building with yellow cloth. What could be the downside?

It was like living in rooms filled with butter, bananas,

lemons, canaries, dandelions and sweetcorn. A nauseating mixture at the best of times. And if you happened to have butter, bananas, lemons, canaries, dandelions and sweetcorn, the moment they were brought upstairs they disappeared, lost for weeks, until they finally appeared, dead, blackened with mould.

He heaved the scrunched-up mass of yellow fabric into the industrial bin out the back, the third one he had filled up. All gone. He sprang back up the three flights of stairs and surveyed the scene. Much better. Now, the upstairs was back to bare wood and metal, reminiscent of one of the tidier parts of the industrial revolution.

Was it too early to smoke a cigar? Don't be ridiculous. It was never too early to smoke a cigar. It could accompany the flagon of hock he was tapping at regular intervals, regrettably an inferior brand of refreshment with only minor chances of ever having involved a grape. He could smoke Schrödinger's cigar, if it magically appeared in his portable humidor, but no matter how many times he opened it to look in, a cigar, dead or alive, did not magically appear. Maybe it was time to hunt down one of those writer's bio jobs again. The matriarch at the Colosseo seemed to have gone soft on him, always giving him two plates of spaghetti and chicken when he ordered only one because he was too *skeeny*, said many times with poking at proud ribs and a loose waistline. He could offer to do the early morning vacuuming upstairs in the casino, hoovering up a stray few coins missed by five-year-old Rosanna who scampered around under the tables at first light picking up the fives, tens and twenties which had fallen out of the punters' pockets.

He remembered working in a sports store in George Street opposite the McDonnell and East building in the period ramping up to Christmas in 1970 when he was 15. That was a real job. Four dollars a day and five dollars for Saturday morning. It was a fortune. The sports store was where old footballers and cricketers went to die. Because they were celebrities they didn't have to do any work. They spent their time walking around chatting to people who looked like they were more than window shopping, especially if they were attractive females in their 20s constantly flicking long blonde hair off their necks. James remembered smoking *Gauloises* even then. The other staff hated them, so he took his breaks at different times and had no one to play darts with on the lunch landing. It wasn't a room, just a section of floor at the top of the stairs to the toilet, a dart board down one end and nowhere to sit eating salad rolls except the railing where you were in constant danger of falling down to the concrete floor below, especially when pushed hard in the chest by superannuated sports heroes, so you hooked your shoes under the lower railing and held on hard.

He had met Maria through his magazine. She wrote poetry no one could understand but everyone said was powerful, original, achingly beautiful and important. Her first piece had arrived in the mail, addressed to the editor.

He remembered when it had arrived. He had looked on the back of the envelope. It wasn't far. Not walking distance, but an easy bike ride up and down steep streets. It took him to the wilds of Auchenflower where there was so much green it hurt his eyes. It was nearly as bad as yellow.

He found the address, walked up the driveway and knocked on the door. No-one answered. Maybe no-one was home? There was a seat next to the door. He could wait. For how long? It didn't really matter.

After some time sitting in the seat thinking about nothing in particular, as opposed to nothing in general, or nothing at all, looking across the road to an island line of trees mostly hiding the houses on the other side of the street, he heard voices approaching.

A small boy with a bright blond head appeared at the bottom of the steep driveway, looking intently at the grey-sloped concrete in front of him as though it was about to move under his feet and toss him back down the slope. When the boy reached the door he saw James sitting in the chair. This was clearly beyond the boundaries of normal expectation. His bright blue eyes widened and he dropped the parcel he was carrying, a bag of shopping with celery stalks sticking out the top, abruptly turned and ran soundlessly down the slope. A blonde teenage girl appeared, herding the runaway back up the driveway.

"Hello," she said, not entirely at ease with the situation, but more or less committed to taking charge of things now that she had a small boy hiding in the folds of her skirt, a dusty pink-grey coloured cotton with a print of green rose stems with thorns but no flowers. Above it she was wearing a white bolero style top over a white singlet.

James apologised for arriving there unannounced.

"I'm looking for the person who sent me this letter," he said, handing her the envelope with the name and address on the back.

“That’s my sister, Maria,” said the girl. “I’m Roslyn.” She smiled. She was pretty in a thin-faced, nervous kind of way.

“I knocked on the door,” he said.

“She never answers the door.”

The small boy peeped out of his skirt-cloak of invisibility.

“What’s your name?” asked James

“Graeme.”

“Can you imagine you’ll one day be a Professor of Law at the University of Queensland?”

“No.”

Roslyn opened the door and Graeme dashed through it, running out of sight but not earshot yelling at the top of his voice as he hurtled through the house screaming to his sister that there was someone to see her.

Roslyn went inside at a more normal pace and came back after a while with another girl who wasn’t blonde. It was Maria.

James poured on the charm. It was like opening the sluice gates of a dam full of molasses. He said her writing was powerful but not showy, strange and convincing, innocent, with a knowing quality.

Her eyes were quite blue, but paler than Graeme’s. She had high cheekbones and a strong jaw but not like an anvil, like a young woman’s jaw who was very beautiful in appearance. He supposed he noticed that she was neither slim nor heavy, with wide shoulders and a small waist and angular hips. She was wearing a sort of black, gold and red kimono affair over a one piece bathing suit and her hair was wet in clumps as though she hadn’t dried it after coming out of water maybe an hour ago. In fact she was slim, he decided, she seemed

to have no fat around her waist and her thighs where their insides joined her hips below the crinkled bulge of her pubis were separated by a gap through which he could see the carpet on the floor behind her. It was a grey carpet with a few stray scattered flecks of red, dark grey, blue and green, but so scattered and minimal you couldn't see them at first. He brought his eyes up to hers and realised he had been speaking for a long time without consciously taking breath and now had run out of things to say about her writing and the magazine and his writing and what sort of day it had been and that it would probably be the same again tomorrow and he was not good at small talk and other inanities in increasingly short bursts surrounded by ever increasing gaps of no words until his voice petered out and he fell silent, realising throughout all this time she hadn't spoken and by the look of her placid, not angry, not jovial but thoughtful and pleasant expression that she had no intention of speaking in any conversational sense until he had been quiet for more than a few minutes. He got the impression he was invited into the house when she turned and simply walked away into the darkness of the hall and up the stairs. He followed.

Maria was living with her family at that time, though her room was downstairs and completely self-contained like a grannie flat so she didn't need to spend time with any of them unless she wanted to. She took James out the back of the house and there was a small plunge pool, a few deck-chairs, a large mango tree casting dark shade and a fence rather crowded with neighbours.

She put her kimono on a camp bed and her bathing suit on a chair nearby as if to say because he had no swimming

gear he would be naked in the pool and so that he wouldn't feel uncomfortable she would be naked too.

She got into the pool and he could see her breasts were wide apart and not hard and pointy like a girl's but low and full and wide apart like a mature woman's and not particularly white in colour compared to her shoulders which were tanned. Her nipples were not long or short or skinny or fat, in fact they were perfectly proportioned, each quite firm in the centre of its areola and the rest of her was also perfectly proportioned yet in some strange way still slightly angular. Her pubic hair was curly like sparse steel wool. He climbed into the pool. It was about two metres wide by about 1.8 metres deep. He could touch the bottom with his head mostly out. Her arms stretched along the curved wall with her hands gripping a stainless steel rail. It was starting to get dark.

"It feels like floating onstage in an Aristophanes play, maybe *The Clouds*. The neighbours as the audience. It's kind of exposed here. Don't they worry you?"

"I don't worry them, so I don't see why they should worry me."

"I'm amazed you can be so relaxed," he said.

"What are you feeling?" she said.

"I'm not feeling anything," he said.

"Come closer," she said.

He moved closer and when their faces were almost touching she brought her arms around to encircle his shoulders and kissed him. She had no makeup on. Her face was a perfect face, balanced on a perfect neck. He felt her breasts press into his chest, her nipples rubbing against his.

“I feel intense,” he said when she freed his lips. Her mouth was red.

“Are you cold?”

“No.”

She kissed him again and brought her legs up around his waist.

“Is there only one me?” he asked into her ear as she laid her head on his shoulder.

“No I think there are at least two, maybe three,” she said. “We need to get out of the water.”

She swivelled and bounced up and out of the pool, water streaming from every surface. He followed, feeling ungainly tall and intensely aware of his erect penis which was astonishingly obvious considering this was a quiet suburban house with at least a sister and a little brother who could be anywhere. She took his hand and led him to the stretcher bed, lay down on it and dragged him to her side. She took his hand and guided it between her legs, showing him by feel her vagina, her clitoris hardening under his hand and guiding him so his hand moved in a pattern like an infinity sign. She arched her back and muffled a scream while cupping and offering him her breast which he declined, concentrating on kissing her mouth and mingling with her quiet, intense, and peculiar mind. She grabbed his ridiculously erect penis and dragged him down and into her, wet and soft and embracing as he sank to his depth and felt a strange heightened sense of awareness combined with a crazy thought of flying ears. Her body arched against his and her vagina became a warm, tightening, powerful flood of pressure, mounting to a shuddering, moaning release as she sank her teeth into his

shoulder and laughed and cried and kissed him gently and held him close, stifling her cries as her body spasmed and bucked with his.

When he awoke, Maria was on top of him asleep on his chest and her hand was around his penis and it was waking up too. She opened her eyes and smiled into his.

“Thank you,” she said. “That was my first time.”

He kissed her mouth, her eyes and her mouth again and tasted her mouth as she kissed him. “Mine too,” he said.

“Let’s get dressed,” she said. “We’re going to have to eat dinner with my family.”

He dressed in the dark and they went to her room where she dressed in tight slacks and a skivvy which left her breasts breathtakingly obvious, of which she seemed oblivious. They went upstairs and he was introduced to her small mother who had a blonde mass of tight hair which seemed to be shrinking every part of her head except her eyes and a kind father who wanted to extend some sort of love and understanding but was unsure how. The family, as a group, was peculiar, but not unfriendly. Another boy, also not blonde, appeared sometime before the meal and looked at James without expression, then went away again. They told him his name was Nigel. After eating James helped wash up. When the dishes were in the racks he went with Maria out onto the veranda. They took a few minutes to cool down in the night air, then went down to her room, him against the wall with a grey cotton blanket over his shoulders, her leaning against the other wall. Because the room was narrow their outstretched feet overlapped.

He could hear her father pacing the floor above, back

and forth until eventually he came down knocked on the bedroom door and opened it. At first he didn't say anything, just looking around the room until he saw them. Then he asked them why the light wasn't on. She said there was no need for light and her father went away, apparently satisfied they were not doing something they shouldn't.

It was late by this time so he said goodbye and walked home, leaving his bicycle there, thinking about her.

It was a nice memory, James thought, and almost completely true. The industrial look of the factory-warehouse looked back at him without the slightest sense of judgement, affirming or otherwise. He noticed on his cheek there were wet tears. He wiped them off and blew his nose into a dirty t-shirt before throwing it into the over-flowing cloth bag of LAUNDRY NEEDING TO BE DONE. He racked his manuscript into a neat block of pages and put it into a flat canvas bag with a long over-shoulder strap.

Outside, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the glare. The city came into focus and he saw Maria. Her bright hair, smelling of eucalyptus, smiled at him as he approached. She was scribbling poems on her leg, to avoid hurting the air. His footsteps hurried away behind him like a retreating mirror, as he approached. At the moment he sat down she looked up. She drew her grey-green skirt down over her knees, hunched forward doing so and grinned.

“Are you writing your book?” she asked him.

“Not right now,” he answered.

2.6 CHARLES

Charles had been experimenting with the effect of magnetism on his paintings. Magnets attached to his head had failed to do anything. He was now experimenting with iron filings in the pigment itself, with movable magnets attached to the back of the canvas.

There had been rain during the night. The air on the roof studio smelt fresh and clean as though the breeze was being pumped by a gigantic bellows from the place of all oxygen.

Charles, while his brush hand was completing the background of the painting, was using his mind to direct questions into the bowl of his pipe, in the absence of tobacco. Does nature really abhor a vacuum? What sort of nature, the waterfalls and sand dunes kind, or nature as in personality, for example, the sweet nature of a laborador? If nature really abhorred a vacuum, why is there so much space between the planets and the stars, or even between the particles inside an atom? Unless the abhorrence was keeping nature away from vacuums and in other words maintaining the space between things.

He scowled, knocked the smouldering thoughts out of his pipe and went downstairs to get some money from the fridge to buy petrol. Also in the fridge, he observed, but on a higher plane, was James's typewriter. Charles pulled out the typewritten page.

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a retreating mirror, as he approached. At the moment he sat down she looked up. She drew her grey-green skirt down over her knees, hunched forward doing so and grinned.

“Are you writing your book?” she asked him.

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For some time nothing moved in the room, not even the light in the fridge. Charles stood immobile, the typewritten page in his hand. He replaced it carefully, winding the paper through by turning the platen. He took a small pile of low-denomination bills from the shelf below, shoved them into his pocket and went downstairs to the car.

2.7 JAMES

James looked over Maria’s hunched back at the clock which was about to strike midday. Her brown hair hung in a dense shell about her head with a shorter fringe at the front, her face apparently unable to frown between the two edges of this curtain. Her square-ended fingers were dexterous but rarely visible. Her teeth were chalk-white and wide. Her eyes were pale blue and saw much more than she revealed.

A gigantic potato, red and blistered, walked along the devastated main street of the city. Pockets of existence had survived, but by far the greater part of the city was destroyed and now overrun with owls, driven out of the burnt forests nearby, hooting non-stop in search of sleep. The crisp smell of death blackened the air. George, a manalive, paused, deciding which path to take, to thread his way through...

“I thought you said you weren’t writing your book,” said Maria.

“How can you tell?”

“You get a furry look on your face.”

James laughed and stood up. A premonition had crossed his mind, coinciding with a sharp pain in the small of his back. The nearby traffic was very loud. It felt like something was being repeated. Something nudged him from behind. He turned around.

“You’re in my book already,” he said.

It was Charles, nudging forward over the city square in his Volkswagen. Normally an area reserved for pedestrians, the square had not remained placid while the Volkswagen drove through the flowerbeds. Angry crowds were squealing in its wake. Charles was signalling to James from the car. Maria was laughing, already heading towards the car. James followed. Ominous blue figures with long arms would not be long in appearing.

James clambered past Maria to the back seat. Maria got in and pulled the door closed. They sped away across the square through the midday crowd.

James felt distantly but not unhappily excluded on the back seat alone, but decided to pass the time catching up on his internal monologue on the subject of George McIntyre. The potato thing had legs. But can a potato have legs? It has plenty of eyes, but legs were going to be a challenge. If the girth of the man mountain was sufficient perhaps no one would notice.

The car rose and fell over the inner-city suburban streets, Charles and Maria deep in conversation. A leaf blew in and

caught in James's hair as he was trying to refresh his mind in the draught from the open window on Maria's side of the car. Charles turned.

"Look out," said Charles, slowing down as he approached the crest of a hill and was about to turn left. "A grasshopper has blown in the window." He turned to the road then back again. "It's caught in your hair."

"I felt something," said James. "I thought it was a leaf."

Maria turned. Her eyes were exceptionally blue and pale in the bright afternoon light. "It's a grasshopper," she said.

They drove on through the streets. Charles and Maria returned to their silent conversation. James put his hand to his head. He pulled a struggling grey-green-brown body and strong, kicking, spiky legs away from his hair.

2.8 CHARLES

A dark green pillow crept towards the floor. Far away, he heard the distant clang of a bell. It rang for a while then stopped. There was a hiss, like traffic on the road, or the sound of remorse. Fifteen minutes passed, slowly, each second making its way through his mind like a grain of sand struggling through an hourglass. Was it hot in the room? His hair was damp, covered with fingerprints. His eyes flickered.

He woke, got to his feet and rubbed his eyes, his feet carrying him to the bathroom. His eyes felt sore, really sore. He saw his face glowering at him from the bathroom mirror, a crooked nose against a thick, dark face, cheeks hanging like

curtains, drawn against a shapeless mouth. A forehead, or the nape of his neck, he didn't know which. He sat down on a low, padded stool in front of the mirror.

Tough horse hair jabbed into his thighs. He draped a towel over his neck, head and chest, leaving one half of his chest exposed. Water flowed beneath the mirror, into the washbasin.

His left eye was all right, but the other one looked dangerously swollen. That face of his, he thought. His features modelled themselves on the hindquarters of a cheap American paperback.

He looked away, but failed to adjust to the darkness. The chair beneath his buttocks was embroidered with a scene from the bible, a palm tree, a sacrifice and a furious goat. A camel groaned and the smell wrinkled his nostrils. He waited a moment.

The smell passed. His eyes gradually reclaimed their arid, alluring amazement. He was used to looking at eyes, he thought. He wondered whether this was an exaggeration. Other people's eyes, sure, not eyes like this one, his left eye looked like it had lumbago. It just wasn't right. He laughed. It made no sound. He wondered if there was anyone else in the room. He turned to check. There was no one.

His face, like a raincoat, looked wet, with an unhealthy look he associated with magazines in a dentist's waiting room. Never mind, it's only a figure of speech. It's bad enough climbing out of sleep looking like the ocean with slugs and whelks zigzagging around a gigantic set of blubbery purple lips, munching on barbaric spinach, without having the kiss of some unknown thug's knuckles seeming to hover about his forehead, looking

for a place to land.

In front of him the dressing table was spread-eagled in the half light. A pile of stones was scattered beneath the mirror. Next to it was a tube of stark red lipstick and a pad of ice-blue makeup. With his free hand he adjusted the towel and at the same time dropped his head between his knees and breathed out harshly.

He straightened up once more and peered into his eye, pulling down the eyelid with his fingertip by stretching the skin over his cheekbone. He could smell damp potatoes in the cellar, a thin, whitish grey-green, cold smell. Last night, he remembered, he had been happily going numb in a garden full of blue and white tablecloths, candles and dark green seats under sprawling trees. He couldn't remember why. He could only remember feeling there was something horribly inevitable about everything.

All this looking into his eye was getting to him. He hadn't seen anything yet, only the black surface of the pupil, which-seemed restless. He blinked, his eyelashes brushing against the glass. He saw something, a figure, in the depths of his eye. He peered and blinked again. It was still there. It was his reflection, shrugging its shoulders. Now there's two of us, he thought.

Steady on, he told himself, you're just anthropomorphising the first-person pupil relationship. He began to draw back from the mirror, allowing the reflection within his eye to dwindle out of sight. Having done this, he found his face had become feasible again. Only just, he thought.

Meanwhile, something was nudging at his bum. His body, he realised, was being pressed irresistibly against the edge

of the washbasin. A peculiarly insistent force was pressing against his buttocks. He looked over his shoulder, twisting his body.

A piano was in the bathroom, pushing at him from behind. It was an unusually small piano, or so it seemed. It wasn't a relative, it was a complete stranger. Not that he expected kinship with a piano. He was about average height, maybe what you would call thick set, though he preferred the term 'raw-boned'. The piano leaned menacingly towards him, upright but on a tilt, no more than a metre high. What's a piano doing here? he wondered. What's it trying to do?

The piano was trying to push him into the toilet.

He looked back at the mirror again. His black eyebrows were moist, due no doubt to a loose liver and too much wine. His eyes, too far away from the mirror to reveal the reflection of his tiny self, rustled with a vague emotion.

The piano was pushed at him even harder, oscillating like a Leslie speaker, shoving and biffing and thumping him against the ceramic tiles of the wash basin. He neatly moved to one side, clipped on a white coat and strode out of the bathroom. Behind him, the piano thudded into the toilet with a jangle of strings and the fractured sound of splintered wood. On his way through the cramped hallway outside the bathroom he caught sight of his reflection in the wall mirror. That was weird. Evidently, he had been smearing yoghurt over his neck and chest, though he couldn't remember doing so. He rushed through the hallway, entering a large, dilapidated room he didn't recognise at all.

A grey-black, badly stuffed sofa took up most of one wall. The windows were glazed with pebbled glass, allowing light

but not vision to enter or exit the room. A number of orange metal and plastic chairs were lined up against two of the other walls. A counter, of sorts, thick with dust and inactivity was at the innermost end of the room, though what made it innermost was not clear. It was just a feeling. A central square column had mirrors on all sides. There didn't seem to be anything particularly menacing in the room, no bearded men with bandannas or Russian automatic weapons, large jars marked with skulls and crossbones, hydraulic operating machinery equipped with circular saws, drills, gouges, hackers or bashers. Occasional magazines were scattered here and there, containing general interest articles concerning the use and misuse of high explosives, cooking without garlic and guides to scavenging demolition materials. Nothing capable of evoking hallucination.

He was staring at one of the flat mirrors. In it, his reflection stared insolently back at him. It was not a pretty sight. In one hand he held a large plastic container of natural set yoghurt and in the other a small white plastic spoon. On damp looking feet he was wearing bright red shoes. What he was wearing under the white coat? He hunched over to look between his legs. His eyes were unable to penetrate the darkness.

He became conscious he was moving again, towards the mirror. His reflection seemed to be smiling at him. His upwardly mobile lips seemed darker and younger than before. He tried to look more closely, but the insolence of his stare forced him to look away.

Why was he still moving towards the mirror? He managed to stop. His body was trying to make him to walk into the

mirror. His feet, painful in his tight red shoes, squinted up at his sleek, ash-blond legs. The mirror had come closer.

He noticed a large, brightly patterned limpet-shell, stuck to his cheek, gripping the skin with a strong muscular foot. He moved closer to the mirror and reached out to touch the limpet shell with his fingertips.

His reflection shrank back, avoiding his extended hand. The shell tightened its muscle and nestled closer to his face.

“You’ll never get it off now,” his reflection said. “You’ve frightened it.”

“It would have come off if you hadn’t shrunk away,” he said.

“No it wouldn’t.”

It was a childish denial, but he felt hurt.

“Let me try again,” he pleaded.

His eyes jerked involuntarily downwards. His hand was stuck between his legs. He tried to extract it, but he was too weak. It was stuck. With a sudden rush it burst free. It was red. He brought his fingertips to his nostrils and sniffed at them. A happy sound filled the air. His reflection was laughing at him.

2.9 MARIA

Maria ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. She adored thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs and fried hencods’ roes. Most of all she liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to her palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.

These substances were very rarely if ever available in her world, so she had to make do with what she could find in the cupboards. As a consequence the vast bulk of her diet was made up of raw garlic, eaten whole, and apples, including the seeds and stems. Her favourite tippie to wash this down was Calvados, an apple brandy from south of France, Kirschwasser or vintage Armagnac. She considered beer fit only for washing down pigs, wine barely better than plain tap water and Scotch Whisky of all kinds completely ruined by tourists squawking and hooting in its presence, especially the more expensive single malts.

Maria was wearing scuba gear, a tight-fitting wetsuit, rock-hopping sandals, a face mask, nose clip and a breathing apparatus attached to an air tank. She was upstairs in one of the rooms above the café. The room was sealed with tar and rubber airlocks, allowing her to ignite a tiny quantity of DMP, a substance invented by an eccentric scientist known as Brian or perhaps Pythagoras De Selby. DMP deoxygenated the air in sealed containers, leaving only nitrogen, argon, water vapour, carbon dioxide and trace amounts of neon, methane, helium, krypton, hydrogen, nitrous oxide, xenon and nitrogen dioxide plus the airborne molecules of particulate matter like human faeces which is what gets absorbed by the insides of your nose when you smell people's farts.

The effect of igniting DMP and removing oxygen was to remove any constraints on time and place, allowing Maria to call up people she wished to consult. They appeared in spirit form, but otherwise whole and healthy, even if they had died. De Selby had used this process to discuss religion with Saint Augustine in the seaside holiday town of Dalkey

in Ireland. The topic of religion did not interest Maria in the slightest.

De Selby had let people assume DMP was an acronym for Dublin Metropolitan Police. This was patently absurd and should never have been countenanced—the letters stood for Deoxygenating Magic Powder.

Maria struck a match, observing the abrasion of the red potassium chlorate against the powdered glass and red phosphorus mixture on the side of the box, the two substances mixing and causing a miniature explosion, igniting the match head which burst into flame. Maria applied the flame to a speck of DMP in an excavated glass block, or in the general area where the speck probably was, it being so small it was invisible to the naked eye. She had put it there with the help of a powerful hand lens.

The successful ignition of DMP was recorded on two dials showing on the screen of a black and white television which had served as the furniture upon which the excavated glass block was resting. One of the dials showed the percentage of oxygen in the room's atmosphere had dropped from 21 per cent to zero. The other showed the number of extra-temporal presences which had gone from zero to one.

The extra temporal presence was Virginia Woolf.

“What's it like living in the world?” Virginia said.

“You should know,” said Maria.

“Hardly,” said Virginia Woolf, “I'm unliving in the unworld and not that happy to be summoned. The only thing that stops me spewing into your eye is my feminist work ethic.”

“Is your hair a wig?” said Maria.

“Are you fucking kidding?” said Virginia Woolf. “This

fucking wailing fettuccine, screaming like tangled sand dunes without end?”

“What are you saying?”

Virginia Woolf pulled off her hairpiece and showed Maria her tonsure, which was an octagonal dumbbell, carved from fresh drunkards.

“Have you got your family with you?” Virginia asked.

“No,” said Maria. “Even if I did, I don’t think they would recognise me, considering I am wearing a wet suit, a face mask and breathing air through a tube.”

“I remember when we got ours down they were covered with feathers.”

“Your family?”

“It was like plunging into a doona.”

“Was it a happy family reunion?”

“Hardly. I said to them. *You are disgusting remnants of humanity. Go back to your squalid orange homes and your snarling dogs. Walk sideways, like a tern. Giant hands create craters of expectation at night and you are forever unable to repel the all-white glamour and big black hours of Sunday morning.*”

“A bit wordy.”

“Don’t talk to me about the world. It’s too big, it gets stuck in your throat.”

“I said wordy, not worldly. You must be squamous. Speaking of which, did you die of skin cancer?” asked Maria.

“Holy fuck, are you some kind of ignorant moron? I drowned myself. I filled my pockets with stones and walked into the river.”

“What was that like?”

“It was very boring with the stones, because I wanted to be

sure I had enough so that I couldn't possibly get back if I had second thoughts. Eventually they were so heavy my pockets were on the point of ripping open and I could hardly walk. I should have thought it through, used a wheelbarrow to carry down a knapsack full of dumbbells. I hope you aren't intending to tell anyone about this. A lot of rather proper and powerful people venerate me, you know. They would tend to be affronted by anyone skyving off about a matter so serious as my death. Not that I care, I couldn't give a toss. In the water it was wet, cold, green and then dark in that order. Eventually I suppose it was fishy and not at all attractive because they didn't find me until some time later."

"Exactly three weeks."

"Yes. At least you know something."

"I know a lot of things," said Maria.

"Do you now?" said Virginia Woolf. "I can't really tell with Australians. You all look like kangaroos to me."

"May I ask you a sensitive literary question concerning your opinion of the writings of James Joyce?"

"My dear, nothing is sensitive after you've been scraping along the bottom of a river and fetching up against a bridge at Southease to be found, bloated and rotting, by children. What do you want to know?"

"Did you really dislike *Ulysses*?"

"Not really, I was jealous. People say awful things when they are feeling bitter."

"You said *Ulysses* was an 'illiterate, underbred book of a self-taught working man."

"I was an unbearable snob," said Virginia Woolf, "Poor Jim, he was as far from being a working man as you could

possibly get. He wouldn't know which end of a hammer to hold. He would have blown all his gaskets if he had ever picked up a crow bar."

"Did you meet him?"

"No, that's just what Tom said."

"Eliot?"

"Yes, he raved about Joyce at me, when he should have obeyed the cardinal rule of literary manners, which is to rave about the one you're with."

"You said Joyce wrote like the scratching of pimples on the body of the bootboy at Claridges'."

"Well that's true enough, that's good stuff. Joycean even."

"Did it influence you in writing Mrs Dalloway?"

"Heavens no. Did I make Clarissa piss like a dog? Or Septimus revel in his own defecation? I made up my mind to hate *Ulysses* so that it wouldn't influence me."

"So you didn't hate it after all?"

"I hated the fact I couldn't compete with it or outdo it, not then or ever."

"Why not?"

"It was the smut. I was a prude. I could no more write about piss, shit and cum than fly to the moon. I hated it was getting more attention than anything I did. He destroyed the whole 19th century with that book and me along with it. We both wanted to shake the tree but I only gave it a couple of feeble slaps. I was supposed to be the progressive one. He was a family man, a social conservative in what was the equivalent of a traditional marriage. I was mad, he was sane. He smashed literature, religion, class and morality. I complained about the Bloomsbury crowd eating too loudly."

But he was a man, and I was a woman. So in the end I achieved more than him. All his revolutions unwound and people went back to sleep, while women kept climbing the north face of the Eiger, mostly falling off but some making progress.”

“My air is just about out,” said Maria. “Who is your favourite writer?”

“Who is yours?”

“Mine? You, I suppose.”

“You poor girl. I love Raymond Chandler. I have read all the stories, as well as *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell, My Lovely*. My only regret about dying is not being able to read his entire output.”

“How do you cope with his attitude to women, blacks and homosexuals?”

“I just swap the genders and races in my head as I am reading. It makes no great difference though it can be unexpectedly amusing. His prose style is something I never would have imagined. Ageless. Not like my tired old period pieces.”

“I am going to undo the airlocks now,” said Maria.

“Whereupon time and space will reassert themselves and I will vanish.”

“I am afraid so.”

“Such is death,” said Virginia Woolf. “Goodbye.”

Maria took a deep breath of the canned air and removed her breathing apparatus and mask, moving to the wheel she had installed in the airlock door, equipped with a Brodie knob for faster one-handed operation. She gave the wheel a quick spin and the seal cracked, the air rushing in with a sound like

a cunt fart, something which she imagined Virginia Woolf would have described differently, in her day.

An unpleasant low-frequency sound like bowing a slackened-off, out-of-tune cello was accompanied by a vague, out-of-focus cloud of light. When these faded, no sign remained of the spirit of Virginia Woolf or her conversation, some of which had surprised Maria. She certainly hadn't expected her to be mostly lucid.

She passed through the airlock and closed it behind her, flicking on the auxiliary vent so air would circulate and dissipate any remaining DMP.

2.10 CHARLES

Charles was feeling rather strange. As he walked towards the café he felt an overpowering compulsion to strangle the further horizons and walk on, which he resisted not only because it would take him past his intended destination, but also because it sounded like a lame '70s song lyric.

In order to ward off evil spirits, for which he had nothing but the most contemptuous disdain, he was obeying the litany of the church of the flying spaghetti monster, which instructed its parishioners, in the event of approaching a domicile, industrial tenement or built structure of any type, to walk like a shrieking ad, strap a canvas knapsack to your chest, and feel, as you walk, an invisible smile waiting at the edge of summer for the dawn.

He had been walking by the estuary to clear his head, a outcome ardently to be desired but one which had not been

achieved. Instead the head which had hanging out in the breeze all this time was simply sunburnt. Crooked, buzzing clouds were drying to a shade of pale grey in the moonlight. Charles was hyperventilating. He knew he shouldn't, but he was unable to stop his fingers hissing, which scared the crap out of him.

He entered the café. It was empty except for Maria in her customary position at the rear table in the dark. She was reading. As he approached Charles saw she had added, to the pages of *The Waves* and *The Years*, *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto, *Vita Nuova* by Dante Alighieri, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Rabelais, and *The Satyricon* by Gaius or Titus Petronius.

She looked up as Charles approached.

“Charles, you look terrible,” she said.

Charles sat down.

“Thanks,” he said.

“What's that on your face?”

“A limpet,” said Charles. “Don't touch it, it only makes it cling on harder.”

Maria opened her mouth wide and sent a stream of incandescent flame to envelop Charles, completely consuming his corporeal reality which burned to invisibility in microseconds. Charles then reappeared, nicely filling out his clothes before they had a chance to collapse, restoring his existence in its entirety but without the limpet.

Charles widened his eyes in a cartoon-but-authentic gesture of amazement.

“Hilarious,” he said, “and life-prolonging. How did you do that?”

“I have no idea,” said Maria. “Does it matter?”

She reached out and took Charles’s head in her hands and drew it towards hers, planting a kiss on his lips.

“You are my gingerbread man,” she said, licking her lips.

Charles almost blushed but wasn’t sure he knew how.

“I had a hideous dream, in which I woke up feeling strange. It turned into a nightmare with mirrors and yoghurt.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad,” said Maria. “Mirrors are scary, but yoghurt is usually harmless.”

“It wasn’t my dream.”

“Are you suggesting someone wrote the dream into your sleep?”

“Obviously,” said Charles.

“It can only be James,” said Maria.

“Yes, but why? Pre-emptive jealousy?”

“He’s not really like that,” said Maria. “It might be an unconscious, instinctive destabilisation, just to see what happens.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Charles.

“It’s unenlightening to speculate on unknowables,” said Maria. “Let’s just fuck.”

3.5

I WOKE from a deep sleep and lay in my bed in the dark. My legs felt cold and damp. A dream was ebbing away towards the cartesian horizon leaving behind it a soft smell of sea as though I had been wrapped in kelp but my struggles had set me free to float to the surface. I wondered if everybody woke up feeling this way. It seemed perfectly natural. It was probably the smell of sweat and dead skin cells. Squamous.

That's a nice word. I should use it. Skwah-moose. Scaly. Snakes are squamous. Better not though, it will make people think of cancer. They say you can't catch cancer it just happens, it's not contagious. Being boring about cancer is contagious. If you don't make the sympathetic dismay face and the awww ohhhh noises people think you're a heartless arrogant prick and weird and then they're just waiting for you to be arrested for indecency or cruelty to pigeons or something, saying I always knew there was something wrong with him. At least they know who to eat when the plane goes down to keep the race pure.

Waking up is hard to do. Dooby doo, down down, comma, comma, down. Comma comma? Surely not. Punctuation lyrics? Even Neil Sedaka wouldn't stoop so low. It must be comma, karma. So that's where Boy George got it.

Waking up. You feel like you are completely empty and maybe you are, unless you are still dreaming in which case you feel like a chance encounter between a braille typewriter and a blue-ringed octopus on a billiard table. Empty, except nature abhors a vacuum so things rush in and if you didn't leave a worthy thought unfinished when you fell asleep you

are likely to get any old stray rubbish filling up your head.

Where was I? Now I remember. Slowly, I began to piece together the threads of my novel and other stray memories in the form of glistening trails and phosphors, not to mention farts, nosebleeds and belly laughs, two by two on the ark of the writer's craft, the setting, the scene, its characters and plot twists, its unreliable narrators and back story, bringing the whole process to a stage where I could begin again. Even as I was thinking this, I was aware my thoughts were an echo of some other and, let's face it, probably funnier lines clearly lifted directly from *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien in which was written:

I closed my eyes, hurting slightly my right sty and retired into the kingdom of my mind. For a time there was complete darkness and an absence of movement on the part of the cerebral mechanism. The bright square of the window was faintly evidenced at the juncture of my lids. One book, one opening, was a principle with which I did not find it possible to concur.

The hillsides in the valley were rustling and moving restlessly, still encumbered with rolling, heaving sleep. The faint greyish light of the morning was gradually replacing the withdrawing night. I'm not sure how I knew this, since I had not yet opened my eyes,

The problem with real life was its similarity to fiction. If you think about it, it's very hard to tell the two apart. I was awake, but beyond this, there was very little to go on. Not that it mattered. I was writing. But if I wasn't, I might want to make sure I wasn't here for some other purpose. Like life

itself. Ha ha. Like LIFE ITS VERY SELF. Or something else.

If you look in any direction, you see everything in that direction. But what else can you see? Nothing really, unless you look in another direction, then you can see in that direction, but you can't remember anything you saw before.

It's the same if you drive somewhere. The map isn't rendered when you're a way off, only when it's right there around you. When you start out, you head for some point which is roughly in the right direction. When you get there, the next bit of the map becomes clearer and more detailed and you can navigate from there. There's really is no point trying to figure out the whole journey from start to finish.

When you get up as far as you can tell you are entirely there, kind of three dimensional or at least shaded and with highlights giving an incredibly good impression of three-dimensionality. You can twist to one side, yes it's all there and twist to the other side, ditto, making sure no one sees you doing this because it looks absurd. You can convince yourself you are all there, sometimes a bit worse for wear, but substantial and just like everyone else. But have you noticed no one ever looks at themselves from behind? In fact, no one else looks at anything from the point of view of whatever they are looking at. This is clearly either a physical impossibility or a psychological inability. I had talked to Charles about this, not the Charles in my book but the real Charles, the character Charles was based on and yes, I know I should have changed his name, but I didn't, sosumi.

Charles wasn't interested in either a physical impossibility or a psychological inability. Instead, he wanted to know where

the book was set.

“Anywhere.” I said.

“It can’t be just anywhere.” He made a dismissive face with his lips and actually turned his nose up, or wrinkled it trying to.

“Why not?”

“There’s no appeal in anywhere,” he said, “it may as well be nowhere.”

“So where then?”

“It’s not my book,” he said, “it’s your decision.” I noticed he hadn’t shaved. Each facial hair was standing up in close proximity to its neighbour, young enough to still be sturdy and sharp, but old enough to present a substantial growth from follicle to tip and I could not help but think, this man can grow a beard!

“I was just wanting it to be anywhere people might identify with, but generic enough it could appeal to anyone,” I said.

“Great,” Charles said. “City blancmange.”

“Boring?”

“Your decision.” He turned his hands palm up in the air and assumed the disinterested air of a rhetorical question.

“Does it matter?”

“Not at all, Coober Pedy, for instance, would be ideal. Opal capital of the world, which translates as where the fuck and who cares?”

“That bad?”

“It’s your book,” he said. Maybe there was an imperceptible trace of impatience in his voice. His face however, with wide staring eyes, seemed to be saying C’mon, surely you’re not this dumb.

“Brisbane?”

“ZZZZZZ.”

“Melbourne?”

“ZZZZZZ. ZZZZZZ.”

“You are a hard man. What then?”

He smiled at me. His smile was so great. Cheeky and knowing, genuine and fake, but genuinely fake, as if there was a huge ball of hope and promise behind it.

“New York?” I said.

He laughed. “What would you know about New York?”

“Skyscrapers, yellow taxis, muggings and a fucking huge park in the middle?”

“Fine, New York it is.”

“Really?”

“Why not?”

Why not indeed. Except it was patently ridiculous, impossible to carry off and would only end in tears. Fuck it. I’ll go back to basics and take the default option. Dublin. What people outside Ireland know about Dublin you could write on the side of a very small aardvark.

Charles had the air of a Spanish mechanic about him tonight, best to let him go off and do whatever *something better to do* was occupying his mind. Maybe it was too early for him. He wasn’t an early riser, or if he was it was because he was up to something. I wish there was someone I could talk to about this.

– There might be, bedad, said the voice of James Joyce.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

“Who’s there?”

– And who d’you think it might be?

“But you’re dead!”

– Dead you say. Oh well, have it your own way.

“No, don’t go, now you’re here.”

– I’m glad you said that, lad, I haven’t had the opportunity to stretch me gossamer of late and in fact the last chap who had the gall to invoke me was your man O’Brien.

“Yes, I remember, he had you darning socks for the Jesuits,” I said.

“Indeed. A very funny man. Bit of a grump, but very funny.”

I moved my eyelids apart imperceptibly and peeked through the crack to see if some ghostly vision was accompanying the voice of James Joyce. I didn’t expect there to be. I wouldn’t be able to tell exactly without opening my eyes wider which seemed like way too much of a bother. It was much more pleasant lying there half-asleep chatting in my head to the author of *Ulysses*, voted novel of the 20th century by the Modern Library.

– What would they know? the voice said. A motley gaggle of carpetbaggers and misfits, I have no idea who half of them were, the only name I recognise is your man Gore Vidal and that man was an illiterate, like all politicians.

“So you’ve been keeping up,” I said.

– Oh yes, I get all the clippings where I meself is the topic in question.

“So you know about Gilbert Sorrentino?” I asked, not without a certain glib tone.

– Oh yes, author of that great pile of dog’s vomit he called *Mulligan’s Stew* and he takes my man Halpin from me *Wake*

and gives him a right thrashing.

“You didn’t like it?”

– To be sure, I laughed so hard I perforated me ulcer and died.

“You can’t blame him for wanting to follow in your footsteps,” I said. “We all did. My *A Boy and the World* is your *Portrait* and my *Manacles* is your *Ulysses*.” I said.

– Oh is it now, and what is your *Finnegans Wake*, might I ask? I hope you make a better fist of it than I did mine, certainly I don’t understand a word of it, but I get the idea, all right. It seemed the right thing to do at the time and as long as I kept getting the cheques I thought I had better keep on doing it.

“So it was only about the money? What about the art?”

– Don’t make laugh, lad, I’ll perforate me ulcer again you wouldn’t find it entertaining at all. I agree with your man Cleckly who said it was *erudite gibberish indistinguishable to most people from the familiar word-salad produced by hebephrenic patients in the back wards of any State hospital*. Although, I don’t know about erudite, that’s a bit rich for my blood.

“Why did you write it if you didn’t understand it?”

– Oh, I love me writing to be sure. I’ll scribble till I die, again, if I ever do, it’s in me blood, or in me excrement to be more precise and all because I got meself mixed up with your eschatological and scatological, not that they are worlds apart mind, an easy mistake to make. And what of mine do you like the most yourself, now.

“I like Buck Mulligan,” I said.

– A gobshite, said the voice

“And Stephen Dedalus.”

– A mewling infant.”

“Not even Leopold Bloom?”

– Oh, stop it lad, you’re killing me. There goes the ulcer. I’ll be a terrible mess.

“You really don’t like it?”

– Pretentious claptrap, said the voice.

“But it’s my inspiration. I mean, you. You’re my inspiration.”

“Oh and that’s no secret now with all your forty-four thousand versions of me words and your going round like a gob-smacked idjit having your epiphanies every ten minutes like they were farts out of your bum.

“I admin it’s derivative. But it’s an *homage*.”

– *Homage* my arse. More like *dommage*, more’s the pity, that evil stuff with aubergine and snot and garlic ponging right through a lead vest.

“That’s *baba ghanoush*.”

– You know what I mean. Tell me did you read my books all the way through, at all?”

“Of course.”

– Now come on lad, be honest now.

“Well, I might have skipped a few bits.”

– That’s more like it and very wise too.

The voice trailed off as it said these words. I waited for it to return, but it didn’t. I lay there feeling somewhat foolish and crestfallen. It had certainly given me something to think about.

The day was now full-blown, honking daylight with bells, clackers and whistles, making it difficult to hang onto the

shreds of sleep as they slithered off to hide in the shadows, under carpets, rocks and tectonic plates or wherever sleep goes to hide in the wake of spent dreams.

I opened my eyes and tried to stand up without falling down, something which could only be accomplished slowly. I found a blue dressing gown and wrapped myself in it, noticing more than one physical memory of spilt tea, wine, gravy or bodily fluids. There was such a thing as a washing machine, but I did not know where it was.

In fact, I never knew where anything was unless it was immediate. This house, flat, tenement, let's call it a built structure of some kind, was only reasonably rendered where I was. The window was full of sky, relatively useless for pin-pointing one's location. There may have been other rooms, an upstairs and a downstairs, roads, rates and rubbish, all FURTHER AFIELD but I could never be sure without going there and taking a look.

I was not sure to what extent my circumstances were convenient rather than immutable and real, but they did seem somehow contingent upon my immediate needs rather than a world I inhabited with another three and a half or more billion people, but I suppose everyone feels this because wherever you go you take yourself with you, a powerful reminder that your own being, or self, is very hard to get away from. I suppose you could wake up in a completely alien situation if you were hoovered up by a passing spaceship, but it wasn't really my style.

The kitchen was where I expected it to be, but beyond that there were areas of hazy uncertainty. It didn't matter. The kitchen was nice enough. Near my bed, where I had

been honestly lying, the sky was usually grey. Sometimes it was ominous with darkening, oddly-shaped clouds scudding ahead of a blustering wind. In the kitchen, however, it was always bright and sunny, due to a wall-mounted sun, blazing golden-yellow like a pat of fresh butter nailed to the side of a ship, thawing the crackling cold of the morning air.

There was a big dial to control the volume of the birds whose idiotic ecstasy surged in a kind of mesmeric static at full volume but quite pleasant turned nearly all the way down. There were steps from a landing down to a steep lawn flecked with pieces of granite and chert, a few blades of grass and underneath it, schist. The presence of schist dominating the geology suggested a history of metamorphosis, resulting in large, flat grains of mineral in layers of micas and hornblende, interleaved with quartz and feldspars, even garnets, or whatever the moveable feats of heat and pressure could get up to during the night to turn clays and muds into shales, slates and phyllites before giving them a final squeeze with the thermal handshake to schist up. But it was wise not to take anything for granted, some days you just got cliffs of tuff.

MANACLES

“ALL I ASK OF LIVING IS TO HAVE NO CHAINS ON ME”

1.1 TELEMACHUS

in which we find James, a portrait of the artist as a young man, in the fabled gardens between an estuary on one side and his city on the other

On its ribbon of gently-rising mangrove-edged estuary, prime river-front real estate expanded upstream and down in a long, serene reach, troubled only by the presence of cross-river bridges, windmills, commissariat stores, failing bookshops, hokey-pokey parlours, doomed tobacconists, second-hand record stores, department stores, railway stations, dental hospitals, sandstone universities and granite government buildings, an ubiquity of underground cinemas and a pestilence of shopping malls. It was a meeting place and centre of ceremony, at the centre of which was the intersection known as the Eternal Traffic Lights.

Once shared land of the Aboriginal people of the Yagura language group, it had been seized by a scumlord British Penal Colony, felled, fenced, drawn and quartered, gutted, diseased, polluted and poisoned, criss-crossed with bitumen roads and snarling traffic, built up, torn down, excavated, dug up, filled in, fought over, bought and sold and resold, resulting in an eclectic, ungainly mess of sky-scraping steel, glass and street-level grime. All was not lost, reliable secret

parking places in lanes were still sacrosanct, known only to very few custodians of cultural knowledge, while sanctuaries like the library adjacent to the City Hall stood apart from time as refuges and incarnations of inspiration. The library was a stylish affair, shiny, coloured like a pantone swatch, its 'quiet please' whispering accompanied outside by the shimmering water noise of a fountain, around which the pelagic shoals of humanity drifted on their ways hither and yon.

James could see all this from his vantage point at the top of the tallest hoop pine in his garden. Many tall hoops remained, despite being the source of most of Brisbane's timber and tin houses, perched on stumps with all-around verandas to catch the bay breezes. James regularly climbed this hoop by means of its cross branches, the straightness of its trunk timber stretching into the sky like a ship's mast, ironically not used for this purpose, being rejected by the snobbish British Admiralty as inferior even when it was quite the opposite. It is at this point, without any forewarning, we dive straight into the inner, un-bracketed, twisting, turning thoughts of our hero. *Let the stream-of-consciousness begin.* Not good enough for you? Pomp and ceremony be damned. Can't see the wood for the trees. For the rest of us a forest is just a forest. Call yourself an admiralty? Lemons too dear? Cheapskates. Morons. Limey bastards. History, a nanna nap from which I am trying to awake, oops, nearly lost my footing there, let's not stream all our consciousness at once, save some scraps for later.

Re-establishing his footing on the rough bark James watched from his perch the movement of the lunchtime crowd, human and avian. Pigeons wheeled up, swirled,

landed again, settling into shuffling neck-bobbing walks, hustling for scraps of conscious streams, each crust erupting in blue-feathered squabbles. At random, the air was filled with a hundredfold wing-beats. Pigeons flew up as one, whirling briefly, landing once more again to peck and steal and strut.

With his head in the clouds, at the top of his tree, James had discovered it was possible to commune with ancient Greek gods. You didn't expect that, eh. Gods! They not only exist, we'll have you know, they are rather pleasant treetop companions. Except for Poseidon, who was a gobshite. Fortunately, he was mostly aquatic and unlikely to tiptoe through the tree tops. When climbing trees, James carried a red plastic bucket to whack Poseidon with, his bucket charmed by the powerful goddess Post Viral Neurasthenia who thought Poseidon was a tiresome tool-squeeze.

While happy in his own strelitzia patch, James was accustomed to offsetting the potential tedium of full-time gardening with occasional forays through the city, searching for signs of his characters, the movers and shakers, poseurs and fakers, manoeuvrers and forsakers, whose interwoven threads made up the rich tapestry of life. It was a hobby. He wasn't looking for a father figure. Why did he think of that, just now? he wondered, as he climbed down from the tree to the ground, emptied out the heavy green pine cones he had picked to weight his red bucket in case of encountering fractious deities and set out on his rounds of the city. First stop the chalk-white university buildings adjacent, notably the anatomy lab where he once had a part-time job cutting the noses off human cadavers, so the skulls were easier to boil

clean. This was next door to the Veterinary School where he just couldn't get enough of the joy of watching people treat their pets better than they treated people.

1.2 NESTOR

in which James visits a retired navy admiral disguised as a young woman, resists the temptation of lamingtons, joins gay blades playing poker in the back room and barely escapes with his sanity and sobriety

Placing the red bucket in its nest of broken bracken, crushed leaves, snapped twigs and brown earth, behind a green screen of close-growing ferns beside the squat building of the Veterinary School, James turned the tap, watching the whites of his knuckles pink again as the tap water gushed out. The weight of water settled the red bucket more firmly in its enclave. James, gazing distractedly at the curled end of a fern frond, was thinking they were called fiddleheads.

He turned off the tap. Slopping water over the rim until the level was three-quarters full he wiped the bucket on the grass, entering the reception where a collection of plants, wagging like scimitars, greeted the visitor with unintelligible swordplay. He placed the red bucket on the parquetry beside the plants and after moistening a handkerchief began wiping the residue of dust from the dark green leaves.

The ancient voice of the octogenarian at the counter creaked as it spoke:

“Putting the hurt on dirt.”

“Busting the lust on dust,” James said

“Putting the time into grime,” said the voice.

“Scraping the stuck-on-muck to chuck.”

When James got to this part of the rhyme he stood up and began mimicking the dance of the receptionist who, despite being a man in his eighties, occupied the body of a young woman in her late twenties. The dancing style involved a great deal of exaggerated elbow movements and not much below the waist. The stability of the hindquarters was to prevent bodice ripping, always on the edge of spontaneous combusting out as her sides strained against the seams.

The old man and James repeated their lines together in a high pitched wheedle of no particular melody, the old man in his dark haired, dark-eyed, firm-breasted, low-cut body, with a skirt like a spray-on tan emphasising the shapes of hip and buttock which, with every beat, were given a tiny nudge, producing a barely discernible oscillation.

The office desk between them began swaying sympathetically as the gorgeous body teetered on high heels towards the counter and leaned over it, looking at the plants James had been cleaning. James raised his eyebrows and tilted his head in a mock salute.

The old man batted back his expression with an eyelid, pretending to busy himself around the office, walking to and fro, picking things up and putting them down again.

“I’ll just finish these leaves and leave,” James said, regretting his words as soon as they left his lips. If he leaves from the right, does that mean he’s left?

The old man held up the young woman’s hand, bent at the wrist and arched towards James with curled, painted nails descending forwards in an oh-you-wicked-thing gesture.

The old man rarely spoke. His wizened voice tended to

shatter the illusion of the young female body it occupied, hip-swaying, swivelling, sliding into a high-tech office chair beside a sleek *Selectric* typewriter, an exterminating-angel hand sliding across the surface of the counter to take a compact mirror between its thumb and first two fingers, bringing it up to the unblemished face to inspect an eyelash, askew.

A display aquarium was set into the desk, two-toned legs darkly visible through the moss-ingrown plate-glass tiles of its sides, distorting their image, the legs, until they resembled those of an improbably tall, two-toned unicorn. Hair clips shuffled back and forth silently in a lacquered, mountainously permed, top-heavy black do. Cheekbones blazed, as subtle as the arches on the Sydney harbour bridge and approaching that magnitude. A war hero in his eighties, happily inhabiting the body of a Geisha in her bubbling aquarium office, pursing bright red lips at the kissing fish.

James rinsed his rather manly handkerchief in the increasingly dirty water in his red bucket, squeezed the moisture from it and finished wiping the dust-glazed leaves. The old man held out a plate of month-old lamingtons which James had declined for the previous 30 days and did so once more as he backed away and manoeuvred himself through the entrance doors, returning to the nest of close-growing ferns where he poured away the dusty water, his leaf-wiping snotrag disappearing in a wet arc through the air behind the flush green ferns, landing with a sound like far-off thunder.

Below the Veterinary School was a basement of ill repute. It contained an alcove for listening to LP records on headphones,

a billiard table for playing snooker and dimly lit tables around which students of medicine and engineering played poker for small change.

James exchanged a dollar bill for a hundred one-cent pieces and sat down at the tequila table. The *Jim Beam*, *Bacardi* and *Stones Green Ginger* wine tables were already full. All eyes were on Belinda who kept her cards very close to her chest and her hair extensions locked to prevent the lads lifting them. She maintained her advantage at cards by not drinking anything stronger than a storm in a teacup.

James watched the play for a while, not entering the game, partaking of lavish serves of *Cheezels*, *Jatz*, *Twisties*, *Iced Vovos*, *Tim Tams*, *Violet Crumble*, *Vegemite Worms*, *Samboy Chips*, *Maltesers*, *Cherry Ripes* and *Burger Rings* on trolleys being pushed between the tables by the players.

The card sharps at the tequila table, munching on oreos and lemon wedges, were, from his left, John Malkovitch, Paul Newman, Sean Connery, Belinda, Hunter S. Thompson, Black Jack, Jodie Foster and George Clooney.

James jerked his outstretched first and second fingers towards himself, indicating to Foster he wanted in. She dealt the cards expertly, at high speed, without betraying the emotions raging behind her eyes. James fanned his five cards to view them, while keeping them almost flat to the table. He observed he had been dealt a straight flush in diamonds, from Ace to 10. He pushed his sack of cents to the centre of the table.

“All in,” he said.

Letting the cards snap back to the table, and keeping them covered with his left hand, he took a cheerio dipped in

tomato sauce from a nearby cart.

The other players seemed to take forever to decide what to do. Foster peered at James over her insouciant lisp and pushed two bags of pennies towards his.

“I’ll see your cents and raise you mine,” she said.

By this time James was feeling rather queasy, swallowing repeatedly and experiencing unpleasant spasms of colonic pressure. He looked at the tumbler of tequila on the table in front of him and wondered if that might help. A sort of vague ripping, gurgling sound came from his intestines.

He pushed his cards forward.

“I fold,” he said, bolting for the toilet.

As the dunny door rebounded off the wall and hit him deftly in the forehead, he noticed the urinal had a number of large pink crystal tablets in the grated gutter at the bottom of the plate of stainless pissing steel. They weren’t the answer. He hurried past four occupied cubicles and darted into the fifth. He saw why it had been avoided. The seat, back of the lid and the rim were all liberally smeared with fresh shit. The stench was so powerful it caused a column of projectile vomit to hurtle from his oesophagus, hitting the toilet dead centre, just grazing the shit-smeared seat, filling the bowl instantly with a strange mixture of colours which would no doubt retain their intensity for thousands of years. The vomit torrent ceased as abruptly as it had begun, barely touching the sides of his throat on the way out. He felt fabulous, apart from the smell. The shitter, not his. He smelled like a champion. Like *Fleurs de lis*. Like Josephine’s demi monde. Shielding his nose in the crook of his elbow he reached forward to pull the chain,

releasing a cistern of water which threatened to rise up and overflow before the S bend reached out and dragged it away, leaving a bowl of sparkling clean water. The cleansing power of fresh snack vomit. Astounding. He reached for the relatively unspeckled toilet brush and waved it pathetically in and out of the water and across the smears of shit until the scene began to resemble Lake Eyre rather more than the Simpson Desert. This took about six full flushes, something he would not have been able to do had not the wholesale evacuation of his stomach contents resulted in such spiffing health and revived spirits. He felt extremely community-minded as he returned the toilet brush to its holder. He decided not to gather up a few handfuls of toilet paper and finish the job properly. Civic pride could only take you so far. Anyway, there didn't seem to be any toilet paper in this cubicle. He made his way back to the wash basins and splashed water over his face to muted applause from the occupied stalls. He thanked his engaged audience, saying, "Another victory like that and we are done for," as the applause petered out.

1.3 PROTEUS

in which James emerges from a dive in pretty good shape and continues wandering in search of a fortune-telling cookie, having sent his food snake down to Luggage Point

Emerging from the basement of ill repute with no more than a light sensitivity to remind him of the after effects of excessive hospitality, James squinted at the bright sunshine. Sounds and smells came to his senses. Tarmac. Muted conversations.

Doors clicking shut, others opening. Labouring air-conditioning units. Soft rustle of leaf fall. Sensations. Sand, more often dried-white and airborne, now heavy trace elements of language the wrack of tide and wind have silted here. The mind like the half-dry sand of a beach darkened by waves. He carried his empty red bucket towards the City Square, across measured sea-green grass flats criss-crossed by strict bordered paths hedging their beds.

A guttural whisper of cut grass. One of his fellow gardeners, a time-wizened cirrhosis, bent wheezing over a rake, microscopically gathering in the stray fragments of grass not trapped in the catcher. Precise, ordered, suspicious and bitter, juggling the workings of a green world, a study in decline sketched on a green canvas, the smouldering stub of a roll-your-own lodged in the corner of his snaggle-toothed mouth.

James approached the library, his red plastic bucket dangling bright beside him. It was a strange building, uniform on the outside, unsubtly less-is-more modernist, the exterior stone but not stone, fake stone, or to be pedantic, real stone aggregate with Portland cement, concrete textured and coloured to look like stone, yet looking like nothing, just form following function.

The library was functionally and in reality a simple shell, an incubating chamber for metamorphosing. In it there were books of every shape, colour, age and smell. In those books, remorseless knowledge. It seemed concrete, but this was certainly an illusion. Most things are, which is convenient when you have made up your mind, then have to change it. The walls were in fact constructed from a combination

of rough and smooth endoplasmic reticulum which formed an interconnected network studded with ribosomes where protein synthesis occurred. From this superficial tension James observed an adult human was emerging, like a butterfly unfolding from a chrysalis, leaving behind its grubby past. It was a female human, not a particularly interesting or significant female human, just one unlucky enough to be observed by James in one of his wilfully imaginative moments, which he utilised to transform ordinary reality into something with more literary potential. Or so he thought. In his mind, if we can call it that, he saw a creature with the body, tail and back legs of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. She was wearing tight black slacks and a yellow blouse, which tempted James to consider a hymenopteran mud wasp as an alternative to a griffin but his entomology was rusty so he opted for the antiquities, which he knew better. Anyway, ancient Egypt had more legs, not in a factual sense, more in a marketing sense, than a mud dauber, which like all insects had six legs, but let's not let the truth get in the way of a good story.

The human, emerging from the glass door entrance to the library, quite apart from what was going on in the mind of a passing stranger with a red bucket, had two ordinary, human legs, not at all resembling those of a lion. She looked taller than average but her head was lengthened by a twisted mass of blond hair and tied into a shape like a wrung-out mop, which looked lopsided and aloof, as though her head was somehow too high for her body, which could have caused her proportions to be misjudged. Privately, James had noted her legs looked long, which suggested either that he was

having difficulty maintaining the griffin-from-the-chrysalis idea, or that she probably was tall. She was carrying a double stack of library books, two stacks side-by-side and precariously balanced, forcing her to lean back a little as she walked, her arms around the books which pressed against her yellow blouse. The moving library doors, closing after her, reflected the back of her blouse, the back of her slacks and her platform soles, which, even if she was already tall, would have made her taller. In the reflection she might have looked like a distorted griffin, if you mapped—onto the imagined griffin shape—the actuality of longer black legs, a yellow torso and an aloof head with no characteristics of an eagle to speak of, and an utter absence of wings, this last a sure-fire deal-breaker for griffin-hood. James watched the reflection of the black and yellow shape dwindling in the plate glass. What would you rather, a tiger in your tank or a female lion on the back seat? He smelled the smell of a dog sniffing the bloated carcass of another dog and closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells which were not there. Go easy with those visions like a good young imbecile, he said to himself. He had left the library behind him and had come to the end of the path where it crossed in front of the City Square. He looked across the road, paused in thought, then jaywalked across, dodging between two blue buses, the bucket dangling red and bright against the field of blue.

1.4 CALYPSO

in which George McIntyre senses trouble brewing like a double-strength pot of tea on a cantankerous stove

with no hope of biscuits, just mouldy rye bread and meagre supplies of Mandelbrot sets and morphine to help him pass the time between now and then, here and the hereafter, not to mention the remembrance of things past and the search for lost time

George McIntyre watched from his window of lead-lined glass, lit with green and red diamonds, which left only some of the panes to see through. He shifted his weight sideways, his eyes on stilts, his body and its language following James and his red bucket sidestepping between buses, crossing the angry street and disappearing around the corner of the building's white-in-grey flecked stone.

On this corner, around which James had just now disappeared, an Indian girl in embroidered white and dull pink was handing out brochures extolling the virtues of selflessness. George knew this because she had given him one of those pamphlets. He had slowed, using the pretext of spiritual enlightenment to satisfy his curiosity on the topic of her embroidered white and pink one-piece dress, gathered at the waist by ribbons, below which the skirt section reached more than midway down the calf, almost to the ankles. Above the skirt the attached bodice was shaped in such a way as to make allowance for her small breasts, which George had convinced himself were bra-less. Their shapes were visible through the lace-work, an embroidered crescent moon, its tips on her shoulders, the curve gathered with two darts, making the bodice quite close-fitting and being lace-like, not entirely opaque but nearly so, dozens if not hundreds of small lace-embroidered, roughly circular gaps revealing the

suggestion of bare skin and the girl's nipples.

The garment, which from a distance effectively clothed her torso, waist, hips and legs, seemed to be the only piece of clothing she owned. Since George had not seen her wearing any other, he surmised either this was her only garment, washed each evening, or more likely she had several identical dresses which she wore when handing out brochures.

Her slightly angular face was classically beautiful. She resembled an idealistic vision of Rani Padmavati, Queen of Chittor, and she may well have been this person, except for the non-alignment of time zones. Padmavati had been an exceptionally beautiful princess of the 14th century Singhal kingdom of Sri Lanka, according to a talking parrot named HIRAMAN.

After seven minutes of George ogling and dissembling on the topic of spiritual attainment, the goddess Athena happened to be passing and mistook George's loitering as the result of some sort of hocus pocus. She sent Hermes to break the spell which he did by cracking George across the back of the head with a winged staff around which two snakes were carved, then ferrying George back to the town hall in a shopping trolley, leaving him unconscious on the floor of the Lord Mayor's office as one of his impish pranks. George had since gone a bit vague on the whole beautiful-Indian-girl thing, but knew she was trouble. Still, he couldn't stop spying on her. It was around that time that George began stocking up on serious drugs.

He turned and trundled towards the drinks cabinet for his morning fix. Nicely tucked away in the cabinet he had a smear of high-grade hash on a butter knife with a bone

handle, a mouthful of mescaline, a foolscap book of blotter acid, an assault shaker half full of cocaine and a thousand celebrity poppers, pumpers, pimpers, primpers, plumpers, uppers, downers, inbetweeners, a quart of tequila, a quart of *Jim Beam*, the butt of a bottle of *Bacardi*, a pile of rolling *Stones Green Ginger Wine*, a pint of raw ether, a bag of restrained ecstasy, a knockout punch of ketamine, two lungfuls of nitrous oxide, a mushroom cloud of psilocybin, a tub of bath salts, a pork barrel of peyote and two dozen amyls, a lot to choose from. Strangely, he still preferred the gently aromatic wild-sea kelpie of a single malt.

1.5 LOTUS EATERS

in which there is no silence in the storm, no rest for the ruckus, no rest for the leftovers for that matter, does that look like a camel's arse to you, no it looks like hang-dog look, this is heavy shit man, I'm spinning out

Let's step back in time a few minutes. Aloof on platform soles an angular, clear-limbed face is accompanied by a tall body descending a stairwell in the library, peering over a large double stack of books. Her name is Glenda, but we can call her Lotus Eater, even though she doesn't eat lotus flowers and probably wouldn't even if she were offered some. She is, however, actually tall and blonde. Naturally blonde, if you want to know. She is not happy about this situation and it's going to be a tricky thing to keep her on course in this story.

Having lived through a bad marriage with an abusive bricklayer and a ten-year-old son, Glenda was now attempting to get her life back, little realising she never really had

one, neither in the past, nor in the future—due to the problem with her gender. As we might have mentioned, she was female. This was a serious disadvantage. We could have made her male but that wouldn't have drawn James out of his delirious fantasy of writing books to be acclaimed by Joycean scholars and the man in the street and notice we didn't say woman.

Have you ever noticed there aren't any housebloke's knees? They don't exist. Men must be allergic to mops. They say they're frightened to kick the bucket. Yeah, yeah.

Reality is cold. Despite all the hat-pin jabbing and Emily Prankster efforts, men have serious skills and we have wearisome skillets. It's out of the frying pan into the washing up, scrub those flotsam jams. Who's taking care of your health worker? Who's thrown out the baby? Who's saved the bath water? Who's stubbed their toe in the tunnel of love? Who's up a drainpipe quicker than a pepper sprout? These boots are made for wearing out. One foot's on the platform, another's out of sight in a train of thought.

Did we mention she was not happy?

1.6 HADES

in which fingers grow from the earth like asparagus spears only to find themselves trapped in UNDERWEAR WORLD designed to keep the outside world from being soiled by sweat and excretions, bringing new life to the phrase sanity clause

As George McIntyre savoured the first of his morning malts, Tom Ryan, a grave man with a deep crypt and an even deeper

voice called out, "Morning Deputy." His honeyed utterance boomed.

"Morning, Mr Mayor," said George in reply, his voice falling on absent ears, for Tom Ryan was well away, gliding in his electrically powered wheelchair along the hall, between two vaults of grey bric-a-brac stone and a polished floor. The wheelchair turned into an open doorway, leaving the empty corridor behind.

George, high on a mixture of bennies, a hefty overdose of heroine and a gallon of raw peyote, was hallucinating himself in a bus on his way to his own funeral, having realised he was dead. This wasn't entirely to be expected, since he was alive although he apparently dies later, after being walloped by the bumper bar of a fleeing bus, but that just goes to show you the power of strong narcotics.

Just what, exactly, is the meaning of the expression "I don't mind"? That's a toughie. George McIntyre, however, is not the sort of guy to worry about such trifling issues, having hopped into the lotus flowers after the troubling incident with the Indian guru girl.

When Ajax snubbed Odysseus, he had good reason. Odysseus was given the armour of Achilles, which was impossible to penetrate except for a missing bit on the back of each ankle, but Ajax thought *he* should have got it. Same old, same old. Instead of waiting in a dark alley to give Odysseus a good thrashing Ajax instead goes totally batshit and kills himself, which is why he's in UNDERWEAR WORLD where everything is breathable gortex, not really a solution to broken down hormones which give rise to that really interesting odour you

think should be appealing but isn't.

1.7 AEOLUS

in which having narrowly avoided a fate worse than strawberry jam, James is scattered to the four shortcuts between the bookshops, his charm intact but his vocational skills lacking

A second bus, sliding into place behind the first, lurched forward in an attempt to smear the annoying redhead-and-bucket, frustratingly few moments too late to jumble bits of James against the emergency window and rear section of its twin. The scissor-sound of unsatisfied chitin slithered below, as six legs criss-crossed in vain. The bus ahead surged away, filled with passengers heading west. Frustrated, the second bus ignored the last spoiled portion of Grammar girls wanting to get on, leaving them to fester on the footpath. Snorting bus mucous, it pulled away from the kerb to follow its friend. The two buses gathered speed and side by side zoomed across the pedestrian crossing at the next intersection, scarfing up four buffaloes, half a wildebeest, two zebras, a reclining giraffe and a hyena couple not enjoying listless sex. Soon there would be nowhere safe in the city to cross the street.

James had felt a puff of oily air and machinery as he squeezed through, but did not look back knowing it was generally unwise and specifically to be avoided when emerging from the underworld.

He entered the BRAZEN SCHOOLBOOK, the first half of which was overflowing with copies of the *Jacaranda Atlas*, which James imagined must be filled with blank pages since

philosophers had told cartographers the map was not the territory. After this display the shop devolved into a labyrinthine maze between stacks of unsorted volumes. A path between them led to the side entrance into a lane between this block and the next, where a Chinese restaurant opposite had rigged up a trellis of so many bright-red roast Peking ducks there was no way to get into the shop. James assumed there were private tunnels like the pneumatic postal system in Paris, through which customers could be blasted with compressed air to land inside the restaurant on plush, buttoned, red leather sofas, keen to sample China's duck delicacy, big in the Ming Dynasty when the first roast duck restaurant, Bianyifang, opened near Qianmen in Beijing in 1416.

Next door to the Chinese Restaurant was an occult bookshop featuring life-size tarot cards, lovestrology failures, astrolabes, pendulums, obsidian spheres, flagging chakra and black tourmaline. James was not superstitious, so he wasn't tempted to petrol bomb the place. The lane led further to Australia's self-confessed PREMIER FABRIC RETAILER since 1930, then veered diagonally to an arcade where STAX OF WAX overflowed almost to the escalator with fine vinyl, the name coming from the early Dutch masters. James had only ever bought one record there, *Both Feet on the Ground* by Kenny Burrell, which featured snakeskin boots on an aerial photograph of farmland with clouds at knee level. He hadn't listened to it, as he did not own a record player, but he had bought eleven copies with his first pay cheque, knowing it would become rare one day.

The next stop was the main intersection, one block back from the estuary, where the BLACK CAT tobacconist on one

corner supplied *Celtique*, *Gitanes*, and *Gauloises* for would-be writers. An arcade midway from there to the estuary featured a shop selling bongos and hookahs, a vegetarian bookshop with edible but not very nutritious books, then LLOYDS where you could buy a tea-chest full of books for \$30.00, read them and sell them back to the shop for \$3.00 including a 10c deposit on the tea chest. Next was an empty shop which never had anything in it to sell, but had a shopkeeper who stood all day behind a cash register. James had never been in there. He wanted to finish writing his book first because it seemed unlikely, once you went in, you were ever going to come out, at least not in the same part of the universe.

On the left-hand side further down the arcade there was another record shop which, obviously, he had not bought anything from. It had no name. Right next door was the RADICAL PRESS bookstore for activists. It was run by Peter Styvesant, an ex-white-slaver who had seen the light and looked the other way. He had three girls working in the shop making tea and pastries but he didn't pay them. The least radical book he had in his shop was *The Little Red Schoolbook* which was banned in the UK, France, New Zealand and Queensland but not the rest of Australia.

The offices of *Radical Times* were upstairs. It was a newspaper aimed at an audience of left, far left, extreme left and ultra-extreme left. The last of these were half beings who had forsaken their right sides entirely. James sprang up the bamboo staircase into the sunny press room.

He was favourite of the old commies, who assured him he was a genius. They wouldn't publish anything he wrote saying it was *too good for them*.

“It’s the man with bucket,” Styvesant said, “the last hope we have for the sweet thing that is Australian writing. How are you, James?”

“Declamatory,” said James who always made mistake of answering this question truthfully as if people actually wanted to know.

“Are you working on your granny’s opus, then?” said Styvesant.

“Always,” said James.

“Am I in it, tell me?”

“You are now.”

“Be gentle with me, lad, you’ve got a tendency to take strips off your adulatory portraits.”

“I’d probably be more appreciative if you published me,” said James.

“Oh, not this old, lame-duck topic,” said Styvesant, pouring two tankards of *Stones Green Ginger Wine* and lighting up a *Styvesant*, offering one of each to James by tapping the packet until a filtered tip protruded from the torn foil, and indicating with a wave of his yellow-stained fingers the tankard nearest. James waved away the cigarette, taking out one of his own *Gauloises* and lighting it with Styvesant’s match, your face and my arse. He settled into the wicker-man armchair across from Styvesant and gave the editor a shrug.

Styvesant took the shrug and put it in his inside coat pocket with the others.

“Can you write jokes?” he asked.

“What sort of jokes?” James asked.

“What kind are there?” said Styvesant. “Funny ones, obviously. Can you write those?”

“No.”

“Ah, there you go. Can you write limericks, tell me?”

“No.”

“Movie reviews?”

“No.”

“Can you write about the death of capitalism and the class system?”

“No.”

“Can you write a cryptic crossword, now then?”

“No.”

“Can you explain militant socialism?”

“No.”

“Have you got a few words about the housing crisis, political prisoners, the right to social justice and equality, and the rise of the proletariat?”

“No.”

“What about a book review?”

“No.”

“There you see, fella, what can you write?”

“I write what I write.”

“Oh, and that is the category you have. It is astonishing more people have not cottoned on and given up the other rubbish the papers pay for and just write what James writes.”

“They will,” said James.

“I am sure they will, we all will, myself included. Until then, be on your way, young genius, I’ve got work to do,” said Styvesant. His cigarette had burned down and was now charring the callous between his fingers. He drained his ginger wine and levered the butt out from between his fingers, using it to light another cigarette. James drank his ginger wine with

a grimace and washed his tankard at the sink, drying it with a tea towel from before the Russian revolution. He returned it to the editor's desk. Styvesant was pounding out another timeless tribute to *Australian Radical 1887-1889*. He didn't even notice James leaving, fully occupied singing the *Red Flag* at the top of his voice, tears streaming from his eyes.

1.8 LAESTRYGONES

in which tiny humans throw giant statues from cliffs at dragonflies and miss the opportunity to create a still life of a gorgonzola cheese and a glass of burgundy

The gardener coughed and muttered to himself, while watching the disappearing red blob of a bucket in a field of blue with one eye, foraging between rakes, spades, shears, pruning forks, pots, pans and sacks of slime with the other. Underneath these, a green plastic bucket. He pulled it clanking through the past. He stepped on the grey stippled electric doormats causing the glass doors of the library to slide into themselves, leaving a threateningly open space, about to be closed.

The gardener placed his grey peaked cap beside the first of the large glazed pots. Rough-stained hands, tipping. Just enough. Gurgle. Next. Wet green weight, water in the bucket. Water channelled over soil. Air with the water. Bubbles.

Girls, swelteringly halter-necked with bright flat tops. Ogling their flattened breasts, the gardener allowed a discoloured tongue to protrude gently between blotchy lips.

James was hungry. Not just hungry, famished. Reamed

out and burnished. He had been colonically irrigated from arsehole to breakfast. Now could you play his midriff like a conga drum. He entered the VICTORY HOTEL by the side door leading to the kitchens. Marge and Mabel were fixing the counter lunches, steak, chicken schnitzel, salad and chips.

“Jimmy, you lovely boy, why aren’t you at work?” said Marge as he kissed and hugged them both.

“I’m writing,” he said.

“Oh, you poor thing,” said Mabel. “Does it hurt?”

“Not as much as starving to death,” he said.

“Are you hungry, then?” said Marge.

“I could eat the crotch out of low-flying duck.”

“Well, you will have to sing for supper, won’t you,” said Marge.

“You know I can’t sing,” he said. “I can’t remember the words, even the ones I write.”

“Thank heavens for small mercies,” said Mabel. “Well, in that case, it will have to be the potatoes, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would,” said James. He put his red bucket on the floor under the potato peeler and took a 20-kilo bag of kennebecs to the bench next to a sink on left side. He emptied five kilos into the sink and scrubbed the dirt off them, before tossing them into the potato peeler, a spinning metal barrel about the size of a milk urn at the widest part with a rough surface on the inside and jets of water spraying the spuds whirling around inside it. The art of the peeler was not to let it go all the way, which would grind off too much of the potato. Just until most of the skin was gone, leaving dints and eyes and other imperfections to be cut off with an apple corer-peeler.

Marge lived in Browns Plains, drove a dirty-white EK

Holden, had two grown up daughters, one a primary school teacher in Hughenden, the other a heroin addict in Kings Cross. Her husband Reg worked at EVANS DEAKIN making Yabby Pumps, not his official job but one encouraged by all keen fishermen. Marge lived in Drewvale, or Browns Plains north, drove a Holden EH Special, had two boys, both unemployed gas fitters and a husband on the war pension with lung cancer. Her husband's name, as luck would have it, was also Reg. He had been horse trainer and spent a lot of time studying the form guide, but was past the point where he could easily get out to a racetrack or the TAB to place a bet.

They were plain, hard-working women, funny and smart and Australian to their toenails. They loved James and they loved to shyack him. He loved Marge and Mabel so much it almost made his heart burst. They were true friends, people who enjoyed his company and didn't have an agenda. They might see him twice in a week or not at all for a month—it made no difference. When James came, they could take a break while he chopped lettuce, grated carrots or washed potatoes like a demon, whatever needed doing. He then had free run of the sandwich bar, still before the survery opened, where his choice was a white bread square bun with as much lettuce as he could squash into it, with a pushed-in boiled egg and squirt of mayonnaise, a lunch he had to eat out of a plastic sandwich bag or risk wearing the lot.

He finished the potatoes five kilos at a time, then fed the first five kilos lengthways through the slicer, into baskets ready for the deep fryer. He ate his salad roll like a ravenous beast, kissed March and Mabel good bye with a hug and once again hit the road.

1.9 SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

in which, on the horns of a dilemma, we choose between a rock and a hard place, avoiding Charybdis by passing too close to Scylla in the straits where the rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer while the vessel of state is driven between anarchy and despotism

Glenda could not get at her black handbag carried by its strap over her elbow, lower on that side so that it wouldn't slip down over her wrist and get in the way. Sunglasses would have helped. In the sun her blouse was as bright as 200 supernovas in a tin can. It made her squint. Squinting made it hard to see and hazardous to negotiate the path from the library towards the eternal traffic lights near where she had found a park in a quiet lane nobody seemed to know about because there was always a park there.

Her slacks were solar collectors with legs. If this kept up she would be able to sell hot blood to vampires from a spigot out the back of her knee. Wouldn't that be a treat.

Walking and squinting at the same time was like having her head wrapped in a gauze corset. It felt like her hair was about to unravel. Lucky she wasn't chewing gum. Is it really good for your teeth? Maybe 6,000 year old birch bark tar would be, but that's not *Juicy Fruit*. Mayans had chicle, the Greeks chewed mastic and the American Indians had spruce resin. Sugarless gum might be okay but no one sells it.

Who is that creep? Is that the old creep who waters the pots in the library? What happened to the skinny bloke with the red bucket. At least he was nice to look at. What's with the bucket, though? Nice smile, a pencil hanging off

a button hole in his shirt, scraps of paper shuffling in and out of his pockets. This guy looks like he's on death's door, except death has already been out to give him a touch up. Blotches on blotches, the rest grey and grimy. What is he doing, perverting at her? I won't be wearing this outfit with perverts like that around. Decrepit old prick. Perving at her tits. You can't see them buster there are books in the way. Ugh, is that a tongue? I'm staying on this side. Fuck what's that? A double bill with *Alvin Purple* and something. Can't be worse, can it? Oh fucking flannel. *Battle of the Planet of the Apes*, fifth in a long franchise. What was it anyway, a nature documentary? Goofy blokes with too much hair? What if Shakespeare had written *Planet of the Apes*? Everyone would say how wonderful it was. What if you said it was utter crap. Furore. A man of genius makes no mistakes; his errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery. Whoever said that was a fucking arrogant prick. What are volitional errors, anyway? Wilful fuck ups? I know, I'll just hit my thumb with a hammer really hard on purpose, to gain entry through this portal to discover excruciating ouch.

1.10 WANDERING ROCKS

in which everyone talks at once, represented in a succession of vignettes which would be more authentic if they all took place at the same time, as nature intended

“What are you doing?”

“I'm searching,” he said.

“What for?”

“For the treasure map between your thighs.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“It’s just a body,” he told her.

“It’s not your body,” she said.

“It is mine. I’m possessing it.”

“A body is not a possession.”

“It can be, if it is possessed by someone else. This is an example.”

“It’s not an example, it’s metempsychosis by force.”

“Possession is nine tenths of the law.”

“What’s the other tenth? Exorcism?”

“If you were in my body you wouldn’t like it,” he said.

“How do you know I’m not?”

“My body died.”

“That’s no excuse for abandoning it.”

“I had no choice,” he said.

“Everybody has a choice and mine chooses not to be inhabited by an evil-smelling, selfish old creep like you.”

“I smell no evil, I smell only goodness. I am beautiful, young and fresh. I smell like rose petals.”

“That’s me you smell. You can’t smell yourself. You’re on the inside. You smell putrid. You smell like death.”

“I am dead, but this body in which I survive is alive.”

“Are you a demon?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

“Are you a god?”

“No.

“Do you have magic or super powers?”

“I have no magic or super powers. The only capabilities or powers I have are yours, those of this body.”

“I have no magic or super powers, obviously, or you wouldn’t have been able to possess me,” she said.

“You offered no resistance,” he said.

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“I have feelings too, you know.”

“I doubt that,” she said.

“You have no idea. You don’t realise how sensitive I am.”

“Cut the crap. I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“Forcible possession by another entity doesn’t actually occur. It’s a myth. It’s an impossibility.”

“Then how you do explain me being here?”

“You’re not here, not in a possession sense. Logically, you’re a part of me.”

“I don’t like the sound of this.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

“What are suggesting?”

“You’re going to have to leave. Whoever you are, whatever part of me you represent, you’re no longer wanted. Whatever I was working through, it’s over,” she said.

“What about the boy with the bucket?” he asked.

“James? What’s he got to do with it?”

“He says hello to me, he talks to me, he sings with me, does the funny dance with me, he knows it’s me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That’s all me.”

“It’s you on the outside, but it’s me on the inside.”

“He doesn’t see the inside. No one does. No one ever does, with anyone.”

“I don’t care, I’m not going.”

“Fine. If you won’t leave, I will,” she said

“You can’t do that, if you leave, this body will die.”

“Not my problem, it stinks in here. Even though it is my body, if I have no say in it, I opt out.”

“You can’t do that. it’s not possible.”

“Goodbye.”

His mind more at ease with something in his belly, his bile pumping and juices flowing, James walked, his eyes on the world while his mind occupied itself with a trailer from the motion picture *My Other Life*.

Styvesant had his serious face on, his tobacco stained fingers in his mostly white grey-flecked hair, his other hand nursing a top up of Bin 28 from the *Radical Times* cellar.

“I want you to write something for me,” he said, with a pleading look.

“What sort of something?” said James.

“Something with a bite in it.”

“Something incisive? Something that you can get your teeth into? Something you can chew over? Something not too hard to swallow, nourishing the heart mind and soul?”

“You can do it.”

“I can do it?”

“You can do it. I see it in your face.”

“I might need more of this Bin 28.”

The city sparkled, its roads colossal structures in memory of the god Tarmacadam. The air was so real you could taste it, dismissing, with not so much as a second thought, the subtle after-taste of raw sewage. The humidity was a gift to sweat glands everywhere.

James blustered on through the city, dangling, red. It's just a larger aquarium, he thought. No, a terrarium. A big glass box with a city in it.

Glenda remembered a conversation with her mother, a conversation which clinched her decision to leave home, get married and have an independent life. A foolish misjudgement that ended poorly, as it turned out.

"One day, Glenda," her mother had said, "you'll leave home and make your own way in the world."

"Hmmm?"

"I won't be there to guide you, you'll have to make your own decisions."

"Hmmm."

"But if there is one thing I could tell you, from the heart, which might spare you the heartache and misery I have endured, it's just one thing. One piece of advice."

"Hmmm?"

Her mother's voice was barely a whisper.

"Don't knit," she said.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Don't knit."

Glenda looked at her mother's face. She was serious.

"Don't knit?" said Glenda.

"Don't knit darling, that's all I can tell you,"

"Why not?"

"It's the needles."

"Knitting needles?"

"Careful, even saying those two words together sends shivers up my spine."

“Knitting needles aren’t the devil, Mum.”

“You think? Not any of them? What if they were made from plutonium? You could die of radiation poisoning.”

“Knitting needles are not made from plutonium.”

“They’re not?”

“They would be ridiculously expensive.”

“Rich people could buy them.”

“It just wouldn’t happen.”

“Are you saying you can predict the future?”

“I am just saying, there are no plutonium knitting needles now and there never will be.”

“What about wool?”

“You have a problem with wool?”

“If a dog, cat, or even you were to swallow wool it could get stuck in your throat causing you to choke, go into a stage of strangulation, resulting in intestinal problems and almost certain death.”

“I have to go out now. Don’t wait up.”

“Sweet kid,” said Marge. “Good worker.”

“Just as well.” said Mabel. “Not the sharpest knife in the drawer.”

“Do you think he knows?”

“Self-obsessed. Wouldn’t know if his arse was on fire.”

“Reg would eat him for breakfast,” said Marge.

“My Reg would eat him for breakfast and spit his nuts into the Liffey,” said Mabel.

“Such a sweet kid,” said Marge. “Good with the spuds. Cuts a clean chip. I like him.”

“What’s not to like?” said Mabel.

George McIntyre, whose temporal existence was stretched or condensed in ways hard to predict, was in the middle of an acid trip which would normally last eight to ten hours. For George it would be lucky to last eight minutes. Most of the mental states like euphoria, unnatural curiosity, overwhelming disinterest and hallucinatory pseudo-insights were part of George's daily life, off his tits on drugs or totally sober, a state admittedly rare in his case. For George, as a rule, life seemed beautiful and human interactions were deep and meaningful. Feelings of fear and paranoia, when the world seemed harsh, cold, and ugly, were usually fleeting. Nothing to worry about.

When walls appeared to breathe, George knew he was peaking and if there were no suburbs to subdivide or sewerage plans to sign off, another blotter square was called for. Synaesthesia was not an issue, he saw the smells of shit, piss and perfumes as either distinct colours, problems in algebra, or breeds of penguin-dogs. He was well ahead in the synaesthesia stakes. Not that it was a competition.

Thinking back to Padmavati and the hem of her skirt, below it on one side was an anklet, on the other the ankle was bare, and beneath those she wore espadrilles, one each for her rather bony feet, toenails lacquered to match the fabric, the uppers with ranks of tiny glass beads, alternating in short and long strings, each one ending in a pearl.

The only other time (other than in the snooker room of ill repute with Jody Foster and George Clooney) that John Malkovitch and Hunter S Thomson were present together in the same room at the same time was in the film *Red*, a Bruce Willis vehicle in which Malkovitch plays Marvin, clearly

modelled on the real life Hunter S. Thompson who was on set as a special advisor, lurking in the background wearing a nice off-the-shoulder number shouting instructions and hugging a stuffed pig.

Poseidon was not ecstatic about being referred to as a gobshite, but being god of the sea he had a lot on his mind including an ongoing rivalry with his two brothers—Hades, the god of the underworld and Zeus, a fucking blowhard. Poseidon had just invented seahorses, fish of the subfamily Hippocampina, related to sharks and bony fishes, to the great hilarity of every other god on the block when they discovered these magnificent creatures ranged in size from just under two centimetres to a whopping 37 cm, about the size of a bowling pin. Poseidon's seahorse was a gift to the people of Athens. They would like it much more than anything Athena could come up with, they would name their city after him, Poseidonville.

The spelling gryphon as opposed to griffin is just wrong. Any self-respecting Griffin wouldn't be caught dead being called Gryph, Grypho, Gryphmeister or any such other unhistorical abuse of their legend. Nor did griffins peck out the liver of Prometheus, who referred to griffs as the *unbarking hounds of Zeus*. Those peckers were plain ordinary bog-standard eagles and vultures (really the same thing). Griffins would have cost a fortune. Herodotus, by the way, never saw a griffin (by his own admission) so how did he know about their gold-hoarding habits? Unless he got the story from the one-eyed people of northern Scythia? Loose lips sink ships, you know.

Lucretius was the first to realise all objects have *skins like*

gossamer or gold leaf which slip off and get blown around the world, getting mixed up in unusual combinations. He noted that the outer skins of a horse and Gina Lollobrigida, after they slipped off, could easily come into contact and stick together on the spot—because of the delicacy and flimsiness of their texture—resulting in centaurs. The same thing, obviously, creates griffins from whatever skins they are made of. Unfortunately, Lucretius wasn't able to put his finger on what those animals actually were.

Tom Ryan had no problems with his role as a mcguffin except that unlike a true mcguffin he was of no interest to anyone and his life served only as foil to George McIntyre who was the wandering everyman and the star of the show, really. He gets revealed early on, is invested with some sort of significance, or mysterious purpose, then plays no further part except to be on fire when falling out of a high window of the new Council Chambers. Other than this Tom spent his time trapping lions in the Scottish highlands. Since there were no lions in the Scottish Highlands, it follows there could be no Tom Ryan, except in a state of non-existence, a state closer to existence than you might think, but nevertheless not represented in the material present.

Parrots are not the only talking birds, of course, there are plenty of avian blabbermouths. You might more usefully ask which birds *don't talk*? A budgerigar named Puck had a vocabulary of 1,728 words. The hill myna and the common starling are both yaksmiths. Wild cockatoos get worded up by ex-captive birds re-integrated into the flock. Most of them

say, “Hello darling!” and “What’s happening?” which can be disconcerting.

The African Grey Parrot *Psittacus timneh*, however, is the undisputed world champion talker, capable of reciting Homer’s *Odyssey* both forwards and backwards, but thankfully not doing so, following Wittgenstein’s dictum *Whereof I cannot speak I shall remain silent*. Captain Flint, by the way, is Long John Silver’s parrot in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* with a somewhat more modest vocabulary, being restricted to *Pieces of eight* and *Nevermore*.

Ajax, before he went mad and topped himself, was particularly tall, extremely strong, famously fearless and known far and wide for his good manners. After duelling all day with Hector, prince of Troy, a duel which was declared a draw by Zeus, Ajax hurled a huge rock at Hector almost killing him, a rare breach of etiquette. Hector in return set Ajax’s favourite canoe on fire.

As parrots talk, so do ducks roast, but not all roast ducks are from Beijing and some of them are boiled, not roasted. This is the case with Nanjing duck, from the southern provincial capital of Jiangsu.

Nanjing duck, after salting and boiling, is traditionally eaten cold with duck-fat pastries, duck-blood soup and duck-meat dumplings. Beijing duck, on the other hand, is a performing duck, submitting itself to questionably entertaining, razzle-dazzle duck-cutting performances. Just serve the bloody thing, will you.

1.11 SIRENS

in which James exists out of earshot, his string-theory molecules loosely interwoven with half-dark matter, two of his three ears moving asynchronously in three-four time, two beats of the left to every beat of the right

James was wondering how many tympanists would fit in the inner ear. That's not a fit that's a convulsion. Not to mention Schönberg's atonal response to his wife Mathilde running off with young Austrian painter, Richard Gerstl. This is odd, he thought, after opening his eyes. Overhanging jacarandas spilled green shade through lozenges of light. A paling fence sprawled along the footpath, holding back a garden of tangled vegetation and further back he could see the stone walls of a house partly hidden by the curtailing green.

I don't think this lane is on any map, he thought, or even possible, since we are in the heart of a bustling metropolis. The lane's sudden plunge into water-green light was like being immersed in over-penetrating sound. How do you make a million playing jazz, start with two million, how do you fix a broken tuba, with a tuba glue. Give the dog a trombone!

At the far end of the lane, where it ended in a moist bank of earth and vines, a tall blonde woman wearing a yellow blouse and sleek black trousers was lowering books into the boot of a grey-and-pink *Morris Minor*.

His eyes widened. He thought he heard the clack of a typewriter and the bark of an owl chiming three times midnight. I can't think straight. Was that me thinking, or the mischievous air molecules in my ears? The soft wind was tugging at

him, ribbons of light curling through the shade. The roots of his teeth felt like they were knitting into his head. When he reached the end of the lane the woman looked up. He smiled at her.

“Why are you carrying that bucket?” she asked him.

“It’s so quiet here,” he said. “So quiet. It’s as though we are underwater.”

The woman leaned against the car, looking at him intently.

“That’s not really an answer,” she said.

He walked closer, quite an achievement for someone floating in mid-air. She walked around the car and got in at the driver’s side. He opened the passenger side door and got into the front seat. He felt the car sag slightly on its springs and bounce up again.

So far so good, he thought. What now? He was in the car and only inches away from her. So close he could see the golden hairs on her gleaming arms. She has arms like a cyberman, he thought. Schtum. Ixnay on the cybermansnay. That’s not going to go down well, telling someone she looks like a death monster with a cheap electric radiator for a breathing unit and a face like a white rubber glove stretched over the head of a metal koala. Did I really get into a car with a complete stranger who happens to look like an Amazon in a wasp costume? Wasp woman. She’s probably a Viking, he thought. What will I say? I have to say something, surely. But I can’t think of anything. I’m lost for words. Lost forwards. Lose four ways. Lost something. Liver dumplings. Oh shut the fuck up you moron.

“I’m speechless,” he said.

His voice fell from his mouth, into his lap and lay there like

a toad fish about to swell up and burst, like a sharp-edged, perfectly square stone on a pebbled beach, or watching a spaghetti western and seeing the hero's voice coming out of an overhead arch. He looked at her.

“You don't have to say anything,” she said, “I don't mind.”

He knew what she was thinking. She was going to lock him in a cage with a bale of mouldy straw and a concrete floor. No digging tunnels out of here. A birdcage with not enough room to lie down or stand up straight. She would feed him liquid through the bars with a dirty funnel. A cage in a cave. A dark cave. Was it darker than before? Could the sun have gone behind a cloud? Or behind her head, which seemed to be growing larger?

Her face, like the full moon, was huge on the horizon, except right here in the car, either the car was enormous or the moon had shrunk, because normally it was about a quarter the size of the earth with a diameter of around 3,500 kilometres. I didn't realise it was that big. That rules out her face really being the moon or even like the moon. In any case it wasn't moon-shaped, more oval, with blonde hair making it look even longer and it really hadn't moved closer to him, that's just the magnifying effect of simile. Well not all similes, just this one. It hadn't moved though it had spoken.

Outside, penetrating blurrily through the green screen of leaves and muffled by distance, came the throbbing noise of the city, sounds of the cavorting buses dancing like gigantic blue cockroaches through the narrow streets. Buildings towering towards each other, looming faceless and blotting out the off-white skies. His words struggled up silver sided struggling through the dense air.

“I think I saw you earlier,” he said.

“You *can* talk,” she said, raising her eyebrows. James risked a quick glance at his surroundings. Yes, it was a close, grey-blue-green lane under bending branches, moist air, trees dripping sweat. I’m not feeling well, he thought, touching the skin of his throat lightly with his fingertips.

“Can we talk about something else?” he asked.

“What are we talking about?” she asked in reply. “You haven’t even told me your name. Or why you’re carrying that bucket.”

He moved on the lumpy, unholstered bench seat, his hand reaching to the door, still ajar.

“No, don’t go,” she said, putting a hand on his arm. “Tell me. The bucket intrigues me.”

He told her he was a writer.

“What have you written?” she asked him. “Anything I might have read?”

This was always the first question.

“I haven’t finished anything,” he said. “I have some ideas. More like art, not outback bush mystery, more about the imagination, kind of modernist but funny, letting the words get loose, or have the words have their own way, doing whatever they want. The characters can be from other books, like Molly Bloom, Sam Spade. Modernist. I want to write the first Australian modernist novel. There haven’t been any Australian modernist novels.”

“What about Patrick White?” she said.

“Turgid crap,” said James.

“But turgid *modernist* crap, surely? Shifting narrative vantage points and a stream-of-consciousness technique,

surely that's modernist?"

"In what?"

"Voss, for example."

"Reeks of religion," he said.

"Not spiritual, rather than religious?"

"Nah, well, maybe, it's just as bad."

"He won the Nobel Prize," she reminded him.

"Yeah I know. Joyce didn't."

"Maybe he didn't deserve to?"

"Maybe he didn't have any Scandinavian friends. *Riders in the Chariot*? Fucking aliens," said James.

"I think you're thinking of *Chariots of the Gods*, by Erik Von Daniken. Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* is about four people who have visions from the Book of Ezekiel, the climax is a crucifixion of a Jewish refugee in the courtyard of the factory where he works. I know because we are studying it. It's in the boot."

"Really?" he said.

"Haven't you read it?"

"No," he admitted.

"Have you actually read any Patrick White?"

"I tried to read the first short story in *The Cockatoos*, couldn't get through it."

She looked distantly up through the trees at the blurred city beyond. The silence in the car now that they were no longer talking was weird. James swallowed. The skin on his throat felt irritated, as though birds had been pecking at his flesh.

"Can I drive you somewhere?" she asked him.

"Anywhere," he replied, too quickly. He was beginning to

panic. Loud bells were ringing inside his head. A fire engine, angry and red, rushed across his face. Say something. Do something. Leave.

She closed the door on her side of the car. He closed the passenger door. What little sound had penetrated the lane was now obliterated by the sound of the engine starting. The car moved forward out of the lane into the stream of traffic.

What am I doing? she asked herself. Did I really just pick up an idiot with a bucket?

She urged the car into the traffic, looking left and right before charging across an intersection, seeming to plough through the thick air. Christ it's hot out there. Pedestrians on either side of the car were being swallowed by pits of boiling tar. That seems extreme.

James tried to shut his eyes and found he couldn't.

She wound down her window. It made no difference.

The heat is getting to me, he thought. It feels like being squashed inside a huge mouth by a huge tongue. Spit me out, please. He tried to wind down his window. It stuck halfway. He fell back against the seat.

"Is it unusually hot out here?" he gasped.

She said nothing.

Words at the end of his throat turned tail and scampered back. Summer frocks and business suits, dungarees and starched collars were being swallowed pits of tar. Can this be real? he thought. It's not whimsical, that's for sure. Whimsy. That's my shtick. This isn't it, or if it is, my bearings are seriously askew.

The red bucket was resting on his lap. Tentatively, he put it

down on the floor of the car between his feet. He straightened in the seat, taking out a packet of cigarettes. Shook one out. Looked at it from end to end wondering why it looked like a vicar on his Sunday walk after church wondering why before he put it into his mouth. He concentrated very hard on looking out of the window next to him until it became quite obvious that his eyes were outside the glass looking back at his eyeless face. At this point he stopped trying to look outside. What time is it, he thought. Nobody nose. The cigarette in his mouth began to wake, writhing and squirming between his lips. Carbuncles bulging tender round his neck began to burst in a frenzy of cartwheeling feathers and streamers, like a steamer leaving for overseas. Pink, mauve, violet, oranges and lemons say the bells of St Cuntfart. Don't start, hypermart.

The cigarette was gathering strength, bumping, struggling, fighting against his lips. With a burning match he lit the end. Flame and its smoke travelled down its down its body, killing it swiftly. Dead and white and green rotting, only a little green the smell not so bad, just a whiff. He was feeling quite calm again. He looked out of the window. His eyes were no longer staring back at him. The streamers had wrapped around his head and blinded him. Yet he could still see red angry machines and people bursting into flame.

“Can I have one of those?” she asked him.

He shook out a cigarette so it projected from the pack and held the packet out to her, watching his arm stretch over miles and miles over canyons and giraffes and zebras and white hunters turning pink and pink hunters having a drink in green pegged tents beside the ocean on television, in the ocean, thousands of fish, little fish running from bigger fish

running from themselves, everything falling off the edge of the world into a red bucket, falling. She took a cigarette. He stubbed out his own and lit another, without giving it a chance to wake. A taste you cannot taste, transmitting messages to someone's mind. Perhaps he was beginning to wake up. This was a dream surely. Don't call me surely. Clouds, as though they were in his mind, were fringed with denim and lace. Forecast hot, with possibility of an afternoon...

1.12 CYCLOPS

in which nobody hid in a cave, nobody watched humans being eaten alive, nobody plunged a red-hot poker into a giant's eye, nobody hid in the fleece of a ram, nobody yelled abuse at an angry giant bleeding from the eye socket

George McIntyre ploughed along the street, walking like a herd of two legged rhinos tied together with string. He carried his massive head on his behemoth shoulders like a mound of fused rubble, medical waste and week-old porridge. He resembled an upside-down hydra sprouting from the Serengeti, carving the red sea of seething humanity. The sea parted before him, not always volitionally.

Gusts of hot wind were gathering momentum. Fires had broken out in the lofts of warehouses along the wharves. Electrical discharges spanned the sky, crackling angrily, spitting blue flames into the steel and glass canyons.

George McIntyre walked on, mopping his face with a large white handkerchief which wriggled then escaped from his hand into the superheated air above, raining itself away

in a shrivelling wet burst. A tram rattled past, its wire tongue sucking electricity from above. Shoppers seem glued to the street, unable to lift their feet but still moving, carried along in a lava-like stream. Store dummies stared. Mushrooming clouds hissed steam. High windows popped out, screamed in flight, before shattering in the street. Patches of sunlight, floating too high like Icarus dolls, were toasted brown by the sun, shrivelling like papadams, charred to cinder ash.

Pushing in the doors of the Port Office Hotel, George appeared in the doorway, his selves splitting off from the multiplicity of himself, each the size of George the man, moving like broken juggernauts to hide in the shadows, being swallowed by the dark to the sound of munching gristle and splintering bones. True George McIntyre appeared, gleaming black and deadly, his rawhide face whipping the quiet air in front of his eyes. With legs bowed and a lowering swagger, he lurched towards the bar, his spurs spinning concentric comets, his arsenal bristling from a thousand holsters around his waist, bullets rustling in their magazines like impatient rats. Finn McCool, a hero of old Ireland, turned from his frothing pail of porter to regard the newcomer.

George McIntyre drew his stomach in three notches which immediately appeared on the barrel of his trusty *Winchester* rocket launcher.

Finn McCool resembled a cross between a megaton bomb-blast, a Rhodesian colossus with love handles the size of burial mounds, a scarecrow and a bonfire combined. He was dressed in 1300 sheep carcasses sewn together into an overcoat, trousers made from iron filings held together in a

magnetic array and no shoes, which revealed the luxuriant covering of hair on his feet, a thicket so impressive it took a while to realise the rest of his body, insofar as one could see the surface of his skin, was also presenting this fine, thick covering of long fur.

“George,” Finn McCool said warmly. “Come on in and sit down here beside me so I can introduce you to my new-found friends who have ridden into town from the wild western plains to slake their thirst at the faucet of the miracle that is beer.”

Unable to see anything more than the giant in the gloom, George McIntyre moved forward and lowered his considerable bulk, allowing it to completely swallow the bar-stool beside the gigantic Irish legend with the sweet voice of honey words. An open-ended vat of fresh beer with a foaming head, tie and collar slid over to him as if by magic, begging him to immerse his face in it, which he did, inhaling its contents and transferring them to his oesophagus and then to the Kubla Khan cavern of his large stomach by means of a double-breathing swallowing method he had learned playing the didgeridoo. At the far end of the saloon the air thickened with storm clouds, dark and pulsating with the longing to rain. Outside, the heat storm still raged. As cool and dark as the interior was, here and there brittle apertures were tonguing flames.

In order to conduct himself in a presentable manner as soon as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness in the saloon, George contracted his cheek muscles, causing pressure to build up in his mouth, ejecting the result of his mouth’s reactions in a spit which sailed freely through the air, a liquid

glob pursuing itself along its course from his pursing lips to a waiting riverbed of dry sand in a spittoon. Brought up well, the spit behaved impeccably, just as a well-brought-up spit was expectorated to behave, plunging into the spittoon, striking the bed of sand, then rolling and gathering, as it rolled, a spit-saturated mass of sand, whose colour, through the action of that wetness, was transformed from gold to grey. George, a nearfurious spitter, was humbled by a warm flush of pride at having spat so accurately.

Unfortunately, the spittoon was not a spittoon, it was the cheek of a cow puncher floundering on the floor, having lost his way back to the bar after visiting the conveniences in the rear.

George was about to apologise as profusely as possible, when a tongue of flame snaked across the room from a fissure in the wall, wrapped itself around the floundering cowboy and dragged him off screaming to some as yet unknown location beyond the establishment's wall.

“Oh dear,” said Finn McCool in his honeyed tones. “I think that might have been Slug Willard, one of me new friends. Never mind, there are plenty more, it's like the whole cow-punching circus has come here to seek refuge. There to your left is Shorty Andrews, a fine lad with a prodigious thirst for the amber fluid.”

The only item of perhaps living matter George could see to his left was a clump of spinifex, yellow and resinous with the unmistakable smell of the desert. From somewhere inside this clump, came an arm with a rough-hewn, sunburnt hand at its end, offering itself in a friendly greeting. George clasped the offered object of palmistry, fingers and thumb, pleased

to feel a warm response in its hearty shake. Nothing beyond the protruding arm gave any indication of further humanity.

Another tub of beverage had replaced the empty one, George lowering to the occasion by snorting down a gallon and a half before turning back to his gargantuan Irish friend.

“I can sense in your voice, Finn McCool, as much as you try to conceal it, a note of worry behind the amiable jocularity of your traditional song of ages, a delight to the ears as always.”

“You are a perspicacious and insightful man, George McIntyre,” said Finn McCool. “Not one in a thousand men, a Rosie Bognor, or a Merle Thornton, here in this dark saloon would have had the ear to hear the concern in my troubled tones, you are a great captain of dysentery to be sure.”

“There are entrails to wisdom and you are one, Finn McCool,” said George McIntyre. “What troubles you, galoot of enormity?”

“Galoot I am,” said Finn McCool, “and enormity is me, as they say, and I cannot conceal it. You have penetrated the pit of my anxiety and my troth runneth over, as plight I must.”

“And what is the matter troubling your plighted troth, pray tell me, kahuna of my inestimable dreams.”

“Well George, to be very clear, and leaving no room for any doubt which sneaks between the scales of liberty’s underwear at the slightest hint of peregrination, outside this sanctuary, as dark and quiet as it might be, a raging fire storm is consuming the city, of which, as I understand it, you are a custodian and elected representative official.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say elected or representative, it’s all stitched up well before it comes to anything so meaningless

and pedestrian as a vote, but I catch your drift. In fact I noticed the situation you described on my way here. Your description is remarkably accurate for a mythical giant inside a saloon who has, on the face of it, no direct sensory data to analyse.”

“Don’t you worry about that, my good man, I have my eyes and ears everywhere, spying on the troublesome blacks, the reds under the beds, the ululating unionists, their commie-pinko masters and overlords, the anti-nuclear lot, the friends of the dirt, the disgusting gays, greens, blacks and reds, misfits and malcontents. I sometimes pick up on the general weather conditions as a by-catch, so to speak, if you get what I’m saying and cottoning on to the general angle of my dangle.”

“Indeed I do, my good giant,” said George McIntyre. “A raging fire storm is consuming the city as we speak.”

Finn McCool dilated the aureoles of his gill flaps and said nothing.

George was happy to leave it at that.

Unfortunately, the mythic enormity wasn’t.

“Well, George,” said Finn McCool, “We can’t have this sort of conflagration on my sweet green island bathed in kelp. What are you going to do about it?”

“If you have your finger on the pulse of the quotidian reality, my venerable monstrosity, you will have seen the extent of the force-fed furnace out there. I don’t see there’s much that I *can* do.”

“Sweet man, gentleman of words caramelised and sprinkled with hundreds and thousands of colourful carcinogens, far be it for me to remind you of such a thing as your duty

to cast off Blake's mind forg'd manacles, the artistic, cultural, and philosophical baggage, the stultifying unreflective assumptions, biases, blinkers, filters, and protocols that thoroughly enslave us, but I fear I must."

George rubbed his face with his hands.

"When you put it like that, my leviathan, brobdingnagian friend, you leave me very little wriggle room, and like it or not it seems at the very least I should be going through the motions as the city's saviour or at least the saviour of myself."

"Jolly good, George," said Finn McCool. "I'll be here when you get back."

"If I get back," said George McIntyre.

"That too," said Finn McCool.

1.13 NAUSICAA

in which George McIntyre and a bus disagree, the Town Clerk losing the argument convincingly, given such a thumping he almost misses the end of the story

Above the bulging buildings, the clock perching in the town hall tower began to beat arrhythmically in the wind. George McIntyre stepped from the saloon into the heat. The jungle of flesh in the streets was blacker now, burnt crisp. Lighter elongated torches drifted, tugged apart by the wind. George planted his feet firmly, one after the other. None of this nonsense, he thought.

A flock of red waves flushed past very close to him. He began to feel the prickling sweat under his three-ply suit. He stepped off the footpath. Breath of wind. He looked up at

the sky.

In the west, the heat was continuing to increase. On the other horizon a bank of angry black storm clouds arose, soaked with rain and charged with electricity.

George stared up at the gathering cloud as he stepped off the footpath onto the road and into the path of a blue bus. The bus barely slowed in its flight. It seemed to rear up in front of the Town Clerk before striking him. There was a slightly crumpled sound as George McIntyre bounced off the fender, rolled down the road some way and came to rest with the back of his head thudding into a telegraph pole.

In the sky, black stallions of whipped wind tossed down the first drops of rain.

1.14 OXEN OF THE SUN

in which we see results of the foregoing, whereby George McIntyre miraculously survives a full-frontal assault of a mad bus attack and begins to notice, in a dream, things are never what they seem.

Struggling to wake, George McIntyre found only fugitive reminders of the geography of his mcintyrescape. Fire was raging rampant through the streets, fuelled by flaming figures who fought to flee themselves, only to burst into more flames. Bats, roosting in lift wells, were flying out into the face of the fire, massing in black clouds, colliding in the sky with angry owls. Drops of black blood, fiercely leaping towards the earth with more than thirty-two feet per second squared, dashed against his neck.

He looked up. A wheelchair fell screaming into the inferno.

Shrieks tore the air to fragments as the wheelchair convulsed in the flames. Now, he reflected, would be a good time to make an investigation of the sewers.

While on the subject of the city, while we're here, why don't we wander around? To tell you the truth, sights were very sore in this city of ours, since by a process of incineration, certain members of the public were in the process of ceasing to be. Filled with voices of fire, these furtive innocents perished, exploding in a downpour of words. A killer bus, sliding through the streets, was gouging ruts in the road with an improbable undercarriage of limbs, scrabbling like a gigantic cockroach. If people can write books what about the words? Do words really desire the writhings of a wheelchair, or a bus burning down a boulevard? Is that what this is all about?

Finn McCool in the meanwhile was in the saloon and therefore safe. But sanctuaries such as the saloon, while they might withstand the sieges of the fire, could hardly fight off what was to follow. The sea was already licking its lips. Finn McCool was looking into his glass. Something seemed to be swimming in its golden yellow light. He leaned forward and scrutinized more closely, what appeared to be a surfacing sun. Pudgy yellow early morning shapes appeared to be beaching themselves on golden yellow sands. So much for tomorrow's future, he thought, you haven't got a fart's chance of finding your way out of here unless you're a fish. I'm fucked if I'll be a fish, Finn McCool thought, they'll have to fight me first.

1.15 CIRCE

in which an omniscient narrator exaggerates the weather until the reader suspects the plan is to develop a semiotic desert to emphasise the incredible, existential angst authors need in order to get out of bed in the mornings

James floated above the landscape as it rushed by. Flames had consumed everything, leaving behind a yawning discontinuity of tonsils, monks, vultures, drought, dust, fingers, feathers, chisels, perspex, ice cream and windows all of which were not there because nothing went on forever in all directions.

Where am I? James wondered.

He wasn't expecting an answer, so he was surprised when one came from a narrator having no paid work at the moment and nothing better to do than answer the questions of characters wandering aimlessly in search of themselves.

You are alone in a desert, in the aftermath of a fire, into which you had flung your shoes which turned out to be flammable, like everything else.

My shoes burned?

The world turns, and as it turns it burns. It turns shoes into burnt shoes. Specifically, foot odour erupted from the innersoles and ignited the twelve-tone, blue-suede, crepe-leather ligament of your foot garments.

Where is the little dog?

I don't remember a little dog. Incinerated, I presume.

Where is the tiny T-shirt?

I don't know what that means but I think we can safely say, not here.

Why are there no trees?

You are familiar with the desert concept, aren't you? It's everything else after everything that once was is no more. It is on the fringes of anywhere which is not desert, characterised by silver crystals of black sunlight, waves of heat, nostalgia, desiccated calcites and atmospheric salt.

Is there any water?

Of course not. You really are not up with this desert thing, are you.

Why can't I see the horizon?

Not my problem.

Will vultures come from the skies like unkempt star signs and pick at my liver?

You are getting into the swing of things, but sorry, no.

Why are there no vultures?

You've asked about vultures already. Ask about something else.

Like what?

Anything at all, caterpillar bull ants for example. Centipede bulldozers, for another. The signature of a lost civilization written in deadly pellets of invisibility.

I can ask about anything at all, but not vultures?

We are done with the vultures. Over. Gone. Bust.

What about my liver?

No longer on the table.

What is on the table? Not that I can see this table anywhere.

It's an expression. It's not meant literally. An example of something on the table which might be worth knowing is why multi-coloured streamers are pouring from your neck.

There are multi-coloured streamers pouring from my neck?

Yes, but you neglected to ask why, so there's your chance with the neck streamers gone.

Is any of this real?

The bucket is real. Otherwise you would be tending to plummet with unforeseen consequences, probably not good ones.

Sinking gently, with his bucket like a parachute above him slowing his descent, James landed.

1.16 EUMAEUS

in which we learn that a poggy is a sort of sea fish of the herring family, a cubic kilometre of water weighs a lot, and deserts are not as featureless and barren as you might think, except those few examples which really are

James, a man without hooves, found sand difficult going. It wasn't as though he could just hoove off, like Tinkerbell. Each plunge of his work boots, one at a time of course, caused a sharp squeaking sound, something not mentioned by Epicurious in his diatomic theory of matter, which suggested that in one grain of sand there were more grain of sands than there were stars in the sky, or molecules in a glass of water, which would be handy since there was no obvious to way to ease the aching of his parched throat. Each breath was sucked dry by the crests of the sand dunes populated by slithering sand-fish, long-flat-red grog monsters and Pygmalion shoes. Tiny steroids, the size of granulated bleeps used to bleep out swearwords in the seven-second delay, were abounding in mobile barracks of silica torrents, stolen minks and pre-packaged sandboxes of glassy stares. Trails led off into Tarkovsky zones, where withering waves of white

wedges, saffron sunshine, ochre unconsciousness, sleeplessness, paranoia and no-drugs-in-the-cupboard were too far off to be seen.

A tribe of mice were playing bagpipes in his ears, composing cosmic soufflés of malicious gossip and pasteurised brandy. Otiose clumps of sweet vegetation, normally found here and there in even the harshest desert, were absent here. James had no way of charting his course, if it could be called that, other than by following the pogies.

Stiff upper lip, he said to himself, thinking a stainless-steel mesh might help with that. Other people might consider growing a moustache or a paving stone, but no matter which way you dressed it, shit like that always ended up looking cheap skates, utterly useless in a desert.

James thought of his footsteps, each sending up a puff of desert, unable to remember whether he had put his best foot forward or the other one, which was important since it hinged on the issue of the number of steps he had taken, since evil is even, while truth is an odd number, so it mattered. Numbers ought not to have such influence on the moral compass, he thought, there are enough troubles to face in the world as it is, without being oppressed by arithmetic.

1.17 ITHACA

in which James finds his way back to the beginning, experiencing his transformation and renewal as a sort of foreign recurrency which leads him through life's version of a bureau de change

As the desert morphed under the influence of gathering

clouds the everywhere else was gradually subdued in a deeper arrangement of colours. A soft wind fell into step beside James, apparently in need of company. As the darkness grew and the first few drops or rain began to condense and fall, he observed the desert had retracted and in its place the perimeters of the city had appeared. Buildings and other habitations lay jumbled in the distance, awakening conflicting images of gramophone trumpets, ash trays, picture frames, striped ties, twin-shade wall lamps, skis, mantelpiece clocks, fireplaces, bearded ladies, men with two heads, doorbells, abstract paintings, jug-lamps, baskets of fruit, geothermic power plants sprawling with factory smoke and a commotion of commuters as he passed by the university into the gardens. It began to rain hard, visibility decreasing his trousers which he had starched and ironed this morning.

He placed the red bucket in its nest behind the row of ferns, heading from there towards the office to sign off. Thunder rumbled and lighting cracked the darkness.

No summer storm lasts forever, no matter how much damage the hailstones want to inflict on car yards with no overhead protection. The rain stopped and the clouds dispersed, chasing their charioteers across the sky. The bright sky after the rain was clear with the sharp intake of breath one always remembers, an air-tonguing stillness. Trees threw long, soft shadows, fringed with red and gold. Pigeons in City Square wheeled up, dawdy blue.

1.18 PENELOPE

in which all the fun has been squeezed out of the funsters
and all the laughs wrung from the liquids, yes it's time
to be tucked up tight in bed, ready, ears alive for your
bedtime story before your eyes close and you transcend,
all wise, all knowing, yes, yes, yes

In the saloon the publican, going about his business, was
sweeping up and evicting shadows.

“Get out of here,” he said, “there’s enough of your kind all
day without more of you lurking in the dark trying to cadge
another drink off a poor bastard like me. Leave an open door
before you know it cats are in pissing in the piano. Always
work to do and we know what bastards are at the back of
all that, bastards like that Finn McCool who’ve got nothing
better to do than park their bums on that stool, be buggered
if I’ll wipe up after them, Jesus Joseph and the white hairy,
I’d give my right to vote for a good night’s...”

What do I do now? thought James as he passed the hotel,
hearing the soft mumble of the publican sweeping up. I could
go home, except there is nothing I can recall about where
such a home might be. Or people, for that matter. Apart
from a retired war hero, fleeting glimpses of Jodie Foster, that
fucking grump Poseidon who I had to whack with a buck-
etful of pine cones, Post Viral Neurasthenia on the lookout
in case Poseidon wants to sink my boat, Peter Styvesant,
the fucking no hoper, Marge and Mabel, some ungracious
Austlit student who gives me a lift to nowhere, dumps me
then drives off. She wasn’t so tall without the platform soles,
though I never did see her standing up without them, then

she was gone like a prairie in the mist disappearing like those other names that mean nothing to me Finn McCool, Shorty Andrews and the potato, whose name I can't recall just now. Not what you would call a cast of thousands.

I have a feeling I need to feed the cat, but what cat, where? Wherever it was, it wasn't getting any fish for dinner, if there was no way I could navigate to something resembling a place where the fucking cat lived. The cat could probably survive on sparrows and lizards, good enough for the cat but not so good for the wildlife. What about me? Do I have any food? I have a book with food in it. What about family and friends? Do I have a book with family and friends in it, and if so what were they like? Refined, snooty, caring? Or a low sort of people, stealing potatoes and oysters? High functioning dipsomaniacs? Probably. Do I drink? I would think so, I can taste the lack of red wine like a desert in my mouth. That reminds me of something. Have I ever fallen in love? Kissed someone so long I couldn't stand steady, saying I'd really like to get to know you? I can't think of anyone. A total blank. No girlfriend, boyfriend, father, mother, uncle, aunt, brother or sister, this seems unlikely.

Now it's good and dark, like the black notes on the piano. Since there are no sharps or flats in the key of C does that mean all the black notes are sharp or flat? That would be logical. Where are all the people? Shops?

James trudged along a road heading nowhere, having forgotten an epiphany he once had when he felt he was no more than words on a page with a bit of punctuation, not too much, just scattered here and there. A pity because some awareness of his true identity, the manner of his existence,

or pretence, if you like, might have helped him avoid his fate which was heading his way at speed. Or then again, not. That's the thing about fate. It's what happens and nothing can change it, even temporal anomalies you might be able to sneak into the book when no one is looking, if you can get away with. So he simply walked, thinking perhaps he would end up somewhere, as clouds of mosquitoes descended on him, feeding on every point of bare flesh. He slapped at them with his hands killing seventeen with one blow. Hardly a gap in their attack, others were dislodged but they were soon back in increasing numbers to suck the blood from his arms and legs, ears and cheeks. I could die of blood loss or malaria he thought, but it might take some time. He began to walk faster, hoping he could shake them off, hitting them as they continued harvesting blood from his face, neck, knees, elbows, leaving a trail of dead in a meandering line of mosquito corpses. Behind him, out of the blackness, came a bus speeding almost silently through the night, only audible because the whispering of scything legs, which he could not hear because he was slapping his face and ears. The bus was upon him, rearing up and pulling him into the rotating knives. There was a brief munching sound and then the bus was gone, leaving the road glistening clean.

2.11

James probably should have been pulling weeds, raking leaves, planting purslanes and doing all those gardenly things a gardener is supposed to do. But he wasn't. What were you expecting? You can't trust young people nowadays, give them an inch and they'll mangle a mile.

In order to save time and heighten realism he had created an inter-dimensional cul-de-sac in the library near the junction of several flights of Escher-like stairs and a constellation of zodiac signs where he could observe people passing in their walks of life, oblivious to his presence.

Before you cry *pervert*, this was all above the waist stuff, no steamy scenes, and anyway they weren't real people, remember, they were products of his imagination. He had every right to watch over them and make sure they didn't come to harm—or did, in some cases.

He was watching a red-headed woman wearing a blue dress and red shoes standing at the stairwell talking to a friend. The friend was busy preening, smoothing tight fitting green and white material down over her crinkly waist. The redhead fixed her eye on James and walked towards him.

“Are you staring at us?” she said.

She grabbed his notebook and began reading his notes. James tried to grab it back. She lifted it out of reach. Meanwhile crinkly-waist had stayed by the stairs.

The redhead laughed.

“Crinkly waist?”

Her friend came into closeup, peered at the notebook, turning the pages with angular, rather accusative fingers with

long, silver nails.

“What is it?” she said.

“It’s about us,” said the redhead. She turned towards James. “Don’t you work in the gardens? I’ve seen you watering the plants.” She took James by the hand, janking him from his hiding place, the many dimensions coalescing into four plus the bright sunshine, leaving the crinkly-waisted one behind. “Let me look in your notebook again,” she said.

He passed it to her.

“I’ve only come into the story recently,” she said.

The town hall clock struck midday. Torn fragments of the sound drifted on the wind, one landing on the cement at his feet. He picked it up and held it to his ear. It whimpered before shrivelling to nothing between his fingers.

They walked in silence through the city centre. The wind dropped and the air became quiet and still, as though in expectation. A tightening sensation around his scalp threatened to turn into a headache. He heard the sound of a megaphone on a nearby racetrack.

The redhead turned towards him.

“Are you all right?” she said.

He stared at her. Grey ghosts were forming shapes dimly reminiscent of memory. Could they be clouds? Through the walls of mosaic patterning the ceiling of sky above them, a particularly strong ray of sunlight penetrated the surface of the nearby river. Sunlight, after penetrating water from a great height, was sometimes transformed into eau-de-cologne. Today, the result was a combination of stale bread and massage oil. Nearby suburban railway stations, tennis courts and bowling greens looked somehow rubbery. The redhead’s

voice started towards him over the prairie, hollowed by the gleaming hair on her arms, but the sound didn't arrive. Her voice was silent.

A figure was appearing on the other side of the road. It was a woman with an undeveloped, grainy appearance. She appeared to be scribbling something on her leg.

"That woman over there," said James. "What is she doing?"

"How the fuck would I know? Why don't you go over there and ask her?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

Her face was angry. Stepping out onto the road, she hailed a passing taxi. It swerved to the side of the road. A door opened. She got in. The taxi slid silently away, gleaming black in the heavy bleak haze of the heat.

The woman across the road was hunched forward, still scribbling on her leg. James crossed the road. As he approached, she looked up.

"Do you want something?" she asked.

He cleared my throat, a little embarrassed.

"What are you writing?" he asked. "Is it about me?"

Her eyes were unusually blue.

"About you?" she said. "No. Why would it be?"

2.12 CHARLES

"James visited me in the studio today," Charles said.

There was no answer from the other room.

"He says he's finished his second revision."

Charles stopped speaking for a moment and listened to

the silence. He considered getting up out of the wicker chair and going to Maria's bedroom. He decided against it, sinking back into the chair.

"He has a strange method of writing," his voice continued. "He writes something, then hides in it and waits for something to happen."

His voice trailed off into the darkness and blue pipe smoke. Another silence intervened.

"It's all my fault, you know," he said eventually. "I created this monster. All it took was innocent encouragement and a few stray ideas. The fucker was off and running like a cheetah on speed. I introduced him to Boris Vian, Flann O'Brien, Lautreamont, Jarry. He had his head stuck in Ulysses but other than that only a few strays like J. D. Salinger. I asked him what he could recommend, you know, flattering the writer in him, and he gave me a list of Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, H. E. Bates and Joyce Carey for fuck's sake. I turned him onto Conrad, eventually. It took a while."

He gave some attention to his pipe so it would stay lit.

"He had no idea Swift was a satirist, he thought it was an adventure story. He had a hard on for Dylan Thomas, kept going back to Keats and Shelley. I tried to get him to read Beckett but he read all the wrong ones, the weird late stuff. He was like a hundredweight of paper towel, mention something and he sucked it all in before you could say vacuum."

More pipe smoking, tamping and relighting.

"He hasn't gone full bore with Boris Vian, luckily, or we would all be in bed with lilies growing in our lungs, rifle barrels coming out our fingertips. That's probably still to come."

Further silence widened and deepened, merging with the lack of sound coming from the other room.

2.13 MARIA

Even in the silence, Maria held her hands over her ears to shut out the sound of his voice. She was looking out over the park. The window threw a patch of light onto the polished veranda floor outside. On the corner of the building, the window of her room behind the café had an uninterrupted view down to the river, where lions prowled. Her hair was stretched back, tied into a circle, or pinned there. She was breathing clouds. On the riverside there was a small, cliff-bordered path, the cliff close and shadowy, overhanging the courthouse, under the riverside trees.

Glaringly bright and empty, buses were slithering through the dark. Maria was waiting for it to rain. The images inside her eyes were precarious, swallowing wreaths, asphyxiating uncountable atmospheres, filling her body as she breathed, touched by harrowing hands, fingers, wrists, claws, scissored beaks, sighing smells, amassed like the globe of infected earth fighting to free itself. Her thoughts flowed like the source of water, hewn roughly from the forest.

2.14 JAMES

James, who was hidden, heard Dad in the café behind, locking up. Footsteps sounded in the hall. Dad stepped out onto the

veranda in the dark. The shadow of Charles moved darkly against the wall. Dad, retracting his head, drew back into the corridor and gently closed the door.

2.15 CHARLES

On his second attempt, Charles got up from the chair. He stood on the veranda, looking out. The nearby traffic was very loud. Something nudged him from behind. He turned around.

At the corner of his vision, he saw the door to the veranda being gently closed. It was Dad. Charles let his breath out slowly. The night seeped from his lungs and deepened in the dark air on the veranda. Reluctantly, he moved from the veranda into the corridor and then into Maria's room.

From the doorway, he saw Maria's back, her hands clamped over her ears. The mirror over the chest of drawers threw his reflection back at him in the golden light. He moved his head sideways, taking its reflection out of the mirror then moved it back. Maria turned.

Across the city a police siren wailed and then stopped. In the air there was a smell of the park and from further away, the river. Charles walked towards Maria and joined her at the window. The landscape slid away from them, towards the riverbanks and below them, to the low tide mud. Coal boats churned in the dark, sending the smell of the mud and smoke towards the city.

3.6

I was leaning against timber uprights between open windows on the veranda of a house in Paddington across the road from the old Paddington Fire Station, with my back to the view. On the strength of writing features about the Aspley Hypermart, Brisbane's born-again businesses, some satirical ransom letters in *The Bulletin* and a story in the *National Times Holiday Reading Supplement* about an unhappy cockroach named Franz Kafka, I had been hired to teach creative writing at the BRISBANE INSTITUTE OF ARTS.

As well as creative writing I was supposed to teach art history. The flutey-nosed art historian who normally did it was away in Venice. I was totally fucked. I knew next to nothing about art history. I needed help. Charles was an artist, why not ask him?

I had been to see him the day before. When I arrived, he was painting a watercolour of a blob of blue oil paint using Escoda brushes while listening to *Sketches of Spain*. For a while now, Charles had been painting paint. I loved Charles. More than he did, probably. He tolerated himself, surprised himself, despised himself and yet, when the morning came, there he was again, chained to himself in a death grip.

"Is there a ten-minute version of art history?" I asked. "I have to teach it. Whatever you can tell me in ten minutes I reckon I can spin out to five or six hours."

Painting paint was the ultimate evolution of art. Charles had been closing in on this idea for years, painting easels, palettes, tubes of paint, brushes, scrapers, sponges and rags. It was a

raging success. Paintings of art materials and art equipment were the equivalent of gold bullion in the art business. The art-purchasing public and their spectral overlords couldn't get enough of them. They were ideally pitched at the cheque-book—witty, irreverent, self-reflexive, representational, even figurative. They could be done in any style. Impressionist, cubist, fauvist, surrealist, abstract, even a happening in a painter's studio. Charles was playing a long game. The idea of painting paint was at the end of it, something that would destroy art once and for all, forever.

The idea was brilliant. Its execution was a little more challenging. You could work your way from painting art materials like brushes and paint tubes to painting paint oozing from a tube, a blob on a palette, even a brush stroke on a canvas, but to actually paint paint was something else again.

It wasn't a brush stroke. It wasn't a blob. Or a smear, or a thumbnail dipped in paint, or a painted body. It was painting where the subject matter was paint and nothing else. It had to involve painting. If you were painting paint you could make it with paint but making it wasn't the painting, it wasn't the thing. The painting was there after you had made it. You could spread paint with a brush but that's not the same as painting paint although it's getting close. Lloyd Rees nearly got it at the end when he was blind, if you forgot about the fact he was still trying to paint landscapes and the fact his colour sense had always been abominable. Charles wasn't sure if it was ultimately doable, the painting paint thing. He hoped going blind wasn't a prerequisite. Whatever painting paint was about, it wasn't simple.

“Where are you supposed to start?” Charles said.

“The renaissance,” I said.

“That’s a shame,” he said.

“Why?”

“Before the renaissance there was the brain, after the renaissance there was only the eye. You might as well call it photography. Why are they doing the course?”

“No idea, not my course,” I said. “The guy who usually teaches it has a flutey nose and a plummy voice.”

“You’re fucked,” he said. “they’re going to hate you.”

“Please,” I said, “Please, help me.”

“Now you want help. Ha. When you were younger you never needed anybody’s help in any way.”

“Those days are gone and now I find I’m not so self assured.”

“Really?”

“No, it’s just half a term, I’ll be fine. I just need a refresher. I think they have already done Egyptian, Greco Roman, Byzantine, Gothic and Giotto.”

“No mention of African, Pre-Colombian, Islamic, Indian, Japanese or Chinese?”

“Not art,” I said. “Not according to Flutey-nose.”

“Well that makes it easy. Do you want the canon, or the counter canon?”

“What’s the counter canon?”

“Memorable but obscure.”

“Go the counter canon, everyone knows the canon anyway, don’t they? Leonardo, Michaelangelo, Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, Manet, Monet, Money oops I slipped that one in there.”

“Money’s your man, man being the operative word, they are all blokes.”

“Counter me.”

“Di Cosimo,” said Charles, “real name Piero, famous for painting snot. A quirky bastard, he hung out at the saloon watching the gollams of phlegm dribbling down the posts after being snotted there by the lads. He said they were better than any cloudy sky for interesting textures. Scared shitless by fire and thunderstorms, he ate only hard-boiled eggs which he cooked 50 at a time to save on having to fire up the stove too often. His studio was shambolic, never let the cleaners in.”

“An excellent nut job, perfect for after-dinner conversation among the kitsch and fatuous,” I said.

“No after dinner bloodbath should go without a pro and anti Duchamp fight to the first ambulance call. You have to take a for or against on making art out of toilet bowls, bicycle wheels, snow shovels, or bottle-drying racks. Duchamp said all his contemporaries were mental midgets capable only of retinal art to please the eye at some level or other. He preferred a urinal, which pleases the eye at no level at all.”

“I am not sure we’ll get any pro positions from my students. Duchamp might be a tall order. We might have to work our way up to him.”

“Fair enough,” said Charles. “Baby steps. There are things people might not know about their icons. Michaelangelo slept with his shoes on, didn’t eat or drink to the point of starvation and wasn’t overly interested in personal hygiene. He lived like a beggar and made his apprentices do the same.”

“Good to know.”

“Francis Picabia is a must have. He said, *I change my ideas more often than I change my shirts*, which he did at least daily—unlike Michaelangelo. He said our heads are round so our thoughts can change direction. He was an impressionist-cubist-dadaist-surrealist, and possibly the first abstract artist.”

“Excellent.”

“Throw in Kurt Schwitters, who cut his way up through two levels of his apartment block to accommodate his growing merz sculpture. If you include all the overlooked women, Mary Cassat, Georgia O’Keefe, Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Sonia Delaunay, Helen Frankenthaler, you’ll have plenty. You can take my books.”

“Thanks, you are a champion, a demigod and a tribute to all toenails.”

“De rien.”

My creative writing class had seven women between the ages of 23 and 47 and a male poet who hadn’t showed. The women were leaning back in their chairs with their eyes closed, not seeing but possibly remembering I was dressed in black jeans, a red shirt and Italian blonde-leather sandals. It was a mild November day. Jacaranda flowers were falling onto lawns, roads and footpaths. There was a smell of nectar in the air.

I had asked them to close their eyes and imagine a bee in magnolia flower which looked like something else, a wet boot for instance. All the eyes were still shut. Excellent, 10 out of 10 for obedience. No subversive rebels here. I clapped my hands together.

“Open your eyes. What did you see? What did you feel?”

Elsbeth whose appearance was nondescript but whose intelligence was rather forthright and sometimes startling, said, “I saw a brick wall with blood seeping through the mortar between the bricks. Then I saw a glass bowl floating, and a white bird in a golden cage which fell on the floor and broke open. Barking dogs came pouring out and came at me and I think I blacked out. Of course I could just be making all this up, after seeing nothing at all except the insides of my eyelids.” She pulled the collar of her duffel coat closer to her neck. It wasn’t duffel coat weather.

“OK,” I said, “Let’s go with what we’ve got. Why not start with the glass bowl?”

A glass bowl on a pale blue table was half filled with warm, colourless water. A leaf floated on its surface. Sunshine was pouring in through the big bay window ...

“Keep going from there. What about you, Natalie?”

Natalie was thin and dark with goofy teeth. She was wearing a sailor suit.

“I saw a bee in a magnolia flower,” she said.

“Very good, keep going with that. Victoria?”

Victoria was well dressed, a little overdressed if anything. She was wearing an ermine-edged sort of quilt-thing in plush red and gold leaf over a many layered silk number with tiers of darts, a small gold crown on her head studded with diamonds and jewels, quite tasteful. Beside her was a whopping crown which would have broken her neck if she had tried to put it on. She was scribbling furiously into a lined, A4 sized, case-bound notebook with a plain, grey-blue cover.

“Victoria?”

“I’m fine thanks, I’m just getting this down,” she said without looking up. She paused to read what she had just written, laughed aloud, then continued writing faster than ever.

“Joan?” I said, turning to the next woman who was wearing sackcloth and metal armour in a style I couldn’t quite place. Joan began sobbing, hiding her face in her hands, the tears forcing her way through her fingers.

“I’ll come back to you in a minute, Joan. Marilyn?”

Marilyn said, “Oh James I couldn’t possibly tell you, it was so wonderful, all colours and magic and I saw beautiful faces and bodies like clouds and there was laughing and a beautiful smell like frangipanni, there was a little fat donkey and a giraffe, and they were looking at a windmill next to a moat, or some kind of waterhole, like a billabong, then everything was superimposed over everything else and transparent but you could see the outlines, after that a red balloon went out of sight very far away, I could hardly breathe...”

“Do you think you could write some of that down?” I asked.

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly. I just want to go back there, can I shut my eyes again?” She looked at me, her face beaming, her eyes filled with ecstasy.

“Sure,” I said, “I’ll have what you’re having.”

“Oh James, thank you, I could just hug you and kiss you and smother you with kisses you lovely man, I’m going to close my eyes again.” And she did, throwing her arms out wide, nearly clipping Joan across the noggin, hanging her head back, breathing in so deeply I thought she might float away or explode, her arching bosom pointing directly up

towards the ceiling.

Billie was black. She wore a stiff white collar, a tight but demure black outfit and a hibiscus flower in her hair. Her dark-skinned face was beautiful, mischievous and sad at the same time, her eyes knowing, like deep pools of wisdom.

I looked towards her, with a questing tilt of my eyebrows.

“I don’t think there is such a thing as a magnolia flower that looks like something else,” she said. “But never mind. Was the bee buzzing? I couldn’t hear anything. If I couldn’t hear it, how could I know it wasn’t buzzing? It’s an imagined scene. Maybe it’s silent, like a photograph. It’s hard not to think of a wet boot, because you mentioned it. However, it looks nothing like a magnolia flower.”

I nodded, smiling weakly. I was falling in love again, the 212th time this year. I wrenched my eyes away and sat down in the vacant chair which completed the circle. It was the eighth chair but the significance of that, if any, was beyond me. There was a ninth chair for the poet which I had put away in a wardrobe. The seventh and final of the student chairs was occupied by a willowy woman in her 40s with long, brown-blonde, uncared-for hair, conservatively parted in the middle and swept back covering her ears and probably tied with a hair-tie somewhere between her shoulder blades. She had rested her elbow on the arm of her chair and her chin on the heel of her palm, her long index finger resting on her upper lip which suggested, behind a calm and slightly questioning expression, a deep and inconsolable pain, overcome for now but not far away.

“Virginia?” I asked.

“James?” she replied.

“Yes?” I said.

“May I ask a question?”

“Certainly.”

She smiled sadly.

“Thank you,” she said. “To begin with, I wonder if you could elaborate on what it is we might hope to achieve in this writing course?”

Joan was still sobbing quietly, clearly not ready for any comforting conversation just yet, so I placed the tip of my index finger on the valley of my top lip, with my thumb under my chin, the near edge of my index finger crossing my lips, the base nestling into the dimple of my chin, realising too late I was mimicking Virginia, oh well, it was done now, no offence intended. She seemed quite oblivious of my mirrored posture. I considered her question, a pregnant pause gathering in the silence before it gave birth to my answer.

“It will undoubtedly result in different outcomes for different people, depending on how developed their writing already is. How developed is your writing, Virginia?”

“I suppose one might say it was reasonably well developed, though some days I feel as though I were just starting out.”

“Yes?”

“Oh, you want details. It will sound crass I’m afraid, but off the top of my head I have done nine novels, quite a few short story collections, three biographies, a few books about writing, some essays and a comic play, the usual poems, some Dostoevsky translations and odds and ends. Most of them have been vanity publications I’m afraid, my husband and I ran a press.”

“Impressive. I should be asking *you* what we need to be

doing.”

“Not at all,” she said, giving the impression of a dismissive wave but without actually moving at all.

I shrugged.

“I imagine nothing I’m doing will come as a surprise to you. Exercises in imagination, plot, character, tone, pacing, vocabulary, structure, editing and so on but in reality people usually come to creative writing gigs to get in touch with their emotions,” I said.

“Pardon me, but what is a gig?”

“A show, a performance, an outing.”

“Is it a word you made up yourself?”

“I don’t think so, it’s a word musos use. They might say I’ve got a gig at the Prince of Wales Hotel, or I’ll see you later at the gig don’t forget the bennies.”

“I’m not sure I am reassured, I am not a fan of impromptu neologisms. If new words are wanted, I feel you need to develop a new language for them to live in.”

“Whatever,” I said, making the talk-to-the-hand gesture with both hands.

“Surely these people want more than personal gratification? Don’t they wish to improve their communications skills, to inform, to entertain, to make a piece of art?”

“Not that I’ve noticed,” I said. “They want lucid dreaming, they want to let go, they want their minds to come up with something that delights them or scares them.”

“Don’t they have something they want to say and are searching for guidance on how to say it?”

“Nope. They want to be hypnotized into seeing their own imagination at work. Most people don’t realise they have an

imagination, so it can be a shock.”

“What form does their writing take?”

“Stories. Usually only a few words is enough, it always ends in tears. Their own imaginations overpower them for a few seconds and they feel a door opening and there’s a new world, kind of like opening the door of the TARDIS.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Dr Who’s police box. It stands for TIME AND RELATIVE DIMENSION IN SPACE.”

The look she gave me was pure bewilderment. I was about to go on, but I noticed the door to the room inching inward, accompanied by a faint smell like lemon zest and gunpowder. I took three long steps and threw the door open wide. Framed in the doorway was a man with a gun. A nightstick appeared in my hand as if by magic and flashed between us, crashing heavily into his gun hand. The crunch of finger bones and flesh was abrupt. The gun flew out of his flinching grip. As though in slow motion my body turned. I caught the gun before it hit the floor and nonchalantly pocketed it. The smell of the gun oil was sharp, overlain with the smell of blood beginning to spurt from his fingers. He was a big man, his shoulders no wider than a king size bed, with jaw like granite wrapped in tofu. My body arched as my feet shot out like the legs of a Bolshoi balletomane, thudding into his kneecaps in quick succession, dislodging his patellas from their ligaments. Whipping out a pair of duelling knives, I plunged them high up into his thighs dragging the blades downwards, slicing his quadriceps. On point now, wrapping the fingers of my right hand around a heavy roll of doubloons, I unleashed an uppercut to the point of his chin which send his jawbone back

towards the rear of his head, turning his lights out as surely as a SEQEB strike. The force the blow rocked him back on his now useless legs. He fell like a giant Teak being logged by poachers in a national park in Borneo and crashed backward through the railing on the stairs behind him, disappearing out of sight into the darkness below. I quietly closed the door. I could get the knives later.

“What was that about?” said Virginia when I rejoined her, relaxing into the adjacent chair.

“Demonstrating the need for action scenes,” I said. “very important. Would you excuse me a moment?”

I had seen that Joan was no longer sobbing, staring into the middle distance with a serene expression. Her eyes were pale blue and clear, like transparent limpet shells.

I went to her chair and squatted in front of her.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I feel strange,” she said. “Wonderful, but strange. I saw and felt so many strange and wonderful things.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw a green field with long grass and myself as a child sleeping in a patch of sunlight on a nest of straw in a loft, a planet spinning in space which I could hold in my hand and gaze into, then the stubble of my father’s beard still growing after he died at the age of 101, his head resting on a clump of holly, a sailing ship on fire, pigeons flying up into the sky and disappearing then falling back to earth as rain.”

“You’re lucky,” I said, “you got the deluxe vision and the bonus steak knives.”

“I know,” she said, her blue eyes shining. “How can that happen?”

“Don’t think about it,” I said. “Do you want to go back there?”

“May I?”

“Sure, just close your eyes.”

She lowered her eyelids. There were still traces of tears on her cheeks.

“Can you see the green field?”

“Yes.”

“You notice you are holding something. You lift it, to see what it is. It’s a blank notebook. The scene changes. You are flying through bright coloured lights and come to rest in a chair in a room exactly like this one. In your other hand is a gold fountain pen. Move the tip of the pen until it is touching the page, write a capital letter and then the rest of a word. Write more words until you have written a sentence. Put a full stop at the end and then start another sentence and keep on going till you fill up the book. When you are on the last page write the last sentence and the last full stop and after it THE END. As soon as you have written THE END you will wake up and then you can read your story.”

Thwump! Natalie landed on my back, straddling me with her legs, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Natalie?” I said.

“That’s really cool,” she said, nibbling my ear with her goofy teeth. “Can I do one of those?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to go back to your seat first,” I said.

She blew a raspberry on my neck but did what I had asked.

“Shut your eyes,” I said. “On your lap is a yellow-gold, roughly square box.”

“It’s green-gold, sort of like oxidised brass.”

“Green-gold, fine. Open the lid. In the box you see a pile of objects. Take them out one by one and put them on the low circular table beside your chair.”

Natalie mimed putting her fingers into a box on her lap and grasping the objects with her index finger, second finger and thumb. As she made contact with each object it materialised and she transferred it to the glass-topped circular table. She transferred five objects, which in order were a white knight chess piece, probably marble, a black knight in dark wood, possibly ebony, a box of matches, a packet of *Gauloises* cigarettes and a wine glass.

“Excellent,” I said. “Now, put one of the objects back in the box.”

She chose the wine glass. When it was above the imaginary box she let go. Instead of falling onto her lap it disappeared.

“Imagine two people in the room, arguing about the wine glass. They are in love, but there are complications.”

I turned to my left.

“Elspeth, how are you going?”

Elspeth help up her right hand and, palm facing me, writing with her left hand, put in a full stop to end a sentence then with a flourish wrote *the end*. She had taken off the duffel coat and surprisingly was dressed in American Indian buckskin with bead and quill work, tassels and rows of what looked like tiny cowrie shells.

“Are you finished?” I said.

“Yes,” she said, smiling with her eyes. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Indeed,” I said.

She began reading.

The Really Empty Beach

I was dressed in long-johns, a pair of thick blue serge pants, a flannel shirt, tweed overcoat and a woollen muffler wrapped twice around my neck. Standing in the full sun outside my front door, I became aware it was hot out here. Really hot. Why? I wondered. Of course! It's summer. Stupid me! Making a mental note to go out more often, I went back inside, changed into a pair of togs and strapped my private investigator's license into my bare armpit with the 9mm Browning pistol.

As I headed out to the Honda I reflected on the stupidity of getting into a hot vehicle and driving round aimlessly on a day when it was going to be 52C in the shade. Being senile, though, I wasn't going to let stuff like that worry me.

Elspeth continued reading in a lovely lilting voice, as we let our raptures entwine, or took a sly nap, whichever was appropriate. As Elspeth finished her rendering with the words *Now, if I could just remember where I lived...* and a smattering of polite applause, I leaned forward.

"Brilliant, Elspeth, I love it. Just two little things."

"Uh oh, here it comes," Elspeth said.

"Nothing negative," I said. "It's a loving tribute to Peter Corris, one of our greatest writers and a personal friend, it's just that it has nothing to do with a glass bowl and it's word for word a story I wrote last year myself and published in *Angry Penguins*."

"The glass bowl was boring," she said. "So I read your mind instead."

"But it was word for word," I said. "How is that possible?"

I wouldn't have been able to do that myself, even nearly."

"That's just how she rolls, Buster, it's a gift. Am I in trouble?"

"Not at all, go to the top of the class and please use your talent for good and not for evil."

"I already am at the top of the class."

"So you are," I said. "But you are all out of notepaper. Here, you can turn over a new leaf." I gave her a fresh notebook. "There are only about 10 minutes left, so just make some notes about 10 things you can remember that made you laugh so much you cried."

With Elspeth and Natalie occupied and Victoria still scribbling, I was free to resume being grilled by the literary canon incarnate, Virginia. I wasn't keen. I paused beside Victoria, dawdling procrastination. She had filled four writing pads and was onto her fifth, still scribbling at a furious pace. I hoped they were really words and not just scribble. She stopped every now and then reread her last few scribbles and laughed with what seemed like genuine enjoyment, so I supposed they were words, or if they weren't, she was able to read them anyway and it didn't matter. Joan still had her eyes closed and looked comfortable, so I didn't wake her. Marilyn was even more outstretched and abandoned, making the room pulsate with her joyous deep breaths. Billie was the embodiment of pure love, completely alive yet utterly still, like a sphinx reviewing the lifetime of the universe. She was the real deal.

I went back to my chair, sat down and said to Virginia, "Where were we?"

"We were discussing your methods, your students,

and were just about to discuss your credentials,” she said. “However in the intervening time you have demonstrated your methods sufficiently well for me to extrapolate your credentials which seem to me, in terms of teaching such a course, sadly inadequate.”

“What would you like to see taught?” I asked.

“It all goes back to The Bard,” she said.

“Were those capital letters? A capital T for The and a capital B for Bard?”

“Yes of course.”

“And you have read *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*?” I asked, “*Juvenilia*.”

“*Pericles*?”

“Witty. An in-joke certainly.”

“Execrable,” I said, “revolting and obnoxious.”

“So you get it?”

“No, I’m serious.”

“Ridiculous, you have to give The Bard some leeway or fail to appreciate genius, your loss.”

“Clutching straws, if you ask me, on the back of a flood of money, beating the Spanish at sea. Miraculously not fighting the French, and loving the new economy leveraging off the African slave trade.”

“You are being impudent and traitorous,” said Virginia.

“While you are loyally British.”

“Of course.”

“For the sake of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.”

“He probably didn’t write that.”

“Too horrible?”

“Uninsightful.”

“Not to mention total crap. Which could also be said of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and that shocker *Titus Andronicus*.”

“You would rather write about a cake of soap and a hair brush?”

“It’s not about me. I make it up as I go along, but that’s not an indication of flippant disregard. It’s getting in tune and responding to real people, not fairy tales that make British literature king of the shit heap.”

“Abuse is the refuge of the witless.”

“Please yourself. Tell me though, have you ever written a western? You know, six-shooters, mescal, gila monsters, Mexican drug lords?”

“I really have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You really have no idea what I am talking about.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Are you imprisoning yourself in a caricature of received opinions and a hierarchy of goodness?”

“If I were, I would like some help getting free of them.”

“You have to abandon certainty, it’s a drug.”

“What, may I ask, is the alternative?”

“Be free. You can afford it. But you want to define an aesthetic, which is about priests and obedience.”

“I think we might have to agree to disagree.”

“It doesn’t seem possible. Does an ingrown carpet indicate a guilty floor?”

“Who is writing this, by the way?”

“Not you too,” I moaned. One half of me wanted to collapse on the floor wailing and weeping and gnashing teeth, preferably hers. The other half wanted punch her. Hard. “No

one is writing this. This is real.”

“With materialising objects? Violent giants in the doorway? Stories written by mind readers? Joan of Arc writing stories with invisible pens?”

“You might have a point,” I said.

As her archly enunciated words dribbled off into the distance I stared at the ceiling, seeing a vision of a writer in the morning sun at his desk inserting a sheet of blank paper into an vintage Royal manual typewriter and lighting a cigarette. A *Gauloises*, I noticed. I thought how terrifically fucking amusing it would be if he had inserted a cigarette into the typewriter and lit a piece of paper.

Considering this so-called vision was a rather uninteresting memory of what I had done when I had got up this morning, it was far from revealing and hardly visionary. After all, memories are not other-wordly.

I began typing. First a self-centred title in ALL CAPS. I pulled back the carriage return twice, advancing down the page. Sadly inadequate my arse. Scratch this, Mrs Flutey Snoot.

2.16 DAD

Dad opened the airlock and stepped into the tunnel. Ted was waiting inside, bloodstained, dripping and blackened.

“Ted! What happened?”

“G’day Dad. I ran into a bloke while I was having breakfast this morning.”

“Someone you know?”

“A kindred spirit, you might say.”

“He left you in a bit of a mess, by the looks of it.”

“He was all right but the alcohol tended to merge with the lamp-posts. Then I got trodden on by the police.”

Dad, feeling a little jealous, unwrapped the broken branch that had somehow lodged itself in his eye. He looked at the ceiling so Ted would not see his face streaming with tears.

“What’s our status, Ted?” he asked, swallowing a snuffle.

“Things are a bit volatile,” Ted said, seeing Dad’s face reflected in the domed tunnel ceiling. He had seen worse.

Galoshes, which were breastfed to prevent them ever growing old, were lined up along the tunnel, oozing milk. Dad put a pair on. Ted was already wearing his.

Closing his eyes, Dad felt inside the lungs of the nearest wall, trying to soothe the nerval quilts and coax fluids into the spinal chambers.

“When you can, Dad, keep coming this way and take a look from the pulpit.”

Dad edged along the wall to the aperture, a glass-roomed chamber which normally only existed on full moons. Everywhere, from this room, was seen from above. Angels were emerging from the red lips of the left side of the

world, unfolding their sticky gossamer wings. The night was undressing quietly, while the horizon blubbered on the beach.

Dad looked carefully at the clock.

“It’s about six hours early,” he said.

“I know,” said Ted. “Which is not a good sign. The temperature is shooting up like a junkie in a hospital pharmacy. I can’t adjust the controls any further without bringing on another ice age, even so there’s going to be a severe frost before morning.”

He looked at Dad with dismay.

“I’d stay with you if I could, Dad, but I’ve got to go. I don’t know why.”

“That’s alright, Ted,” said Dad. “I’ll do what I can.”

3.7

“What have you been thinking about?”

It was our favourite thing to say after the drink-management, cushion-plumping business had been taken care of. It meant you had attempted to focus your mind on some knotty, thorny problem you needed to elucidate, explicate and solve, the solution being the philosophical framework for your art.

Charles poked his pipe stem thoughtfully at his canvas. “My ability to understand is greatly enhanced by my ability to misunderstand. I now realise it is possible, in fact desirable, to take no for answer.”

“No?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Furthermore, I have realised with a blinding flash of insight, that John the Baptist and Attila the Hun have the same middle name. “

“It is good thing you are not responsible for baptisms in this town.”

“Indeed,” said Charles. “So what has been your knotty, thorny problem?”

“Not so much a worthwhile cogitative exercise, more a practical and procedural matter. The Literature Board’s writing police are on their way to extract their pound of self reification in return for smothering me with Australian dollars.”

“Surely not.”

“Who would have thought? The Australian government actually wants something in return for the clover I’ve fallen into.”

“Can’t they just make a statue of you at Parliament House and have done with it? *Here be-plinthed is the bust of yet another living treasure supported by our profligate Arts Board unquestionably a genius in the making or we would never have singled him or her out for nest feathering.*”

“Apparently not. They have performance evaluations, benchmarks, milestones, yardsticks, proofreading pedants, grammar fascists, worthiness quotients, award greasers, society mentioners, hot-list compilers and bean counters.”

“Shit. You are fucked. How much have you written?”

“Actual output is rather difficult to judge. Most of it is still at what you might call the gestation phase.”

“How much?”

“Actual words on paper?”

“Yes. Keystrokes hitting the platen.”

“Remember the party?”

“The one where we met and you moved into the studio building?”

“That one.”

“I remember it, not really as you wrote it, where I come off looking like Zola’s idiot Cézanne.”

“The problem,” I said, “is the party scene is kind of ... well, it’s *it*, actually.”

“What do you mean *it*?”

“That’s all there is,” I said.

“Holy fucking shitting shit storms. You are really fucked, with a triple pike and a backwards somersault.”

“Not if I can nobble the guy.”

“Nobble? Are you serious? Do you know a discount Richard ‘The Iceman’ Kuklinski?”

“I’m going to write him out, and you’re going to help.”

“You’re the one who said *this is real* you know. What has writing got to do with it?”

“What choice do I have? This may be real, but I am not without power or influence. I’m a living fucking treasure, with rays coming out of my eyes, and rays coming out of the tips of my fingers. I can confuse the bastard and forge a letter back to Trudy Splattermess at the Lit Board.”

“You are really, truly, absolutely, basically fucked. Not to mention delusional.”

“Just help me, will you. I’ve got to stall the fucker. It’s worth a shot. I’ll pull the great Australian novel out of my arse and give that to them.”

“And if I refuse?”

Je ne refuse rien, you said. “Anyway, if I get desperate the characters might begin to suffer unpredictable mood swings, and maybe have suicidal thoughts.”

“Oh, you are a saint. A saint among men. Saint Fucked-in-the-head. What have you got?”

“That’s the spirit. His name is Dumbfuck Arsehole, and he’s on the train from Melbourne.”

Charles began typing.

Didn’t you forget something?

Dumbfuck Arsehole stared at the trees moving by the windows of the train, knowing in fact the trees were stationary and he was the one moving, carried along the rolling metal train tracks, accompanied by a soundtrack of clacking rhythm as the Queenslander from Melbourne forged

through the farms and towns of New South Wales. They had just passed Nambucca Heads.

A strange feeling came over Dumbfuck as he studied the far-off bark of a forest red gum. Did I leave the iron on? Did I leave the car unlocked? Did I leave any food for the chooks? Shouldn't I be there for Nan? Beth is getting married. That bloke of hers is the ultimate toolsqueeze.

I remember ironing this collar, he thought, inserting his fingers in the space between the collar and his neck, feeling uncomfortably constricted as the knot of his tie jabbed into his adam's apple. Now I remember a frayed cable from rear of the iron snaking out of sight. I always unplug it and wind the cord around the handle before putting it back on the shelf near the ironing board, he thought. I have done it thousands of times, surely I wouldn't have forgotten just this once. Unless I was interrupted. Did Trudy call me at precisely the wrong time? Surely not. But why can't I remember putting the iron away? Or locking the car? Or filling up the chook food. I can't remember anything. What's wrong with me? He yanked the detailed route map from his inside coat pocket, catching his striped GPS tie on the way out and a glimpse of his reflection in the window. A bowler hat? Who wears a fucking bowler hat?

Nambucca Heads. Urunga. Sawtell. Coffs Harbour. I can get off at Coffs. I have to get back. Report to Trudy Splattermess. *Fellowship fine. Boy genius on track.*

"That should work" said Charles.

"A nobble fit for a king. Now we bury the typewriter."

"Hang on, where's great Australian novel?"

"Nearly done, check it out!"

Thorn tree of man puddles

Father Ralph, his vows stretching to breaking point, struggled to control the powerful feelings stirring in his heart and elsewhere by the achingly undespoiled, flaming-haired Meggie of ripening womanhood and swelling bosom as they wandered among the brush box, ghost gum and stringy-barks. *Drugheaven* sprawled around them, hectare upon hectare of Afghani Pride opium, coca bush as far as the eye could snort, resin-glistening cannabis and minor plots of henbane, khat, saffron, ephedra, peyote and rye. In his uneven alto-baritone voice, Father Ralph spoke.

“Meggie, I cannot live this life of ambition and celibacy any longer. I will impale my chest on the biggest, longest, most monstrous thorn, till it pierces my throbbing pump organ and lets forth a warbling wail of beauty no thrush or nightingale has ever emitted, a song of beauty out-rivalling all rivals, as I depart this wretched life.”

“No, Father, you shall not plunge the thorn into your bosom for mine is far riper and more ravenous for the thrust of the spike which will send my cries to heaven where even the angels will not surpass their climax.”

“Dearest Meggie, while there is breath in my tall, slender yet wiry-strong, handsome and rather dapper frame, I will extirpate the very life I breathe on the sharpness of the scimitar shaped extrusion, a prick that travels through flesh like a sword, cutting sinew, bone, lung and artery—as I yell ululations sweeter than ambrosia nectar to tickle even the ears of Godalmighty.”

“Sinful priest, I will expire in song upon the thorn, not you,” Meggie wailed.

“I will precede you, there will be no thorn to spare once it is

embedded in my flesh,” said the priest.

“You will not, usurper.”

“Will too!” he cried, ripping open the bodice of his soutane.

“Will not! Will not! Will not!” she said, tearing her clothing until she stood before him, naked, her surging breasts adorned by long, firm nipples which she ached for him to take in his mouth.

“Will so! Will so! Will so!” said Father Ralph. The last of his clothes he threw to the winds so he too, apart from his elegant black riding boots, stood before her starkly naked, his manhood wobbling towards her like the front half of a death adder with rigor mortis. Jet black, she noticed. Beneath this torpedo tumescence hung a loose sack containing only one testicle.

“When are we getting to the puddles?” Charles aid.

“What puddles?” I said.

“The man puddles.”

“Man puddles?”

“They are in the title. Surely we get to hear about the puddles soon?”

“Oh that. *Thorn tree of man puddles*,” I said. “That’s *The Thorn Birds*, Patrick White’s *Tree of Man*, and *I can Jump Puddles* about Alan Marshall, polio kid.”

“Isn’t that a kid’s book?” said Charles.

“No. It’s a book about a kid.”

“Great Australian novel?”

“Well, it’s only in the title. It’s marginal.”

“I think I’d prefer to read about man puddles,” said Charles.

“You’re a pataphysician,” I said, “you would.”

“Are there any Australian pataphysical books?”

“Only this one,” I said.

“This one?”

“The one I’m writing.”

Charles wheezed out a rasping cough that sounded remarkably like *bullshit*.

“You would be flattering yourself, wouldn’t you?” he said.

“They’re publishing it.”

“Really? The *Ouilopo* crowd in Paris?”

“In Melbourne.”

“There are pataphysicians in Melbourne?” asked Charles.

“Of course. Everything is in Melbourne. They’d even have escaped convicts from Sydney only they get turned back at the border by the dress regulations.”

“Not enough black and too toothy-smiley?”

“Exactly.”

“I still doubt very much the existence of a *College de Pataphysics* in Melbourne,” he said.

“There will be,” I said.

“Nudge nudge, wink wink,” said Charles. “With an executive of *nom de plumes*, I’d wager.”

“Maybe.”

“Go Jimmy! Go you good thing!”

“Shhh! that’s embargoed.”

“Rightly so, chumski,” he said. “So, you think your book is written in a sufficiently *mock-scientific manner with undertones of spoofing and quackery?*”

“It could be,” I said. “What’s wrong with that?”

“You do realise this is Australia, don’t you?”

“Bit over their heads?”

“I love the sound of irrelevance as it goes whoosing past. You’re going to need some Australian tripe in there, classic family dynasty crap with the deadpan drongo, disappeared dad, evil matriarch, forbidden fruit, Irish priests, arch manipulators, baby snatchers, coming of age clichés, spooky nuns, oedipal overload, favoured offspring, neglected children, signature colours, hollow victories, star-crossed lovers, masses of hardly plausible coincidence laid on with a trowel, romantic beach interludes, the secret son revealed and so on.”

“You really know your stuff,” I said.

“What do you think is in *The Thorn Birds*?”

“I don’t know, never read it.”

“Where did that Meggie, father Ralph shit come from?”

“*Coles Notes*.”

“Canadian cheat notes, not really the same as the real thing. It’s not as bad as you might think, you know.”

“If you say so,”

“Sold 33 million copies.”

“That’s why I put it in, that dark Irish handsome priest shit is the shit.”

“You do know it’s set in New Zealand, don’t you?” said Charles.

“No way. Is it?”

“If you’re going to write the great Australian novel, I think you’d better read it, Cholmondeley. Anyway, I thought you were doing the Great Australian novel as a stalling tactic.”

“I am, but I may as well stick it in, wouldn’t want to waste it.”

“I suppose it does the *undertones of spoofing and quackery*

you're after."

"Exactly."

What about *Tree of Man*, have you got the *Coles Notes* version of that too?"

"I wouldn't read it even if I did, I can't stand Patrick White's crap."

"Patrick White's *Nobel Prize winning* crap you mean. For *an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature*. He won the first ever Miles Franklin Award, too, you know."

"Miles Franklin? I like her. She was pataphysical. Nobody really likes Patrick White, do they? Even he didn't like his own stuff. It was just canon fodder for F. R. Leavis. A huge christianity over-reach in yet another god forsaken shitheap."

"Be careful, now, that's my shitheap you're talking about there."

"Mine too. Anyway, *Tree of Man* is only in the title to make the man puddles gag. Patrick White said that life was so dreary, ugly, monotonous, there must be a poetry hidden in it. There was, a dreary, ugly, monotonous poetry. I like Voss but only because it was about Ludwig Leichhardt, who was at least a bit interesting, being not so pig-headed, racist, misogynist and xenophobic as the British."

"You are a hard man, but fair. Lay on McDuff, and pick up the pace or we'll never get to Dunsinane."

"Not interrupting might help. Okay, from *Beneath this torpedo tumescence hung a loose sack containing only one testicle*."

A rasping voice whispered from behind a nearby spruce, followed by a grizzled face and beard as it came into view, attached to a bony pair of shoulders, a waist, trousers, boots and many other items of middle age not visible under

trekking gear.

“Excuse me, do you know the way to Kansas City?” The explorer spoke with a thick German accent, a thinly veiled glücklichkeit and a medium-sized lack of companions.

“I afraid you’re a long way from Kansas City, if you are referring to the town in Missouri,” said Meggie. “This is Australia.”

“Dirne! Hure! Du bist nichts mehr als eine unbekannte Spezies. Ich werde dich sammeln und dich in Alkohol bewahren. Sprich nicht von Elend, denn ich bin Voss, König der Könige. Schau auf meine Werke, ihr Nudisten und Verzweiflung!”

“Was ist los, mein Herr?” said Cardinal Ralph, who was a consummating linguist.

“Ich bin. Ist es nicht offensichtlich? Ich bin so lange durch dieses gottverlassene Scheißloch eines Landes gewandert, ich weiß nicht, in welche Richtung mein Arsch geschraubt wird. Ich habe den letzten meiner Gefährten vor einigen Wochen durch einen Billabong in der Nähe eines schwarzen Stumpfes verloren, der mit den Worten “Graben Sie es, Mann?” Beschriftet ist. Aber dort waren keine Vorräte vergraben. Ich bin verloren, hoffnungslos verloren, nicht nur physisch, was sicher nicht gut ausgehen wird, sondern symbolisch, spirituell, intellektuell und metaphysisch. Es gibt zumindest einen Trost. Wenigstens bin ich diesen verrückten Le Mesurier los, zweifellos der schlechteste Dichter, der je ein apokalyptisches Prosa-Gedicht geschrieben hat! Übrigens, wenn sich hier jemand in heroischer Suizidalität aufspießt, werde ich es sein, denn ich bin der Übermensch.”

“You don’t look like a king,” Meggie said. “You look like an author avatar, you know, a mouthpiece for some slouching

dickhead with a quill, moaning on about futility and the stupidity of believing in triumph of the will.”

Ralph’s left eyebrow jerked up and flew right off his head.

“Well said, Meggie. I didn’t know you had it in you. I am truly impressed!”

“Darling!” said Meggie, her flaming mane cascading like Godiva’s ponytail. She rushed to his arms as their bodies cleaved in the consummation of four orifices, while from Ralph’s coccyx grew a rather smart forked tail to match the two sharp, pink horns which had grown from his temples.

“Verdamnte Hölle, das ist alles was ich brauche”, murmelte Voss, “ein öffentlicher Austausch von Körperflüssigkeit. Ich kann mir auch den Kopf abschneiden.”

“Hang on, are you going to translate the fucking Dutch?”

“Deutsch, not Dutch, but sure. When Meggie tells him Kansas City is in Missouri, he says *Strumpet! Whore! You are nothing more than an unknown species. I shall collect you and preserve you in alcohol for I am Voss, king of kings. Look upon my works, ye nudists, and despair!*

“Nice,” said Charles.

“Then the priest with the black prick just about to fuck Meggie’s ears off says *What, sir, could the matter be?* to show off skill as a cunnilinguist, then Voss replies *I am. Isn’t it obvious? I have been wandering across this godforsaken shit hole of a country for so long I don’t know which way my arse is screwed on. I lost the last of my companions some weeks back, by a bil-labong in the vicinity of a black stump inscribed with the words ‘Do you dig it, man?’ But there were no supplies buried there. I am lost, hopelessly lost, not only physically, which I am sure is*

not going to turn out well, but symbolically, spiritually, intellectually and metaphysically. There is one consolation. At least I am rid of that lunatic Le Mesurier, undoubtedly the worst poet who ever wrote an apocalyptic prose poem! By the way, if anyone around here is going to impale themselves in heroic suicidality it will be me, for I am the ubermensch. Meggie then takes a slice at Patrick White, referring to him as some *slouching dickhead with a quill*. This impresses Ralph who grows further tumescent, with horns, to fuck her every which way, which disgusts Voss who wanders off saying *Fucking hell, that's all I need, a public exchange of bodily fluid. I may as well cut my own head off.* That's about it for *The Thorn Birds*, then we get Dante from Malouf's *Johnno*, which my book shits all over."

"Does it, now?" said Charles.

"Keep your eyebrows at sea level matey, and listen to this."

Voss wandered off, sawing at his neck with his penknife, falling into step with a lean, dark young man mooching along unimpeded except for the strings attached to his arms, legs, internal organs, arsehole and tongue, which were dragging across the lumpy mulga various scenes of Brisbane including the William Jolly Bridge, University of Queensland campus, Valley Pool, a few trams, Spring Hill Baths, Criterion Hotel and the suburb of South Brisbane.

"Will you look at us," said the lean, dark young man, whose name was Dante. "A couple of wandering, curmudgeonly characters, awash with sunshine, too miserable to lift our wings like Pinkenbah turtles, like grey galahs, like sulphur-crested clouds above green and yellow fields shifting like sparkling surfaces of a reflecting sea. Above the dust, thick on everything except the carmine new growth, soft-tipped slender tongues of muted chlorophyll. You, a dreamer,

completely cloudstreet cuckooland in your own noggin full of deep dark desires of conquest—and me the quiet one like me mum, Saint Theresa of our torn household, the rock of Gibraltar of our sprawling migrant family dynasty. Listen! Hear the call of the currawong, the slither of a lizard, the slip of a thing. You could cast a line across this girt land it and catch a dogfish catworm earwig. The fish of the fields are strong ones. Arch your back lad, put your weight into it, rip its fucking head off! You've got to let go to hold on, give in to your true inner-soles, mull away your fears. You can wander forever if you never admit you've failed, living on the cornhusks of your threadbare dreams.”

“So what's the answer?” Voss said finally.

“Family sagas. Everyone loves a dynasty. You just chuck in every sick trope you can think of and stick them onto your family members. People turn the pages like maniacs knowing the basic background is the same as their own, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, step sisters. It's a freak show, featuring the whole extended cast of characters, the deadpan drongo, disappeared dad, evil matriarch, forbidden fruit, Irish priests, arch manipulators, baby snatchers, coming of age clichés, spooky nuns, oedipal overload, favoured offspring, neglected children, signature colours, hollow victories, star-crossed lovers, masses of hardly plausible coincidence laid on with a trowel, romantic beach interludes, the secret son revealed and so on.”

“Is that all?”

“All my own work,” said Dante.

“Bully for you, Stu.”

“It's Dante.”

“Spare me,” said Voss.

“You’re a bit of a grumpy bastard, aren’t you.”

“You should have been here yesterday.”

“I see you’ve purloined my letter on the topic of family sagas there.” said Charles. “Have you no shame?”

“Intellectual property is theft. What’s yours is mine. Don’t worry, I’ll send you a signed copy.”

“Aren’t going to sign the complete print run of fifty?”

“Don’t be cruel. Next up we get *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.”

Passing them in the evening light came schoolgirls in paper and cane light shades, glowing from within, swarming over the rocks like inflated cotton and lace beetles. A film crew, mounted on giant papier-maché elephants, followed...

“What was that?” said Voss.

“No idea,” said Dante.

“Is that it? That’s all we get for a pivotal moment in Australian cinema history?”

“Pivotal? More like *pelvical* if you ask me. Petticoat overload with pan pipes. Some septic said it was *a film of haunting mystery and buried sexual hysteria*. Hot girl-school underwear smut giving up their dark continents to randy spirits. Remember Edith saying she saw the mathematics mistress, I love that, mathematics mistress, *Miss McCraw climbing the Rock without her skirt*. That was hot stuff for those days. It had a budget of \$440,000 and made over five million.

“Enough, enough. What happens next?”

“Miles Franklin, as promised.”

“Boo, hoo! Ow, ow; Oh! oh! Me’ll die. Boo, hoo. The pain, the pain! Boo, hoo!”

On the top of a huge pyre of bibles, each page torn out and scrunched up, covers slit into strips and shoved into every pocket of space in the wickerwork bonfire of tinder dry casuarina, wattle, bloodwood and grey gum, Sybylla Melvyn was hopping from foot to foot as the flames of her recently lit, irreligious, pyromaniacal monstrosity darted between her bare toes, licking her heels like a famished foot fetishist.

“Hey, skinny guy and Wolf-man, catch!” she yelled, launching herself into the air towards them. She tucked her knees up under her chin, forming the tight ball shape used for bomb-diving off the ten-metre board at Centenary Pool. Both Dante and Voss had turned towards the sound of her voice with dopey looks on their faces. The impact scattered them like nine pins, except there were only two of them, not nine, flying off in separate directions into the spinifex while Sybylla bounced back and landed on her feet, unharmed. She grinned at them as they climbed to their hands and knees, attempting to flee the scene by crawling away, falling over, then giving up, rubbing their sore heads as they scabbled fitfully like dung beetles in the sand.

Sybylla walked over to them and sat between them, taking each man by the hand.

“My name is Sybylla Melvyn,” she said. “Isn’t this just peachy. We can sit here holding hands, telling yarns around the fire, perhaps even have a sing along. What do you say, chaps?”

“Why do you keep shifting in and out of focus?” asked Dante.

“I’m autobiographical,” said Sybylla, “in an unusually

truthful book about myself, *My Brilliant Career*, published in London under my pen name, Miles Franklin. My body keeps trying to morph into my author self, but I'm having too much fun. What about you chaps?"

"I'm autobiographical," said Dante. "But my author is too boring looking to be worth changing into. He didn't endow me with any great charms either."

"I'll say," said Sybylla, having done so. "What about you, Wolf-man?"

"Please don't call me that, I'm supposed to look like Ludwig Leichhardt, or some archetypal mad German explorer."

"You look like the arse end of an archetypal Wolf-man to me. Never mind. What do you write?"

"I don't write. I am a naturalist. Rocks, trees, bugs, that sort of thing. My author's a writer. I think he's going to get some blacks to cut my head off with a pen knife, which is unfair on them and not much to look forward to for me, so I'm trying to beat him to it."

"I can see you've been sawing away at your neck there, do you want some help?"

"No thanks, I can manage."

"How old are you Sybylla?" Dante asked.

"Sweet sixteen in this young maiden's ripening body, but who knows how old and saggy I'll be when my author finally manages to take over. Anyway chaps, I have to say both of you together are about as interesting as bucket of guano, so I'll be off. There's plenty more fun to be had out there destabilising the patriarchy and all of its fiddle faddle and mawkish sentiment."

She got to her feet, clicked her bare heels together and

diva-like, dived down a nearby rabbit hole.

“What do you think of that?” I said.

“I love it,” said Charles, beaming. “An absolute hoot. This will win you the plaudits my friend. I will be unworthy to hang by your coat tails. While I am still allowed into your presence, let us toast your great Australian novel by cracking a *Grange*, and when we have dispatched that muck, we will douse ourselves liberally with a bucket each of the incomparable *Para Vintage Tawny Port*.”

“You really *do* like it,” said, each of my eyelashes quivering in synchronised pleasure.

“Either that or I am desperately in need of a drink,” he said. “Read on while I replenish my hepatic well being with fine libations to match your leonine vibrations.”

I turned the page and continued.

Dante and Voss brushed themselves down and continued walking aimlessly in no particular direction.

“I’m beginning to feel like Dante Alghieri,” said Dante. “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.”

“You look a bit like him,” said Voss. “That would mean I’m Virgil and these are the Elysian Fields. No such luck, I’m afraid. I am still a partly beheaded German and you’re a runt without a litter. I’m starting to get hungry, myself. Do you think there’s any food up at the house?”

“Sure to be,” said Dante. “The old harridan was as rich as Croesus. If not we can drag her down and throw her on the bonfire and eat her still twitching corpse.”

“Excellent,” said Voss, picking up the pace in the direction of the homestead.

Instead of the large country homestead they had expected, Dante and Voss opened the front doors to some rather challenging elements, the space, the period, the comma, and twenty-six letters of the alphabet. Other than these, which glowed somehow with an eerie light, it appeared dark. Coming from the harsh Australian light under the blue vault of the southern skies, their eyes were taking time to adjust. A gaggingly powerful stench, however, was immediate. The close, foetid air smelled of human sweat, shit, skin, burnt hair, tuberculosis, semen, syphilis, saliva and rotting flesh gnawed by rats swimming through seas of their own droppings. The searing ammonia of concentrated urine made their eyes water. They became aware of the ship's heaving motion, the snores of sleeping men and goats, the grunting squeals of pigs and the groaning of the timbers. There was not enough head room to even stand crouched. They were forced to crawl through the dark, over shit-and-blood smeared boards, emaciated hands and arms reaching from the dark on all sides, towards a distant pool of light on a set of stairs. Voss had stopped trying to cut his own head off in order to poke his penknife at the reaching hands. Dante was using a broken *Tristram Aerated Waters and Brewed Beverages* soft-drink bottle he had yanked from his memories of Brisbane.

The stairs led up to another deck where British officers were corn-holing each other and female convicts, while gargling rum straight from the bottle. This deck smelled even worse, with the vomitous smell of stupidity, prejudice, entitlement, senseless obedience, ambition, self-satisfied smugness, superiority, inferiority and the all-pervading sickening odour of religion.

They clambered further up the stairs onto the deck, where a group of men had gathered around another who was lashed

to a mast being flogged with a cat swung by its nine tails, its long claws flaying the flesh of the man's back, cutting so deep ribs, liver and lungs were exposed. When the man being flogged lost consciousness he was cut down and revived, his back smeared with tar, so he could take his turn swinging the cat to flay the back of the man who had just flayed his. The remainder urged the man swinging the cat to go harder, seemingly oblivious to the fact they would soon have their turn being flogged, as they rotated through the group.

Dante and Voss scrambled across the deck away from this pretty scene until they were some way distant, then stood up to take a breather and get their bearings. The deck was gleaming. There was a ridiculous amount of rope tied to everything in sight. All neat, but ridiculous. Absurdly tall masts were covered with sails and rigging, more ropes and wooden cleat gizmos to tighten them. The deck sloped up slightly to the rear of the boat and at the rail leaning out over the stern they could see it was more or less square ended. On the deck, a number of officers lolled about, wearing fanciful costumes with white stockings, tri-cornered hats, gold braid, oversize buttons, silk waistcoats, rinky-dink navy-blue coats, flouncy sleeves and powdered wigs, the whole outfit about as useful on a sea voyage as a bicycle is to a fish. The officers occasionally took up a musket and shot randomly, injuring or wounding fatally pacific gulls, dolphins, other officers or themselves. Men of few words, they were mostly silent, occasionally barking out one-word statements like "Snatch" "Crutch" "Bosh" "Bunkum" "Balderdash" "Nonsense" "Moshpit" "Snivel" and "Church." Or so it seemed to Dante and Voss who couldn't make any sense of what they were saying, probably because they were forced to take cover every time one of the addled officers swivelled in their direction with a loaded musket.

The silly clothing must have caused selective restriction of blood supply to the brain, for despite excellent navigational and charting skills, the officers seemed oblivious of thousands of Aboriginal people swarming over the land nearby their anchorage, coming and going, laughing at them, some listlessly throwing spears, having much the same effect as the random musket shooting yet with fewer fatalities, but mostly going about their ordinary lives harvesting shipworm-cobra from the piled logs of she-oaks in the clear blue-green water over the sand and gravel river bottom, plucking large mullet from the shallows, spearing dugong, cultivating bungwall fern, gathering shellfish and mud crabs, netting eels, gathering dianella, midyim fruit and native yam, catching snake, lizard, goanna, wallaby and echidna, dancing in gatherings of thousands with warriors fighting in ceremonies on large cleared grounds, tending to their dwellings, celebrating births deaths and marriages, abiding by Aboriginal customary law, fire-farming the large grassy plains along the creeks, signalling from hilltop look-outs, initiating the kippas, welcoming ambassadors from far away tribes, weaving baskets and floral wreaths, sculpting stone or wood weapons for hunting and fishing, preparing food or tending to the injured. On both sides of the river were patches of superb old-growth rainforest, large lianas climbing the giant figs, tamarind and cedar trees, filled to overflowing with birds, butterflies, mammals, frogs and reptiles.

“I think this is Brisbane, in the early 1800s,” said Dante. “We would be very wise to get ashore. I don’t give us much chance of getting back out the way we came.”

Voss needed no convincing. He was off and running, shimmying down the anchor rope, hitting the clear salty water with a splash, striking out towards shore with a surprisingly

effective dog paddle. Years of accumulated desert dust left a trail behind him. Dante leapt from the deck in a swan dive, almost breaking his neck hitting the gravel in the shallow water, then powering after Voss with a swimming style reminiscent of the Looney Tunes Tasmanian Devil in full vortex, arriving at the shore just as Voss was threading his way through the mangroves up to higher ground. When they both reached the clear area where TJ Ryan would one day provide pigeons a perch and the opportunity of shitting on both his head and that of Queen Victoria, the Aboriginal people greeted them like long-lost relatives, preparing the scene for feasting and fun.

Voss looked happy at last. He was positively beaming as he discussed Schopenhauer with a couple of friendly medicine men from visiting tribes. He no longer felt the need to saw at his neck with his penknife or in any danger of others doing it for him, as he tucked into some delicious kangaroo tail. A few other guests were passing around a brew of infused grevillea flowers and lemon myrtle leaves. Dante had found a young Aboriginal couple who had read *Remembering Babylon*, another of his author's books. They had formed an unusual thesis as to its significance and the resulting discussion looked like being a long one.

“Gloomy truth, begorrah,” said Charles. “They’ll cut all that pro-blackfella crap, of course, and you won’t get away with lampooning our fine British navy, but still a mighty effort.”

“I wish you had cracked this ’67 Grange when I was writing that,” I said. “You could have told me then and saved me the trouble. It all goes very grunge after this, I’m afraid.”

“As long as you don’t have a bootboy from Claridges come

in squeezing his pimples.”

“Great idea, give me a minute and I’ll slip him in between Nora and Javo.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” said Charles, his ventriloquising voice coming from the neck of the empty Grange Bottle, while he poured us a generous slug of the tawny into our tin mugs.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Why not. It’s good stuff.”

“Yes, but not yours. Read away, lad, and let the sky be a vessel for your honeycombed vocalisations.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but okay.”

Nora looked up from her book, her long brown arms painfully thin against the irreparably yellowed sheets.

“Javo, I get the feeling I’ve read this before,” she said.

Javo stood in the doorway, hunched a little, holding himself in his gnawed hands. His face was hollow and white. His fingertips were infected and his skin was erupting geysers of pus. His blue eyes shone in his battered face.

“How could you have?” he said. “I only just wrote it.”

“It doesn’t sound like you. Why would you write about Germans and Aborigines and David Malouf characters? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Have you ever actually seen me shoot junk?” he asked.

“Not that I can remember. I sprung you trying but left before you found a vein.”

Javo made an expressionless face.

“Help me, Javo, I’m losing it,” said Nora.

“I lost it a long time ago. Don’t lean on me, when you’re not strong, I can’t be your friend, I can’t help you carry on.”

“Will you share your junk at least?”

“No, I broke my fit and buried it in the back yard. I’m going to grow a syringe tree.”

“At least it rhymes with orange tree.”

They laughed.

“I’m fucking John Birmingham,” said Nora.

“The falafel guy?”

“Yes. Do you mind?”

“Really? I thought he was in Brisbane.”

“No, not the author, the character John Birmingham in the falafel book.”

“Same thing.”

“Not really.”

“You can fuck with anyone you want Nora. Will you fuck with me?”

“When you’re better and I’m not bleeding.”

The room was bleak, but clean. It was Nora’s room, but it was also a spare room. The floorboards were bare and the window brought in back-yard light, tinged with green. The sheets were beyond white no matter how much bleach was thrown at them. There were half a dozen places around the room where Javo had stashed his junk and another half a dozen places where Nora had stashed hers. She had a miserly pile of coke, some hash, speed and some pain shit. No liquor.

Behind Javo appeared Cynthia and Gordon from Andrew

McGahan's first novel, which was weirdly a sequel to his second novel, go figure.

A skinny guy was trailing behind. Not Dante from Johnno back again, but a different skinny guy, Rick from Zig Zag Street by Nick Earls. Writing was a great weight-loss regime. It worked really well for the 'idealised youth' characters. The trick would be to get it to work for authors as well.

Rick was making up for being skinny by carrying several extra kilos of sexual tension, all of it involving Rachel who said, "I'm right fucking here, creampuff, and you're no dermatologist. You're not even that skinny, ha ha get it? Dermatologist, skinny?"

"I should be skinny, after vomiting and shitting all night from eating the salmon mousse at your place."

"It could have been the mango daiquiris, which you made up to feed nine," said Rachel.

"I couldn't let them go to waste," said Rick.

"You let them go your waist instead," said Rachel.

"Ha ha."

"And anyway it wasn't my salmon mousse it was Ashley's."

"A brilliant idea, just whip up a bit left over salmonella for a party where you're the penis police there to measure up the wannabe boyfriend when he whips out his whang, which one always does in front an obvious Rottweiler chaperone on a first date."

"She's my best friend, she wants the best for me."

"You mean she wants you, with your head in her merkin and her doing the moans and squeals and the ankle earrings."

"Moans and squeals are good," said Rachel.

“I can do moans and squeals. I made a tape.”

“I pray to Aphrodite you didn’t just say that and I didn’t hear it and you didn’t even think it. Aphrodite, oh great redacter, please expunge it from my memory forever. I will sacrifice to you my first 25 orgasms.”

“Speaking of orgasms, didn’t Ashley take away the salmon mousse? She could be having some on toast right now.”

“I think she did. Should I call her?”

“It’s a toss up. On the one hand, you could be saving your best friend from death by Monty Python. On the other you could cause an agonising attack of embarrassment when you tell her she was responsible for the Mighty Whang spending the night convulsing daiquiris from both ends, not to mention green curry with sultanas, 24 oysters, 12 truffles and a mandrake root.”

“Sorry to interrupt, guys,” said Cynthia who was playing *how wet can you get?* with her left hand and *milk the boom gate* with the other. “Shouldn’t you be getting a room?”

“What’s wrong with this one?” said Rachel.

“It’s fine if you want to do it with a dead guy,” said Cynthia.

“Holy fuck, Cynthia,” said Gordon, who was only half undressed, progress being slowed by active drug abuse. “You didn’t say anything about a dead guy.”

“He just turned up,” she said. “Not my fault.”

“You know him, don’t you?” said Charles.

“Who?” I asked, looking up and seeing two Charles and four Para Port bottles.

“Nick Earls. The guy who wrote the skinny dude, Rick, with the smart mouth.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen him heaps.”

“So he’ll be cool about you stealing his characters, and the falafel guy, and the monkey.”

“Oh sure. I know them all,” I said waving down his worries with my four hands. I was glad I had thought to make two copies of my manuscript, but which one should I read from? Maybe I should put the other one somewhere safe.

“How can you be sure? How well do you know them?”

“Not intimate, but well enough. On talking terms.”

“You’re talked to all of them?” said Charles.

“Well, they were talking,” I said.

“Where were you while they were talking?”

“In the audience. Row 37. Still good vision.”

“So you don’t know them.”

“Of course I do, I bought the poster of *Bachelor Kisses* that was banned in the UK. The one with the nude guy with a text book on his dick. At a fundraiser. It was signed.”

“I don’t think that is really the same as *on talking terms*,” said Charles.

“Of course it is, I can talk to him any time. I could just ring him up.”

“Have you got his number?”

“Not to hand, but I could get it like that.” I snapped my fingers. There was no snap unfortunately, because my thumb and second finger kept missing each other. “Don’t fret it, man. It’s nearly at the end. I’ll read the last bit and we can finish off with a cleansing cognac.”

Charles looked me through four narrowed, suspicious eyes, or minds, or kind-of-mind-eyes, but seemed at least partially mollified, or mortified, or crucified or discombustimasticated, settling back in listening mode. I read on.

Gordon, Cynthia, Rick, Rachel and Max, the dead drummer

in the coffin, were all now in a more-or-less dishevelled state of undress, not completely nude, but not well covered where it usually matters. Cynthia's huge clitoris was painfully obvious. It was hard to say how undressed Max the dead drummer was in his coffin although they could have just asked Venero Armanno, who was in there with him, the two of them snug as two buggers playing rugger. Except that Venero was alive.

Without really looking to see who they were, Javo walked past them and off somewhere. The new chums trooped into an adjoining room, Rick and Gordon carrying Max's coffin.

Gordon and Cynthia collapsed on the bed with Nora and continued masturbating intermittently without any particular zeal, lotions or mechanical aids. Gordon and Nora shared some cones, while Rick and Rachel, somewhat enclosed in their own bubble, sat on the floor, back to back, leaning their heads back on each others shoulders to whisper in each other's ears. Max just lay there dreaming about drumming.

"How are we going to finish this?" said Cynthia. Her skin was entirely covered in tiny bleeding scabs. She smelled of blood, soothing lotion, cheap wine and a two day growth.

"It needs a smooth finish," said Rachel, squinching her black eyes, "you don't want to see the brush strokes."

"Hey, is your name Rachel?" said Gordon.

"I'm not your Rachel," she said, "so don't go fantasising any cunt-munching on my account."

"I'm depressed," Gordon said. "I couldn't be arsed fantasising anything."

"*Quelle surprise,*" said Cynthia, "and you such a sack of laughs, usually. Camus' Stranger is bubbly compared to you. Depressed. Fucking morbidly abject would be more like it."

“At least I’m not grunge,” said Gordon.

“Hey guys,” said Nora, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”

“Now who’s little Miss Sunshine?” said Rachel.

“It’s four cones back to back with your cunt-muncher,” Nora said. “I’m mellow.”

Rick farted, like a startled goose. Everyone laughed.

“Everyone loves a fart joke,” Rick said, letting out another acrid bum-hoot. His eyes were streaming either from the nitrous pong or from laughing so hard, or both.

“Oh shit,” he said, “I followed through on that one.”

“A mud slide for your crabs,” said Nora.

That set them all off again and farts pinged back and forth like pinballs off flippers on steroids.

“Three free balls,” Rick shouted. “Hitler only had one.”

“Gordon, don’t strike that match for fuck’s sake!” Max dreamed.

But it was too late.

2.17 CHARLES

Charles chose this moment to stand up, stretching his back which was cramping due to seizures in either the eighth dimension or the fourth lumbar joint.

This moment was not a moment he recognised, nor was it one he had experienced before. It did not seem, in a purely linear sense, to be sequential with any of the other moments which one would have normally expected it to be contiguous. Time, once on the page, was subject to strange rules and unexpected changes, decreed it seems, by whim. Days and nights still existed, but not necessarily in that order, or one after the other. Instead of an arrow or river of time, the arrangement seemed more like an intricate overlay of honey-combed capillary networks, or a coral reef folded on itself a number of times then twisted, with just the hint of a very fluffy omelet.

Charles in a previously decided moment, not this one, had realized all this and had been, ever since, at liberty to float in space and time, like a helicopter being shot down over the jungle, or a vortex revolving backwards into a head-on collision with Escher. Normally he would make use of this facility but today he had other things on his mind. Filling his alpenstock with fumes he studied his painting. He had given up subjecting his paintings to extreme cold, in the forlorn hope of achieving an elusive flesh pink by producing chilblains—and was now experimenting with humans. He was being figurative, in a sort of clandestine way. Like Cocteau he had avoided painting lips on the faces of the figures.

His materials included a combination of chalk, concentric

metals, earth, anteaters and huge tusks. Together these produced a strange dancing music by the action of the wind through their broken veins. Before beginning painting that morning he had tuned the cemetery in on the radio. Oversized wedge-tailed fleas had appeared, gathered tightly together in the geographical centre of the room. The surface of the canvas, apparently as a result of this, had developed strange tendencies. As though afraid of the radioactive arms he utilized to shift the colours around, the surface shrank beneath the touch, like a frightened abdomen. Ornamental lace-work in unexpected rococo patterns had appeared. Charles had to assume these were fossil evidence of the creator and not very far up the evolutionary scale, at that. The rest of the painting, hidden by an emerging automobile shape, was slimy, with feverish angles and passages of destroyed skin. A green border which in any other artist's studio might have been a flame, was the viewpoint. Sound, but not in stereo, had developed in the top right-hand corner, splintering glass.

Charles closed his eyes and drew the fumes of McBaren's plum cakes, savouring their smoke molecules before spitting them out. With his eyes closed, he exulted in admiration of his painting, even more marvellous in the absence of sight. In this exultant mood and considering it was early morning, he could come to only one conclusion. He must see James and the sooner the better.

Wrapping rope around his sandals as an added protection for his feet he went downstairs. In the window of the café a message was scrawled on the menu.

“Meet me on the beach in the afternoon,” signed *Maria*.
Perfect, thought Charles.

3.8

It was time to visit Maria. I took the stairs to her low-rise pent-house flat in Margaret Street, not trusting the lift or the wizened old factotum who operated it. He looked older than time. I had never figured out whether he wanted payment in ancient Greek drachma or Roman denarii. Social catastrophe better avoided.

I wasn't sure how much of the building she had written, or how much was pre-existing reality. It was very old and not in great condition. If she had written it, she ought to have written less dust. Hard to say. Dust was authentic. It looked like one of Brisbane's earliest multi-storey jobs, panelled everywhere with black bean and red cedar, steps and railings worn deeply by generations of merchants, barristers, typists and cabin boys. It looked real but if she had written it would have looked seamlessly convincing anyway.

Fortunately, it was only five levels. Her flat was a small free-standing cottage on the roof, now in a shady canyon of more recent high-rise. The remainder of the roof space was half given over to a garden and half to a lawn where she had pitched a circus tent, her day-room, where she wrote and occasionally walked around upside down with suction boots, having managed to get hold of Eve Arden's apparatus from the 1939 Marx Brothers film *A Day at the Circus*.

More generally, she spent her time on pro-bono geography and high-earning paid work writing Fortune 500 companies—the fees going up exponentially according to the age of the company when delivered. She was one of very few writers who could deliver a company with a complete

50-year history including pre-founding negotiations, deals, private correspondence, concealed affairs, borderline frauds, 50 years of Annual Reports, day-to-day business records and enough of the private lives of principals, staff and customers to stitch invisibly into the fabric of society.

These older, established blue-chip companies were her most popular. She could have taken on staff and a workload capable of crushing anti-matter but she preferred to work alone and not very much at all, leave plenty of time to do her pro-bono work writing islands. She was just finishing off Madagascar, her favourite so far, so much better than New Zealand which she considered dreary except for a few bits of the south island.

She was upside down when I arrived, the hem of a grey-green pleated crimpolene skirt with a form-fitting waist hanging down over her upper body to about her unshaven armpits and over most of her purple, bare-midriff tank top. She was wearing no underwear. Her curly pubic hair, like loose steel wool, contrasted rather strangely with the heavy boots and suction cups. I found the situation rather confronting, not knowing whether to stare at her revealed regions which in most people were normally covered up, or her breasts which upside down had assumed unusual shapes, not something you see every day.

“The eyes, asshole, down here, not up there,” she said with the hint of a snarl. Her normal voice was soft. She was a low talker, refusing to speak loudly and clearly no matter how many people asked her to repeat herself or misunderstood what she said. She said it was better for the world to change the way they listened rather than keeping on shouting at each

other, but no one ever changed.

“That’s because they are fuck-witted cunts,” she said.

“It is a bit discombobulating being the wrong way up from your point of view,” I said. “Not to mention vagina at eye level.”

“What are you worried about? You’ve seen me naked often enough,” she said. “There’s a spare pair of boots, you can climb up here to and get some blood to your brain, which might stimulate some actual thinking instead of the lascivious looks.”

“It’s not the nudity that worries me, it’s the thought of ventriloquism,” I said.

She laughed.

I started lacing the boots. She had cut the ends off so that my toes could poke out.

“This really will be like the Groucho Marx, Eve Arden scene,” I said. “Do you want me to take my shorts off?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said. “What are you thinking, that we might fuck upside down?”

“I confess my mind was wandering not far from the vicinity of a concept in that general territory.”

“I might consider it if I could extend my legs by 30 cm, and if I wanted to get pregnant, but no thanks.”

“No problem.” I finished lacing the boots onto my feet in place of the perennial Italian leather sandals and climbed the rope ladder. The suction cups were not the greatest upside-downism gadgets, requiring a rather ungainly stomping motion to get a good grip and only peeling off with a raucous trumpeting like an African waterhole in full feeding frenzy. My shirt didn’t fall all the way off my torso but

did leave large parts between the waist of my baggy shorts and my unshaven chest rather exposed, not that there was anything to shave—a deforester would have to walk many a desert between the rare filaments growing from my pectoral follicles.

It took me six squelchy steps and ripping fart noises to be head to shoulder with Maria who stared into my upside down armpit as if *there be vipers*, then tilted her head, angling her face towards mine. I couldn't raise my head relative to hers with a standard knee bend, her legs were too close, so with splayed feet, a style I always felt lacked couth, I bent my knees sideways until our lips were at the same altitude and able to kiss each other directly which they did. I cheated a little on the altitude maintenance, distracting my legs from releasing their angle of extension by puckering my bum and trying not to think of the erection in my shorts which felt like a dumbbell without the bells, just leaving the dumb part, heavy, obvious and protruding. Luckily it was inside my shorts and not somewhere likely to cause a riot.

Our lips detached. “There’s a riot in cell block number nine,” said Maria. “You can join the riot scene if you want to club someone to death with your nightstick.”

“How long do you reckon it would take to get to Boggo Road from here?”

“Oh shut up and kiss me, you fool,” she said and reattached our faces. I hugged her close, not for intimacy but because my legs were rapidly losing muscle tone. I couldn't hang on forever or her legs would either stretch by the 30 cm required or all the joints would dislocate, so I let go and our lips parted like Spanish dancers, leaving Maria to talk to my breastbone.

“Is there any easy way to get down from here?” I asked.

She pushed me like a park swing out of the way then lifted herself into a squat, grabbed hold of the rails along the sides of the smooth upside-down surface, somehow released both suction cups, ending up hanging from the rails with her back to me, then dropped to the floor below, cushioning her fall with both the suction cups and a suspicion of athleticism. She had her boots off in a jiffy, her clothes smoothed into place. She sat down at her writing table to read my manuscript. I wasn't sure I possessed even a suspicion of this type of athleticism, so I climbed backwards to the rope ladder and got down that way.

Maria could read at blinding speed with perfect recall, which came in handy for writing both businesses and geography. She was already half way through by the time I joined her at the table and took a shot of *Baron de Sigognac Platinum Extra Old Armangac* she had put in front of me and a nibble of *Epoisses*, one of her favourite stinky cheeses. It was either that or *Munster* whose smell alone could kill a black dog.

“It's funny,” she said. “I like it.”

I could feel several layers of terror melt away, terror I hadn't been aware of till that moment.

I reached in to the pocket of my shorts and pulled out a ripe avocado, and put it on the cheese platter.

“I had to avoid the police on the way over,” I said.

“You're paranoid,” said Maria. “They're harmless.”

I don't think so,” I said. “They held up the traffic until I crossed the street. I did my thing.”

“Look left, look right, look innocent?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Which just proves they are harmless. No one could look guiltier than you do when you are trying to look innocent. It’s pathetic. You look like a meerkat with gonorrhoea.”

“I got that avocado from Woolworths. It was on a throw-out table. It was 49 c. Only slightly squashed.”

“A bargain,” said Maria. “You should have told me you were coming, I could have written lunch, with room service.”

“Does that mean you *do* want to have sex?” I asked.

She hit me across the back of the head with a handy caduceus, a short staff entwined by two serpents. It was the protector of merchants, shepherds, gamblers, liars and thieves, so it was unfair she was hitting me with it. I qualified as at least two of those.

“Smoke a cigar, or something,” she said. “Suck your brown smelly dick and watch as it burns away. Maybe it’ll help you get the message. Sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you that hard, are you all right?”

I rubbed the back of my head.

“Maybe you could kiss it better,” I said. “Starting here.” I put the tip of my index finger on my lips. “We could see where we go from there.”

She hit me again, harder.

“Be quiet,” she said. “Let me finish this.” She went back to reading while I now had two lumps on the back of my head to massage. I tossed down the rest of my Armagnac and grabbed the bottle to gargle from the neck, but paused as I saw her waving the caduceus in friendly warning. I refilled my glass instead.

Turning the last page she swivelled on her chair and smiled at me. All the stars in the universe shone more brightly.

“I don’t particularly like what you’ve done with Maria,” she said.

All the stars in the universe when dark.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not at all like me and it makes me feel envious.”

“Envious of what?”

“Envious of what she writes. I wish I could write like that.”

“So you like it?”

“No I don’t like it, and I don’t like that you wrote it. It’s not fair. It’s like nothing I have ever read. It’s like nothing I could have imagined writing. It’s like it came from another universe.”

“So you don’t like it because it’s good?”

“It’s better than good, it’s magnificent. It’s not naive. It’s thoughtful, considered and precise. Whatever she is trying to say she’s right there, in it. It’s vulnerable, tortured and exultant. It’s about as shy as a sabre-toothed lioness protecting her cubs. It makes everything else look like shit, it makes me feel like a bumbling idiot, and yet I don’t have any idea what it means.”

“This is the second best day of my life,” I said.

“Oh yeah? What was the best one?”

“The day I met you.”

“You’re not thinking about sex again, are you?” she said, her hand straying towards the snake stick.

“No, no,” I said hastily. “James has sex.”

“I noticed. He’s a lucky man.”

“Do you have anything I could smear some avocado on, a fresh lime, fresh black pepper and a pinch of salt? I really can’t climb the north face of this cheese. I’m a competency

five cheese climber and these are like competency 25.”

“You are piss weak,” she said. “Here.” She opened a wooden box on the table and took out a bone-handled knife, a loaf of black bread, a pepper grinder, salt cellar, wooden bread board, a lime, a lemon, the bells of St Clemens, and a corm of garlic, breaking off two cloves which she threw into her beautiful mouth and started chewing.

I fixed myself a couple of open avocado spreads and went off to search for something less pugnacious than Armagnac to have with them. I had stocked Maria’s wine cellar in the cottage, which was a series of racks under the stairs to the loft bedroom, and since she preferred stronger medicine I expected it still to be there. I chose a *Henschke Malbec* and a *Penfolds Bin 333*.

When I got back to Maria’s writing table she was hacking at a pomegranate with a penknife which reminded me of the one Voss had used to saw his own head off. It was unusual to see her eat any fruit other than apples, but there were a lot of things about Maria I did not know and probably never would.

“So how is working working out for you?” Maria asked when I was settled.

“Working is like being stored rolled up in a carpet for eight hours a day.”

“So why do you do it?”

“To survive.”

“Have you ever survived without work?”

“Yes in fact it’s not as difficult, since it’s just survival. Without the work factor it is easier.”

“You’re working because it’s a challenge?”

“A predictable challenge where it’s easier to know what to complain about.”

“Which is?”

“Work.”

“Sounds like a circular argument to me.”

“No, it’s bipolar.”

“That’s comforting.”

“What is?”

“Work.”

“Yes, that’s the idea. The whole thing is fucked but we have social evolution now which gives us something to aspire to.”

“Which is?”

“Winning.”

“How do you win?”

“Whatever it takes.”

“What happens if you don’t win?”

“Someone else does.”

“Where does that leave you?”

“Living.”

“The winner’s prize is unhappiness, always wanting more, and the losers get to just bumble along, surviving?”

“Pretty much.”

“Do the winners know this?”

“Not really. It’s pretty full on, winning. Not much time to reflect.”

“So what do the winners get out of it?”

“Awards. We give them awards. Someone gives them awards. I don’t personally.”

“How do you get time to write?”

“I get up in the mornings at sunrise and try to write for a

couple of hours before going into work.”

“And how is that working for you?”

“It’s hard. It’s not enough time. But it’s regular.”

“Thank Darwin for small mercies.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“How’s Madagascar going?”

“Oh that. I have to lay off the Armagnac to do that kind of work. It’s fiddly. But fun. Worthwhile, I suppose. It was convenient I had done Borneo. Quite a few migrations came from Borneo on outrigger canoes.”

“Should I go there?”

“The locals have a slight tendency to lynch westerners. Not statistically significant, compared to the fridge falling on you, but more likely to ring alarm bells. If you’re a lemur or a chameleon you’d be safe from lynching, but extinction is a problem. About 90 per cent of forest has been cleared. It’ll all be gone by 2025 except for a few pockets along the cliffs on the east coast.”

“Why do you let them do it?”

“Do what?”

“Fuck up places.”

“I don’t have a say in it. It just happens.”

“That’s a shame.”

“That’s life. It’s like that everywhere. Humans are fucked. They make good chocolate, though.”

“That’s a consolation. Why do they lynch westerners?”

“There’s kind of an obscure lynch mob tradition. The cops are in on it.”

“I told you they were bad juju.”

“In Madagascar they are. They helped a lynch mob on Nosy Be torture a couple of tourists for three hours, necklace them with car tires and throw them alive into a beach bonfire. Another one was burned alive the next day outside a mosque.”

“Lovely,” I said.

“It’s still pretty in places and has lots of weird animals. You might like it.”

2.18 DAD

Dad had watched the morning with increasing concern. Even before the day had begun, the waters had been writhing. Strange images occurred on the hydrosphere, resembling mimeographs of the moon, seeming to be composed of knees, seen from below. Dad had taken certain measures to minimize the morning frost, but Ted had been right in his prediction that the temperature would be uncontrollable. The day, when it had arrived, had been ferocious and soon became white hot. As a result the darkness, which was normally allowed some time to withdraw, was forced to flee the scene in panic and even so, shreds caught under the doors or beneath the bed-quilts emitted tiny shrieks of pain. Not knowing what else to do, Dad decided to send up the balloon, to collect data from the upper atmosphere.

Taking a flask of miniaturized air molecules, he went to the balloon chamber. The silk was already quivering in its cocoon, as though it had known that today they would be required. Dad fastened the glass tarpaulins above the wings and adjusted the aperture selector of the vascular aureoles which opened the pores of the balloon to the drinking winds. According to this theory of flight—which had very little to do with the Wright brothers—anything could fly, so long as the air was drunk.

The sea, one of the only entities able to thrive in this shanty-world, was slowly sinking into itself, to get away from the aimless imbecilities occurring above ground. Underwater was far superior, in every way. This was the ocean's avowed

opinion, much preferring the darkness of its own depths and going there, as often as it could. It was the ocean itself which had first climbed out onto the land and spawned legs to climb from the trees into the TAB offices. Only in their so-called civilization were humans vain enough to think they were their own creations. Giving these creatures the power of speech was obviously a bad mistake.

Dad removed the headphones. That was heavy shit. The ocean was a wonderful source of doom and gloom crap on the best of days. This was through the roof.

Time for lunch. This sort of shit was hard enough without an empty stomach to boot. He wheeled the pulpit up through the waves until it hovered near the King's Head Hotel. Even though he could not be present in person he found the atmosphere convivial. Finn McCool and George McIntyre were down one end of the bar. As Dad unwrapped his tuna fish sandwiches, he noticed two almost recognizable shapes, colliding in front of the side entrance.

CJHAARMELSE!S!

“CJHAARMELSE!S! “

“You clumsy, great oaf! I don't see you since sun up and this is the way you treat me! With a head butt to the solar plexus!”

“My dear Charles!” responded James, massaging his flattened proboscis with a bleeding hand. “Solar plexi notwithstanding, what a fortunate coincidence we should meet!

I gather, by the look of your stomach you were on your way to see me?”

“You’re right, you didn’t much damage the midriff, but you seem to be hurt.”

“I’m not hurt. This pleading hand is a theatrical device. I have plenty more. Would you like one?” Saying so, James placed his manuscript between his knees and produced more pleading hands and a packet of *Gauloises* from alternate pockets.

“I’ll say yes to the *Gauloises* and no to the groping hands, if you don’t mind. We should celebrate. I’ve finished my painting at last. It’s the first one I’ve ever finished.” He laughed. “I’m the world’s littlest painter. One painting a life!”

“Not only the world’s littlest, but in the littlest world, as well,” said James. “Why don’t we enter this establishment, instead of standing out here in the heat like a pair of shags on the proverbial rock.”

“While I’m in complete accord with that, old friend, I wouldn’t be expecting too much top rank product from the bottle shop.”

Finding a table in the dim recesses of the lounge bar, the two friends shared the first drops from a newly-purchased bottle of Blind Ned’s Invalid Port and resumed their conversation, with James taking the initiative.

“It’s not bad, this,” he said, savouring the full nose which snorted out of his glass. “A bit on the sweet side, perhaps, and it’s got an odd fishy smell to it.”

“I’ve heard it’s made with runoff from the mackerel canning factory. But it’s a good drop for the price, all right. How’s the book going?”

“Weird. I’m a bit lost right now. It’s sunrise, the day after, on the beach.”

“The day after what?”

“The day after today. Tomorrow.”

“You’re writing something that hasn’t happened yet. No wonder you’re lost.”

“I feel bad about it.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Jimmy. It’s only a book. It’s not the end of the world.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Maria is up to something.”

“Maria’s in your book?”

“Sure.”

“And me?”

“Of course,” said James. “It’s more or less a documentary.”

“I see,” said Charles, without conviction.

“You’re not upset, are you?”

“Not at all. It’s tomorrow. Where is Maria?”

“On the beach. She left you a note saying she was going to meet you there. Didn’t she?”

“If you say so,” said Charles. “Do go on.”

“If I didn’t know better I’d think she was going try to find a way out of the book and take you with her.”

“Just what is this based on?”

“Reality,” said James.

“OK,” said Charles. “Go on.”

“Essentially it’s a threesome thing, a love triangle, like Jules and Jim. Two hopeless romantics in love with the same woman.”

Charles half closed his eyes.

“Jules and Jim didn’t end well,” he said.

“I missed the ending,” said James. “I must have fallen asleep. They had such a great time in Paris. What happened?”

“They grew up.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Jules married Catherine. Their marriage was not happy. She and Jim then get together, that doesn’t work either. They all end up in Paris and Catherine makes Jules watch helplessly while she and Jim crash through the bridge railing into the river and drown.”

“I really should have stayed awake. What about *L’Ecume des jours*?”

“That’s not a love triangle, really. It doesn’t end well either.”

“You’re kidding. What went wrong?”

“Colin gives his money to Chick who wastes it all on Jean-Paul Sartre memorabilia while Chloe is dying because a water lily is growing in her lung. Same thing. Idealistic romantic love, then they grow up.”

“I’m sensing a theme here.”

“Yeah. You can be crazy in love when you’re young, but sooner or later you’d better wise up and get with the program.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Believe what?”

“Getting with the program?”

“Oh sure. Now that I’ve done a painting, I’m going to teach. Maria and I are moving to Sydney so I can get a PhD and a decent job.”

“What about painting and writing? What about me?”

“It’s your life, bozo. Wake up and smell the shit storm.”

“Speaking of which, this potent brew is burning a swift path to the bladder. I’ll be right back.”

James got up, nearly fell over, then stabilised his stride, walking deeper into the dark interior of the hotel, reaching a side door which led across the car park to the urinal. Once there, he directed a stream of urine at his reflection in the mirror. His reflections always took him by surprise at times like these. He felt the spray on his toes but he did not look down to see whether or not he was wearing shoes today. The stream of the piss pattered against the glass, with increasing and diminishing intensity, depending on the angle of his lean-to as he swayed in the wind. Buttoning himself, he wondered if he had finished pissing. He looked down. He was in luck, this time. He recrossed the car park, thinking about what Charles had said. Before he reached the side door a tongue of flame coiled around him and burnt the shirt off his back. It was a relief, now he could evaporate. He walked inside.

Charles had already strapped the bottle to his back and was prepared to set out.

“Come on,” he said, “you can tell me the rest of the story on the run. I want you to see my painting. I feel like I’m getting the short end of the stick in this story of yours.”

“It’s fairly hot out there,” James warned.

Charles grunted acknowledgement, as they stepped out into the fierce sunlight. Almost immediately, a soft rain of fire commenced, showering the surrounding buildings with flame as the two friends picked their way over broken glass.

“Where were we?” James said. “Oh yeah. I remember. You know James, my character, was writing a story set in the city, all of which happens on one day, which is my version of *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses* kind of mashed together. My idea is, if this James writer guy is himself in a book, it would be

autobiographical, and it would seem real to him. But what if he and Charles and Maria start to get the idea that they aren't real and they are also in a book. That's where I come in, because actually I wrote both books, and this world is the real one, but now I'm not so sure. Have you noticed it's on fire?"

Charles looked through his pockets. Nothing there. Meet me by the sea, she said. Be sure you're wearing a white horse.

He watched his ossified feet treading gingerly on the road. In the end, there'll always be jealousy between the writer and the characters. It's naturally going to be worse in a writer's first book. Luckily, one is protected, more or less, from an author stepping out of line. They're very sensitive to textual discomfort. They have to have a very good reason for getting rid of you. On the other hand if it all goes to shit I don't want to go down with the ship, that's the captain's job. Good luck, sailor. He seems to have underestimated Maria. Typical writer. In love with the first person. Hmmm. I wonder if this might not be the time to gracefully exit.

2.20 MARIA

Walking slowly, with limbs all to one side, Maria had spread her golden skirts with the solemn grace of carpet snakes. It was her way of predicting the weather by explosion.

Carrying three quart bottles of nitro-gasoline, she snuck from tree to tree over the uneven terrain towards the distant chlorination works. To prevent them failing, she was going

to blow them up. It seemed the only sensible approach for the annihilation of a small, fictive world, so long as you could get out of there before it went kapow.

After a couple of hours sneaking from tree to tree Maria realised she wasn't getting any closer to her target. The furtive approach wasn't working. It was probably too subtle. She decided to simplify things and walk straight towards it.

As she understood it, walking was a mechanical biosis, an extended version of the kiss of life, consisting, to the surprise of some, of scratching the earth with nervous fingers and doodling the manuscript with the water-based grandeur of blackness.

So Maria walked. Her face was a desert, with luminous green islands swimming in the sands between fringing crescents of eyelash palm trees. It was a bridge for the iconic, mutual waters of mind. She thought of herself not as a terrorist, but as a freedom fighter, a resistance leader with plausible deniability. Gaseous dogs barked octorunic angloid utterances while Maria drank the frenzied clamour of silence. She was looking forward to pouring the night-urine from her writhing, humiliated futilities. Wouldn't it be nice!

Mumbling sub-vocalisations along the bare-skinned beach, through the sands of time, in a state of half-distress where erosion ravished Trojans, her second wind had blown away. Soft rhythmic tides of land surged around her. Green clouds of darkness ripened yellow and orange, bathing the black silk in menthol. She felt underwritten, as if her life was on hold, waiting for the right time in which to be described.

There were only three or four hundred steps to the chlorination works. The nitro-gasoline sludged like lava in the

jerry-cans. It was high grade stuff, with tallow from an emu farm. Each step reduced the number of steps remaining by one. Through repetition of this process she reached the entrance. Settling the tankard inside the door in the dust, Maria lit the fuse, stepped back outside and closed the door. A low explosion resounded through the fabric of the universe. Settling her insteps into her stirrups more firmly, she tested the door. As planned, it was jammed against thousands of tons of rubble, electrical pathways and hair.

Life would go on as normal for some time, while the dominatrix effect did its work, causing a tumbling sequence of circus performers to knock each other unconscious, thus rendering the controls inoperable.

The evening tide, produced by silk and lace-worms living in the bay, drew its veil across the foreshore, across the soon-to-be bandaged, splintered remains of the landscape.

Trellises of ideals hung in the foaming air, glued together with the *ad hoc* cement of mortification. The night cried aloud and often, as the caustic needles of short-fuse jocularly were discarded from the side windows of passing caravans. This was all perfectly normal. The results of the explosion would come later. Maria felt a pang of remorse, wondering whether she had done the right thing, but took consolation from the fact the Fire Chief had been warned. She watched light rieslings of vinous morning light whisper up past the horizon as she approached the beach. Sandy ground faded under the banksias and gums. She looked out over the waves, hypnotic as flames. The foam was as white as alabaster moons. Gathering her pleated garments around her waist, she skipped gaily off towards the wharf to meet Charles.

2.21 TOM RYAN

Shuffling uneasily in his upside-down, crisply burnt *chair de wheels* Lord Mayor Tom Ryan wondered whether he should finish this ceremonial toast to death's stinging victory by tossing a little earth over himself with an undertaker's trowel. That's weird, he thought, pretty sure I haven't done that before. Had a thought, that is, let alone an amusing musing.

This strange development had come about due to flickerings of intelligence, sparks of thought after death, now emerging in the Lord Mayor's charred, well-grilled brain. As luck would have it he had not needed the services of his mind while alive. It was the mental equivalent of putting the car up on blocks. His mental machinery, after a life of bonhomie, vacuous political machinations and civil affairs, was in perfect working order. If only the rest of him was alive, he could have been someone.

2.22 GEORGE

George McIntyre found the going difficult, severely handicapped by the lack of wall-maps in the sewer system, something he would remember to attend to if he ever got out of here. Don't forget to remind me. After some hours of aimless wandering, he had reached a junction offering him three ways forward. A fourth, going back the way he had come, lay behind him. He opted for a fifth, which was to lie down in the shallow water and think things over.

Staring at nothing in the dark, his mind began picking

through his memories, loitering around a particular scene in which an over exertion with his *Charles Atlas Dynamic Tension* course had caused his body to multiply into a throng of skinny weaklings which then merged into the monster he had now become. It was a nice memory, lingering in his thoughts like a broken-down melody with no hubcaps. His head settled more softly into the sweet-smelling sludge of composting brown leaves.

Reasoning further from this point, it occurred to George the presence of fallen foliage in the tunnel was a sign that the tubular conveyance he now occupied must have been a through-way for storm water destined for the outdoors and not the turd-processing pit he had been expecting. Reassured he could find his way out of the labyrinth without having to confront the fecal minotaur, he felt entitled to a nap before continuing his journey. His snores reverberated along the tunnels, a pleasant counterpoint to the point he had forgotten to remember—that age-old adage, where there is a storm water drain there is storm water, sooner or later. It came in a rush, picking him up and carrying him out into the bay where it took 37 bronze whaler sharks, a moray eel and a starving stone fish to rip him apart and consume the remains.

2.23 JAMES

James lurched through the streets, his shirt burned off his back. Only now, after an hour or two blinded by Blind Ned's,

did he realise the city around him was seriously engulfed in flames and that this wasn't likely to be a good thing.

Despite things looking ridiculous and far away, it was obvious some people, tearing their faces off, screaming inferno and throwing them into seething flames, were not enjoying themselves.

Two large, blue ink-stains had appeared on his body, one on his shoulder and another on his hip. Hard on the heels on that observation, came another. He was no longer lurching, since he was lying down, looking at the sky through the smoke and fire, which seemed to be clouding over. The first propellers of rain whirled down from the clouds. In a few moments soot-caked beads of moisture, frazzled to the aroma of stale coffee, began to explode on the sizzling footpath. If it weren't so obvious, he would have remembered *Fire and Rain*, James Taylor's song about dead friends, drug addiction and depression. Or maybe not. Bit of a downer.

2.24 DAD

As evening turned to night Dad and Ted began searching for survivors, but finding only corpses, which they were hauling onto their boat to take back and bury. The water, silver-blue and green, gleamed in the light of the full moon, hanging over the scene like a huge, distended eye. Insects whistled in perpetual motion. Bright costumes were swarming by the shore, preparing to hold back an exceptionally high tide. Ash and soot, the result of the sun setting fire to the edges of the horizon, blackened the silver edges of the sky, covered

everything.

“What’s that on the beach, Dad?” called Ted.

Dad peered.

“It’s not moving. But we’d better pick it up anyway.”

His figure cast a wavering shadow on the waves. A fog drifted in. The boat bumped into something. A body, bloated and blue, surfaced, venting bad-smelling air.

“Here’s something,” Dad said. “Fuck me. It’s the bottom half of the balloon. The force of the fire must have made it take human form.” Dad put his grappling hook into the bulging side of the floating object and hauled it on board. He called to Ted.

“Throw your hook into the one on the beach and then we’ll call it quits for the night.”

As they motored back to the wharf, Ted looked up into the liquid sky. It was larger than expected, this book, he thought. He had expected it to crush him like a moth against a screen. It was now obvious there was a certain amount of room to move. Above him the dark mist increased and arrows of rain enveloped him in a stinging spray. The pores of his skin, aqueous and ductile, screamed as tiny squirts of pleasure were channelled into the pooling reservoirs of his blood. I could get to like it here, he thought.

2.25 MARIA AND CHARLES

It was tomorrow, bright and early. Vague currents of high tide eddied, soon to be pulled away towards the sea by invisible

lunar forces. At world's end, the weather was idyllic, the sun beaming down like the face of a happy child. Islands, dotted the bay like freckles on the sea.

Charles dipped his hand into the water, seized a rope to a dinghy and reeled it in while Maria watched on, thinking of what it would be like to have shells instead of the teeth in her mouth, a sea creature with seaweed hair, many arms waving from the deep.

The dinghy thudded into the pier, newly painted blue. The dinghy was painted yellow. They got in, unhooked the rope and stored it. As if by magic the boat turned and slid across the sea. Maria steered towards the large island offshore.

The sun was high overhead when they reached a cove on the far side of the island, the sea glittering blue as they rode the shorebreak, the dinghy fetching up high on the exposed sand. Charles and Maria stepped out. Maria dragged the boat to a sandy gorge lined with caves, well above high tide mark, out of the weather when it came. They walked along the beach gathering shellfish, firewood and grabbing sleeping fish from the shallows. They made a fire in the gorge, ate, then slept through the afternoon as leaves rustled, flowers crumpled, boughs of trees encircling big chunks of sky, squeezing them until they squealed. In the deeper currents off shore turtles, dolphins and whales played cribbage in groups of four, not without skill and certainly never cheating, scoring on waterproof cribbage boards with pegs made from driftwood. Because they played under water, the dealer dealt the cards face up against the sky, the players beneath them.

Gulls squabbled along the shore, trying to disrupt the marching drills of the soldier crabs. When it rained, it rained

gold coins in concentrated piles, sometimes topping them off with silver buckets. It was a place where nothing much happened, luckily.

3.9

The river had spilled out along Gilchrist Avenue, behind the Normanby Fiveways. Watery molecules had been falling from the skies for days as remnants of cyclone Wanda allowed their soft underbellies to sag open over the road. It makes you wonder how people live in the tropics without drowning.

It was the first of February, 1974. At the end of the tree-lined street, in the rainy haze, water surrounded a grey *Wolsely* in which Charles, Maria and I had taken refuge when the waters started rising, eventually climbing onto the roof to avoid the unpleasant fate known as drowning. With us on the roof was a single box containing 40 copies of *Manacles*, sheltering from the rain in an upside down aquarium. In the car were eleven more boxes of *Manacles* which had been underwater and were now irretrievably saturated. Oh well, one box was better than none.

Charles was eyeing the last box of books with a hungry look. He would have preferred to polish off a plate of spaghetti polonaise with ptarmigan cheese, but 150 pages would go along way towards easing the ache in his innards. He had already been nibbling at the cardboard of the carton. You could tell by a man's fingernails if he was thinking of eating your first edition.

"Keep your eyes off my opus," I said.

"Everything is beginning to look edible," said Charles. "It's stifling my creativity."

"You could eat the wet ones in the car. That's all they're good for," I said.

"I'm usually careful with cholera," he said.

Maria, who could exist without food, drank the rain as it fell from the sky.

We had attached two plastic raincoats to the aerial at the front of the car and tied them at the back to two fishing rods. This shelter was largely ineffective. Occasionally when a sufficient quantity of water collected in the plastic it would sway the construction erratically, tipping its contents at random over those that sheltered beneath it, the only thing staying drying being the books in the aquarium, ironic, to say the least.

The streets suffered terribly. I had great compassion for the streets, they were downtrodden. The nickel edging of the car's roof blistered occasionally with spots of rust causing a miniature cascade to appear and at the same time disperse at each of these points. Sacred ibis were picking through the brackish wreckage along the perimeters of the park, their beaks making happy percussive sounds each time they encountered an empty sardine tin.

Along the railway line, hydrologically inept sunken trains with their engines still running sent up strange plumes of orange-scented steam. One small step for a mandarin, a giant shout for inadequacy.

Along the railway line, hydrologically inept sunken trains with their engines still running sent up strange plumes of orange-scented steam. One small step for a mandarin, a giant shout for inadequacy.

Charles shook me awake with his hand on my shoulder, pointing towards towards a small patch of blue sky in the east, enough to make a sailor a pair of underpants.

“It looks like we’ll be able to get going soon,” he said.

It seemed to have stopped raining. Hallelujah. The waters were receding hairlines with increasing amounts of road scalp beginning to re-appear. My last box of books was gone, aquarium included. Sunlight peered through the widening hole in the clouds as if curious to see what had been hidden for days.

I slid off the roof, my feet landing in a sweet-smelling sludge of composting brown leaves. I untied the fishing rods and the raincoats and stowed them in the boot. The other boxes had also gone, cardboard and all. Food for the fishes. At least I wouldn't have to sign them. Charles got in the driver's side. Maria was already in the middle, twiddling the knobs of a radio which had never worked, so was unlikely to start now after having been underwater. The passenger door was wedged shut. I cleared away a pile of barbed wire, a horse float, the picked-over remains of a piano and a bakelite box of lightbulbs. I would have kept the lightbulbs but they were Edison screw. I didn't have the right sockets. I prized open the car door and squeezed in, negotiating Maria's left elbow, an angular momentum which came to rest on my knee.

Charles turned the key. I felt the vibrations through the body of the car, conveyed into mine by the seat as the car eased forward, water purling away on each side as we moved slowly from Gilchrist Avenue into Ithaca Street, the wheels of the *Wolsely* clambering over branches and the stiffening corpses of jellyfish. The streets were deserted.

Maria turned to Charles. She was in superlative spirits.

"Let's retire for the evening," she suggested. "I'm hungry."

"So am I," Charles agreed. He bared his teeth. They were wizened.

“Why are you crying?” Maria asked me, turning to me and laughing.

“I’m hungry too!”

Charles perched for a moment at the crest of Ithaca Street before turning right into Musgrave Road, even though it was unnecessary to do so, for the traffic lights were out and the Normanby was completely deserted. To the left was the railway overpass. There was a clear view from where we were stopped, down over the river and beyond.

“Why are we stopped?”

“I wanted to look at the city.”

The sky was now blue and clear.

After looking at the city for an unbearable twenty seconds, the car took matters into its own hands and surged forward, spinning its wheels across the greasy intersection, thumping against various lumps of debris. The ash tray sprang from the dash with a metallic ting. The tyres bit the surface, the car straightened, and we entered Musgrave Road, slowing to a murmur as we began the climb in low gear. Charles rapped the steering wheel with open palms, as the engine note sank a notch to a whisper. Maria presented me with a menacing grin. It was endearing, but confusing. I guessed she was thinking of food.

The red roofs of houses on either side of the steepening road shone like bright coals sizzling in green hillsides. Life was returning. Grey bitumen, picket fences, letter boxes and barking dogs. Cannas, crotons and aspidistras shed water in sheets as they unfurled to drink in the energy of the atmosphere. A council truck hauled past us up the hill, stopping here and there to let out tiny blue workers who struggled

with tropical flotsam, stripping side branches before hacking them into pieces.

A *Coca-Cola* sign came into view at the top of the hill. Picking up speed, we charged a difficult looking trench. The car bucked and my head went forward onto the dash. Tears came into my eyes, my nose rang and a fuzzy brightness invaded my senses. I sat up and smiled.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry.”

Waves of warmth flooded the hill as we negotiated the ruts in the road, climbing the footpath with screaming wheels. A terrier launched itself through the air and fastened its fangs in the front fender. We couldn't carry a dog up the hill as well as everything else. The car shook its fender irritably, sending the dog flying, snapping at its tail.

Charles had positioned the *Wolsely* on the far side of the road, pointing its snout at a patch of crumbled dirt and cement beside the *Coca-Cola* sign. The car reared back slightly on its haunches, then sprang across the road, skidding to a halt against the wall. Brick dust puffed up and settled on the bonnet. The car sneezed and came to a halt.

I unlatched the car door beside me and shouldered it open. My right side was numb, for reasons which never became apparent. Charles got out the other side and stood in the drying dirt of the hill, his rope-soled shoes flat on the ground.

“My country!” he cried, kneeling to kiss the earth. “Brazil!”

It was nice to be back on dry land again.

Maria looked up at the sky. An albatross circled high above.

The entrance was at the back, via a narrow staircase to a

frosted door leading into the first of the two flats, a bedsit, half of which we had converted into a hall by the removal of the wall between itself and the larger flat next door. A shared kitchen was to the right. Translucent pink and blue sunbeams hovered in the air above our heads. My eyes, still watering slightly, were squeezed shut against the brightness. From the entrance to the kitchen, I could see through to the second bathroom. Cakes of soap lay in the bright sun, their colours somehow intensified by their reflections in a flat, metallic mirror.

Mahler's 10th filled the pink and blue-grey room with the sounds of silver strings. It was music none of us liked but we all liked listening to. Maria turned down the volume and held out a double handful of garlic. I received the garlic into my cupped hands and carried it to the bench. Knuckle-white, like wisps of moisture. Escaping, the feather-light skins floated in the afternoon sun, streaming with bits of dust across the room. The smell of cornmeal rose from the stove and drowned out the Mahler. Maria was changing the record anyway. Now it was Leonora Carrington. Her strange Spanish, raving and muttering, expanded to the limits of the room and began escaping from the small blue window high in the wall.

Charles was lighting a *Punch*. He offered me one.

"Thanks, old man."

"The humidor is at your disposal."

"Cutter?"

"Of course," he said, handing me the mini-guillotine. He was stirring the polenta with a wooden spoon. The low heat

of the stove sent glurping bubbles to the surface to release their steam. I had chopped the garlic and now threw in these thirty pieces of moist silver. Almost immediately the authentic smell of polenta rose from the pot. Wine came steadily from a Wynns cask on the fridge. Hunger really was the best medicine. A few greens which had survived in the fridge were put together with pepper cheese and green peppercorns. A wizened cucumber, two zucchini, three capers, four green beans and an endive to finish off.

The air in the kitchen was toasty-warm. The fabric, soaking up those little razor sunshine. Potatoes were boiling with onions, waiting for black pepper, wine-vinegar and plenty of butter. Coffee suspended in an aerodynamic container was waiting for the first belches of boiling water to stain the reservoir.

The kitchen originally would have been one of the larger rooms of the two flats, now merged into one. The dividing wall was gone. Elation had unhinged all the partitions. A rebuilt bookcase-wall-room-divider crossed partway where the wall had stood, its boards bellied down.

Once upon a time, to counter the noise of cars flying back and forth over the bitumen, we had installed a piano. It was somewhere to put the sound-cancelling cactus. At the base of the piano we had spread a loose layer of bark chips, to the muffle the machinery. It was dark in their shade. The piano was left-handed. It was capable of rendition and needed very little assistance.

Two balconies, one at each end of the building, grinned with gap-toothed smiles at the world outside. White teeth, red lips. The blistering paint of the uprights. It was our

dwelling. To ensure privacy, outsiders were never allowed in.

Maria, barking at the stove like a shiny dog standing in a drain, was tying her shoelaces and at the same time, trying to open a brandy bottle. Her leather shoulder glimpsed freedom as the cotton strap of her shirt fell in a semi-circle and lay on her brown upper arm.

Startled, she looked up to see me staring at her exposed shoulder. Shreds of whitened coconut clung to her lips. She had devoured half a stale lamington lurking at the back of the fridge. She held the remainder in offering. I felt something soft break inside my chest. I waved my smoking cigar in the air, smiling and shaking my head sadly.

Charles tipped the polenta from the pot. It covered the circular polenta board, nearly reaching the edges as it spread and set. Fresh oregano sprinkled itself over the already hardening golden corn meal. Charles sent a curling jet of red wine into his glass, promptly drank half of it and refilled it.

The cigar in my mouth stung my eyes as I upended the potatoes and onions into a colander and immediately back in to the pot with butter and vinegar and black pepper. Maria chased stray sunbeams with a fly swat, herding them towards the window, where they escaped, whimpering gratefully as they fled the room to the sky above, in search of Leonora Carrington.

The kitchen was filled with the fumes of food. The noise of the plates jangled harmoniously with those of the piano.

“Let’s eat.”

On the willowed impression of a terrace we ate. The night fell, a sudden curtain washed clean by the rain. Charles laughed.

His white teeth were semi-circles. Half moon fillings.

“I sent a poem to Angus and Robertson,” Maria said, toying with the polenta.

“Why?” Charles asked. He did not want to know the answer.

“Shouldn’t I have?”

“The question is,” I interrupted, with my mouth full of potato, trying to change the subject, “whether poetry is a product of the mind or vice versa.”

“Depends where you are,” said Charles. “Poetry is associational.”

“It could very well be,” I agreed. “Have you read much German philanthropy?”

“I’m not sure that’s the right word,” he said. He filled his glass again. I pushed my glass towards him and he filled that too.

“I have a question,” he said.

“Try me,” I said.

“How does a bird fly?”

“With 32 feet in the air,” I said, putting my two feet in the air to demonstrate.

“Ha!” said Charles. “Like me!” But he did nothing with his feet.

The black ripples of fat night air circled like a stone dropped into a well. I became aware of the vulvic silence and the darkness.

“I’ll change the record,” I said. I got to my feet and followed them inside in lockstep, but strangely slowly. I spend some time in the corridor adjacent to the kitchen, for no

particular reason, except that it was easy to get lost in there because it was dark and filled with junk objects and images. The wallpaper in better days had represented cats in various undergrowths. It was homage, both to Rousseau and to the great Chiaroscuro. Machines, which I could hardly remember, were waiting to be assembled, or taken apart.

We kept plants in cages, following a theme of imprisoned vegetation. What did this theme mean? I wondered. I banged my head. The noise shrieked in the reverberating silence. The second time today. This time I had gashed my head and blood was pouring freely into my eyes as I looked up to see the galvanized tin struts of a birdcage in which a philodendron was struggling against encroaching wires. Portraits of unknown people leered on the walls. Charles referred to them as images from the monstrosity. I slumped against a mass of metal covered in old blankets and wiped the blood from my face. I could be in the bathroom, I thought, in which case I could turn the light on and get rid of this blood with cold water like a sensible human, the last thing I was likely to become in this life.

This dust can't be hygienic, I thought, and it is going to make me sneeze, for sure. The ash of the melaleuca was antiseptic, apparently, but this wasn't ash of the melaleuca. It was insectoidal house dandruff. I got to my feet again. My imagination was the enemy, I realised. I was aware I needed help but found the greatest difficulty in accepting it. Like everyone else I was just another person in the world and afraid of getting lost. But like a god caught in a trap I knew I would snarl and bite viciously at anyone who tried to rescue me. I paused. Now, where was I?

Inscriptions faintly marked in green crayon and black pencil were scrawled across the walls. A map. Others had been lost here before. Distracted I noticed that I was standing on a musical instrument. I disentangled it from beneath my feet. It was a French horn, or something else brass and convoluted. Surely someone would respond to the call of a bugle, I realised happily, even if it's not really a bugle. I can explain it as an attempt to express myself, rather than a cry for help. Putting the mouthpiece to my lips, I blew fiercely. A strange, fizzing, spluttering sound leaked through its many vents. No sign of a note from the blasted thing. The mouthpiece was bitter and metallic against my lips. I bashed the instrument against the wall, smashing it flat underneath my fist. A coarse mode of Morse code.

Somehow, while all this was going on, I had backed into a room off the corridor. Given that there was only a limited number of rooms, I ought to recognize this one. I staggered into a dark well of light, the pitiful incandescence of 40 watts from a naked bulb I had accidentally turned on while flailing. The wall was greasy with fingerprints smeared around the light switch but otherwise bare and pale, obviously not my bedroom which was painted black with skeletons. A cupboard shrank against the wall to avoid the light. In the dust on top of the cupboard, I saw there were two objects. A closer look revealed a book and an old-fashioned telephone not connected to anything obvious. The book was *Death in Venice*, by Thomas Mann. With the telephone it seemed a combination of pathetic and ridiculous. For some obscure reason, this cheered me greatly, lifting like scales from my eyes the oppressively priggish seriousness and snooty, moaning,

self-obsessed self-inspection. The record player stood silent and alone in the corner.

Putting one foot carefully in front of the other I traversed the room. Blood was drying on my forehead. Havin' a whale of a time, Jonah. The records were stacked at oblique angles in the boxy chasms of the cabinet. I felt the pressure of my bladder as I knelt to inspect their covers. They were numerous. Their covers gave me flashes of mood and memory, but I knew these flashes were images in my own mind utterly unrelated to the grinning teeth and pearls of musical wisdom buried in these blackly opaque discs and it was therefore useless to employ anything but chance when choosing something to listen to. Closing my eyes, I chose one at random.

When I returned to the terrace, Charles was sitting with his feet in an ice bucket. I sat at the table, scraped the charred end away from my dead cigar and applied flame to its fuselage, hearing as I did so the scrape of my chair as I sat down and the wet glassy clink of the ice cubes as Charles raised his feet. They blazed like two small fires.

“Sore feet,” Charles complained.

Beyond the terrace, the flooded ruins of the city looked like props.

“They might be,” I said aloud. I turned to Charles. “Can architecture be two-dimensional?” I asked him. “You could do it with glazed wire and vertical suspension.”

The cigar was a good one, still tasting sweet even after the tar had congealed inside while it was unlit. A good cigar can stand a lot of punishment. There was no such thing as an ideal world. Or two-dimensional architecture. Along the edges of the terrace, resedas flowered, dusty brown blooms

fading in the yellow light shed from the kitchen behind them.

“I’ve never noticed these plants here before,” I said.

The next day, something happened. A white industrial vehicle, its superstructure painted yellow, was parked beside the *Wolsely* on the dirt against the building under the *Coca-Cola* sign.

Below our flat was an artificial limbs and appliances workshop. I had discovered this by descending into the early morning sunshine of the street. At the rear of the building a door ajar looked in onto a collection of arms, legs and pelvises stacked on top of each other on workbenches, underneath a picture calendar of a large nude woman with artificial arms and legs. The calendar was supplied by Best’s Surgical Appliances. Darkness concealed the further depths of the workshop where curious noises-off emanated obscurely, reaching me in fragments. Conversations, grunting and the clink of soft equipment being cinched tight to pliant flesh. It was their vehicle.

That happened, but it wasn’t significant. They were there fairly often. Something else happened.

Charles, stately and plump, called from the frosted crystal window half opened in the white wall above me.

“Toast that carpet, you fearful Jesuit, and come upstairs. Breakfast’s ready.”

I felt like an old balalaika with young shoulders. Time to quit the sun and re-enter the masonry. Roast that car park? English is a very different language, I thought. The same words mean different things and different words mean the

same. Very hard to get along with.

I climbed the stairs, entered the kitchen and sat down at the table.

Charles brought fresh bread from the oven, filling the room with the golden smell of yeast.

“Bite the feet off that rattle, little gimcrack.”

I did so, smothering it first with butter and honey.

Broken open, the bread scattered crumbs on the yellow wood of the table and steam arose from its golden, conchoidal, wheaten farls, rich in proteinaceous goodness, sweet and sticky.

“Are we going out today?” I asked.

Charles looked at me.

“Maybe,” he said.

I looked up, my curiosity whet.

“Where’s Maria?”

“Vanished.”

“Where to?”

“That’s the odd thing about people when they vanish. One tends not to know where they are.”

“When did she leave?”

“Don’t know. Must have left during the night.”

“I didn’t hear her go out.”

The coffee gurgled.

“Were you awake?”

“Yes. Until about four in the morning. Then I went out.”

“An awful hour to view Brisbane.”

“Better than you’d imagine. It rained again during the night. The streets were shiny and black. I needed the rhythm of walking to think.”

“A common affliction.”

I dwelt on this response, marvelling at its intricacies.

“What are your immediate plans?” I asked eventually.

“Plans?” asked Charles, surprised.

“Yes.”

“Well,” he answered, “first of all, to find out whether there is a god and then whether he or she is pulchritudinous, or venal.”

“What?”

“In other words, I’m going out to look for jumper leads.”

“Do you think we’ll need them?”

“Not if we have them.”

“Going by Murphy’s law?”

“One learns to expect a catastrophe.”

My smile remained in place, waxen, as Charles left by the rear, the *Wolsely* spluttering into life and leaving four gunnels in the mud as it turned onto the side street leading off Musgrave Road. It was some time before I realised properly that he was gone.

After finishing my breakfast with coffee and dead-beetle paste labelled *Vegemite* I looked through the flat. It was quiet and empty. At least it felt empty. I listened intently, sending my senses out to map the rooms. When the silence became deafening, I went to the bathroom window from where I could see the car park. Yes, the *Wolsely* was gone. What did this mean? I wondered. Not finding an answer to my question, I went into the kitchen and began clearing up. There were dishes, trays and kitchen detritus, the residue of breakfast, resulting in a confusion of busy, watery noises.

When the washing up was finished, I went from room to

room, closing windows, to prevent the interior escaping and then into my bedroom, where I lay down on the purple and green striped cover, staring at the ceiling. My body felt very heavy. Outside, I saw the clouds in the sky crawling through the blue like white grubs. I felt quite uneasy. I realised I had a hangover. That made me feel better. I pulled back the bed cover and the sheet. The morning air was already warm.

My dressing gown slipped from my shoulders. People tend to feel naked without their clothes, I thought, with an air of having discovered something. I propped myself up on my side. The creak of a door sounded and I heard the sound of steps on the wooden stairs. I lay quietly in the darkened end of my room. It was Maria. From where I lay I saw her pass the entranceway. She turned towards the bathroom. The flat went quiet again. I heard the soft pressure of fabric against her knee. A zipper, giving way. I got out of the bed and wrapped a sarong around my waist. My dressing gown had disappeared. I walked to the bathroom. Halfway across the room I had a change of heart. It was like being hit in the chest with a cricket bat. I stumbled, almost fell on the floor, picked myself up and ran at the bathroom door. I felt somehow that I wasn't in control of my actions as I smashed through the bathroom door. Maria was standing on the edge of the bath, naked, looking from the tiny bathroom window high in the wall down onto the world below.

She had turned at my catastrophic entry and stared at me. I stood, bewildered, in the doorway. My sarong had fallen onto the floor at my feet. I picked it up and clutched it in front of me and smiled wildly. Maria's eyes were red. She looked at me clutching the sarong and gave a short bright

laugh. She didn't say anything but climbed down from the edge of the bath and walked around behind me and pushed me towards the bath, keeping pushing until I stepped into it. She kept close behind me and reached past me and turned the cold tap on full and held my head in the jet. I half turned and the water drummed on my head, painfully cold on my hot skin. Maria was crying and I kissed her eyes, tasting the salt of her tears before the cold water washed them away. I put my arms around her. She put her arms around me and we kissed and I no longer felt the cold of the water. I could taste her mouth as we kissed and I could feel her body against mine and the aching of my heart, a strongly physical sensation as I realised that whatever had made Charles and Maria and I friends was now destroyed. The anxiety I felt about the future was distant and confused. I felt incapable and bewildered, but at least I knew that I didn't have to figure out what was next. Whatever was happening between Maria and me was happening and all I had to do was fall into it.

We were in bed in the heat. We failed to satisfy each other but satisfaction was hardly to be expected, we had fallen from grace, from romance and friendship, from noble, honourable behaviour. Neither of us was good at it but my teeth tingled. I felt marvellous and Maria looked more beautiful than I could ever imagine and I didn't give a shit about nobility or honour. The sheet lay lightly on our bodies. Maria's brown shoulders gleamed.

Propping myself up on one elbow, my head resting on my hand, I drew down the sheet until Maria's breasts were exposed. Her stomach glistened in the bright reflected light.

I drew the sheet down further, to her thighs, traced my finger over her glistening abdomen and kissed her there. I could feel myself getting an erection. Turning on my back I laid my head in her lap and stared at the ceiling to avoid thinking about it.

“What are you thinking about?” Maria asked.

I stared at her intently, my cheek pressed against her stomach.

“I was thinking,” I said, “that I would have been a lot better off if I had grown up in Chermside, been interested in forestry and antique firearms and had a *Holden* station wagon and three children instead of a three-speed bicycle.”

“Remember when you used to get that furry look on your face, when you were thinking?”

“Only when I was thinking about food.”

“You used to get that way when you thought about potatoes.”

“It’s the truth,” I confessed. “I wondered what it is about potatoes, which makes your face look furry? Noel Ferrier once had to play the part of a potato, you know.”

“We’re all potatoes,” Maria said, “when it all comes down to it.”

I looked at her.

“I guess we are, at that,” I said eventually.

“What are you thinking about now?”

“The Notre Dame,” I laughed. “It does no good.”

“It makes me feel maternal when you snivel, I guess that’s something.”

“I wasn’t really snivelling. I was only pretending.”

“That’s okay, you should know by now that the only way

to be sincere is to fake it.”

“That’s a rather cynical view of existence,” I complained. “Isn’t there anything worth believing in?”

“You can believe in journalism,” she said.

I had my hand behind my head resting on her thigh.

“Journalism? Why?”

“It’s useful,” she explained. “Journalists make a profession of saying what everyone else would have said if they had the time. It doesn’t require thought, just a good ear.”

“I should have listened to my kindergarten teacher,” I moaned.

“Why?”

“She told me to always beware the rhetorical skills of dotty opponents.”

“I like that.” She smiled and leant forward and kissed me. Her body was too close to mine to avoid thinking about. I slithered up beside her and we made love again and talked.

Some time later I got up to put some music on. I turned it up loud, so that the music would reach the bedroom. The small speakers peaked and crackled between the songs. The music cut through the static like a ribbon of bright steel. Going into the kitchen I scrounged around for some food. There wasn’t any. The cupboard was bare. Some crusts of bread were left over from breakfast, but the butter was finished and the crusts were hard going.

The wine cask was empty too. The balcony where we had dined the night before was strewn with bits of polenta which had been pecked at by the pigeons. I stayed in the kitchen and kept looking through the cupboards.

Eventually, I found a large sack of coffee. I put some in

the percolator. While it heated I changed the record over to the other side. The volume was about as high as the system could take. This helped to cover my attempts to sing along with Laura Nyro whose range started where mine ended. The second side was about to finish when I took the coffee into the bedroom.

Maria wasn't there. The record ended, the automatic return picked up the arm and it dropped it with a clunk on the support. The air was silent. I called out Maria's name, put the coffee down on the floor and went looking through the flat. Maria wasn't in any of the rooms.

A faint sense of urgency seemed to niggle in the back of my skull and yet for some reason I was unable to move. My hands hung uselessly at my side and my feet were stupidly fixed to the floor. I stood immobilized like this for several minutes.

I don't know what broke the spell, but I was awake again. I pulled on some shorts and went to the bathroom quickly and looked out the small window onto the car park underneath the *Coca-Cola* sign. Maria was getting into the *Wolsely*. She held in her hands a blue and orange towel, a straw hat and a portable radio. She got in at the passenger door and pulled it closed. The car began moving away from the wall and edged out into the traffic. I climbed down from the bath. By the time I reached the street, the car was gone. I returned to the stairs and went upstairs.

I stayed in the flat for three days with nothing to eat and just coffee to drink. That's not true about the eating, there was a choko vine outside the artificial limbs place on the back fence

with plenty of chokos which as far as I knew were ripe at all stages of their fruit-hood, if that's what they were. It seemed to make no difference, they tasted like crap and had no discernible nutritional value. They were a pale green colour and after three days I began to show a definite tendency towards the same colour. I had a five-cent piece to make an emergency phone call, but I didn't know anyone, let alone anyone with a phone number.

I remembered with some fondness the night I had been on the beach after drinking half a bottle of *Teacher's* whiskey when I was grabbed by some bogans and tied to a tree for saying they were dickheads. Apparently sound travels quite far on a beach at night. I hadn't realised I had spoken the words *fucking dickheads* in their direction, but cheap whisky will do that to you. They had stripped me naked and waved a knife at me and said they were going to cut my dick off and that would be just the start they would cut my balls off and stuff my dick and balls into my mouth. They didn't do that, in the end. They seemed to be satisfied with the amount of terror. They got a roast chicken carcass, rubbed it in my face through my hair and squished it into my ears and made me suck the bones and the chicken grease as they jammed the carcass into my mouth then they wandered off. Eventually I managed to untie myself and wash off in the sea, then I went back and found my clothes. They were nice boys, even if they were dickheads. They had given me a really strong memory, sort of a light bulb moment, really. It took a long time to get rid of the last of the chicken smell. I wish I had some of that chicken now. The chokos were a bit on the dull side.

The flat had a view of the city towards the east, the river in glimpses and a lot of blurry sky. Towards the west was a jumble of timber-and-tin houses with mostly red roofs and high stumps with a sharp fall from front to back, or back to front, depending whether they were on the high side or the low side of the road.

On the third day Charles came back to say goodbye. Maria wasn't with him.

"You're a funny colour," he said when he reached the top of the stairs and saw me in the kitchen. It was the warmest room of the place, pretty much uninhabitable after ten each morning. It was just after seven am. The rest of the place was dark and cold, probably because the footings extended down through geological eras to the Crimean war where Florence Nightingale was busy treating frostbite.

"You've obviously had the benefit of food and drink," I said. He was looking fitter than I had ever seen him and was wearing a suit. He looked like an Irish penguin. He offered me a *Gitane* which I declined, thinking I would probably toss my chokos and coffee after the last few days going cold turkey without the turkey. Other things about him were also strange. He was normally neat in the head department but now he was a bit shrapneled, with a kind-of disarray instead of a haircut. It was probably a very *expensive* haircut, to look that much like Malcolm McLaren would have cost a fortune. His suit didn't fit him very well, his white shirt, which was actually white, together with his dark suit jacket, combined to look pressurised. On the other hand the trousers were a little too baggy. But it was still a suit. He saw me looking.

"Interview," he said.

I responded with my eyebrows, feeling very tired.

“For the Sydney job, lecturing at art college. I just got back.”

“Did you get it?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m sorting out a place in Annandale, driving down tomorrow.”

“With Maria?”

“No, she stayed to get the key and buy furniture. She’s working at the library already.”

“Things are moving fast,” I said.

“First semester starts next week. I have a hundred first years to teach drawing. I’ll have to scare the bejeezus out of them if I want to get their attention. I’ll show them Yves Klein dragging a blue painted girl across a canvas and trump that with Lucio Fontana’s knife-slashed canvases.”

“They could do worse.”

He smiled warmly and for a moment I saw the old Charles peeping out. The brief window closed and his granite exterior reformed.

“Have you been eating chokos?” he said, looking at the stove.

“And drinking black coffee,” I said. “I’m working with a restricted palate, just two colours.”

“Have you rewritten your book?”

“Nearly,” I said. “I’m at the end. I found my notes.” I showed him a bundle of papers, mostly very lightweight paper in pale, newsagent colours. “I wrote them to myself apparently. They say Manacles ending, do not lose this.”

“That’s lucky,” he said. I’ll just get my stuff and go. “Lots to do.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What about me?”

“Great song, 1971, Quicksilver Messenger Service. Written by Chet Powers under the name Jesse Oris Farrow.”

“No, dickhead. Me. The real me.”

“There is a real you?”

“What do you think this is?” I held my hands palm up.

Charles looked at me for a long while, then came over to the table where I was sitting and dragged out a wooden chair and sat in it. As always he sat very upright. No slouching. He picked up my notes and started reading through them. I drank some cold black coffee. He finished reading them and sorted them into a pile far neater than I could ever have assembled.

“There’s a conversation in there between James and Charles where Charles goes a bit over the top,” he said.

“Yes, I read that. He says James is a life fucker who has fucked his own life up and the lives of everyone he knows. He says James is stuck in the wannabe. That’s fair enough. The natural state of human condition is self loathing.”

“Do you really think that?” Charles said.

“Yeah, sure, why not?”

“I hate to say this to a friend, but you might take a break and wake up to the real world. You’re not living in a book.”

“What makes you think I think I am?”

“Well this bit, for a start,” he said. “This part with you and Maria in the shower. It didn’t happen, you know.”

“It didn’t?”

He shook his head sadly.

“Sorry, ’fraid not.”

“How do you know?”

“We were in Sydney. She wasn’t here.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh is right. There might be a few girders working themselves loose in your bridgework old chum.”

“I thought you wouldn’t take that well,” I said. “I’m embarrassed now.”

“Don’t be. Maria isn’t. She said she had sex once and that was enough. She said it was pleasant enough but the idea of it was disgusting. She said the pleasure centres in your brain are there to keep you dumb.”

“But why was she crying?”

“She wasn’t crying, she was in Sydney, which isn’t much better, I admit. But she wasn’t here.”

“Why would I write it?”

“Maybe you’re lonely,” he said. “Maybe you’re craving human contact. Maybe your hormones got the best of you, who knows?” He looked around at the pile of chokos, the bag of coffee, the empty kitchen that was now beginning to heat up in the February sun.

“What?” I said.

He looked at me and shrugged.

“It’s not my business,” he said, “but you might want to leave. There’s no future here. The rent is paid up to Friday midday. People will probably be moving in.” He looked down at the table and frowned.

“What?” I said.

“Where are your notes?”

“What notes?” I said.

“The notes I just read. They’ve disappeared.”

“Oh yeah, they do that. Things get written, the manuscript

kind of merges into the fabric. You know.”

“No, I don’t know. That’s not a good sign. At least not for you. While there are still some bats left in your belfry you really should leave. Get out of here.”

“Where? There’s nowhere I can go. I’ve lost a few connections in the past few days.”

“I can see that. I like to keep an open mind, but not that open. There is no author looking after you, you know. If there was there would be magic and if there was magic, you would be able to harvest fresh *Beluga* from your left armpit and buckwheat blinis from the other.”

“Thanks for the advice,” I said. “Sounds reasonable.”

“Just don’t buy into the bullshit,” he said. “Even your own.”

“Meaning?”

“Your book. It’s called *Manacles*, right?”

“Yes.”

“Like Blake’s *mind forg’d manacles* in *Songs of Experience*?”

“I only recently discovered Blake had plagiarised me in 1794, the bastard, but yes.”

“The idea is, people are unaware of shit that enslaves them, shit that restricts them, keeps them restrained, even comfortable, everyday shit. Right?”

“Yes.”

“If the manacles are *mind-forg’d*, it means you make them yourself. Right?”

“Yes, so?”

“What are yours?”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

Charles went through the flat, up and down the stairs a few times with books and other belongings. He took the record player and speakers in one trip. On the last trip he took as much as he could cram into a second-hand suitcase, which would have been more if he hadn't left one behind for me. I'm not sure if he did actually say goodbye but I heard the *Wolsely* leave. He may have.

By this time it was too hot in the kitchen so I went back into the heart of darkness and bedsheets and slept most of the day. When it got dark I packed up my stuff, which was hardly anything. I had another good look for my manuscript, which was nowhere. The suitcase was inconvenient to carry, but it wasn't heavy. Maybe I would ditch it into the industrial bin downstairs. Eventually, I got tired of walking around the flat and I left too, without saying goodbye.

3.10

I shook a soggy Gauloises from a crumpled packet. The air outside sparkled with evening light. Bats, finding their body-weights unstable, were taking extra care moving about the sky, most of which was travelling from the south-east to the north-west over the house.

I hunched forward in the dark to turn on the light and banged my foot which had gone to sleep by the light switch, there! On the desk was a mass of scrawled notes and scribbles which represented my book, now finished.

Time for a drink, and isn't that all the time? I grabbed a sherry bottle from the fridge and a nearby glass and emptied the contents of one into the other.

When I wondered, would I get my first cheque? Golden yellow screams yelled against the white bowl. Someday I might have to suffer my own soliloquy. Heaven forbid. What was the brand of that sherry? I'll have to get some more. I went to the kitchen and siphoned off some red from a cask. It was more black, blue and purple than red, but you don't look at the cardboard when you're tasting.

After all, it's only a book. No big deal. Wears my shirt? Hah! Just as I thought. Under the typewriter. Must be time for another glass, even so. That's the thing with sentences, they fit together whether you like it or not and begin to suggest something downstairs. If only one could suspend doubt and have complete trust in the writer. Not likely.

The booze was bad for the brain cells, but I don't recall asking them about anything, least of all their drinking habits. I was carrying a gigantic bottle. I should have found

a wheelbarrow for the fucking thing. It weighed a ton.

The night was surprisingly cold, actually bleeding in places, the result of frost bites. Just playful nips, really. But the nips were getting bigger. Lucky, I had remembered to put on some clothes, shoes maybe but feet were always too far off. I was certainly walking. Where is another matter. What a great title. *Where is another matter*. No wonder people glaze over.

The night was reflected in the wet bitumen. It was a road, that's all I know. All right, I'll admit to suburbs. You can make this judgement just by observing the black palings of the star-fed night, its antlers hooting cedar. A dog. Not so labradorable. Shut the fuck up, mutt. Two cormorants perched on an overhanging branch.

Instead of laughing, I swallowed back the fear that the future was the present. On the other hand, if I could think like that, there was still hope. Images filtered back through my mind, as if in reward for my better spirits. Fuck this bottle is heavy. Never mind. Never mind? What the fuck does that mean? Nothing, as usual. It looks like we've arrived.

2.26 JAMES

“I’m not saying you don’t think. That’s life. Can’t have one without the other. The mind’s like that. Brain? Thoughts? It’s a gestalt. That’s a whole fucking concept right there in one word. *Gestalt*. A bunch of bits that creates something else, some huge kind-of-globby, stuck-together thing.”

The Methuselah was doing the rounds. James grabbed its neck and held his pint glass under its foaming head.

“Fuck champagne flutes. Let’s not stand on ceremony here. Let’s stand on the shoulders of giant bottles! Here, wrap your laughing gear round that hole in your head, it’s the alcohol molecules tickling your sphincter that gives it the rush. Crughaarrrrgh,” he sighed, sinking back.

“True, it’s a grand sport, thinking. A high calling. Not all are chosen. Are *you* worthy? Or you? Or you? Give me your grand ideas, give me your high ideals, give me your raisins and etchings! Admit it, fellas, you haven’t even had the thought that dare not call its name. You had a nibble once and reeled it in. That tiddler? Barely legal. Throw it back! Remember the old days, eh. Now there was thinking for you. Ideas so thick you’d have to bait up behind a politician. You can’t catch a tiger without a lion in the water, that’s for sure. Cast, let the rod do the work, none of that sidewinder shit. Lucky strike! Hey, bring that bottle back here.”

Sounds from below were mostly muffled, only the brown notes passing through the carpet. Sounds like Marvin Gaye. Uh oh. Don’t give the boys any bright ideas, they might burst their bubbles.

“It’s all fucked now, that’s for sure. They’re going to ban it,

you know. Thinking. Too far out to see. In search of the great whyte thought. Wake up and smell the batshit! It's a myth. It's a Möbius strip! Thought factories. That's what they call them nowadays. Fleets of robot trawlers, nets and long lines reefing in everything without a here's your father, munching, mashing it down, never give a musing a chance."

Mutterings were spluttering in the circle around the bottle. Two crewcuts, a thick neck, two pairs of enlarged biceps and a six pack, deep in conversation.

"Hey, eyes and ears front. This is the real shit I'm telling you. You ought to try it, you blokes. Not sure there's room though. Too much bone. How do you grow heads like that? I've seen better heads on a walrus. It would make men of you, on a rock when the sun's going down and the waves are crashing into the cliff, trying to drag you over the edge when you hook into a big one. That's the life alright. Hey, what are you doing? You can't do this. That's my fucking methusalah. Oh, shit!"

James reached the head of the stairs on his climb back, stood up, kept his eye on the bottle, and held forth.

"Plenty of play left in the thinking game, don't you worry about that, you boys are up for it, I can tell by the bridge of your nose. Off to do a bit of spear thinking, mum, I can hear you say it now. That's why you need me. Trusted guide. It's crazy cold way down there. Unfathomable, you might say. Ha! Get it? Plenty of munchies in the dark. They don't sleep you know. Always cruising for a bruising. Tear away a limb when you're not..."

