Speaking the Unspoken:  
The Ontology of Writing a Novel  

By  

Elizabeth Dianne Colbert  

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Abstract

Creative practitioners, undertaking practice-led research, theorise their practice within an academic domain. Within a three-tiered, performative research paradigm, this project researched writerly identity during the writing of a novel and exegesis. Firstly, based on the writer’s experience with creative and academic writing, the differences were explored through two first-person narratives in a frametale novel, The Fragility Papers, a process documented by critical and reflective journaling. Secondly, the insights gained during the writing of the novel were theorised within the domain of creative writers. Thirdly, the understandings embedded in the novel were considered in the light of these insights and those gained during writing of the exegesis and further theorised within the areas of voice, the writing process and ontological change.

Novel writing, it was found, drew not only on the imagination, research, in-flow stream of consciousness writing and serendipitous occurrences but also on personal embodied inscriptions, linguistic play, logic and reason in the development of narrative coherence, forward planning, previously unidentified editing values based in the sonority of language, and a knowledge of the expectations associated with the literary genre. Acknowledging this breadth of experience led to changes in the writer’s creative-writing process, a questioning of the theorised sole influence of language based texts as proposed in intertextual theory, and the proposal to italicise ‘text’ within intertextual to accommodate this breadth.

The theorising of insights and emerging, experiential knowledge during the writing of the exegesis was realised in a series of evolving drafts in which interiorised knowledge was increasingly drawn upon in stream of consciousness writing. Further, in both genres, the dialogic engagement of the writer in conscious and unconscious activity at different stages of the writing process was found, suggesting that unconscious activity has a larger than envisaged role to play in academic writing.
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To you all, my heart felt thanks.
Statement of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written for an award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning with the exception of two letters in the artefact which were significantly adapted from material submitted for a Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing.

Signed ____________________
Elizabeth Dianne Colbert
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Joyce Eileen and Allen Thomas Millsom.
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Preface


Preface

*Speaking the Unspoken: The Ontology of Writing a Novel* is a practice-led research project comprising a preface, a novel — *The Fragility Papers* — and an exegesis. Individuals and communities are able to explore their identities through narrative and these texts seek to both fulfil this purpose and contribute to both individual and disciplinary knowledge.

The foundation of this project is an emergent, performative research model in which the lived experience of writing *The Fragility Papers* was documented by way of a working journal in which reflections on, and insights into, my writing process, writerly identity and relevant theory were documented alongside my reflections on the relationship between them. This process facilitated an analysis of my writing process, the embodied experience of writing, the influence of personal and social agents and provided a framework for reflecting on my academic writing. The discussion of my writerly identity was also informed by my ongoing and broader reading which was an instrumental element in the research process. It not only influenced the writing of the novel and exegesis but precipitated unexpected insights into both my creative and academic writing which led me to reflect that this project might have been more appropriately titled *The Ontology of Writing a Novel (and Exegesis)*.

This research project is three-tiered. The first tier comprises the novel and Section 1 of the Exegesis which details the background to the project and research methodology. Experiential knowledge informs the distinction drawn between creative writing and academic writing in the novel. The difference is embedded in two juxtaposed first-person narratives and the voices of two narrators: Zoë, whose chronological narrative references the embodied and experiential, and Celia, whose lifeworld is determined by an event in her past.
The second tier, Section 2, describes and contextualises the insights and understandings gained into my fictive writerly identity within the writings of other fictional writers and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997, 2002) theory of the creative process and ‘flow’. My raised awareness led to some changes in my writing process: the discovery of my inherent emphasis on the sound of language when writing and editing led me to review the role of editing in my writing; I became more adventurous with structural and poetic elements in the novel and, finally, I reassessed my dependence on stream of consciousness writing. This process of review also led me to reposition of the novel as a creative artefact rather than an expression of self and to reflect on the concept of intertextuality. By italicizing ‘text’, hence intertextuality, I hoped to more fully reflect my writerly identity by broadening the concept of text to include experiential and embodied inscriptions.

The third tier, Section 3, continues to explore my new understandings about my writerly identity during the writing of the novel and exegesis. Firstly, the roles of experiential and theoretical knowledge in the writing process in both texts are explored. Secondly, the proposed differences between fictive and academic writing as embedded in the novel are reviewed. Thirdly, the manner in which a writer may have a unique voice is discussed in the light of insights gained.

Section 4 weaves the personal and theorised threads of my project together.

This exploration of my lived experience, as Nick Mansfield (2000) would suggest, reflects a contemporary emphasis on the ‘self’, a defining issue of modern and post-modern cultures. By way of critical reflective thinking, such an exploration has taken place during the writing of the novel and exegesis. However, the writing process, as Laurel Richardson (1994) argues, is both an alternative method of inquiry and way of arriving at both individual and community knowledge. In the process of writing the novel and exegesis, I have come to a greater understanding of the differing demands of the two genres and the similar and differing aspects of my writerly identity which have been drawn upon during the writing process.
As a participant researcher moving between personal and theorised perspectives in a performative research model with an embedded auto-ethnographic approach, I have found, like other researchers reflecting on their own experiences, that the distinction between that which is personal and that which is cultural becomes blurred. This blurring also occurred as my reflections and readings were interwoven into both the novel and exegesis. However, in spite of this blurring, many personal interests were woven into *The Fragility Papers* and, as constituent elements of my writerly identity, their role in my writing is included in the larger discussion.

Although the ‘self’ is seemingly central in this project, both the intertextual and intratextual nature of these juxtaposed texts asks the reader to find their own meaning. This reflects Roland Barthes’ suggestion in ‘The Death of the Author’ (1987) that meaning rests with the reader rather than the author, although I would want to argue that these different texts offer the reader, as well, more than one way of knowing. The theory of intertextuality, too, implies a denial of the ‘self’ because all language is culturally inscribed. However, by acknowledging the role of embodied experiences in the fictive writing process, as implied in intertextual, I am arguing for a unique ‘self’ which is reflected in the individual voice of every writer, a voice that is inevitably a merging of the experiential and situational lifeworlds of the writer in which the ‘self’ is always present.

In placing the novel and exegesis in the public domain, I want to suggest that these texts not only indicate that writers have more than one voice, each of which being perhaps unique, but that both creative and academic texts make a unique contribution to knowledge by offering different ways of coming to know. Placing this PhD in the public domain is a communal act; a sharing of an imaginative flight and the knowledge gained during this flight. Both texts seek to take the reader beyond the page into a deeper understanding of writerly identity during creative and exegesis writing.
The Fragility Papers

Novel
Chapter One

Lachlan sleeps.
Above his soft form, his phone pulses.
Outside, white gulls screech above the waves.
In the still warmth of our bed, rests love.
Ah! The triplet. The simple pleasure of a playful rhythm; the missing beat in Aunt Celia’s writing.

She thought in layers. Sheets of paper, newly white, cream with age. Pages torn from books and magazines. Clipped newspaper articles. All bound with linen tape, roughly tied in cobbled knots, loose ends hanging like the hair of a Raggedy-Anne doll. The bundles rise in stacks against the walls like high-rise blocks in a discarded city.

And the dust — furry, moss-like, smothering the carpet the length of the hall, rolling into black balls beneath my finger tips. Of course, the inquest delayed everything. Dust is to be expected, but it’s not just the dust.

Nothing in her will suggested these papers existed.
‘I trust my niece Zoë to dispose of my estate appropriately,’ was the concluding sentence. Untidy bundles are not an estate. What to do with them, that is the problem.

Burn them, as Lachlan suggested, or follow my mother’s angry advice.
‘Pay someone to empty the flat, paint it and sell it. Do whatever you like, only don’t ask me to touch my sister’s mess.’
They want me to junk her life.

Lachlan stirs. Just stretching to turn up the clock radio elicits a response: his toes curl into my heels within the tepee of my drawn up knees as we listen in silence to the news. It’s the same old formula: natural disasters, notable deaths, politics and policy, and sport — men’s. What did she write? Women are battery hens and men play sport.

The forecast is for a high of twenty degrees, but the sky is a sombre spread of clouds. Lachlan chose well when he bought the flat. Facing south-west across the bay and being on the first floor, there’s no need for blinds.
Her flat is so enclosed and musty. All the Holland blinds are encrusted with dust. Lifting the bundles was a shock — silver fish scuttling and scurrying as they fled back into the layers of paper. Taking the bundles into the bathroom and knocking them against the stained bath was my only choice. At least the confetti of paper flakes, dead insects, silver fish and mice droppings can be flushed down the plughole. They will have to be dealt with one at a time — my eyes are so itchy. Rubber gloves and a mask are needed, and a stronger globe for the lamp on her desk.

It’s hard to imagine anyone living like that for thirty years.

Who was she?

‘She was a reclusive clam shell who shunned me. And your mother,’ Nan said. ‘She returned all my letters and cards unopened. Finally, I stopped sending them. Miss Celia Mischief, the plum blossom fairy who never took responsibility for anything.’

Not that Nan can talk. She was the one who encouraged Mum to divorce Dad. Yet, she always denies it. And she made that huge fuss over the funeral, resenting every decision Grandpa made; flowers, music and coffin. It’s hard to understand. Aunt Celia was her daughter.

‘Zoë, being at war is a way of life in your family,’ Lachlan said on the morning of the funeral, ‘and you’re starting one with me. Do I have to stay for the wake? For God’s sake! You have six grand and step-grandparents because of your parents’ divorce. Most of them are mattress relatives. They could start their own religious order.’

He can be very funny. For someone whose grandparents are dead it must be difficult, but a cloistered life? Never, although my aunt seems to have lived one.

There’s scarcely space in her apartment for one; the front door won’t open fully because of the bundles in the hall. There’s just enough room to squeeze along the passageway, and the wall space in her living room is buttressed with more. A veritable paper trap.

Lachlan was so dismissive last night. ‘You don’t have the time to be emotional about them,’ but it was so difficult to describe the excitement of brushing the dust off the first bundle and seeing the words underneath.

Such a feverish and futile attempt at untying it. Sharp scissors needed to cut the knots … and the small shaving cabinet above the bathroom basin bare save for a scraggly toothbrush, tea-tree toothpaste, an odourless deodorant … no cotton buds, nail polish remover, hair dryer or moisturiser. No Christian Dior perfume or any of the other
necessities that clutter our large en-suite. Finally, a pair of rusty nail scissors in an old toiletry bag. Everything is old, like so many of the cuttings.

She used black ink. It emphasises her old-fashioned style of writing: all strokes sloping to the right, the capital ‘A’ with a curlicue cross line and the long loopy tails of the ‘Gs’ and ‘Ys’ dipping into the words below.

What are these papers? Cuttings with circled words. Wordy definitions. Pages of her writing. The bundle with volcanic scrawled across the top page was a puzzle in itself, and then there was the surprise of her writing. It’s hardly a diary. A memoir? A journal? Neither of these.

**volcanic**

something volcanic has the characteristics of a volcano

**volcano**

a mountain or hill built up around an opening of the earth’s crust through which molten lava, gasses, water and cinders can erupt, sometimes dormant, sometimes explosive due to internal pressure, unpredictable

I have seen the red lava flowing in the darkness of night, snaking down the mountain side, consuming everything in its path. Dragon flames licking the air, darting in split tongues. In the heart of the mountain I have seen sulphurous pools, steam rising and drifting, spiralling up to the rim where I stood on the ashen soil, on the edge of the cone.

**volcanic**

Love-making should not be volcanic.

Paul was charming at first and I was quite overcome but when we made love I forgot myself. He said my volcanic physicality
overwhelmed him, went back to his room and the shadows of the night became mine and bled with tears.

One of the disadvantages of living in a shared house is the discomfort of facing one’s mistake the next day. I couldn’t look him in the eyes. He avoided me. Whereas breakfast had been a time of banter and sharing of the day to come, it was a torture; he didn’t offer to make me toast and when I offered to make coffee he said, ‘No thanks, I’m fine.’

Were we still an item? [an item — the involvement of two people in a romantic relationship] Or had we broken up? Had it not been for the Vietnam War we might have never spoken again. The Moratorium March was planned for the following week and we were supposed to be in the front row, holding the banner, screaming our shared beliefs. But even then, it was another three months before we made love again and this time I knew to let him take the lead. I need to remember that with the exception of tennis and netball, only men play sport. Women are battery hens and men play sport.

I like the photograph of us shouting, our hair loose and long; we became an artefact of our time, like the other photographs of the war in the paper. We knew the images being sent home from Vietnam were in some way censored, selected for the heroic qualities of our soldiers rather than the devastation being wrought on the people and land. The news copy was anecdotal, the photographs black and white.

The dirty brown of stale blood, the slow panning of the camera to a darker patch on a wall, or a stained single shoe left on the side of a road, was still a thing to come.
Paul arrives. He is intense as always. He sits in his chair and I wait for his news to unfold.

‘Bad day?’ I ask.

‘No, but I’ve been thinking about you and all these papers. Why don’t you buy a scrapbook?’

Strange. Who is Paul? Perhaps she wasn’t a recluse. The eaten edges suggest the paper is old but some of the cuttings in the pile are more recent, particularly those about the Iraq war. The second bundle didn’t make it any clearer. More shaking, more brushing … perhaps the sorting of the papers will have to be done over the bath as well. And again, a word across the front … in bold black type … dismembered.

dismembered

to deprive of members or limbs, divide limb from limb

to separate into parts

to divide and distribute parts

dismemberment

the act of separating a part from a whole

Mara says it’s a matter of seeing the pattern: those rows of us at the cinema last night watching Baraka; that sense of order and discipline as we sat, almost touching elbows with strangers in the dark. Each one of us feels the intense sense of the other if we lose concentration. Sitting so quietly as we moved into the imaginative space of film, we became a whole, but when we left the cinema I felt disconnected from myself and all that’s familiar.
‘You’re too dependent on definitions,’ Paul says. ‘You want things clearly identified, labelled and located instead of allowing the possibilities of something to take hold and seduce you.’

Definitions are the practical stuff that allows me to manage my life. Definitions create order; meanings have value when they become fixed on the page.

I live in a street where the curve of the hill is denied by a deep cutting, where the land is awkwardly squared off. As I walked up the hill to the flat today, I realised that I’m like a caged bird, confined behind bricks and glass, pecking at daily rations of food while I write my way to death. It’s only when I open my window that I can breathe in the freshness of life as it curls over my skin in a shivering rendezvous with longing.

Paul, where are you?

Who in the hell is Paul? There’s no space in the flat, or evidence of a lover, but her writing suggests that she wasn’t alone.

The problem is deciding what to do. Dump or save? The articles and photographs are faded and almost illegible where she’s circled some of the words. Caged, pecking. Why? They’re like a whispered secret, absolutely compelling.

*Volcanic.* No one would ever describe Lachlan as volcanic. He’s calm and determined. His flesh is so soft and warm. Nudging him is so assuring — he always pushes back, even when asleep. After five years we are beginning to be a habit.

Habit. Another monastic word. Are her papers simply a lonely habit? They seem so private and disconnected. There are no dates to give any sense of chronological order and the writing is incomplete. Who was she writing for?

My new life — the curious voyeur!

Must get up. Must practice. Rehearsal this afternoon. Lucien wants the Mozart perfect — whatever that means. As Lachlan said, a new conductor inevitably brings
changes. Adjustment — a necessity. Can practice tonight. Lachlan has a play to review. Must make the most of his absence and practice well.

What a good day. Rehearsal went well. Practising in this flat is a joy — every note resonates.

Lachlan’s so late. He must be meeting with friends. Discussing the bundles with him will have to wait. Damn it. Nobody understands why the flat was left to me. And the papers were accidental. It’s going to be difficult. Taking the two bundles nearest to the front door and designating them as the first seemed to be the only way to start tidying up, but it’s not going to be easy. Luckily her kitchen drawers are orderly, and minimal; knives, forks and spoons separated. The top drawer freshly lined with lemon paper. In the second, a spatula and several stained and well worn wooden spoons, one burnt black at the cooking tip. In the third, the sharp knives and a good pair of scissors, identical to those bought by my mother and Nan when they were seduced by that salesman who cut the five cent coin they took from my moneybox in half.

Moving between her world and mine is … dismembering, like being split apart. Still feel so grimy. The copper stains in the bath indicative of the cleaning to be done. But the bundles are so enticing. What will be inside those with lambaste, fornication, relinquish and judicious written across the top?

A vacuum cleaner will be a necessity if the mustiness and the accumulation of crustaceous mites are not going to defeat me.
Chapter Two

The forecast is for a hot northerly wind with a late cool change. It’s hard to imagine the inevitable storm when Lachlan’s breathing so deeply and evenly — the relaxed sleep of one who knows what today has in store and is confident that tomorrow will unfold as planned.

Aunt Celia’s death is disquieting; the bewildering disorder in the flat keeps coming to mind. Did Lachlan feel as distracted when his grandfather died?

There are so many similarities: his father and grandfather were estranged like my mother and aunt; the denial of contact with his grandfather parallels the denial of contact with my aunt; both died accidental deaths; and his grandfather left his inheritance to him — the next generation of the family — not the immediate next of kin. They say there are core narratives that couples subconsciously share. Are these ours?

Of course there are differences. He bought his flat off the plan rather than inherited it. He had always wanted to live by the sea, and with his grandfather being a seaman it seemed natural to buy on the bay. He imagined the view from the balcony through the broad arch of the bedroom window. It was worth the two year wait: the sea is so calm at this moment and the sky so clear that they merge at the horizon, denying any sense of perspective and extending the room beyond the wall of windows into the sky. Aunt Celia’s flat feels so cluttered and enclosed in comparison.

It’s not just the view from the window. Everything here is open plan, the kitchen, dining and living area are one, the study an alcove. My cello stands in its case like a piece of sculpture between the lounge suite and the dining table. At her flat every room has a door and four walls, something to stack papers against, to hang prints on, even a mantelpiece for bric-a-brac. Here? There are only three structural doors apart from those leading onto the balcony: the front, the powder room — as the plan euphemistically called it — and the bedroom.

Of course, that’s why there’s so much tension around my practising discordant music. He has no tolerance for any of that ‘noise’ when he’s working, and my work
demands ‘noise’. Most people enjoy the playfulness of Barton’s compositions, but as Dad says, ‘You can’t account for taste.’ Yes, practising the Barton this afternoon when Lachlan is lecturing, and tidying AC’s flat this morning would be best.

Yesterday, the task seemed overwhelming. Today curiosity has ground-swelled. What would be the best place to start? Her desk.

Her study is so different to the single bench hugging the walls of the L-shaped alcove. Lachlan’s flat-screened Apple-Mac almost perches across the corner above his contoured chair whereas her desk dominates the study, leaving room for little else, not that she needed visual space with that view of the river and city.

The desk needs more than dusting. The surface is scarred with careless use—numberless deep scratches, the circular stain of a hot cup, spots of ink. The timber surrounding the leather inset might reflect the brass lamp and the Chinese ginger jar choked with pens if it were polished. But the desk tells me little, except what is self-evident; she was obsessed with words. There are twelve dictionaries and one thesaurus: *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, a *Macquarie Dictionary*, a *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, a *Roget’s Thesaurus*, *The Dinkum Dictionary*, two French Dictionaries, a second Collins Dictionary, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, the two volumes of *The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs*, *A Dictionary of Fairies* and *The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music*. Only one that interests me.

The chair is an early ergonomic model; adjustable swivel seat and back, but it needs lowering. Her computer and printer have been pushed to each side of the desk and the keyboard is resting against the computer. Is this how she kept it? Dad said he had to move things around when he was looking for her will.

That was such a generous offer on his part. Nan and Mum were saved the pain of visiting her flat and walking across the footpath where her body lay after she was hit by a car.

Sitting here, can’t help but be aware of another distinctive thing about her flat: the sounds. There are no seagulls, but pigeons coo, magpies warble and the harsh shrieks of parrots and galahs drift up from the riverbank. Trams rattle and clang, endlessly, their grinding wheels screeching at the bend in the road outside the flat. The boys in the boat house below are calling out to each other, laughing as they put the boats away. The
wind chimes outside the window are a set of four perfectly tooled pieces of metal whose clear harmonics pierce the air and drift inside on the restless wind. She was surrounded by music. A pair of cast, bronze, Tibetan bells incised with dragons hang on a grey leather thong in the middle of her bedroom doorway. Tapping them is irresistible. The lingering hum as their ringing echoes off the wooden floor fills the room which — unlike the rest of my dear aunt’s junky flat — is Spartan. Cleanliness and simplicity in the kitchen and bedroom, neglect in the bathroom, chaos in the passageway, living room come study and spare room.

The fruit stall at the market will have double layered cardboard boxes suitable for carrying the cuttings and articles to the recycle bin. The circled words and highlighted text seem to be the source of the words she defines, but the articles are of no interest in themselves. Her own writing at least gives a sense of her life. A deep folder and a hole-punch will be needed if they are to be kept.

**habitus**

*condition of the body*
*human characteristics — the combination of learned skills, habits, style, tastes*
*a set of dispositions determining practices and perceptions*
*state of feeling*
*a variant of culture anchored in the body*

The city is crystalline tonight. One of those heavy summer downpours washed everything clean as I was coming home. When I crossed the road after getting off the tram I could smell the pungency of the peppercorns hanging over the footpath. Their feathery leaves were shining in the late afternoon sunlight, the water refracting the golden light.

Once inside, and as darkness started to fall, the full effect of the rain was visible: every light in every office seemed to be shimmering through the glistening windows.
Starlight star bright,
The first star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight.

Paul arrives. He is wet and limping.

‘A blister,’ he says. ‘New shoes.’

‘Surely not.’

‘Surely yes. After all these years I’m changing my style and brand.’

‘Why?’ I ask.

‘I saw my reflection in a shop window when I was walking down the street and I recognised my father. I hadn’t realised that I had subconsciously chosen the same shoes.’

‘But they’re good shoes.’

‘Celia, I have been living in my father’s shoes. I decided to investigate what is being worn now. Did you know the toes are rounder, the soles thicker, the stitching attaching the soles to the upper is a feature, the laces are flatter and wider, the heels are slightly higher? And I’ve been told by the podiatrist that the extra support of the contoured inner-sole will give my feet the right sort of exercise when I walk. And, I will also feel lighter.’

‘You sound like a bloody ad.’
‘That’s right, and the salesman found his way to my heart, my mind, my body and soul. I have new shoes.’

He sits with his ankles crossed, the long length of his legs extending into the space between the chair and my desk. The shoes are black, heavy, and remind me of the shoes I see the school children wearing. Young men in their first suits seem to be wearing them as well. Is this some retro-fixation? [Retro – a prefix meaning ‘backwards’ in space or time.]

I want to say ‘You’re lucky to have shoes,’ but hesitate. Before he came I was watching the news. A young adolescent boy was sweeping up the blood and debris from a terrorist attack. The blood was unusually mauve. The path had been sluiced down with a lot of water and he was standing in it, bare-footed, trying to sweep the water and blood onto the road, but as he swept it forward the slope of the road forced it back over his feet.

It seems unfair to burden Paul with something my father told me. Being a child of the Great Depression, he suffered chill-blains every winter because of his thin canvas shoes.

That the story reminds me of my new cello is puzzling. Well, sort of new: pre Lachlan, pre my current work with the orchestra, pre knowing that playing the cello might be my life.

Caesar’s Strings: the only place to buy stringed instruments. Barry’s discounts for regulars are so generous. The arrangement of the instruments is so familiar, like old wallpaper, that it wasn’t surprising that the cello had never stood out before. Was it the fact that another woman was trying it out? Or was it hearing its glorious tone for the first time? Or was it that it was no longer on display above me but down on the floor where the richness of its dark-honey body caught the light?

‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ Barry asked.
'I’m thinking of a new bow.’ *Liar, Liar, pants on fire*. Anything to distract him from selling such a beautiful instrument to someone who, clearly, was not an experienced player. She didn’t deserve it. Had no right to it.

‘I won’t be moment,’ he said, but the woman felt my sense of urgency and said to Barry, ‘I’ll think about it,’ and left.

The thing about Barry is that he truly understands the intimate relationship a musician develops with an instrument, how it becomes an extension of one’s body, how it must meld with the disposition of the body, not just physically but timbre wise.

‘What do you think?’ he asked, after letting me trial a bow on it for an hour.

‘I want the cello. How much do I need to put down as a deposit?’

‘What can you afford?

And the cello became mine.

11.30 a.m. Must return home. SMS from concertmaster. Lucien wants us to prepare the Sculthorpe composition for the encore. Practising is essential.

11.30 p.m. Exhausted.

Need sleep.

Need amnesia.

Shit what a night. When will Lachlan calm down? He’s still pacing between the kitchen and the balcony, circling the cello like an erratic spinning top. He doesn’t realise that because of the darkness of the sea and sky his double can be seen in the glass doors leading to the balcony. And here he comes again through the bedroom door.

‘I can’t believe your mother,’ he explodes. ‘Nor your grandmother for that matter. I’d give them zero if I were scoring them for tact. I should write a play about them and call it ‘The Bitches of Boxwick’. I’m going out onto the balcony for some fresh air.’

He’s right, but my loyalties are torn. They were only standing up for me in my appalling silence. Moot guilt. The trouble is these arguments always start so subtly.

‘How’s the cleaning going?’ Nan said. ‘I never could understand my daughter. I know your father tried to save us the pain of visiting the flat, but your mother and I did go and clean out the fridge a week after the accident. Awful. It was full of mouldy cheese, sour milk, rancid meat and the vegetables were dried out. She lived like a pauper. And all those papers. Did you hire a skip?’
‘No. I looked through a couple of bundles and decided I wanted to read her writing. Her notes are interesting … more than that … a little surreal.’

‘Surreal. That’s a polite euphemism for indulgent naval gazing,’ Nan said.

‘Did you read any of them?’ Lachlan asked, ready to defend me, but my mother recognised his strategy immediately, and she was determined to be involved.

‘She cut herself out of our lives, Lachlan. Why would we bother to read anything she wrote?’

‘Well, I have a reason. She left me the flat, a small amount of money, and I want to know why. And, she wasn’t the recluse you think she was. She had at least one male friend who visited her regularly, Paul, a journalist.’

‘Paul?’ Nan’s voice is strident.

‘Nan, do you know him?’

‘Paul? No. Never heard of him. As I said, her life was her own. So what are you going to do with all that silly nonsense?’

As Lachlan says, Nan’s attacks are petty and personal. She can be a nasty piece of work. At least he protested by standing up and walking away.

My pacifying, ‘Put the writing in a folder. Once the clippings are tossed out, there’s really not that much,’ probably opened the door for my mother’s next prying question.

‘And what are you going to do with the flat?’ There was no time to answer before she went on. ‘You must be pleased, Lachlan. You have the makings of a good nest egg between you. You could sell both flats and buy a decent house.’ She doesn’t say ‘and start a family’, but Lachlan knows that this is the true sub-text of the conversation.

‘Now, that is an interesting and novel idea, Maxine,’ he said in a slow sarcastic tone. ‘However, I have no plans to sell my flat.’

Even now, the blood rushes to my face. This was such a public rejection of my known wishes. It was as if we had never discussed the possibility of children.

‘Oh, come on, Lachlan.’ My mother was not going to let him off this time. ‘Five years is a long courtship by any standards. I’m beginning to think I should be questioning your intentions.’

Would she never stop?

‘For God’s sake Mum, shut up. Stop talking about things that concern me as if I weren’t here.’
Of course, bloody Mother then turned on me. ‘Don’t come complaining to me in three years time that your biological clock is running out. This is the best opportunity you will ever have of making a future together.’

‘Thank you, Maxine,’ Lachlan said. ‘Thank you for your concern, but we are quite capable of deciding about our future.’

‘Don’t start with the royal “we” and “our”. Since when does “I” mean “we”? I’m going to be very direct with you Lachlan. I don’t think you’ve got your priorities straight,’ she said.

And he replied, ‘This royal “I” thinks it’s time “we” said goodbye and left.’

And leave we did.

Our silence on the way home belied the churning anxiety and anger which exploded as soon he closed the door to the flat. Sure, it stemmed from our unresolved differences, but they had placed a wedge between us by humiliating us both.

Can’t help but think of Aunt C’s *lambaste* bundle. *Lambaste: to thrash, to berate, to scold, to beat with a rope’s end.*

Berate. That’s what my mother did. She *berated* him.

Hearing them speak like that — in that hurtful, harmful, useless way — makes me wonder what really happened when they fell out with Aunt C. Did she airbrush them out of her life because they *scolded* her? To scold implies pain. Dad said some very nasty words passed between them.

He’s always calm. Is that what attracts me to Lachlan? He has the capacity to remain calm in a crisis, at least in public.

He’s stopped pacing and is gripping the balcony rail. He only takes that ‘we’ position with my family, once at home he projects my mother’s criticisms onto me and acts as if only he has the right to be angry.

This time, he has been the one to humiliate me. Did any of that reassuring talk about our future in the last three years mean anything?

Tomorrow is the time to talk, when we are both calmer. Thinking and dreaming space is needed. He will probably sulk his way to the couch tonight, but he’ll get over it.
Chapter Three

Thunder. A loud crack, so close it ripples through my body like a clash of cymbals. Can’t help being fully awake. On the alert.

A bolt of lightning splits the sky and slices the white caps on the dark sea.

A second clap. Following immediately. The storm is directly above.

‘Zoë, stay away from the window.’ His voice is edgy.

‘Did it wake you too?’

‘More or less,’ he says.

A ragged fork bleaches the bedroom grey. We look like naked models in a display window. Pale, spectre like. Another thunder clap rattles the windows and the cold wind driving the cool change sweeps in through the open balcony door.

‘Lachlan, I’m going to shut the door.’

‘No wait. Wait ’til it passes.’

His arms slide around me, restraining, protecting, yet his clutching suggests he’s being comforted too.

‘There’s no need to be frightened.’ My words say one thing but my voice is gravelly. ‘Dad always took me to the window. A storm was something to celebrate, “a carnival of the elements” he would say. When the rain started to fall we would stand against the glass and trace the swelling drops as they ran down the window.’

‘Seriously, Zoë, I want you to wait. There’s a lot of metal on the balcony.’

His arms tighten with the next flash and a whispered counting of the seconds between the flash and the thunder spills out: ‘One cat and dog. Two cat and dog. Three cat and dog. Four cat and dog. Five….’ And the thunder clap is softer. ‘It’s moved on and here comes the rain.’

Drops is hardly the word for the splotches on the balcony. Unhooking the door is easy, but stopping it from being caught by the wind demands all my strength. Lachlan, too, is also struggling with the other.
‘There,’ he says and my sense of satisfaction is echoed in his voice. We have confronted the elements and won.

Gusts of wind whine and bray in the external blinds. The rain drums on the balcony and begins to seep beneath the doors as it becomes torrential. We rush for towels to sandbag the leak. Contained. And we find ourselves sitting side by side on the end of the bed, watching, listening, in awe of the vacuum of stillness inside the flat.

Lachlan breaks the silence. ‘This is not what is meant by the still point at the eye of a storm is it?’

‘No.’ All the anger between us has dissipated and we both start laughing.

It’s 4.33 a.m. but we remain on the end of the bed unwilling to dispel whatever has passed between us. ‘I want us to stay like this for the rest of our lives but we can’t and we seem unable to talk through our transition into something else. My wanting to have children seems to roll off you like the rain on the glass.’

‘I have some very good reasons.’

‘I know. A brick wall of them: you don’t like pressure, you’re too old, there are enough people in the world, you’re not convinced it’s the natural realisation of love, children cost heaps of money and neither of us have lucrative careers. You don’t want to relinquish your lifestyle, and isn’t loving and caring for each other enough? Have I got it right?’

‘They’re very good reasons,’ he says in that steady voice.

‘Reason. That’s one of your operative words isn’t it? Hold on. Isn’t there a second? Judicious. That’s it. This is not something to be emotional about. I should be judicious.’

‘And you’re blaming me for not being able to move on? In thirty seconds, Zoë, you’ve slam-dunked us into a hate session. Why don’t I summarise your “point of view” and see how you like it. I want. I want. I want. And you’d probably back it up with something like, “it’s natural”. What’s natural? Nothing in this day and age is natural. The nearest thing to natural was genetic determinism and that has well and truly gone. Man has never been natural. Even gorillas live in socially constructed hierarchies.’

‘You knew where I stood shortly after we met Lachlan, and you’ve lied to me.’

‘Lied to you. I never said anything. You just assumed.’

‘And you let me. For five years you have let me talk about having a family and said nothing. Now, when it’s a real possibility, you tell me you don’t want to.’
‘Well, you’ve certainly said plenty since we talked about it a few weeks ago. Particularly to Maxine and Nan.’

He’s starting his avoidance tactics, turning the blame on me. Can’t resist a defensive swipe back.

‘At least I can talk to my mother. Perhaps that’s something you should think about the next time you see yours.’

‘Don’t start Zoë. Don’t psychoanalyse my family.’

‘Then don’t talk about mine.’ The rain has stopped and we’re glaring at our sad reflections — damaged good in an aspic of glass. This is not how it should end. ‘Shit. So what does all this mean?’

‘It means nothing, Zoë. We’re tired. Distraught. We should go back to bed and we’ll talk about it later in the week. I promise. Come to bed.’

Even in his sleep he claims my body, his arm is like a window weight across my waist, his broad palm clamping my breast. Familiar spooning, the inevitable proximity that goes with sharing a bed.

Not that every couple does. Emily confessed during a rehearsal break last week that she and Rod not only have separate beds, but separate rooms. They only share when making love because it’s too compromising to be so entangled.

Entangled and proprietary. Is it because it’s Lachlan’s flat? Because his bed was here? His bed. His striped linen. His masculine presence dominates the flat. Emily was right when she said, if you’re going to move in together, start fresh. But the flat’s been his nest for seven years.

He’s breathing deeply, drawing in his breath slowly then releasing it in an explosive rush. A long motionless moment follows and then, as if being kick-started, he draws his breath again. Whether he will start breathing again or whether in the morning he’ll be on his back, mouth open and flesh cold, worries me. Just looking at him brings on such unwanted tenderness. The anger that has kept me awake is dissolving. The time has come to turn off the bed-side lamp and stop thinking.

7.00 a.m. Overwhelming sadness and disappointment. All consuming. To speak to him would be the worst thing. Must try to get out of the flat without waking him.
The forecast is for a hot day. Sky clear. No trace of the storm. Light loose clothes
needed for the long rehearsal this afternoon, the last before the performance. Feel
prepared after yesterday’s practice. Sense of control over the difficult passages. At
many points at one with the music. Concentration on expression giving way to the
pleasure of listening to the music itself. Will do an hour or so at Aunt C’s flat, AC’s flat
— like that name, and its musical reference. AC’s flat. H’m. Should be there in half an
hour if the peak hour traffic isn’t too heavy.

In spite of the storm, the flat is stifling. All the heat of yesterday trapped inside.
Only the bedroom is cool, probably because it’s on the south-east corner. Opening all
the windows should release the muggy, stale air, particularly in the living room.

Odd how functional everything is: functional desk, two well-worn chairs. In the
bedroom, the TV and video player. A boom box for her CDs. The DVDs stacked next to
the computer. She may have been a recluse but she wasn’t out of touch.

Feel driven to look up *judicious*. Lachlan says it so seriously, with such authority.
A childish sense of being intimidated seeped in and that’s the point where my resistance
started to crumble. Is it the moral overtone of the word because judicious is related to
justice? At least in my mind.

*Judicious* — *using or showing judgement as to action or practical expediency*
— *discreet, prudent, or politic*
— *exercising or showing good judgement, wise, sensible or well-advised*
— *for example, a judicious selection.*

The emphasis is on the practical or prudent. Is he showing good judgement?
Clearly for him. But not for us. Isn’t having a child about us, our future?

Lucien talks about working towards the future, organising a workshop with the
composer to help us prepare for the concert Friday week. We need new techniques for
the commissioned composition. ‘Sometimes you have to look beyond the present,’ he
says. One more bundle — then to Sculthorpe.

The Sculthorpe is difficult. The shift from rhythmic syncopation to rhythmic drone
demanding. And the repetition tedious when separated out of the whole. Twice more,
then back to the papers.
throng

multitude of people, things, collection
an assembly, a crowd, a gathering
to collect, assemble, crowd
to crowd or press, fill or occupy, to bring or drive into a crowd or mob

The multitude of people that gathers at the terminal to witness the arrival of the ferry from Queenscliff. We are standing above the crowd gathered on the beach, the edges of our shirts riffling in the breeze. We don’t swim, we bathe; we don’t walk, we stroll, at sunset, when the bright towels have been gathered up with beach umbrellas and the tired families have taken their hot red skins home to cool during the night. Traces remain: crumbling sandcastles decorated with shells, deep holes partially filled in, sandal imprints in the firm sand edging the receding tide.

We join the throng at the bow of the ferry and brace ourselves against the rails and the wind as we cross the narrow gap at the head of the bay. A large liner passes in front of us and we lurch up and down in its wake, ooh-aahing as we totter like skittles in the rolling swell.

Paul is impatient. He hates the small shops that service the tourists. As soon as we arrive at Queenscliff he wants to catch the ferry back, but I persuade him to walk at least to the military fort then the lighthouse at Shortlands Bluff. From here I can see Bass Straight beyond the entrance to the bay. Five ships are waiting for the tide to turn when they will be guided through the rip, the narrow, dangerous passage of water at the head of the bay.

‘Tourist trap,’ he mutters as we walk back along the main street.
We are both burnt — wind burnt, sunburnt — and I slice a cucumber in two and run its flat juicy surface over Paul’s skin to take out the heat and sting. He is still for the first time today, and without resistance. Resistance, now that is an onomatopoeic word.

Lachlan would agree with Paul. He would say, ‘I hate those lolly and cottage preserve shops. Nothing but over-done sugar for a mindless swarm. Give me Point Nepean and the rugged side of the heads any day.’

‘We’re all tourists. Whether one tours the wilderness or the tourist shops is a matter of taste not intelligence.’ Could not help being defensive with acidic memory of pungent boiled sweets surging in my mouth.

‘If you can’t see the difference between looking at nature and buying tacky commercial bric-a-brac, there’s something wrong with you,’ he snapped back.

What did AC think? Point Nepean was probably closed to the public when she wrote this, still a restricted military site. She wouldn’t have seen these cold concrete bunkers built as defensive gun emplacements to guard against an approaching enemy from the Southern Ocean.

Can one weigh the force of the ocean on one side of the narrow peninsular, a sweeping view of the horizon of sea, the heat of the sun and the coolness of the air inside the emplacements with the brittle metallic clatter of the cappuccino brigade, the anticipated pleasure of breaking the barista’s dark swirl of creamy coffee? Lachlan’s taking of the moral high ground is inexplicable, like his insistence that one person’s experience can be ‘better’ than another’s. Perhaps it’s the natural position of the critic.

We walked the seven kilometres to the tip of Point Nepean on our first weekend away, struggled with the windswept and scrubby vegetation, and discovered a shared love of the sea as we wandered through the cold empty reminders of WWII. Like the fortifications, his defences were abandoned, briefly, but enough for him to share some of those poignant intimate stories that bind a couple. Stories we’ve never revisited.

constellation

a number of fixed stars grouped within an imaginary outline
any of various groups of stars to which definite names have been
given
a division of the heavens occupied by such a group
the grouping or relative position of the stars as supposed to influence
events, especially at a person’s birth
any brilliant assemblage
a group of emotionally coloured ideas, mostly repressed

Paul taps at the door before letting himself in. He comes empty
handed, heads straight for his chair and collapses like a string puppet.
He has difficulty now when he stands and has to place his hands on
each arm to push himself up. I tell him he should walk more often, but
he’s never been one to be told.

I take a stroll at midnight and stop on the bridge over the river. The
Seven Sisters is visible. The lacy constellation is usually hidden behind
the thick pall of pollution that hangs over the city, but at the beginning
of January, when Melbournians moves en masse to the seaside during
the Christmas to New Year break, when the heavy traffic of the
working week has ceased, and on a night like tonight when the sky is
clear after a hot dry day, it can still be seen.

They do twinkle, whereas most stars are firm and incandescent. When
I was small they seemed to be visible every night and I would follow
my father’s finger as he pointed out Orion’s Belt and the Pleiades, or
as he called them, the Saucepan and the Seven Sisters.

For the first time, want to look on her bookshelf and see if there are any books on
astronomy. None, but there is her two volume illustrated dictionary. There it is: The
Seven Sisters — the Pleiades, the mythological daughters of Atlas who on their deaths
turned into a constellation. Wonder whether it will be visible tonight.
Midnight. And there are the Seven Sisters. Two thousand years later and the same stars are twinkling at me. Good to sit on the balcony, feet up on the rail, listening to the soft voices of a couple walking their dog, several people laughing and splashing in the water — cooling themselves off, the rustle of palm trees. Do not understand why the local council want to create a tropical landscape. The argument of tradition seems thin, especially when it’s only one hundred and fifty years old.

The streets — almost quiet. Only the rare screech of midnight tyres as the ‘boys’ troll the deserted clearway. They’re revved up. Like musicians after four hours of rehearsal. Physical energy depleted. Mental energy — hot, like the accelerator under their feet. So want everything to be quiet.

Quiet. Lachlan has always understood. Even in the middle of that raucous Trivia night he understood.

Patrick still can’t believe that a Trivia night could result in match-making.

‘Come on Zoë, he said, ‘give up your practice for one night. I need you for our Trivia team. It’s a fundraiser for my sister’s kindergarten.’

Pub already packed on arrival, his sister and friends waiting for us.

‘Everybody, this is Zoë. No more failures in the music department,’ Patrick said.

Lachlan stood up, allowing me to slide past. His politeness was noted.

‘Hi. Lachlan Barstock,’ he said, holding out his hand.

First impressions: the firm handshake, thumbs aligned, although brief and rather dismissive; thick sandy hair, curling and gelled unruly; a lean body emphasised by his black T-shirt and jeans. A sense of assurance that older men have. And aftershave. Astringent. Pheromonal.

We sat sideways to each other throughout the evening, chatting — Patrick told me later he was surprised because he thought we would dislike each other — but we both knew we were attracted and were taking notice. He drank three glasses of red wine to my two and had the right answers for every literature question whereas two of the four about music were about Rock. Not my forte.

Patrick is so kind on the way home. No teasing when asked, ‘What does Lachlan do?’

‘He’s a critic. You’ve probably read his articles, but he writes under his second name, Richard, Richard Barstock.’

He was a feared critical voice. So flattered when he rang two days later.
'How did you survive the cacophony of Monday night?’ He asked.
‘I’m not very good with the unmelodic and rather loud.’
‘Me neither. I was wondering whether you would like to meet me for a drink. At a quieter place.’

A quieter place. He read my need for silence.

Rehearsing, playing, listening. Every day is so full of sound. Sometimes there is a need to block my ears, but even then there is the thump-a-thump of blood pulsing though my head. Almost nothing is quieter than Lachlan’s flat. With the double-glazed windows closed, there is a sense of complete detachment from the world, just like that in the suite we stayed in on our first anniversary — twentieth floor of the Casino, facing north-west, overlooking the old industrial edge of the Yarra River. Below us the day-tripping tourist boats slid over the water and the gridlock of cars and trucks shuffled the city streets as silently as the veil of organza rain drifting towards us from the west. The only sound was the soft rush of the air-conditioning; no wind, no birds, no horns, no squealing tyres. And not a single orchestral instrument. Silence. That’s what we share: an understanding of silence.

The Sisters remind me of my fickleness as they flicker in and out of visibility: I love him, I love him not. I love him, I love him not. Pulling petals from a daisy is not the answer. Nor was reading the stars in today’s paper.

Taurus: Are you suddenly wavering about your closest relationship? Don’t be surprised. Mercury, the champion of communication, starts its retreat on Monday. An old friend will re-enter your life and you, brimming with new knowledge and understanding, will find clarity and purpose in some life-changing decision making.

Bah!
The flat is silent. Eerily. The clock radio has been turned off. He’s left, but his presence is pervasive in the lingering smell of coffee and aftershave. No farewell or waking kiss today, only the paper, folded, on the bed. With so many other things needing attention, the pointed folding of the newspapers can only be ignored.

He’s closed the balcony doors, although it was fine enough to leave them open last night.

The wind is buffeting the palm trees, lifting the sand in flurries, ruffling the surface of the bay, silencing the peak hour traffic as it skirts around a severed frond. The white caps are rolling in from the sand bar — a further assault on the glistening shore, but sand is resilient, unlike the balcony. By this afternoon it will be steeped in a salty film of grey.

‘Soak in brine. Pickled and preserved.’ My acidic, spitting words for Lachlan if he were here.

‘On the contrary,’ he would answer. ‘Gnawed and nibbled by salt.’

Something is eating at ‘us’. The tension of yesterday won’t be talked about today.

Today. Tuesday. The regional day — Lachlan on campus for three hours of theatre studies. The duty call to his father on the way back. A play scheduled for 6.30. A review to be written.

A late concert hall rehearsal for me. Some sort of special meeting with Lucien prior to rehearsal. Dreading that. His sarcastic peccadilloes can be so hurtful. Poor Emily, last week.

‘Ms Cantwell, is it too much to expect you to be organised enough to bring the right music?’ And his, ‘Do I need to remind the orchestra that outré does not mean glitter. This is not vaudeville. The audience is here to listen to music.’

‘It’s victimised I feel — performing being so fearful under his critical eye and ear,’ as Nan would say in her Irish brogue. But he is attractive — crisp, newly laundered
shirts, unbuttoned at the neck, worn leather jacket, tossed scarves. And his clever strategies to improve our playing — closing our eyes, playing as if we were blind, developing the melodic shape, honing the humour of a piece with a suspended pause or a blast of punctuating volume. He’s the miracle worker who can turn us from a screeching flock into a soft harmonious chorale. And who else would think of programming Mozart with Bartók? Make a note: must not forget to take all the music to AC’s flat.

The flat. The bomb site.

Where is her scrapbook? So many days have passed and the significance of Paul’s question about a scrapbook has just surfaced. It’s like the phrasing Lucien emphasised in the Mozart, something present but unrecognised before. Was there ever a scrapbook, or is that what these papers are?

Did she ever have one like my mother’s? That collection of newspapers cuttings: Queen Elizabeth’s coronation, embossed floral birthday cards, swap cards of Mont Blanc, Swiss fields of Spring flowers, mirrored lakes and dogs — cocker spaniels and collies, Dalmatians and poodles — signed photographs of Ricky Nelson and Frankie Avalon and a family photograph of Nan, Papa, AC, my mother and their dog on a picnic on the riverbank. The scrapbook — an essential part of every child’s life when images were few and we had to hold onto the outside world when it came our way. Dear Nan, always explaining. I rescued it from the clean out when your parents split up.

But there are no family photographs among AC’s papers, only war photographs, cuttings of major disasters and rural landscapes with clearly defined horizons. If she had a scrapbook did it survive those student days? Did she move like me from house to house with the contents of her life stuffed into manageable boxes, and if it didn’t fit did she toss it? Bin it? Where would it be if it were here? Only the linen press, her wardrobe and the laundry cupboard remain un-explored.

How many pairs of sheets does a person need? New sheets in their packages, old sheets neatly folded, pillow cases pressed. Towels and packets of hand made soaps gift wrapped in cellophane, but nothing like a scrapbook.

And in the wardrobe? Clothes. Mostly tired and worn. Nothing sparkling and new. There’s the smell of stale body odour, of clothes needing to be cleaned. Lachlan’s wardrobe smells of dry-cleaning fluid. His clothes are few but well maintained. He
would have gently asked her, as he asks his father, ‘Would you like me to drop this at
the cleaners?’ And she, like his father, would have replied, ‘It’s not dirty enough yet.’

The box in the bottom of her wardrobe is packed with videos. Lachlan, too, keeps
his tucked away, but in purpose-built drawers. ‘They’re for private,’ and avid
‘consumption, not public display.’

There are the expected: Amadeus, Roman Holiday, four Woody Allen — Annie
Hall, Hannah and Her Sisters, Crimes and Misdemeanours, Husbands and Wives, but
Being John Malkovich? That’s a surprise. And tucked away, at the bottom of the box,
the film Lachlan so often talks about, Jazz on a Summer’s Day. ‘It’s definitive, Zoë, one
of those things you need to see to be educated,’ he says. Aunt C would be flattered to
know that she was ‘educated’. Will take it home for him. It would make a nice surprise
for him on Sunday.

Did she have a ritual Sunday? Devote the day to relaxation, indulge in the papers,
the summary politics of the week, breakfast at a local café, walk or visit friends in the
afternoon and perpetuate the family habit of watching a film on a Sunday night? The
radio beside the bed is set at 774, Radio National. She probably listened to Nightlife, my
mother’s lullaby.

To the laundry. Beneath the trough, a bag of rags — so she did discard some things
— and another torn box. Home for an old Kodak instamatic camera — still in its original
box — and a single packet of negatives. Friends? My family? A group of two men and
two women judging by the halos of hair. The chemist around the corner has a printing
and processing service —they should be interesting.

Nothing that looks like a scrapbook. What a waste of time. It’s time to get back to
the bigger one. Only one bundle today.

**shambolic**

in a shambles
confused
disorderly

**shambles**

slaughter-house
any place of carnage
any place or thing in confusion or disorder

Paul arrives without warning, shambolic and dishevelled, eyes wild, clearly angry. He throws the keys onto the table and flops into the chair.

‘Coffee,’ he demands. ‘Percolated and strong.’

There’s clearly a story, but it will take time to percolate up, like the water in the base of the old Italian coffee pot. It needs time to boil, evaporate and re- condense into a more palatable form before it can be told. He has a distinct preference when it comes to coffee; he prefers the strength and aromatic depth that comes with a good steeping.

Coffee. It could be a vehicle for my personal history. Early childhood — the chicory essence my mother served, adolescence — instant powder, followed by the more flavoursome granules, and then we moved to beans, grounds, percolators, filters, plungers, and now it is the espresso machine. And coffee is no longer just a drink, but a primary icon in a world saturated with the barista’s flair for presentation; the crème of the short black, the dark swirl across the surface of the flat white, the powdered chocolate of the cappuccino, the layered latte.

‘Sometimes I think it’s all in the language, we only want to say the words,’ I once said to Paul.

‘Rot,’ he said, ‘it’s the caffeine.’

He likes a bitter blend served with almond bread. The dry sweet slices soak up the coffee and leave an aromatic aftertaste. And he likes it served on a tray, maintaining his mother’s ritual, a formal coffee ceremony which pushed us out of our couched-potato selves into the adult world of straight backs and polite
conversation. She carried the tray with both hands, arms spread, elbows high, the milk in a jug, the coffee pot warmed, the sugar bowl brimming with large crystals of brown sugar. On a separate plate, one she had painted with warm pink peaches and curled leaves, she served a generous number of homemade glossy meringues. She would rest the tray on the table next to the Italian coffee cups she had previously set out and then pour.

‘One lump, Celia?’

Paul laughed and kissed me when I told him his mother turned me into a film star. I became a tall and elegant femme fatale waving a cigarette holder when she pronounced my name. The exaggerated ‘e’ twisted into the air in the coil of drifting smoke.

Paul is conscious of me lifting down the two small European coffee cups and takes the sugar and almond bread off the tray. Holding the percolator well above the cups, he pours. A stream of aromatic esters saturates the air but as he bites into the almond bread the memory fractures.

‘Where did you buy the bread?’

‘Usual place. Henry’s. His wife has just had her gall bladder removed.’

‘H’m,’ he says, sweeping the crumbs into the palm of his hand and tossing them into his mouth. ‘Good coffee.’ He’s starting to relax, his darting eyes have become steady. ‘What are you working on?’

‘Shambolic. It’s late twentieth century, meaning to be in a chaotic state, but it probably comes from shambles an Old English word that originally meant stool and subsequently came to mean a table at a meat market. You can see the natural transition to slaughter house, carnage and disarray.’
‘I get it. My life’s shambolic,’ he says and drops into silence. It’s his work. He’s supposed to be in control but, too often, the world seems mad.

The small things must come first: sitting quietly and insinuating himself into the chair, drinking his coffee in slow gulps while he looks at the moving shadows of the leaves on the blind.

‘What’s wrong?’ I finally ask. ‘What has happened?’ The unfolding day slowly condenses at night and demands to be told.

‘They punned the by-line and put Bombs Away above a photograph of a flight crew standing in front of a plane primed to drop its payload. It sickens me. The whole focus is on the action, not the repercussions or the potential loss of life, just a brief reference to minimum ‘collateral damage’ — whatever that white-washing phrase means. Death is always collateral.’

He spreads the newspaper on the table to show me. We’ve seen the prototype before among his grandfather’s war memorabilia: his grandfather’s crew in front of their liberator in Morati. The crew look thin, their half smiles suggesting fear, quite unlike this modern crew who stand with a sense of podgy pride, secure in the knowledge that they will be flying too high to be shot down.

‘And look at this.’

The photograph is of a pyramid of hooded men, naked torsos, arms and legs dishevelled in their overlapping of each other. A young woman is poking her head over and above from behind the pile of bodies, laughing. A soldier stands behind her, arms crossed, legs spread in a strong male stance. He seems to be pleased to be part of this in-the-making war trophy.
'There are supposed to be rules about the processes of war. Codes of conduct. We take the moral high ground because we’re supposed to be the civilised ones.'

I have never lived without war but I have never directly experienced one. My list includes the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Falklands, the Gulf War, the Afghan War and the Iraq War. Then there have been the African Wars with the carnage of mutilation and the Bosnian War where civilisation fractured again on European soil. In my wars, everything is mediated through words, images and sound bites. I think about the collection of war sounds filed at radio stations, and wonder whether they are listed alphabetically or by type of sound: aeroplanes, bomb explosions, distant bombing, grenade explosions, helicopters, hurried and shouted orders, mourning wails, rockets, sniper fire, tracer bullets. All these little snippets sliced and slotted to suit the radio reports. Yet there is silence in the distant shot of a billowing nuclear bomb and the silent sweep of a camera over gutters and walls smeared with brown stains.

‘And we never actually see what happens anymore. Only the silent theatre of rockets in flight, of rubble being swept, of clean white body bags, or coffins draped with flags. Hardly like that Vietnam photograph of a napolmed child running naked down the road. No damaging impressions to the human psyche that might stimulate revulsion. It’s clean. Very clean.’ Paul says, ‘and very dirty.’ Paul has given me another word: collateral.

collateral

situated at the side, running side by side
accompanying, attendant
auxiliary, additional, secondary, indirect
descended from the same stock, but not linear
security pledged for the payment of a loan
It sounds so innocuous, like something residing in a parallel time zone. A friend once asked whether I had ever seen Goya’s response to his war: Saturn Devouring One of his Children and his series of graphic paintings and etchings. Does one look and let the image enter the psyche or look away and protect oneself from the possibility of nightmares?

She has even written on the back of the print — one of the Black Paintings on the walls of his house. None of the cuttings relevant to her wars are as disturbing as this. Nor as gruesome. They might be in focus but they’re no match in terms of repulsive detail. And she’s printed off four from his series, Disasters of War. They certainly question Tchaikovsky’s explosive celebration of war in his 1812. Lachlan might understand these given the horror of what his father experienced.

God, discarding them won’t stop the memories. Maybe all the cuttings should be binned immediately. It makes sense to only keep her notes.
Patrick is sitting outside Lucien’s office.

‘What are you doing here?’ There’s something about his voice that always touches me: it’s rounded, steady and concerned.

‘Lucien asked me to see him. At three o’clock.’

‘Me too,’ he says.

‘Three o’clock. Pronto! Don’t you love the way he orchestrates us in Italian?’

‘Zoë, how observant you are. I hadn’t noticed. Do you know why we’re here?’

‘For some outrageous sin.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You’re perfect.’

‘Perfect? Haven’t you noticed the way his baton is always pointing in my direction, how he looks at me when he makes his comments? I thought after the last round of auditions I was secure. But now? That’s why I’ve been working so hard. I’m beginning to think I’ll have to audition interstate which is a pity. He has such good ideas, like the workshop.’

‘Zoë, you’ve really got it wrong. If you’re getting special attention it’s because you’re the one worth directing the comments to. You listen. If the position of principal cello became vacant, it would be yours.’

‘It doesn’t feel like that.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

‘Well here he comes,’ he says. ‘We’ll soon find out.’

Lucien looks as if he’s stepped out of a storm: his hair is damp, unkempt, shirt pressed but hardly immaculate.

‘Good, you’re both here. Come in, come in,’ he says, waving us to the executive nest of armchairs under the window. ‘So, do you have any idea why I’ve asked you to come?’

Guessing games. But the meeting’s clearly not punitive.

‘We were just talking about it, of course,’ Patrick says, ‘but no.’

‘Two members of the orchestra want to form a quartet. They approached me several weeks ago and asked for my recommendations. You both came to mind. Don’t look surprised. You’re both dedicated, show great concentration when playing and have the sensitivity and understanding of the nuances of music needed for interpretation. You’re both amenable to suggestions and, I think, capable of working with others.’
Neither of us speak. It’s so unexpected, but Patrick finally blurs, ‘Thanks … who are the other players?’

‘James Quinn and Sophie Comps. Like you, they’re newer members. Of course I don’t know how you feel about them, but they are wonderful musicians.’

‘It sounds like a wonderful opportunity,’ Patrick says.

‘It is. Your playing will improve, more than you might expect, and it will give you something to work at in the slower periods of the year. I’m certain you both have the sensitivity and the capacity to develop the rapport a quartet needs, and you have the experience to interpret a broad repertoire. You’re both coming to the workshop aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Patrick says.

‘Good. Let me know. Say, within the week? They understand that you may not want to play in a quartet and there are two others I might approach. You probably need to know they’re aiming for the Grand Prix at the International Chamber Music Competition in July. They don’t expect to win but they’re aiming high.’

Patrick says, ‘I need to think about the time commitment.’

‘Yes. As conductor, I can make some small accommodations. Go away and give it some thought.’

‘Thank you for your confidence in us.’ But my words are barely out before he’s spread his arms and is ushering us out the door.

Patrick grabs my elbow as soon as we’re out of hearing, ‘I can’t believe it, Zoë. It’s a fantastic opportunity. They’re terrific musicians.’

‘But you don’t want to do it, do you?’

He looks embarrassed as he says, ‘I have some reservations.’

‘Such as?’

He looks uncomfortable and turns away.

‘Patrick, what’s the problem?’

‘I want to spend more time doing other things.’

‘Like …?’

‘Cycling.’

‘Patrick, you’re kidding?’

‘I’m not.’

‘I don’t believe you. You’re the one who’s always pushing me.’
‘Zoë, I’m just saying that I’m not sure I want to play more.’
‘But I’d be more inclined if you were in the group.’
‘You can’t decide like that. A quartet demands a very personal commitment. This is something you have to decide for yourself. And so do I. I’ll see you later, at rehearsal, and we’ll speak on Sunday.’

He’s already swinging his viola over his back and clipping the leg of his jeans, adjusting his helmet. He’s right. Damn him. And he’s made me feel like a chastised child.

‘So, where are you off to?’
‘I’m going to drop in on my sister before rehearsal.’

Lachlan’s bare feet on the table with an open bottle of cab-sav, some blue cheese and two glasses, speaks of a welcome.
‘Good day?’ he asks, without looking up.

His voice is flat, perfunctory, his attention focused on cutting a wedge of cheese. It’s the protective move he uses to avoid confrontation, an all too familiar ploy and my anger rises and congeals in my throat.

‘A glass of wine would help.’

He still doesn’t look at me as he fills my glass and lightly tosses into the air, ‘Well, the play was extraordinary. Two parallel narratives linked by an old canister of film. The denouement was black, in fact, totally sinister, and the production and lighting were brilliant. I actually felt as if I were on the Mediterranean coast. They even had a swimming pool in front of the stage for the classic ‘I’m-so-in-love-with-you-I-must-wade-into-the-water-with-my-clothes-on’ scene. It’s such a filmic trope. Hardly natural. The only people I’ve ever seen with their clothes on in the water were thrown in or passing a rescue test. Anyway, there were lots of film references, nudity — the alabaster blonde was a real knockout — and for once, lots of men in the audience.’

So he liked the eye candy. Great. ‘And I have some news. Lucien recommended Patrick and me to Sophie and James who want to form a quartet. We were his first choice. It’s such a good opportunity. It means putting aside some extra time for practice but Lucien said it will really improve our playing. What do you think?’
‘H’m. Terrific viscosity,’ he says as he hold his glass to the light and watches the wine run down the inside of his glass, ‘but where will you practice? You can’t practice here.’

The stem of my wine glass is beginning to feel fragile. ‘I thought you said you enjoyed the play. Lachlan?’

‘I did.’

‘Then why are you being such a shit?’

‘What in the hell are you on about?’

‘You. I tell you some terrific news and you dump on it.’

‘That’s not what I’m doing. It sounds like a lot of work and I don’t want to be dodging around your practice regime. Isn’t that discussing it?’

‘No. It’s dumping and you’re doing it again.’

‘Well, you don’t have time and how am I supposed to work around even more hours of practice?’

‘We can practice somewhere else, on Sunday mornings. Lucien said he’d be supportive.’

‘Whatever that means.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Well, he was the critical, devil incarnate last week. So, what’s made him change?’

‘Patrick thinks he was only commenting because I’m good enough to warrant criticism. I hadn’t thought of it that way.’

‘And, what would he know?’

‘I thought he was your friend. Why in the bloody hell are you being so negative? Forget it. I don’t care what you think.’

‘You see. It was never going to be a discussion between us.’

‘Us! Lachlan, you want me to think about us? When have I ever been more than the small change in your life?’

What a shambles. We’re stumbling awkwardly in the space between us, our anger choreographing a dance of avoidance as we brush our teeth and toss our clothes into our washing basket. There we are, framed into the kingdom of coupledom by the bathroom mirror.
Solace lies at the edge of the bed, limbs tense, arms twisted over the top sheet seeking the sea breeze. We lie swaddled in the damp humidity and oppression of the coming change. Back to back they faced each other, drew their guns and shot each other. We’re ostensibly reading but the words drift in and out of focus and my heroine leaves the room over and over and over and over. And finally, he’s switching off the light.

The bed is saturated with his presence, his breath a rhythmic lowing like a slowly drawn bow across the C string. His elbow knocks my back, intruding into my space. It’s his way of making up, but a slight shuffle across the bed will take me out of reach.

Every pore is alert, every surface pressing: the pillow is overly firm, the sheets a tangled encumbrance, the edge of the bed immediate. There’s no chance of sleep, although his breathing is deepening.

Is there room to stretch out of this foetal position and uncurl my legs without touching him? Shit. That’s his foot and he’s trapped mine beneath it. Resistance seems petulant, but it’s resist or let the fight be over. His hand moves onto my thigh, broad and soft in its caress of the beast that needs taming — the beast to be pacified — and in the warmth of that you-are-me-and-I-am-you-in-being-touched-by-you way, in that borderless place where skin meets skin, at that point when all my existence resides in the possibility of pleasuring, there is only one thing to do — relinquish myself.

‘You know I love you,’ he says as he draws my face to his and shares his warm-wine breath.

‘I love you too,’ are the words that must follow. They have always been the words that must follow. It’s the classic response, lived out in films, written so often ... so often there’s never been a possibility of forgetting or thinking that there might be something else to say … or nothing.

We’re in the never-never land of touching and longing but, for the first time, there is a strong sense that the person he thinks he is touching is not me.
Chapter Five

The sky — a baby blue plasma screen. The horizon — a line edging the iris of the sea. The sea — glassy, save for those ruffled patches. The swell — a relinquishing sigh on the shore.

To relinquish: to renounce or surrender. AC defines it as giving up or renouncing, but surely it means to give into something?

‘I discovered the true meaning of relinquish yesterday.’

‘H’m.’

‘It’s the loss of something outside oneself.’

‘H’m.’

And last night, what was relinquished? The possibility of using sex as a weapon in our war, my anger, or my capacity to maintain my rage?

His fingers are so gentle, so soft as they caress my thigh — that sense of a shared osmotic skin — his touch so compelling as he draws me close. His skin is dry, the scar on the flap between his finger and thumb, rough. Yet his grasp is so firm as he cups my knee and draws my leg over his, so insistent that it’s impossible to leave the bed.

‘Stay here. It’s Sunday.’

It’s hard to resist his crumpled, warm voice. Is this the moment to give in, to relinquish my Sunday walk along the beach?

‘No, the beach calls.’ His hold tightens. Resistance is difficult, but a kiss prompts my release. ‘I’ll be back for breakfast.’

Cockle shells marking the tide line today, masses of them crackling and crunching underfoot, and the air is as promised — early-morning-cool on my skin and humming with the high-pitched whine of the cyclists’ tyres. It’s good to be in the fresh air, away from Lachlan, away from AC’s senseless, claustrophobic papers. Doubt that she ever did much outside that flat. So few people at the funeral service. Token colleagues, as
Dad said. Yet, there’s that odd reference to one of my orchestral concerts. She didn’t seem to be relinquishing life in yesterday’s bundle.

relinquish

to renounce or surrender (a possession or right)
to give up: put aside or desist from
to let go

‘Look at this,’ I say to Paul as I show him the photograph of the demonstration.

‘It’s almost identical to our moratorium one,’ he says, ‘that one on the front page.’

We were both in it. Paul has his fist raised. I’m struggling with the banner. It’s taken as we reach the top of Bourke St. and the air is electric with success: more people than in any previous demonstration, the mob strident but controlled, placards held high as we chant, ‘One, two, three, four. We don’t want your bloody war.’ And as the speeches start and the crowd cheers, we knew we were being heard. But although the photograph made the front page and the numbers were acknowledged, the article focused on an insignificant skirmish that was provoked. We felt so cheated and it didn’t matter how many times Paul tried to explain to his father that he was not simply a rabble-rouser, he had been labelled.

‘You should have been conscripted,’ his father yelled the following day. ‘That would have been the best bloody thing for you. And for me. The Army would soon set you straight. And don’t think you’re going to live here with all those Commie ideas. Go. Pack up your stuff and make sure you take Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book with you. I don’t want a son in my house with an ASIO file, and I don’t want you back in this house until you understand where your loyalties lie. I didn’t spend five years of my life fighting for nothing. Now, get out.’
Paul folds the paper so that the photograph of the protest against the Iraq War sits against the earlier. ‘It’s extraordinary how alike the two photographs are’, he says. ‘Where were you when you took it?’

‘At the top of the hill, on the steps, near the gardens.’

‘It’s terrific. It captures the intensity of the moment, the enthusiasm of the crowd.’

‘But what’s it doing on page three?’

‘Bloody John. Yet another broken promise. He gave me that “demonstrations are passé” spiel as an excuse. As if they have a use-by date! What about the principles of honesty and trust. Never mind. We’ve been constantly lied to since the beginning. Those weapons of mass destruction still haven’t been found. Why should he behave differently? I don’t understand the people I work with anymore. You’re lucky when an editor sees beyond the advertising space. And John keeps saying, in that nasally whine of his, that a photograph has to do more than tell a story. It has to pluck at the heart strings.’

Paul tucks an imaginary violin under his chin and draws a mocking bow across it. ‘Celia, don’t relinquish your integrity,’ he says as he bends and takes a bow.

I can’t help laughing. His flourish is so unlike the detached air of the orchestra at the end of the Ravel last night. How can they be so calm after such an exciting performance? What extraordinary concentration they have.

Did she mean the performance last June? Was she in the audience? Did she buy a program? See my name? There were so few cuttings in that bundle and nothing with a date, but she had to be writing near the beginning of the Iraq War.
So my life was in hers, and she understood the concentration needed to build the tension in the Ravel.

The tension in *Bolero* swells like a rising tide, like the growing tension between Lachlan and me. But today is Sunday and we’re going to eat breakfast and watch *Jazz on a Summer’s Day*, and during my practice at the flat, he will play a casual game of soccer with his mates, and the day will be perfect, glassy like the sea, all the disturbing currents hidden beneath the surface.

‘You’re going to love this film,’ Lachlan says as he plumps a pillow and tosses it back on the bed. For once the suite of pillows is more than a decorative prop. He’s drawing the curtains, closing out the sky. He disappears and from the kitchen the espresso machine hisses as he makes coffee. He returns with a tray, a laden tray. He’s been out and bought fresh croissants.

‘Are we ready?’ he asks as we nestle back into the pillows.

‘Ready,’ and the buttery layers of the croissant are melting in my mouth as the smell of coffee drifts up from the aromatic crema.

The film opens with dancing water, the light playing over the surface. Dark patches like musical notes, rock and break and dissolve into the reflections of the boats. Newport. The summer day is declared and it’s only after the scene has been set that the background music finds its source in the musicians on stage.

Lachlan is grasping my arm. ‘Look,’ he says, ‘it was made in 1958. How many shots have you seen like that?’ The boats are gathered in a loosely arranged row across the sea, but as they spread out, the arc of their tack curves across the sea like a phrasing mark above a sweeping arpeggio.

We sit like some of the audience, against each other, limbs intertwined — his leg bent over mine, my arm linked through his. The excitement and tension is spreading through our bodies, transferring between us as we turn and smile at the moments we both enjoy. But stillness falls over us as a cello player waxes classical in the grey interior of an upper-storey room and the light on his back transforms him into a living sculpture. The close up of his face reminds me of how intense my work can be.

‘It’s fantastic. The intensity of the moment has been captured.’

‘Of course,’ Lachlan says, ‘but what about the music?’
‘It’s great. But you appreciate it in a different way to me. I hear the patterns but it’s the rapport between the members of the group as they improvise that fascinates me. I just don’t feel jazz the way you do.’

‘Yeah, that’s the sad thing about your life. Someone else writes the script.’

Shock is always mute. Like the insect inside his paper-weight, my playing has been reduced to nothing in his synthetic bubble of ignorance.

It’s so difficult to say, ‘I’m going over to the flat to practice.’

‘But the film hasn’t finished.’

‘No, but it’s inspired me to go and play.’

‘What about lunch?’

‘Lachlan, I’ve decided to change the script. Not today.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, what in the fuck are you on about now?’

‘Clearly nothing you’d understand.’

Tears fall in the shower, are contained as he watches me pack up my cello, but they well up again as my cello is bundled into the car and become a flood a mere two-hundred metres down the road. Sitting on a cold bluestone wall and rubbing my hands across an old block of stone is an odd comfort, but solidity is needed when weeping is uncontrollable.

AC’s flat. What does it tell me about her? The CDs: she liked late nineteenth and early twentieth century music: Satie, Saint Saëns, Poulenc, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky. And her shelves? They are stacked with books organised by subject matter — a dozen or so biographies, dozens on photography, and even more on music. Composers and performers’ lives. An often opened book on Stravinsky which she’s annotated. Almost every margin is scarred with comments, words or phrases. Terrific use of quotations. Story told from adult’s viewpoint. Sounds of the city. She’s even asterisked a passage in red and struck out the word ‘musician’ from a Stravinsky quote, ...the dawn of my consciousness of myself in the role of a musician..., and replaced it with ‘photojournalist’.

Patrick was right when he said, ‘Look at the books, Zoë. You might find out more that way.’ Tucked between the pages describing Stravinsky’s 1939 desperate flight from Paris to the United States, there’s a letter. No date, as usual. The paper is blue and thin,
smooth to the touch, a slight sheen, like aerogram paper. The writing, her now familiar loopy scrawl.

Dear Paul,

I too am an exile, excluded from the family circle, and understand more deeply how difficult it must have been for you to stand up to your father, although, my situation is very different. The events leading up to it were not of my making as you know. But I find myself looking to the broader, external world for comfort, for things to take me out of myself. My little habit of taking photographs will be formalised at a technical college this year. Words will always be a force, and yours will never leave me. My father remains loyal but having never been one for confrontation prefers to give me a Stravinsky’s biography than speak to me about what has happened. ‘All you need to know, and all the advice I could give you is there,’ he said, and taking liberty with Stravinsky’s words he said, ‘Whatever interests you, whatever you love, make your own.’ So your fight for the truth will always be mine, never to be relinquished.

Celia.

She and Paul are caught within the words, her wishes suspended in the paper. It seems a sacrilege to remove it from the book.

The sun is catching the tips of the eucalypts beyond the window. The light pierces the new leaves weaving their umber tips between the maze of the mature olive leaves. The limbs stretch with rustled voices, discarding their old leaves which tap on the window as they fall. A cockatoo is screeching its way up the river ─ a new riff to become used to.

And there is practice to be done.

It’s tension that’s making me all fingers and thumbs. There will be no flow of music today with these constant mistakes and the inevitable pauses that go with learning new passages and unfamiliar nuances. Some fragments will only make sense when heard with the orchestra. Patrick agrees that the first rehearsal of a commissioned work is always hard. The lack of a recording makes it difficult. It will be good to have all AC’s recordings of those soloists who are rarely played now. Will bring mine out of storage from Dad’s and do some comparative listening. He will be relieved to have
some space back. It will be a good excuse to go around without Lachlan, and talk to him about AC’s papers.

Some things don’t change. Dad and Marianne. The David Hockney postcard they bought on their honeymoon, *The Second Marriage*, remains pinned to their message board. It’s so them: the couple sitting stiffly side-by-side on a settee, framed by what looks like a bus shelter set against a backdrop of floral-park wall paper, champagne glasses between them, he glancing a little her way. Although, Marianne probably wouldn’t see it that way, particularly the label ‘second’.

Dear Dad. Always available. And Marianne, the soul mate my mother never was.

‘Hello stranger. What are you doing here?’ he says.

‘Thought I might pick up my CDs and ask you about my family history.’

‘I’ve been waiting for this. Zoë, it’s your mother’s business not mine. Your mother is the one you should speak to.’

‘Yes, but you must know something, Dad.’

‘Almost nothing.’

‘Then tell me that.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘What did they fight over? Did you know them then? What happened?’

‘I only met your aunt once. At our wedding. She was invited, but only came to the church, not the reception. Your mother was hurt that she didn’t stay. She saw the invitation as a peace offering and your aunt rejected it.’

‘But what was the fight about?’

‘Your aunt dared her boyfriend to swing out on a rope at a swimming hole. He did, the rope snapped and he died when he landed in the shallows. Your mother, who was there, blamed your aunt and she never forgave your mother. End of story.’

‘What was his name?’

‘Richard something.’

‘She keeps writing about Paul. He was clearly a student friend, and a boyfriend at one point. He was conscripted during the Vietnam War.’

‘I can’t tell you any more.’

‘You weren’t conscripted, were you?’

‘No. My birthday date wasn’t drawn in the lottery. I was one of the lucky ones.’
‘Lachlan’s father was conscripted. He suffers from a form of leukaemia, CLL. He’s always tired, always depressed. Hasn’t the energy to do anything. He sits around all day listening to music.’

‘Music. You and Lachlan might have more in common that I thought.’

‘Dad, he likes vintage pop and heritage classics.’

‘Where is Lachlan?’

‘Don’t talk about him. He’s not the person I thought he was. I really want to talk about my aunt. She was at one of my orchestral concerts last year. Do you remember the Ravel? Last June. Did you see her there?’

‘Zoë, I wouldn’t know her. I’ve only seen photographs of your mother and her when they were very young. Even at the funeral, no one had a recent photograph.’

‘Don’t you think it’s odd that she was a photojournalist and didn’t have a photograph of herself?’

‘Photojournalist? Who told you that? She was a librarian.’

‘Is that what Mum said?’

‘Zoë, you’re going to have to ask her and Nan. They know everything there is to know. Now tell me about the quartet. Who’s in the group? When do you start? Where do I book tickets for your first performance?’

Lachlan sleeps. His head rests on my pillow. His body is splayed across the bed, the summer duvet thrown back although the night air is cool. Does one insinuate in order not to disturb? Does one cover to protect? Does one dump and thump so the person will wake? Now how would AC and Paul have resolved that problem?

How extraordinary, they wouldn’t have. There are no bodies in her world of words, almost nothing physical, except at the beginning.
Chapter Six

Sliding out of a warm bed in autumn is like stepping into a washed out water-colour: the frame of the window, the sea and sky adrift in a chiffon mist, the balcony airbrushed with brine.

The air is cold, gripping my skin with sharp fingers, seeping into my bones. Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me; nor will shivers and shakes.

‘It’s cold,’ Lachlan groans as the clock radio turns on and fills the air with sharp political patter. ‘And too early to listen to all this nonsense,’ he says as his hand hits the off button.

‘Poor shock-jock, laid to rest by an intolerant Caesar.’

‘It’s too early for irony, Zoë. Come back to bed.’

‘Not today, I’m anxious to get to the flat. I’ve worked out what to do. I’m going to vacuum the bundles, save her writing and use the definitions to sort them into alphabetical order.’

‘You’re that interested?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you separate the words from the cuttings you’ll lose the historical connection.’

‘I can’t keep all the cuttings if I want to use the flat.’

‘For what?’

‘Practising. The more I can practise before rehearsals and work on the new pieces, the less Lucien will be on my back about my lack of stamina, and I won’t be disturbing you.’

Silence. The Lachlan silence. His favourite disapproval tactic. But this time, if he has an objection to my decision, he will have to voice it. There will be no second guessing on my part, nor weeks spent arguing about it. What was Marianne’s advice?
Don’t break the silence, stay focused on what you’re doing, and look at anything but him.

‘Okay then.’ So, he’s finally speaking. ‘I’ll see you tonight. Late, probably, they want a review of ‘The Good Boys’ and an interview with the playwright.’

Even after vacuuming, the smell of dust is overwhelming, but the view from her desk compensates; the skyscrapers are blue and gold and above a building-block city. And AC’s hot air balloons are drifting on a slow breath of the wind. What’s her word? Mon…, mont…., montgolfier. It was among the stack shaken out yesterday, near the bathroom door.

montgolfier

a balloon raised by heated air provided by a fire in the lower section
named after the brothers Joseph Michel and Jacques Étienne
the mode of transport used by Phileas Fogg in Jules Verne’s Around the World in Eighty Days
the illustration on the cover of the small book bought by my father when we saw the film

I fell in love with the black curls of Passepartout, the ‘gentleman’s gentleman’, my Ulysses. The film was my passport to India and China, once the home of the distant and exotic, now the ‘House of Nightly Telephone Sales’ and the ‘Bazaar of Cheap Manufacturing.’

Passepartout at dawn: my sky is pinked with clouds which lift as the sun rises, and four balloons are drifting towards me in a fantastic fabrication spun of air, fire, wind and liquid plastic.

Paul arrives. He’s seen them through the tram window.
‘I’ve been to the Anzac dawn service,’ he says, ‘I needed to remind myself of what it is to respect something. Remember the day we met, how we waited on Princess Bridge for our fathers to march past?’

I remember us on the bridge.

My father met me at five-thirty and we joined the mob of walking shadows striding towards the Shrine, our voices swaddled in the dampness of dawn, our footfalls deadened by the deep grass; the silent mob of Brack’s Collins Street 5 pm in step with remembrance.

We climb the steep steps up to the citadel where the crowd gathers for the ritual prayers and last post. My father is serious, and when the rifle shots punctuate the hymn and ricochet in the air he looks at me with choking eyes. We stand next to each other as the dawn light brings up the scene and he locates Harry, Paul’s father. Paul arrives late, breathless, actions hasty in his wish to seem on time. He mumbles apologies as we shuffle down the steps, awkward and self-conscious. He moves ahead, I linger behind. My father aware of my shyness, and confused by its sudden intrusion, turns at the bottom of the steps and says, ‘I have to join my squadron now. See you tonight?’

I’m touched by this unusual suggestion of contact and reply, ‘Maybe.’

‘Paul will look after you,’ Harry says, and off they go, leaving me to deal with Paul and his evident annoyance.

We establish that our fathers were both members of the 21st Squadron, both flew out of Moratai and we share their old fear of crashing and being beheaded. We discover why we are there: to be drawn back into the fold. We have both been protesting against the Vietnam War. My father and I have agreed not to discuss it anymore, to respect each other’s differences. We want to avoid a severance like that between Paul and his father, although his
mother’s recent intervention has at least led to a temporary truce, one that commits Paul to showing that he’s willing to try to understand the other side by going to the dawn service.

We do the Botanical gardens, [to do — to visit as a tourist or sightseer] circle the pond that was once a bend in the Yarra River, follow the path where the remnants of the original vegetation disrupt the flow of the exotics and bamboo, watch the ducks that have always been part of an abundant, resident food chain and sit in the sun talking of protest and pleasure: Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. He asks me whether I would like to go to the Victorian Jazz Club with him.

‘You do remember,’ Paul says.

‘How could I forget, Paul,’ I say. But I remember with my current eyes, not through the tentative and apprehensive feelings I had at the time. I want to remind him that we were walking through a history of cultivation and planning, the grandeur of an empire extended and reflected in the lush green lawns and the Victorian pavilions.

Does this mean that Pops met Paul?

Pops never speaks about the war. And even though he fought in the Second World War, he’s so much stronger than Lachlan’s father. Poor Lachlan, he was so distressed when we visited his father last week. There is only word for his father, crushed. He was lifeless as he sat in the sun with his hair newly washed, shining, falling down the length of his back. Lachlan finds his long pony tail offensive, effeminate, but it’s only its length that surprises me. He is so softly spoken and his eyes reflect the uncontrollable pain that riddles his body. Is it the Vietnam experience? Its toll is evident in the number of anti-depressants choking his shaving cabinet, their names ever-changing as he moves from one to another in his effort to stem the unpredictable flood of memories. He is still as he peruses the gig guide, trying to decide who to see on Saturday night.

Lachlan — always struggling, to engage him in conversation. It’s hardly surprising that Elaine gave up on their marriage and moved into a small unit on her own. She
seems to care, she visits, but the burden of his silence became too much in their lifeless marriage. As she said, ‘No one was ever there to listen to me.’

Nothing is ever straight forward, just like AC’s papers. She added a second word to the montgolfier bundle: defence. Damn it. Do I list the two under M, or split them under M and D?

defence

resistance against attack
protection
a fortification

‘You’re an armadillo’, Paul says, ‘armoured by wasted words and paper.’

Cruel is the word for him. Crewell, my mother’s preferred brand of sewing needles, noted for their sharp points and long eyes, the needles she insisted on using because their feel was familiar and she understood how they punctured and slipped through a fine weave like silk without damaging the fabric.

Paul’s verbal attacks are sharp, but they have thick ends which leave gaping holes in their wake, but I remain at my desk, turn back to the keyboard and put my hands on the keys. My work is to lay bare the nuances of manipulation.

‘I’ve been reading Watson’s Death Sentence,’ I say, ‘all those empty words that reflect on our social and spiritual vacuity.’

‘You should be familiar with them. You belong to the chattering classes,’ he says.

The chattering classes? I never talk to anyone except him.
‘I see. Of course, when you are talking, Paul, you are networking, your conversations are clearly constructive, and you are partaking in a socially acceptable activity. And you are never on the cusp of brown-nosing.’

‘How is it that you always manage to make something out of nothing?’

‘Your words are never ‘nothing’ to me. I am full of admiration for the way you segued from my armoured body to my superficial mind. The idea of a defensive skin isn’t new, but an armadillo? That is a touch original and you’re giving me the quality of cuteness. That, I can wear.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, shut up. Are we going out for a drink or not?’ (To go out for a drink: to get drunk, to get wasted.)

‘To get wasted? No. Changed my mind. There are too many wasted words to attend to. I need to deal them before they lose their currency.’

‘You’re mad,’ he says.

‘Do you think that’s a state of mind or an uncontrolled emotional response?’

He leaves and slams the door. I thump the keyboard and close the program before bookmarking the site. ‘Shit, Shit. Shit.’ At least that expletive still has currency.

So there were problems. Inevitably there are problems — Lachlan wants to work, Zoë wants to party; then Zoë wants to work and Lachlan wants to sleep. But it’s more than that — we can be so deeply disconnected. There is something profoundly different in the way we experience the world. His flat, simply, denies my world. There’s no space on his desk for a second computer, no storage space for my music. The opportunities for practising are limited and, now, it’s unavailable for quartet rehearsals.
We could practice at my flat if the second bedroom were emptied. It could be a study and the living room a music studio. There is no flat above. No noise comes from the adjacent flat so its tenants probably can’t hear me. Lachlan’s place is difficult: the neighbours can be heard, as we are. There would be no need for restraint — an end to practising softly all the time.

Lachlan doesn’t understand that the cello is my solace. Even taking it out of its case restores me, takes me out of this wordy world that he and AC both love. To rest its neck in the cup of my hand, to feel the strings pressing into my fingers, to have its sound box resting between my knees, to sense the tension of its spike on the floor, to listen to the subtlety of changing tones, to sense their resonance in my body, to experience the physical rush that comes with particular chords or the intense concentration demanded in plucking a passage of pizzicato, my cello keeps the wolves of self doubt at bay.

But words weren’t her only passion. What about her photographs? Her world seems so distant; everything is at arm’s length, reduced to black and white patterns on a page. Or coloured. Inhabiting words and images, Lachlan argues, allows him to experience the hurt and happiness they represent but, for me, it’s the rhythmical sequence of musical tones that allows me to feel such things.

Yes, Lachlan would have liked AC. And she would have appreciated his quick fix for the 200-word review, his lists of critical words, although she would never have clustered her lists around genres: adventure, crime, family sagas, fantasy, futuristic/science fiction, history, literary, mystery, romance, satire. Although, Lachlan’s family saga list might have been of interest:

**family sagas**

*at the centre of, authentic, anachronistic,*  
*bigamy, believable, binding,*  
*chaotic, cyclical, comatose, complexity,*  
*domestic, minutiae, drunken politics, deceit,*  
*control, all-encompassing, engrossing,*  
*fratricide, (matra... or patra...),*  
*holds the audience, hatred,*  
*influential, informed by, inspirational, incest,*
'Succinctness is the key to success,’ he says. ‘Readers need familiar boundaries and beacon-words in a review. The odd lampoon of authority, like anachronism, is also persuasive.’

‘My, ‘never mind the creative source, the wounded author, director or even the actor’ always falls on deaf ears.

‘Zoë, you’ve got to give all that Romantic stuff up, if you want to succeed in this world. It’s the formula that works. Bypass individuality and take the three-lane freeway to marketable success. It’s upward mobility, the old rags to riches narrative, that’s all the go. It’s everywhere: in reality TV, where the star is born; in fiction, where the impossible is credible. Look at this. Smith’s re-fabrication of history to suit contemporary values is still on top of the bestseller list. It’s mostly lies, but it trades on our most basic fears. Repackage life so that all the difficult questions about history are answered, and you too will have a best seller.’

And like AC, he likes to annotate. The scripts of the plays he reviews begin their life in tidy stacks with flawless un-crumpled pages, the leaves of paper sewn into tightly gathered spines, covers bright and stiff like unused wrapping paper, but within minutes he’s broken the spine, thumbed through the first ten pages, located the central theme and
dog-eared the page, written in the margins the key words for his review and filled it with yellow and grey Post-its: yellow for quotable detail, grey for memorable moments in the plot.

His first drafts are written on blank paper too, his with a rollerball, late at night. Did she like working late? Did her eyes dart to and fro across the page? He likes to put his feet up, strip off his socks as if by freeing his toes he can open his body to all possibilities. It complements that laid-back, hair carefully dishevelled, casual just out of the shower look that’s current. God, what if he locks into that style for the rest of his life like his father who still inhabits his late 60s identity?

But Lachlan’s eyes are questioning, his heavy steps speak of determination — even when he reads he’s committed. His head disappears into the hump of his back when he’s typing, it’s as if the weight of the world is pressing all his good humour out. Those residual black moods are horrible.

Like last night. ‘You look hot in that cranberry shirt, can I get you a drink?’ It seemed like such a considerate question.

‘No thanks. And, for God’s sake, Zoë, if you’re going to dress me in fruit, think of wine, think of pinot, something deep and rich, not cranberry.’

‘If I said pinot no one else would know what I meant.’

‘Zoë, don’t be ridiculous. I have to finish this review.’

It was not the time to push my wacky sense of humour. He does get cross, but when his hand hovers over the mouse his movements touch me. He has such a gently efficient way of moving. But his head is becoming permanently angled from craning over his lap-top. It’s a sort of organic distortion, like aging. He’s only thirty-nine, but he’s already fretting over the odd grey hair, asking me to look, then accusing me of being unkind when they’re found. What does he want me to do? Lie?

And we too have problems! It’s after midnight, his adrenalin is still running and he wants me to look at an advertisement for a bed. It’s about the image. The bed feels absolutely fine, but he wants a Chloe.

‘A Chloe! Lachlan, who ever heard of sleeping in a Chloe?’

‘Why don’t you take the time to look?’

It’s a full page spread in a magazine that he’s left open on the bedside table. The low bed sits centre page in front of four rectangular wall panels in a Japanese style
room. It’s over-hung by a white, stylish, retro 1950s light. The receding brown and white stripes of the bed cover suggest a small bed, but it’s clearly huge. Does Lachlan imagine us in this? Where’s the unruly twist of crumpled sheets? Is this part of the narrow toehold of vanity that’s keeping us together as the arty professional couple? He the arbiter of theatrical taste, lithe and classic in his formulaic black T-shirt, me the younger woman, loose of limb, fine boned except for my broad, stand-me-in-good-stead shoulders.

It’s too bad that our circle of friends is diminishing. Although they like his wit, my charming disposition and eating with friends, they have mortgages and insufficient cash to pay an adolescent baby-sitter.

‘Zoë?’

It was a mistake leaving the light on. He’s so determined to read his review.

‘Tomorrow, Lachlan. I’m really not awake.’

‘Listen,’ he says regardless, ‘brace yourself, it’s a good one.’

Who’s afraid of the darkness beyond the shadows of excess? Probably anyone who has seen ‘The Good Boys’, the current production at the Playbox Theatre. Set in a futuristic Melbourne, a group of neo-conservative eco-rats meet to complete the final details of a successful merger between two insurance companies. In a luxury suite above the Casino, an evening of dark collusion and complex contracts unfolds against the backdrop of a large, soundless television screen. Here riots, resulting from the lack of compensation being given to residents whose homes have been damaged by one of the recent tidal floods attributed to global warming, unfold. And herein rests the tension in this piece as we witness the silent tragedy of lives lost and communities irreparably damaged while the untouchable superficiality of the eco-rats’ lives, their sated appetites, their rampant collusion, and their aerial detachment from the reality of deprivation unfolds. We recognise the small talk of the football club
box, the banter of share-market success, the implicit insider trading as the names of the companies profiting from ecological change creep into the discussion of their portfolios.

The group of men is in no immediate danger until we see a deadly flow of debris approaching the hotel as an unpredicted wave sweeps up the river. They are warned that it will rise above the ground floor and destabilise the base of the hotel. When the lights begin to flicker, the frightened voices and fighting shadows of these unscrupulous men overlay the images of lives being lost. Be prepared, you will find yourself lifting your feet off the floor.

Andrew Barker as the paunchy CEO of Niall Insurance is convincing and fear evoking as the unfeeling manipulative socio-path. The troubled CEO of Plan Right is played by Tom Katoris who conveys with finesse a man with a conscience. Jonathon Edwards and William Meisson lead us through the legal minefield protecting Andrew and the tricks that will save him from losing his market share in a world no longer able to call the damaging weather an extreme ‘Act of God’.

The punches in this play are to the point and effective: one leaves the theatre feeling one has sat through another sort of darkness, one based on apathy, ignorance and moral neglect.

‘There. How’s that?’
‘Brilliant.’
‘And scintillating. A rhythmical triumph. And all within the 400 word limit. Feedback?’

‘It sounds like we should move.’

‘Zoë, don’t be ridiculous. It’s only a play. Left-wing hysteria.’

‘You wouldn’t have said that four years ago. What’s happened?’

‘For God’s sake! I don’t have to say anything about global warming. Anyway, isn’t the jury still out on that? I’m asking you about the review. I’m a theatre critic and it’s the production that’s on trial. I thought you would understand by now that I have to think of it as a B grade horror movie, not a morality play. The point is I’m expected to get bums on seats, not frighten them away. What do you want? To see me sailing down the river of glorious has-beens?’

‘I was really thinking about us.’

‘In a life and death scramble, there will be no us. Don’t you get it! There will no longer be a place for us.’
Chapter Seven

The horizon is blurred. A glaring autumn morning with the sun simmering behind yesterday’s pollution. The air is oppressive and damp, a drag on the body. Overwhelming listlessness. There is no sea breeze.

What’s the forecast? Now there’s the rub of using my mobile for an alarm. Without the radio there is no forecast. Miss the news, but have no need for the horses, the dogs, or football. No need for talk-back chatter. No need for disasters and political angst. A simple alarm is enough — the rise and fall of the seven note arpeggio. Music with attitude. Could happily sing: I love my mobile phone. I love my mobile phone. I love my mobile phone.’ Advertisers could use me for voice-overs.

‘Hire Zoë,’ they would say. ‘She’s sounds so sincere.’ And Lachlan? God bless his dear-sweet-cotton-picking heart’— he sleeps through it all anyway.

Mustn’t linger. Need to be organised: pack the Mozart; pack the Bartók. Don’t want to arrive at the flat with the wrong music. Do not want a Lucien-sharp barb about being unprepared. Practising at the flat will let me avoid Lachlan’s complaints about the lack of melody in contemporary music. Hallelujah! No more frustration with, ‘If you can’t hum it forget it.’

Defending Bartók will cease. Even yesterday, after two weeks of explaining, he was still complaining.

‘Lachlan, you know Mozart toyed with melodies. You’ve heard Ah! Vous dirai-je, Maman.’

‘What?’

‘Twinkle, twinkle little star.’

‘Yeah, yeah. I know. Lewis Carroll had fun with it, too. Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! How I wonder what you’re at! Up above the world you fly, like a tea-tray in the sky.’

‘That’s not a melody, Lachlan.’
‘But it’s the same principle.’

And pacifying him with flattery didn’t help. ‘Trust you to be able to recite that!’

His patronising, ‘Zoë, that’s what I’m paid to know,’ should have been expected.

‘And likewise.’

Lachlan frowns when he’s challenged. He can’t control it, just as he can’t control
that innocent expression on his face as he sleeps.

Must stop drifting. Focus on the task — mentally organising AC’s flat for
practicing. AC’s bedside lamp should provide sufficient light and the old carpet will
soak up the sound. This flat is like a concrete bunker: prefabricated walls, thin plaster, a
veneer of wood on the floor. Hard surfaces, and resonance in excess.

Practising at AC’s will be a relief — a sense of being able to move fully into the
music rather than being constrained by a forced pianissimo. Will be able to struggle
with the Bartók without inhibition and throw myself into the presto of the fourth
movement of the Mozart.

Still struggling to maintain concentration during the familiar passages. The outside
world keeps drifting in: the flat, the quantity of papers, Lachlan. Lucien is so sensitive
to those inattentive moments. His expectations are so high. Who wants to be humiliated
by his smart comments? He was hateful when he balled Emily out.

‘Emily Chatwin, there is no automatic pilot facility in this orchestra.’

It was so unnecessary. We all know that concentration and attention to detail is
important.

Emily. Thank God, she came into my life. We’re like Siamese twins: joined by
our acceptance into the youth orchestra at the same time, sharing a room during the
summer workshops, practising together. Days of music, nights spent gossiping about the
boys: Sam the percussionist, Toby the double-bass player, Cam the clarinettist. Planning
the after performance party, sharing the girlie world of nail polish and hair colour,
coughing together as we secretly tried smoking. And silently united around our love of
music.

Patrick and Emily are the only ones who understand what it means to be a
musician. And Dad. Sometimes. He did buy me a second cello to use at his house after
he and Mum split because he didn’t want me dragging my cello from house to house by
public transport.
‘Marianne and I simply can’t pick you up,’ he said. ‘Leave your other one at school and your Mother can ferry it between the school and her fancy house in that big tank of hers.’

Mr. Bitterness. And Mother Sarcasm. ‘That was a special Christmas present, Zoë. It seems that your father loves, at least, you very much.’

They were the classic equal timers: Christmas eve and morning with him. Christmas lunch and tea with her. Alternating years. ‘Your parents have always liked their bread sliced evenly.’ Nan said. At least she recognised the cultural shift demanded when moving between them, although she never understood how deeply Geoff’s marriage to Mum split my world when they moved to their lakeside, suburban outpost.

Among the tired furnishings and the books and records lining the walls of Dad’s house my practice took centre stage. ‘Let me hear what you’re practising,’ he would say. It was his interest that supported the discipline of practising and Marianne’s empathy that carried me through the difficulty of juggling a mixture of friends ─ those who played in the orchestra and those who didn’t. At least their single fronted terrace was near public transport and school friends could drop in.

‘Look at it this way,’ Dad said, in his exasperated way when I complained about my split world, ‘at least your mother is happy. I was never able to support your mother’s ambitions. Geoff can.’

And Geoff did. Within months of their marriage everything changed, beginning with a MacMansion-style renovation of the original house on the development. Moving from room to room became a way of life as the soft furnishings were discarded. Every room was stripped: the fireplaces disappeared under sheets of plaster, the cornices and architrave were replaced with simpler styles. Talk of AC’s chattering classes ─ a better word would be clattering, a raucous cacophony echoes from the hard and brittle surfaces of wood, stainless steel, and granite. And no amount of heating gives any sense of comfort to that sparsely furnished house. ‘No knick-knacks, no bric-a-brac and nothing sentimental,’ Mum said to Nan who was to live with them. ‘No ornaments, statements only.’

Upstairs bedrooms ─ stuffy in the stifling summer heat ─ rattling air-conditioners disrupting Nan’s sleep. And mine. There was nothing else to do but sit at the top of the stairs together, Nan tut-tuttering at the nonsense of rebuilding a perfectly good house.

And there was the singular isolation of practising in the front study.
‘You won’t disturb Geoff in there.’ Nan said.

The room had been carpeted to help absorb the sound. My padded cell. That tiny, still-vacant study sitting between the garage and the central ‘portal hall’ — a hall that will open into your new exciting world of designer space — the company rep had said. There was no architect to speak of. It was a standard renovation based on one of their off the plan townhouses called The Parkmoor. Nothing was less like a park, particularly the study. It was a good place for me to be when Mum and Geoff were entertaining Geoff’s friends who came to watch the football. During the summer they opened the wall of folding doors as Geoff entertained on the back patio around the stainless steel BBQ — the ‘Chef’s Kitchen’. And Mum, she started her collection of Italian books on alfresco dining.

*Alfresco* — can see AC writing — in the open air, out of doors; open air as in an alfresco café, of Italian origin. *Alfresco*. It was the only point of similarity in the two households.

Marianne relives her experience of Tuscany in their kitchen and the small courtyard at the back of their house: jardinières filled with kitchen herbs, a wine rack filled with Chianti for summer quaffing and Frascati to accompany her *risotto di peoci*. Passionate to the point of obsessive about seafood — that’s Marianne.

And Dad? He still has only one thing to say about Mum, and it sums up the difference between them: ‘Zoë, let’s be honest here. Your mother suffers from affluenza.’

Biological parents! They’re still impossible. And the step-parents! Selfish and kindly; chalk and cheese.

So peculiar the way my mother’s house was empty of music and my father’s never free of it. But it was in the empty study and the vacant family room, when Geoff and my mother were out of the house, that my old cello came to life. Dad’s generosity in buying me a second instrument was wonderful, but he couldn’t hear the difference between the two, couldn’t understand that it wasn’t only money, that instruments, like a child, have their own character, their own way of speaking to the world, that the sound didn’t only come from me, but from the way we spoke together. In the minimalist grandeur of my mother’s house, in its echoing starkness, the pleasure of playing the cello, of gaining mastery with practice, came to me. If only Lachlan could understand
this. He seems to think that the real work takes place during a performance, as if any performance happens without rehearsals and practice.

Setting a goal, no matter how small, has been worthwhile. Reading her notes from some of the passage bundles and putting them in a folder, that’s the task for today. The bundles are so different — some with cuttings from a single day, others ranging over years. She must have had some sense of the focus of each bundle and where they were located. How else could she have added those more recent cuttings? There’s a hidden sense of order.

Not as many silverfish now. The insect spray must be repelling them or killing them off. There should be a ‘silverfish’ bundle. What would it say?

Silverfish  
a white or silvery goldfish, *Carassius auratus*  
any other various silvery fishes, as the tarpon, or  
shiner  
a food fish of southern African coasts, *Polysteganus argytozona*  
any of certain small, wingless, thysanuran insects (genus *Lepisma*) damaging to books, wallpaper, etc.

These silverfish are the last on the list. Understanding why she devoted herself to these definitions is difficult. There’s no pleasure in it for me, but as Lachlan has always said: ‘You’re like a blind person when it comes to books or writing. You only hear the birds outside. I will never understand why, when you see a shelf of books, you’re not compelled to run your hands over the covers and open them to stroke the pages.’

‘Lachlan, it’s not a matter of understanding. The problem is that you can’t accept that, for me, opening a book is not exciting.’ And my voice rises uncontrollably. ‘And what I don’t understand is why, when I can accept that you can’t distinguish one stringed instrument from another, you can’t accept this.’

‘But that’s different,’ he says. ‘You have a talent, you always have. It’s not just as matter of experience.’

‘I do like books. I just don’t have the time to … to relish them.’ But the truth is, my passion is music.

And what was my aunt’s passion? To explore the meaning of words? Or was she simply locked up in them, lost in a verbal maze, like my maze of music?
Only a dozen or so more bundles in the passage to sort.

*Trajectory.*

This one looks interesting. Mostly magazine pages, a few dates jotted in the right-hand corner, ranging over fifteen years, the most recent only eight months ago. And more war photographs from magazine: WWI, WWII, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War and a war not much is said about, the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The articles both praise and condemn. Her notes open with the word *trajectory:*

*trajectory*

the curve described by a projectile in its flight

Paul arrives like a bower bird with gifts for my nest: a magazine and a word, *affluenza.*

‘It’s not in the dictionary yet,’ Paul says, ‘but it’s hardly new. Two familiar words cleverly joined and recycled. It’s the sort of word that holds us steady, like a glutinous pot-luck stew, blending together the primary ingredients of our *fin de siècle* values.’

‘Sick with wealth,’ I reply. ‘You’ve always understood social trends, seen them clearly in the murky river of life. It is a treat to have someone who appreciates my passion. And how was your day?’

‘Full of glorious retribution and the fearful uncertainty of repercussions.’ I know he’s being rhetorical when he says this, but I also know it’s his way of avoiding his day.

‘Tell me all,’ I say, as he sinks into his chair.

‘Let’s not bother. I want you to look at these photographs,’ he says pointing to the magazine. ‘I think they give strength to your argument that photographs can
never be neutral. These make an excellent case for the importance of angle and light. Look at the cover, then turn to the centre portfolio, the four black and white photographs documenting the effects of war.’

The cover is remarkable. Altogether, there must be four or five bodies forming the overall configuration of a T: one spreads down the page, beneath the magazine’s name, forming the trunk of the T. The body of what appears to be a pregnant woman, her blue and white floral top unnaturally ruched over the top of her swollen belly, lies across the top of the T with a cluster of other bodies in a pool of blood — bright red blood.

‘Do you think the photograph has been enhanced?’ I ask. ‘The turquoise patch on the back of the T-shirt seems too bright. And look at the notebook on the haversack. So red. And so is the blood. Do you think this was taken shortly after they were killed? In most photographs the blood is brown, but here the fluids on the ground are shiny. They are wet because there has been no time for them to evaporate before the photograph was taken.’

‘There is dust on the arms and faces suggesting the bodies have been turned over. See how the protective top of the haversack covers part of the head — was he shot in the head? Those smaller splotches suggest blood has spread out from underneath it.’

The hands of the man spread down into the lower part of the page, leaving space for the bar code in the lower left corner.

‘It all seems too conveniently presented,’ he says.

‘Horribly real, except there’s a feeling that it’s not. The colours are too harmonious and too blue,’ I reply.
‘Aren’t you quibbling about something minor. Surely the point is made. These people have lost their lives, been murdered, killed indiscriminately in the streets, and left,’ Paul says.

How sacred life has become to him. It only takes one untimely death to make the loss of any other repulsive.

I have taken out my photographs of that day at the river. They are inexpensive, Kodak Instamatic snaps taken by my father, but the detail is in focus. When he was driving Maxine and me to the river, I had asked him to take them, wanting to use up the five shots left on the film after the demonstration. And I only wanted the photographs of the demonstration developed so we could blow-up the photograph and make a poster for the Student Union office.

When we arrived at the river, Paul was not there. While I swam, Dad walked. I heard Paul arrive as I neared the far bank, but when I looked back at the swimming hole, he and Maxine were not there.

Dad had no idea of what I had seen. When he returned at the same moment as Maxine and Paul, he simply took the camera from the car and photographed us as requested.

‘Come on, you three. Bunch together. I can’t remember the last time I took a photograph of you two girls together.’

Paul stepped back.

‘No Paul. Come back in. Stand beside Celia. She’s been telling me about the role you played in organising the student arm of the demonstration. Not that I’m on your side. But I do respect those who get involved. Politics always needs young blood. Maxine, stay where you are, next to Celia. That’s right.’
We look so natural in the first photograph, the agitation we were all feeling suppressed by the surprise of the photograph being taken. We are unsmiling, our eyes avoiding the lens, looking above and beyond my father as he took the first shot.

‘One more. To be certain,’ he said. ‘Now smile this time.’

In the second, taken only a few seconds later, there is a subtle but noticeable difference. I am standing slightly in front of Maxine and Paul, and hidden from me, they are looking at each other. Clearly, something is being shared.

‘I would never read that into the photograph.’ The voice of my father was serious when he said that some weeks later. ‘I agree that the expressions on their faces are different, but they are not necessarily looking at each other. They could both have been looking at you.’

Unlikely. Why would they be looking at the side or back of my head? At least in the photograph the tree in the background is in focus. Perhaps that’s the problem. The photograph invokes pain.

It’s quite unlike those in the magazine in which the simple act of measuring a malnourished child, or a cluster of bodies, becomes transformed through light and colour into a tragedy that demands action.

‘You take it too much to heart. See. You have been moved,’ Paul says. ‘Don’t tell me that isn’t the intention.’ I look suspiciously for the name of a sponsor, but there is none, only a brief by-line stating the number of deaths, the number suffering from malnutrition, the lack of access to care.

Paul has left, leaving the magazine behind. I cut the pages as closely as I can to the staple line, bind them with sticky tape so the images once more take up a double page, note the date. They are different from the one on the cover, more
controlled. The lighting builds depth, establishes a certain mystery, the human form looks rendered in the sense of being built, architectural within the narrative construction. Yes, the subjects are naïve, but the subject is packaged.

to package

- to put into wrappings or a container
- to combine as a single unit
- to organise the financing and production of a book, film, etc for a publisher or producer

But my new dictionary has some additional meanings.

- to promote or present somebody or something to others in a way intended to ensure appeal or acceptance

In every war there is an underbelly. If one had to choose four photographs to represent it, these package the underbelly without question. What is it that makes their message unambiguous and my photographs, those taken on that day at the river, unconvincing? Is it the lighting, the authority of the magazine, the context, the text that goes with them? Why wasn’t my story believed? Was the failure of my story simply a question of packaging?

Once a story takes flight it is difficult to control its trajectory. It carves a path of its own, predetermined by the initial throw, vulnerable to the wind, but finally, and inevitably it reaches the ground exhausted. Has Maxine’s story exhausted itself yet?

Beyond the window. The deciduous trees are turning, a shimmering gold, especially the poplars. The eucalypts are a leathery, olive green. The dip of oars in the water as the boys train for the boat race speaks of an imported heritage that overlays the indigenous landscape of the riverbank. Paul would tell me to stop dreaming.
‘For God’s sake, Celia, you’ve wrapped yourself up in a cocoon of self-
indulgence. Break out of the chrysalis. Go take some photographs of your own.
Sponsor a child if you’re worried. Anything but this sentimental navel gazing
you indulge in.’

He can be so harsh.

Trajectories. Can see her point. Reading these papers is an imposed trajectory —
self imposed or inherited — either way, it’s exhausting me. Want to toss the lot. Clean
out the flat and start fresh, but can’t discard this sense of moral obligation to not discard
her, to know something more of her story.

If my grandfather took the photographs she’s writing about, he must know
something. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other. Not since AC’s funeral. That
lazy excuse of him living too far away is well worn even though it’s only a forty minute
drive.

Why not visit now? Yes, but ring first. Damn. Don’t have his number on my
mobile. Thank God AC was old fashioned enough to have telephone books. Here he is
— T. M. Paine.

He’s always been sidelined by Mum and Nan as the indecisive dreamer. Nan
claims the moral high ground whenever she discusses their divorce, blaming his selfish
passion for record collecting as the cause. And Mum supports her.

‘It was, and is, a complete waste of money. Those records, and CDs, took
precedence over anything Nan had to say or wanted to do. He stopped listening to her
and locked himself up with them.’

Was AC like him, a collector?

‘Pops, it’s Zoë.’

‘Hello stranger. What can I do for you?’

‘I was wondering whether you were going to be home this afternoon. I thought I
might drive out.’

‘I’m always home for you. Will you stay for tea?’

‘Afternoon tea, but I have to leave shortly afterwards.’
‘Good. It will give me an excuse to buy something special. So when will you be here?’

‘I’m going to practise for an hour then leave.’

‘What are you working on?’

‘Mozart, the Haffner, and Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra.’

‘You must love your conductor.’

‘Yes. It’s inevitable. Didn’t you know? But it is an interesting program. Would you like to come? I can get tickets.’

‘Maybe. We’ll talk about it, and I’ll have a little fossick among my collection to see what I have. See you around 4.30.’

The unit looks much as it did on my last visit. His simple uncluttered approach to life pervades everything. And he is so generous and warm. His unit has always felt safe. It’s so seventies; double fronted brick veneer, white wooden framed windows with small panels, more Nan’s style than his — quite feminine — but he bought it for the large living room, and the easy garden — azaleas surrounding the neat grass lawn, the beds edged with a roll of concrete to separate them from the grass.

The Venetian blinds are open, he’s at the window waiting, waving back now as my shoes clip-clop on the concrete path.

‘Come in, come in.’

He hugs me as always and holds both my hands as he says, ‘Let me look at you.’ The compliment that follows is always the same, ‘My grandchild was always going to be special. And so you are.’

‘Thanks Pops, and you look wonderful too.’

‘I’m doing well, like an old cheese. Beyond the age of improvement, but gaining a little depth with maturity. Now, come and see. I found six recordings that might interest you.’

His living room is unchanged: sea-green walls, gas heater beneath an empty mantelpiece, dark grey bouclé carpet, dark blue velvet curtains each side of the blinds — both beneath a ribbed pelmet — and two large armchairs with a teak coffee table in between at the window end of the room, and facing them, on the opposite wall, two large B&W speakers and behind them his collection of LPs, CDs and DVDs — his raison d’être — but the centre section looks different.
‘What have you done, Pops. Something looks different.’

‘New shelves and a plasma screen.’ The shelves have been extended onto the adjacent walls and house his CDs. ‘The plasma screen just fits into the space where the TV sat and now all my equipment fits underneath.’

‘Pops, you’re right up to date.’

‘You bet,’ he says. ‘New DVD and CD player. I tried to cull the collection, but couldn’t. A young local man built the shelves. You might consider using him if you need to have anything done at that flat. Are you thinking of living there?’ So even my grandfather is capable of fishing for information.

‘I’m not sure what I’m going to do yet, Pops.’

‘Come on,’ he says, leading the way to the kitchen.

He’s shorter. His shoulders are lower than mine, more folded over, his hair whiter, his walk more stilted. In his kitchen, a sense of déjà-vu sweeps over me: his obsessive tidiness is not totally unfamiliar.

‘So, how’s that young man of yours? Lachlan, isn’t it? I see his name in the paper quite often. I suppose you’re arguing about which flat to sell.’

So he’s not going to let it drop.

‘Not really.’

‘He doesn’t want to sell?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You don’t think so. Something’s up. Tell me.’

‘He doesn’t want to have children.’

‘That’s a hard one. How old is he?’

‘Thirty-nine.’

‘And you’re thirty. That makes it difficult for you.’

‘I know.’

‘Tea or coffee.’

‘Tea, thanks.’

‘And you’ve got all that stuff of Celia’s to dispose of. Quite hard work I suppose.’

‘Time consuming.’

‘Yes. She was always obsessive, our Celia. Family trait. Took after me. Even as a young girl she couldn’t let go of things.’

‘Her flat is full of papers.’
‘I know.’

‘You’ve been there?’

‘Several times in the few months before she died.’

‘It never occurred to me that you might visit her.’

‘Why not?’

‘I thought nobody saw her.’

‘You don’t want to believe everything your grandmother says.’

‘Then tell me about Paul. Who is Paul? She keeps writing about him.’

‘Zoë, this is a very difficult thing to say to you, but it’s better that you leave things as they are. I knew Paul.’

‘I know that. You introduced them on Anzac Day.’

‘Yes, he was the son of a friend. He liked jazz. I took them both to see Jazz on a Summer’s Day, but I didn’t know him well and I wouldn’t want to pass judgement on him. I’ve always tried to be truthful to what I saw and knew.’

‘Which is?’

‘That he was interested in politics, in protesting against the Vietnam war, but I’m not prepared to say more than that.’

‘But my aunt writes about the two of them, incessantly. It’s as if they’re the key to some sort of mystery.’

‘I don’t know. I never understood those bundles. All that writing. She wouldn’t let the past go, she was obsessed by it. You know that obsession can be a sort of illness.’

‘Not if you’re a musician. You have to be obsessive to get anywhere. And what about you?’

‘Don’t be silly. It’s quite different.’

‘Is it? Is it really Pops?’

‘I thought I understood things once, but I didn’t and don’t think I ever will.’

He’s pulling tissues from the box on the windowsill and dabbing at the tears in his eyes. He hasn’t given me any answers, but it would be cruel to continue.

‘I’m sorry Pops. I didn’t mean to hurt you. You must have been very upset when she died.’

He pats my arm in a forgiving way.

‘It’s all right. She was always my girl. She liked music you see. I have some early photographs of her learning the cello. Would you like to see them?’
‘She learnt the cello!’ This is so weird, uncomfortably so. Zoë the clone, the replacement daughter? The replacement sister?

‘Pops, I’m really confused. When did she learn the cello?’

‘Until she was seventeen. But she gave it up when she went to university. She was more interested in politics.’

‘So was the seven-eights cello I was given when I was thirteen hers?’

‘I believe so.’

‘That’s sick. It’s off. I feel completely manipulated.’

‘Zoë, Zoë, calm down. No one asked you to play the cello. Your father had asked you to think about choosing an instrument, never thinking you would choose the cello, but you came for lunch one Sunday with your parents when I had just put on Beethoven’s Cello Sonata No 4 in C and you said, “That’s what I want to play, an instrument that has a deep voice like that”. Your mother and father were shocked. I will never forget. You were only seven and your father had already put a deposit on a piano because he believed children should learn to play more than one note at a time. And your mother was furious, as you can imagine. But you stood your ground. “You asked me to choose,” you said. No one could argue with that. It might help you to know Zoë that my Celia did not play well. I loved music and she played to please me, but she simply never had your talent. And there was always something you understood about music, or heard in it, that we didn’t. And still don’t.’

Lachlan’s home. Stretched out on the couch, book on his chest, paper open at the article about the London bombing hero. Celia would ask whether the radio report of a car bomb killing sixty in Bagdad is in there as well.

‘Hi. I didn’t expect to see you until after eleven.’

‘I came straight home after the play. You’re laden down. What did your Pops give you this time?’

‘More CDs and a photograph of my aunt playing the cello. She learnt too. Can you believe that?’

‘At this rate you’ll end up with all his collection, although I have no idea where you will house it. There’s no space left in the cupboard.’

At least he didn’t say, ‘not here’. And he made no comment about AC learning the cello. And that’s the disconnection that exists between us. We slide around each other
like Chinese exercise balls in the palm of the hand, struggling to maintain a balanced ringing centre. Pops was right to focus on our age difference. He’s not going to change.

‘How was the play?’

‘Mediocre — the play, that is. The performances held it together, but I feel sorry for any playwright when Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* opens in the same week. Everything else pales into insignificance. Nothing like a little socialist realism to put things into perspective.’

Suddenly everything that felt comfortable feels superfluous. The down lights make the room feel hollow and the reflection of us in the expanse of glass overlooking the bay floats us in the dark hole of the sky outside, in an ungrounded world where playing the cello seems like nothing more than a fantastic decorative art. Is this my life? Is it life?

‘So let’s see this infamous aunt of yours.’

‘Black and white. Taken when she was sixteen.’

‘I can see a family resemblance. Something about the forehead.’

‘Yes. Don’t you think it’s odd she learnt the cello?’

‘Maybe. Who encouraged you to play?’

‘No one. In fact, nobody wanted me to.’

‘Well there’s the answer. Nothing’s more delicious than forbidden fruit.’

Now, that’s food for thought. They say a child of four already knows the politics of the family inside out. ‘Pops said I liked the sound. He took AC to see *Jazz on a Summer’ Day*.’

‘So he’s to blame for our pleasure.’

‘H’m. Good book?’

‘It’s a classic, but I’m doubtful about its quality. The first weakness I recognise in a book is the inclusion of material that makes the reader feel consistently uncomfortable, and this one tosses the reader from pillar to post with his main character’s usurious passion.’

‘I thought that’s what books were supposed to do, make you feel and question things.’

‘I don’t mind feeling anger or the disquiet of moral corruption, even the sadness of death, the passion of love, but the heated sensation of anticipated sex, that sick
indulgence in gory post-mortems, gratuitous description, the pleasure of sadistic revenge, plots that make you want to read the ending? Hardly.’

‘Seems to me you want to slice off half of life.’

‘For someone who hardly reads a book, let alone real literature, that’s taking a mighty stand.’

‘And just what in the fuck do you mean by that?’

‘You’re really foul mouthed tonight, aren’t you?’

God. He’s attacking me as an escape route. ‘Why don’t you stay with the issue instead of collapsing it into my style of argument, but then that’s what you’re really about isn’t it, style.’

‘At least I live in the real world.’

‘And what does that mean?’

‘I mean that I don’t spend all day playing music that no one listens to anymore.’

‘You listen to it.’

‘Sometimes.’

‘You can’t talk, Lachlan. What would you do without the nineteenth century? You’re always saying it was the last century to produce anything worthwhile reading, listening to or looking at. Balzac, Mendelssohn and Manet. Strong linear narratives, clearly defined melodies and histories and landscapes you can recognise. Anything else is rubbish. I don’t know how on earth I mistook your passion for the nineteenth century as a deep appreciation of the arts.’

‘Well. Thank you Miss Sweet and Nice. On that little note I think I’ll go to bed. And don’t join me. It might be better if you slept on the couch.’
Chapter Eight

Waking on the couch at dawn. The blanket grey sky casting a winter pall over the flat. Dawn struggling behind a gauze of rain. The horizon hidden. His skin sallow and lifeless in the grey light. The warm bed no longer seductive.

Nothing will entice me back into that space. HIS bed. Not OURS. Or was it ever ours? And he sleeps the sleep of the dead. Thank God. It will be difficult to bundle up my toiletries without being noisy.

Do NOT want to disturb him. Could NOT stand listening to his rationalisations about his past relationship and how — if we look closely at the details — it’s not the same as ours.

Cannot believe the way he swanned into the living room at 3.00 a.m. and wanted to make love. And he had the cheek to bring out a condom. A condom!

And his stance! Those thick ankles and calves propped there as if nothing would budge them and me in my nakedness, vulnerable, arms clasped defensively around the cello case in the middle of the room saying,

‘What in the hell is going on?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘What is that in your hand?’
‘I don’t want any accidents.’
‘Accidents? I’ve been on the pill for four years. Why should it fail now?’

He folds his arms defensively across his chest, his face is flushed, his embarrassed, silence telling.

‘Lachlan, why on earth would I want to force a child onto someone who would resent it? What makes you think I would do that?’

He turns away and looks out of the window and mutters, ‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing! Or is it someone else? Is this why you broke up with Julia? Did she fall pregnant?’
'I made it quite clear that I was in no position to support a child, but the stupid … woman thought she knew better.'

'Say no more.' In the silence between 'stupid’ and ‘woman’ echoes the lack of respect he has for women in general.

'She subsequently miscarried and I left.'

'That was a rotten thing to do. Did you tell her that you didn’t want children, or were you still making up your mind?'

'That’s got nothing to do with us.'

'Hasn’t it? Did you lead her on, too, as her biological clock ticked away?'

'Just stop it. Julia and I split up eight years ago. She knew I had no steady work, only the odd review, and she chose to deceive me.'

'That is the issue, isn’t? Only you’re the one who’s deceived me.’

'I’ve never lied to you.’

'No. You just led me one. You said, let’s just wait until we can afford a house, and now that we can, you don’t want to. What’s the difference?'

His silence was almost satisfying.

'Zoë, listen … I … .'

'No, Lachlan. Not tonight, and I won’t tomorrow.’ By questioning my integrity, he attacked the core of me.

Even in a break-up, my cello was my defence. Somehow my arms had found my way around it. It is my crutch, my salvation, that sonorous construction of wood and string.

Right, toiletries are packed, now clothes: performance dress, underwear, jeans, tops, performance and boat shoes. The two bags can be dropped at the flat on my way to rehearsal and the rest tomorrow when he’s teaching at the regional campus.

Have never, ever been late to rehearsal before. Have been sick only once and was able to telephone about that. But late! Traffic unbelievable ─ one accident in the tunnel and the city gridlocks. Headache ─ also beyond belief. Thank God there’s parking available on the adjacent building site. Empty city blocks becoming few now. The frenzy of affluenza.
Silence from the rehearsal room. At least there’s a pause, or perhaps they’re between movements. Of course all the heads turn with my entry, but even for a late prima donna, there’s no welcome mat.

‘Zoë, you’re late,’ Lucien says. My heart flips twice and there’s a general lowering of the eyes among the orchestra as my boots beat out my arrival on the floor. ‘Make sure you see me after the rehearsal.’ Patrick’s eyebrows arch and he winks, but there are no smiles when panic takes over. Lucien is waiting for me to unpack my music and the impatience of the whole orchestra falls on me.

‘Zoë, Andante non troppo. Ready?’ They are waiting for me.

The music is already on the stand. Be calm. Be alert. Watch Lucien. His mastery over this piece is extraordinary and it all emanates from his baton, his small hand gestures, his body. His baton is paused, ready to take us beyond the ‘dots’ on the page.

The stillness of the orchestra is electric.

Lucien waits, then breaks the silence with, ‘Strings. The contrast between the viola and the cello lines is not strong enough. Zoë, you’re playing like a puppet. Ready everyone? Bar 56, and ….’

Concentrate.

We have been on an extraordinary journey which has left us exhausted. The silence at the end leaves us in awe of Lucien’s vision, but it breaks when Patrick starts tapping his bow on his music stand. This is an accolade reserved for visiting artists but the orchestra joins in, wanting Lucien to know how much we appreciate his leadership.

Music is like a map of a new city, something to be dependent on as it becomes familiar, the streets, the arcades and the laneways are marked, but the real exploration and discovery of the hidden nuances comes with the playing. This performance has taken me into the depths of the despair Bartók must have felt fleeing war-torn Europe, being separated and alienated from his country to which he wanted to return.

Lucien leaves. Clearly, it’s my task to follow. Emily winks and Patrick crosses his fingers for good luck. He’s waiting in the passage.

‘Zoë, it’s not like you to be late.’

‘I know.’ Trying to follow Patrick’s advice to Emily: remain calm, don’t blub, and don’t do the ‘domestic explanation’.

‘In your position, setting a good example is expected.’
‘Yes, I do know. It won’t happen again.’

‘Good. Now you didn’t hear the announcement. The winter repertoire, as you know, includes a commissioned work by Russell Yardley. It’s two months away, but we’ve decided to run a weekend workshop on some of the new techniques being demanded, not only by his work, but by other contemporary composers. I want everyone to come, but particularly you. There is a short solo passage for cello and I think, given the extra training, you would play it very well. It means freeing up the last week in June. Can I count on you?’

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘I thought so. You can pick the music up at the desk,’ he says, patting me on the shoulder as he moves away.

Instead of being scolded, I’m praised. Hallelujah! But the last twenty-four hours have been overwhelming. Tears are falling.

Patrick and Emily are suddenly at my side.

‘Are you all right? What happened?’

‘It’s okay. I’m fine. I need a coffee. Come with me and I’ll fill you in.’

‘Look, I can’t,’ says Emily. ‘I’ll call you later.’

‘Come with me,’ says Patrick.

Thank God for Patrick and the coffee break. This tête-a-tête might save me.

‘What’s going on, Zoë? You never miss a beat,’ he says as soon as we sit down.

‘Stuff.’

‘Stuff. Would that be Lachlan stuff?’

‘Yes and no. I’m beginning to have a problem with his values. We want different things and, in spite of his glass window, the walls of his flat are closing in. Suddenly I’m scared to move in case I scratch something. I’m fed up with my cello sitting in the middle of the room like a work of art – which it is, but not in that way. Fed up with having to pack my music and stand away knowing that it will be needed again two hours later. You know him. Everything’s so precious. He’s always been obsessive, but now he’s being obstructive.’

‘Zoë, is he really over the top?’

‘And how.’
‘He sounds nervous. Perhaps he’s worried that you’re going to leave.’

‘That’s why I was late. I packed the basics this morning, dumped them at the flat and was caught in traffic. The flat is so dark … I need some help replacing the bulbs with some stronger ones.’

‘Is that a hint?’

‘Sort of. It’s also the tired paint, and the papers. All the energy seems to be stuck in the passage. And, I have a migraine coming on.’

‘What will you do?’

‘Take a pain killer, you idiot.’

‘You’ll probably go back tomorrow, but a change won’t hurt you and it will give him a chance to think things through.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Are you nervous about being in the flat alone?’

‘Yes. But, I’ll be fine.’

‘I could stay with you.’

‘Patrick. It’s very kind, but only one person can get used to sleeping by themselves and in this case, it has to be me.’

‘What are you doing now?’

‘Going back to the flat to clean out the wardrobe. I need the space.’

‘That sounds like a long term plan.’

‘I don’t want to go into the details, but he’s done something unforgivable.’

‘Right. I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Don’t be. I’m beginning to think it was inevitable. Inheriting the flat only fast-forwarded it.’

‘Right. I’m teaching later, so I’ll see you in a couple of days.’

The passage is lighter. Can’t understand it. Ah! The late afternoon sun is streaming in because the blinds are up. Might start by taking them down. They are so old and cracked. Brown — or were they cream? Holland blinds. Home decorating was not her forté. The curtains, too, full of dust — will ditch them. God. The room’s a storm of dust motes.

A strategy is needed to make it liveable: discard everything not wanted and dump all on the balcony. Not the papers — damp they will be impossible to manage. No.
Restack them in the second bedroom along with her computer, printer and DVDs. That will make room for my CDs, stereo player and folios of music in the living room. The living room’s a good room, a good size. One of those free standing halogen lamps with a bowl that faces the ceiling and a flexible arm that can be directed towards my music would help.

Can start by emptying out the wardrobe in the second room. It’s jam-packed with clothes, as if nothing was ever thrown out. Can you read a person through their clothes? The palette is autumnal: skirts, slacks and jackets, a beige raincoat with a check, removable winter lining. Flat shoes, mostly black. Her feet were larger than mine; a size eight or nine. Practical. Nothing to keep among them except the plum woollen jacket. The price tag is still attached. It’s very ‘this season’; the open weave, crochet-style reveres falling away from a large safety pin. On the shelf above the hanging space, again among the tired handbags, a dark red, back-pack style bag, price marked down from $900.00 to $450.00 ─ expensive ─ made of what looks like crocodile skin. A ‘Jane Bannington’! And it’s large enough to hold my music and it would look fantastic over my black jacket, or my denim. Really useful. And the raincoat? Too long. Even shortened it would be like wearing someone else’s personality. No. Into the bag for the Salvation Army ─ pass the better clothes on.

Five plastic bags full. The room still reeks of stale body odour. Open the windows. Vacuum again, particularly the wardrobe and carpet.

Now for the unread bundles of papers. Into the wardrobe? No. That’s a good place for the sorted material. Okay. Only seventeen bundles left. Stacking them between the wardrobe and the wall will leave the room looking less cluttered. That leaves moving the computer, printer and all the dictionaries from her desk onto the small table.

The late afternoon sun is throwing dappled shadows across the walls. Clearing the desk has opened up the space. Felt more relaxed when practising the Bartók. Can understand why Lucien organised a workshop for the Yardley, it is complex, difficult, but the music is on the stand ready for me to return to, tonight, tomorrow. Whenever.

Time to start on her bedroom. The hanging space in the wardrobe is almost empty, the space stacked with videos. Not surprising given that the television and video player are on top of the corner cabinet between the windows. Although there’s only a video player. The videos can be stored in the other wardrobe for the moment. Being up to date
with new technologies contradicts everything else. Can’t help thinking of her watching *Jazz on a Summer’s Day* and what she might have worn. Would she have been a sophisticate in a full skirt with dark glasses? The intoxicated girl in jeans dancing on the roof? The young woman in pedal-pushers with her feet up on the chair?

There are four drawers in the wardrobe and they all speak of middle age: tired underwear — beige full-cupped brassieres, elasticized briefs, greying spencers, thick stockings and black knee high socks. All fatigued. Two bags of rags. On the top shelf, a large backpack — can use that to pack the remainder of my clothes in — and an extra pillow — old and stained. Bin it.

The bed needs changing, not that it will help me sleep. It seems so final to remove the linen from her bed. It makes my hands feel dirty, but necessity rules. There is no kitchen, bedroom, living room or bathroom fairy in this house. Her bedding is so worn: the elastic corners are stretched, the edges partially detached and frayed — more household waste. Ditto the under-blanket. It’s all too personal and too close … again, there is lingering smell of … is it simply the human body? No, it’s something else.

There are new sheets in the hall cupboard. And here’s the answer. The linen smells of sandalwood. There’s a packet of incense pinned inside the door — Vishnu swirling up into the sky in pink and aqua plumes of smoke. The creases in the sheets are deep, pressed in. Quite like the idea of creases in the sheets, pillow cases that look crisp, a feather duvet that looks plumped instead of flattened. The bed feels narrow because it’s only a double. The mattress is a little hard and unyielding. The pillows on the bed are cleaner than the spare one, but still too hard. A new abode deserves new bedding — a feather duvet cover and European pillows. Perhaps, even some cushions. Why not? Even Lachlan has two on his bed.

His bed! Within those words lies the truth. The bed was his. And from now on, it will be *his* flat and *mine*.

Proprietary. That’s my new ‘habitus’. What does AC’s dictionary say? Pertaining to property or ownership. Our relationship is now redefined. It’s no longer love that sits between us, but bricks, mortar and the bed.

‘Self definition comes with ownership.’ Patrick said when told about my inheritance. Was that insight or nastiness? Which ever, he was right. With the removal of the blinds and curtains and with my CDs on the shelf, Patrick’s prophecy will start to be fulfilled.
And will the space define me, or will it become mine?

‘You must paint and cleanse,’ Emily said, when she shoved her essential oil, Harmony, along with a burner and candles into my bag. ‘You must remove all the traces.’ Traces of what? AC lived here, although all traces of her presence may be removed, she still lived here. The flat does feel less claustrophobic, but the very sparseness of the furnishing … having to adjust to being alone at night … being on my own again ...

Stop. Breathe. ‘Have some herbal tea,’ Emily would say.
And sort another bundle.

to track

  to follow up or pursue the tracks, traces, or footprints of
  to hunt by following the tracks of
  to follow the course of, as by radar
  to catch or find, after pursuit, or searching
  to follow
  to keep a target-locating instrument or weapon pointing
    continuously at a moving target

My glasses needed adjusting, their arms had become a little loose because of my bad habit of slipping them onto my head. The optician occupies the lower space in a two-tiered shop, a café the upper tier. After leaving them to be adjusted, I ordered a coffee and sat on a stool overlooking the optician’s work and till area. As I was looking at the computer screen, discretely tucked away from the customer’s sight in the corner, I realised that the image on the screen was of the shop. The display area was under surveillance — I had noticed a small sign warning the customer of this — but it hadn’t registered that my recent request was going to be video-taped.

‘You are so naïve,’ Paul said. ‘The London bombing showed us that we are all performers on the big screen. Orwell’s Big Brother exists. We are the living subjects of a global Reality TV program, only we don’t recognise it as a show
because it’s never presented in a coherent way. No one locks us up for ninety
days to see how banal we can be. But there we are, going through our daily
routines, working, shopping, catching the train, having our glasses repaired
and all the while aerial photographs are being taken, surveillance cameras film
us in stores, tracking devices send data about selected people and missile sites,
our movements can be monitored at night, and we mustn’t forget all those
satellite dishes tracking satellites for other countries, twenty-four hours a day,
and bringing us international reports and live sporting programs. We are living
a very global life, subjects and objects living in a slipstream of terror.’

It is a shock to realise that the world she lived in bears little resemblance to mine.
My life is devoted to music, to training a body to feel, to disciplining the body in time
and space, to listening to the spaces between each note, as Lucien says, because they are
more important than anything else.

AC was so occupied with the visual, with the political, the nuances of a change in
expression, with the tiniest trace of a smile, with the observed. Is Lachlan right? Are we
both living nineteenth century lives? Most of his work revolves around drama,
reviewing plays watched by our senior citizens, while younger people are watching
films, television and listening to popular music.

Are we nothing more than the fading glimmers in the tail of a dying age? Is this
anachronistic life the core of our compatibility? AC makes me feel out of touch. She
exhausts me. I don’t want to think anymore. Just need to sleep. Dinner with Mum
tomorrow night will have to be cancelled.

‘Zoë, darling, I’m sorry to have put pressure on you to come,’ she is saying as she
welcomes me at the door, ‘but Geoff has gone to so much trouble. He started preparing
the marinade for the lamb yesterday. It was bad enough that Lachlan cancelled at the
last minute, let alone being left with two meals uneaten. Nan’s made a tiramisu to die
for — and thank God because it kept her out of my hair for a few hours. Anyway, what
on earth are you doing to make you so tired, still mucking about with those papers? You
rang from that flat didn’t you? I think, and your grandmother for once agrees with me,
that sorting those dirty piles of insect ridden papers is a complete waste of your time.
How can you bear touching all those chewed up ramblings?’
Mirror, mirror on the wall
Who’s the most difficult of them all?
Migraine, migraine in the head
Why can’t I go home to bed?
‘Zoë, darling, I don’t think you heard a word I said. Come on. Buck up. What can I get you to drink?’
‘I’d love a glass of red.’
‘Not white?’
‘No thanks. Red.’
‘But Geoff bought this magnificent Sauvignon Blanc for Lachlan to try. You must have a glass. At least you’ll be able to tell him what it was like.’
‘Are you sure my palette would do it justice?’
‘Well, see how you go,’ she says.
Did she miss the irony or deliberately ignore it? Whatever, she was always going to serve the glass of white wine she’s passing me now.
‘Geoff was so disappointed Lachlan couldn’t come. He really enjoys talking to him about wine. What was the name of the play he’s reviewing?’ She not going to let it go and she’s already had enough wine to release that bright and chirpy voice she uses when stressed. Geoff must have given her a very hard time. And Nan hasn’t appeared yet.
‘Mum, I told you. Something at the Playbox. Where’s Nan?’
‘Resting. Don’t go up. She has a headache.’
‘Well, Zoë, you need to know, that Geoff looked up the paper and there’s nothing on at the Playbox tonight. So either he’s lying or you are.’
Shit. Bloody Geoff.
‘Look. I’m sorry Lachlan’s not here, but he and I had a huge fight last night and I’m staying at the flat for a couple of days. I don’t want to see or speak to him and I certainly wasn’t going to trot him around here and pretend everything was fine.’
‘That’s just what Nan said.’
‘Mum, I don’t want to talk about it.’
‘I can’t begin to tell you how furious Geoff is.’
‘Why? So there’s a little food left over. You’ll eat it tomorrow.’
‘That’s not the point.’
‘Oh, for God’s sake mum, what is?’
‘He likes Lachlan’s company, having a man to talk to.’
‘Mum! I have moved out of his flat. We are probably going to break-up, so he might have to get used to it.’
‘I don’t understand you. If you’d been smart you would have forgotten to take the pill. He would have come round.’
‘Mum, it’s not that simple.’
‘No. You’re the one who makes it complicated. You’re too honest. Everything has to have a principle behind it. No wonder you’re interested in Celia’s papers. She was just like that. Always more concerned with principles than getting on with life.’
‘Are you talking about the fight you had?’
‘She was the one who was so high and mighty, who moved flats and didn’t tell us where she was. She broke Nan’s heart.’
Geoff’s standing at the door.
‘Hello Zoë. What’s going on here?’
‘Hi.’
‘Upsetting your mother again, are you? It was bad enough that you tried to cancel at the last minute, but you’ve only been here ten minutes and she’s already in tears.’
God, my head’s pulsating.
‘Geoff, I was only saying that Lachlan and I are probably going to break-up.’
‘You’re thirty now, Zoë. Don’t you think it’s time you sorted these things out by yourself?’
‘Geoff, don’t be ridiculous,’ my mother snaps. ‘Zoë’s my daughter. Of course she tells me these things.’
‘Then do it somewhere else. I don’t want these sorts of upsets in my house.’
His house. His house? She paid for it.
‘Mum, I have the most dreadful migraine, which was why I called in the first place, I’m going back to the flat.’
‘Zoë, please don’t go,’ she says. ‘What will we do with all this food?’
‘Perhaps you could freeze it, Mum. Geoff is such a wonderful cook and we wouldn’t want any of it to be wasted, would we?’ Geoff, too, has a shortfall when it
comes to irony and preens with the flattery, as expected. ‘Mum, give my love to Nan. I’ll call you tomorrow.’

The bird calls coming from the river at night are quite unlike those of the seagulls. Almost every sound is new. Strange. And to relinquish myself to sleep is impossible.

The rhythm of the traffic as it ebbs and flows around the traffic lights is intrusive as it stops and starts. Harsh sounds; blaring horns, grumbling trams and screeching brakes. Can’t help but imagine a car braking as it reached the bend where she was killed. She was the fourth hit and run in that month. Pops was the only one determined to know the truth and very distressed by the delay in finding the driver.

‘I’m not going to see my daughter’s life swept away like that.’

His persistence, and offer of a reward, was telling in the silence of my mother and Nan. His unexpected defence of her life at her funeral, his praise of her resilience, it seems so obvious now that he must have been in touch with her. But, he’d always refused to be caught up in Nan’s outbursts and attacks. He created his own retreat. Portrait of a grandfather: a man with a paper tucked under his arm ready for the quiet sit. AC’s photographs on the passage wall, the five black and white studies of tree trunks with their roots firmly planted in the ground, remind me of him.

AC’s bedroom is a very foreign space: the street light throwing lacy shadows of the peppercorn, the pattern intricate and soft. Resisting the compulsion to call Lachlan. He’ll just be coming home. He will be reflected in the glass window as he opens my note and thinks about my words. Hopefully it will put him off writing his review for a minute or two — doubt that it would be more — and he will be pouring himself a glass of red wine and sitting mulling over his notes in his sparkling glass house. And me?

My clothes are in a bundle on the floor, and my stomach is stuffed with a Big Mac. Only my cello has dignity as it stands centre stage in the living room next to the music stand. But my music is ready — the first performance of the Bartók will be on Saturday.

Feeling extremely brittle, like the thin shelled crab tossed among the flotsam on the beach — detached like its severed claws. A protective shell is needed to ward off the demon of loneliness. And a bottle of wine — another thing for my list — preferably red.

Tears are inevitable. The condensation of feeling, the residue of dampened spirits, the saturated weight of sadness. Jazz on a Summer’s Day. That’s a good place to lay the
blame ─ watching the video with Lachlan. That Sunday was pivotal: the sepia interior of the boarding house, that sense of identifying with Nat Gershman, of being within that evocative haunting sound of the cello, of recognising that it wasn’t his performance that was all important but his being within the act of playing itself. Not that my awareness of this was new, but the immediate mirroring was important. Hearing and seeing him play allowed me to see my own playing, to understand my need to fight with Lachlan, and the reason for not giving in. Bert Stern, should I thank you as the director or curse you?

Curse.

That’s one of my mother’s words. ‘That flat will prove to be a curse. Just you wait and see. You will curse the day you inherited it.’

But it’s Geoff who’s the curse. The longer she’s with him, the more she slides into morbid dependency. The diminishment. It serves no good purpose to think about them.

Damn it. It’s exactly that sort of mental slide over which we seem to have no control. To segue. That’s one of words scribbled across one of AC’s bundles.

Definition? Moving smoothly, making an almost imperceptible transition from one state, or situation, or subject to another. And the familiar one — meaning, musically, that the next section or movement should be played without a break, even without missing a beat.

How does one segue from a meeting with my mother into anything but misery?

Beginning to understand the way memories overtake me. Those practice routines in my mother’s house were a two edged sword, a vacillation between discipline and epiphanies. And at each departure from her house the same old feeling of my love of playing being subservient to her interpretation of what it means to play overwhelms me. And it’s not only music — it seems to be my life.

The street light is playing hide and seek through the shifting lace of the peppercorn. And high in the tree, out on the far end of a branch, my fear hovers in the possibility of the branch breaking. The tree trunk’s dark anonymity is ominous It’s the light that lets us see. In Jazz on a Summer’s Day as the sea washes against the boats, as the light glistens and dances on the water, the music slowly occupies the body and takes over. It’s so evocative. On the big screen, it would have been totally consuming. Can we ever separate ourselves from such an experience?

Only at night, when the darkness draws in and we sleep, can we make sense of the invasion that has taken place.
And fear has invaded me. Bloody scared. The front door is locked but the random cries of those birds are unsettling. The waves and wind swallowed all at Lachlan’s flat.

Must be brave. Repeat the mantra. *This is your choice. It’s for your own good.*

And be sensible.

Place the mobile on the bedside table. Turn off the sound. Connect it to the charger.

Good — the light is flashing. Contact with someone is within hand’s reach.
Chapter Nine

It’s been raining. Above the dripping peppercorn a patch of blue sky. Clouds passing like teletext across the bottom of a screen. It’s a cryptic language of wind and vapour that’s denying the possibility of predicting the day.

The carpet is soft underfoot, warm unlike Lachlan’s polished wooden floors. The furnishings speak of a fatigued spirit: the worn seventies chairs — Berber, brown, coarse and rough to the touch. Now that the bundles are stacked out of the way, the dilapidated state of everything is evident.

Even the views from the flat encourage a turning inwards. The northern and southern horizons are screened by trees. So unlike Lachlan’s sky where the western aspect predicated the day; the day will be fine, the day will sing a song of wind and rain, the clouds — with their ominous underbellies — warn of the unstoppable cold front rolling in. And the sea: white caps bobbing, expectant change, or the smooth glissando sea — a harbinger of static heat. Being in this flat is going to be different.

Already two distinct sound-scapes can be heard. In the bedrooms, the symphony of the waking city opens with discordant horns, gravel trains and the whoosh of wet tyres on the road. The central passage is a buffer, and in the living room the sound of the traffic disappears into the steep fall of land beneath the bridge and the only sounds are those of the native birds in the treed corridor of the river.

6:45 a.m. Two calls from Lachlan. One at 11.39 p.m. last night and a second at 6.30 this morning. A web of anger imprisons me. And loss. Miss him and the pleasure of being together; his warm body, the simple comfort of his presence in the bed each morning. Sharing the paper, drinking coffee.

Nothing works here. The jug is broken — will have to heat hot water in a saucepan — the shower sprays water all over the floor — perhaps she only used the bath, and there is no toaster — had to use the gas grill and burnt the toast.

The monster can wait.
7:30 a.m. Time to return his call. He’s taking a long time to answer. Is he deciding whether to or not, or has he left already?

‘Hi,’ he says. His voice is so familiarly low, stirringly resonant and his accent has always been distinctly cultured. No. Don’t listen to the sound, focus on what he is saying.

‘Hi.’ My voice has tightened already. So hard to be matter of fact instead of angry. ‘You called.’

‘Yes,’ he says and pauses. It only takes one word to know where we stand: his majesty has called and that’s enough. His ‘yes’ reeks of an aren’t-you-privileged-to-be-called-by-me attitude. He’ll be thinking, Zoë will not only take the initiative but keep this conversation civilised. She will smooth the disagreement over. Implicitly he’s saying, ‘I’ve called you, you know I want you to return, but you not only have to negotiate this in the conversation, but make it work.’

And this is what is unbelievable about him — the pause is continuing. Damn him.

‘Lachlan, I’m not coming back. In fact, I’m going pick up the rest of my things this morning.’

‘Don’t you want to discuss it?’

‘Is there something you want to say?’

‘Why should I say anything? You left. It’s up to you to come back.’

‘So, it’s in my hands?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘I’ll be over this morning to pick up my things.’

‘Hang on,’ he says. ‘I think we should talk.’

‘Me, too.’ And the silence hangs in the air like a hot-air balloon on windless day.

‘What time are you coming?’

‘Around ten o’clock.’

‘I have a class then.’

‘Yes, but it’s the only time I have.’

‘For God’s sake, can’t you wait until we’ve talked?’

‘Lachlan, what on earth do you want to say?’

‘I need to see you.’

‘Well maybe you can’t today.’
'I miss you.'
And there we have it. It’s all about his lack, his loss. It’s not about the differences we have to resolve.
‘Lachlan, for the moment, at least, I’m moving out.’
‘It’s so childish and petulant, Zoë.’
And there’s the authoritative judge listing my misdemeanours. ‘Okay, if you say so.’
‘You’re being really pig-headed.’
Now it’s clearly my fault. ‘I guess it must seem like that, Lachlan.’
‘I’ll call you later when you’ve had some time to think about what you’re doing.’
And now he’s patronising me.
‘Why, thank you kind sir.’
‘Zoë, you’re not funny.’
‘Is that so?’
‘Damn you. I’m going to be late.’
‘Then you had better go.’
There is no point in saying goodbye. We are beyond politeness.

12.30 p.m.
Everything fitted in AC’s bag. There is so much less than anticipated: CDs, music, my two towels — the linen is his — little more than the usual hotel guest, a good guest whose recent demands have exceeded the proprietor’s expectations. And like all guests, the key must be duly returned. Perhaps its return will make my departure real. The performer is stepping off the stage, out of the play of his life, a play in which his bed is made, the dishes are stacked in the dishwasher, and the desk is never cluttered. Certainly music is never left on the stand. AC’s flat will not be like that. Chaos already reigns, and it may continue. No. Not as it is at the moment. Must get rid of these papers.

resistance

to act against
to overcome with one’s will
a two sided disposition: one of not giving into, the other
an active movement against

Paul is a classic passive aggressive. He never states what he clearly wants, just resists anything I suggest.

There are two scenes that continue to be replayed in my mind, rather like one of the last scenes in the recent film version of *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth Bennett sees Mr Darcy walking towards her and catches her breath. It is the sound that is most important because we don’t see her catch her breath, we see her face on, looking at something, then the film cuts to Darcy, in the distance, walking towards her. We hear her quick gasp of breath as a voice over, catch her feelings as we see him, and segue from her disturbed sleep and reflective walking to the breathy anticipation of resolved love. This is not the first time Elizabeth catches her breath, so the sound-bite, through its repetition, gives a personal and historical coherence to the narrative.

Historical glue has not given coherence to my life. Reliving those two significant moments still disrupts my struggle to make sense of my life. These moments grind against each other, like the edges of the tectonic plates in the earth’s crust, disturbing the sea bed, forcing a swelling tsunami to flood over me, washing away the hope of them ever fitting together into a neat jigsaw puzzle which, on completion, allows the mind to rest.

**Moment — Scene 1**

Paul and I were determined to fight against the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War. In spite of his father’s ultimatums, Paul was continuing to build his case as a conscientious objector, supported by one of his law tutors who was almost anxious for his birth date to be drawn so he could have his opinion tested in court. Our commitment to his cause bound us, but this political intimacy fell unaccountably into disarray whenever we visited my parent’s house.
Paul liked visiting my parent’s house, to listen to the traditional jazz records my father had collected, particularly Frank Trainer who played at the Victorian Jazz club where we often went — we liked to sit at a table directly in front of the band, drink red wine and admire Frank. Our house was informal and my father liked to talk politics. Although he prefaced any discussion with a statement about his political conservatism, he was open to discussing ideas and liked to challenge our views without making us feel, as Paul’s father did, that by arguing against him we were engaging in a personal attack. The discussions, and bantering, ranged over any topic, the old adage of never discussing sex and politics, which were supposed to set the boundaries for discussion in his own family’s home, never applied.

We often visited on a Sunday night when the evening meal of toasted sandwiches — with soup in the winter or salad in the summer — were eaten while we watched the news, Dad’s obsessive ritual. The arguments inevitably unfolded afterwards, and, at that time, centred round the Vietnam War.

My father’s ‘Let’s see if I fully understand what you’re saying’ statement was always followed by a summary recapitulation of the arguments Paul and I had made. This forced any exaggeration, or defensive behaviour on our part, to the wayside and made us look beyond the war itself into Australia’s geo-political status internationally. We tended to attack our dependency on American foreign policy. Maxine was completing her final year in economics and politics and had a very different perspective. She subscribed to the domino theory, that communism would sweep through Vietnam and down through the more southern nations to our shoreline where we would be forced to defend ourselves.

Usually these arguments had exhausted themselves before we settled into the second ritual, watching the Sunday night film — a negotiated choice often dominated by my mother’s preference. On this night she had chosen Lawrence of Arabia.
We had all seen the film on the cinemascop screen at the Regent Theatre in the city, but here we are, on this night, sitting together. Maxine is annoying my mother as she playfully insists on Paul sitting between us on the couch and starts nudging him with her elbow. Mother remains unusually upright in her chair, nursing her back, face drawn with inexplicable tension.

‘Maxine,’ my father says. ‘If you don’t want to see the film, okay, but others do.’ The film is on a commercial channel, reduced to the pin-prick size of an eighteen inch screen, and this set the scene for our less than attentive viewing and the ongoing banter about heroes and war.

Paul maintained that while Lawrence was portrayed as a hero — the rebellious, poet warrior, which he maintained all successful rebels needed to be — that his violent acts of revenge could never be justified and his moral lapse nullified Maxine’s claim that he was a true hero.

‘But heroes have always used death to glorify war and in any war there are always immoral acts,’ Maxine says as Lawrence is walking along the roof of the train. ‘Look at him being feted for the victory he’s just won, he deserves that. Sometimes the end justifies the means.’ And with that she leans into Paul, nudges him again as she says in a teasing way, ‘Now he’s a warrior I could admire. None of this mamby-pamby marching with banners stuff.’

‘Civilian massacres are never justified. That’s why we have war tribunals,’ I say. ‘Anyway, it’s only a film, a manufactured story, loosely based on his diary.’ I wanted to debunk her arguments, furious that she had not only insulted Paul, but me as well. But Paul turned on me and said, ‘Don’t trivialise it! We need heroes, especially those who stand up against the machine of gratuitous values.’
Maxine looks at me in a smug way, turns to Paul and says, ‘So you’re not quite as silly as I thought.’

And he leans towards her, clearly amused and flattered, and says, ‘And we’ll have to talk about your means justifying the end later.’

And in that moment, I saw that the maturity she had attributed to him, rightly or wrongly, was a way of dissolving the guilt he felt in questioning all that his father stood for. But, the true meaning of the scene, as it replays over and over, always hinges on the words ‘your’ and ‘later’.

‘Your means.’ Was he referring to the means/end argument or her means and ends in furthering a relationship that already existed?

And ‘later’. Did he mean, as I thought he did, at some point in the vague and distant future, if ever, or did he mean later at an appointed time that night they had already arranged?

Or was I seeing the first indication of Paul’s interest in her?

In replaying this scene, I’m reminded of tracing a line that has been drawn on one side of a Mobius strip, of returning to the same place without ever touching the reverse side, of walking a treadmill that goes nowhere, of repeating the same steps, of an inability to change. Late at night, I escape into a frenzy of film noir, saturating myself in its shadows, stretched between the black and the white, lost in the torn threads of scratched film and antiheroes.

Paul is dozing through ‘Desperate Housewives’. He has no interest in the syndicated mayhem and murders of the American suburban lot. I try to imagine living a carved out picket-fence existence and fail. As the program ends the channel segues to the news headlines. Our prime minister is avowing the importance of sustainable growth.
'Shit,’ Paul says, aroused from his sleep by the scream in the final scene. ‘What’s the prime miniature up to this time? Now there’s a word for you, sustainable.’

‘Sustainable,’ I say and return to Maxine at the riverbank.

Moment — Scene 2
Before mobile phones there was a waiting period. We live now in the desperate present moment, when the weather update, the road update, the news update keep us suspended in the possibility of the upcoming, the commercial imperative of living in a designated but future moment. To be left behind is akin to committing a crime.

Reading a newspaper is in some ways a relief. It allows me to stop, to hold the moment still, to relish the words, to linger in the detail, to make sense of it, to reflect on what another has said before being rushed into the new.

On the day of Paul’s death there was no time to reflect. As his body was being lifted out of the water, we could see the full effects of the fall, but by the time his body was lifted onto the riverbank he was lost to us.

It was quite a crowd. Maxine and I were clearly upset, asked questions and told that we would have to make sworn statements. These were to be factual accounts of what had passed between us before he swung out on the rope, and what we saw. We made these separately, and the police reassured us that as it had clearly been an accident, although there would be an inquest to attend, we could consider the matter closed. But even on that day, I should have realised that the matter would never be closed.
My father, sensing that something is not right, thinking that we had been unable to express our grief, came to us as we leant against his car and said, ‘Do you want to come and say goodbye to Paul? They are going to take him away soon.’

Maxine and I look at each other, uncertain about what to do. I want to look at him again — he had seemed so twisted up in the river with the water swirling around — and Maxine follows.

His eyes have been closed. His mouth is no longer gaping, someone has pushed his hair back off his face and the gash in his head is hidden by the length of his hair. He looks at peace.

Maxine kneels down on one side and I on the other. My father stands at his head, looking down.

‘I will miss him,’ he says. ‘He was one of those outstanding young men. You couldn’t help see he had a future ahead of him.’

Maxine reaches over and draws her hand across his forehead, looks at me and says, ‘Yes. It’s a shame someone had to goad him to his death.’

My father is shocked and says immediately, ‘Maxine, no one caused the rope to break. Whatever his reason for getting on it, that was not the cause of his death.’

‘You can say what you like, Dad, I was here and know what was said. You don’t say to some one, “let’s see what sort of hero you really are” and expect them not to respond,’ and glaring at me she says, ‘why did you do that, Celia? It’s all your fault.’
Everyone can hear what she is saying, and there is no time to answer her before my father says, ‘Stop it Maxine.’ He is clearly annoyed. ‘It’s hard enough for Celia without you putting the blame on her. She’s just lost her boyfriend.’

I look at Maxine and she looks at me. This is the moment for her to say something, but she doesn’t and neither do I. We are both torn between anger and love. I reach out my hand towards her, but she slaps it away.

‘What’s the matter with you two?’ my father says.

‘He would never have swung out on that rope if she hadn’t dared him and I won’t forgive her.’

I wanted to yell that I was upset, that I was only teasing him, that I did not plan his death, but the words would not come out. I often think of the word she used — goaded. Surely to goad is not the same as to tease.

to goad: a stick with a pointed end, for driving cattle
anything that pricks or wounds like a stick, stimulus
to provoke to anger; torment
to prick or drive as with a goad, incite

to tease to worry or irritate by persistent petty requests, trifling raillery, or other annoyances often in jest
to sway or disturb a person, etc. by importunity or persistent petty annoyance

Yes, I was teasing him, my words were an annoyance, a trifling raillery, but knowing that heroes held an important place in Paul’s life, I knew my teasing would inevitably incite him into action. It is his actions I want to remember, but I remember his motionless body, his damp hair like dark curly string spread out
on the yellow towel, his parents kneeling beside him, his mother holding one hand, his father the other. And I weep for their loss and mine.

I could not, and cannot, weep for Maxine.

Was this the point in time when my mother and aunt relinquished themselves to fate? Weeping is inevitable. It’s endemic to my family. We weep in loss, we weep in loneliness, we weep in separation, and there is weeping for the past, for the inability to pinpoint a time when fate might have given AC’s Paul his life.

Is there any point in reading further? Sixteen bundles still remain. This one has photocopies of the newspaper reports of the accident itself, the inquest, the funeral notice. They all attack the local council for allowing the local youths, whoever they might have been, to replace it whenever it was removed. The council were aware but not vigilant, and the rope was worn, although photographic evidence indicated that the rope appeared safe. But to my mother and aunt this was clearly irrelevant. What happened?

Resistance — a critical word for me. Sensing the resistance of the bow against the strings needs to become intuitive, the movement of the body and the ear working in tandem, depending on the strings to create a sound that speaks. Resistance — both my mother and aunt chose to resist the truth, that the rope broke, just as a string might break. Our senses are rarely acute enough to predict when.

My mobile is vibrating. There it is! The demand of the moment, but one of the endearing things about a mobile phone, one that my dear aunt didn’t appreciate, is the option of turning off its ring. And another wonderful quality is a screen that allows me see who’s calling.

Patrick.
‘Hi, Patrick.’
‘What are you doing?’
‘Laying another bundle to rest.’
‘Still?’
‘Yes. Still. My family is clearly mad, and I need you to tell me I’m not.’
‘That’s going to be difficult.’
‘Thanks.’
‘So, are you visiting the flat or in residence?’
‘In residence. I picked up my clothes this morning.’
‘Right.’
‘Lachlan and I spoke this morning — if you could call it that — but it only confirmed my decision.’
‘I feel I should offer my condolences.’
‘Why?’
‘If only because you must be upset.’
‘That’s kind of you, Patrick, but I’m trying to be realistic. Being upset is not going to stop overnight. So I don’t want you to keep offering them.’
‘Okay, okay, I won’t feel sorry for you. How did you find the Yardley?’
‘Difficult.’
‘Me, too Zoë, me, too.’
‘Would you have time to run over it?’
‘It’s getting a bit late.’
‘I can offer you a bribe. I’m going to my father’s for dinner. I haven’t told them Lachlan isn’t coming. Marianne’s a great cook. Why don’t you come over, practise for an hour or so and come with me.’

And I hear him catch his breath.
‘Look you don’t have to. It was an off the cuff invitation.’
‘No. I’d like to meet your father, and Marianne.’
‘Good. Then I’ll see you soon.’

Dad has lit the fire in the living room. It’s warm, probably too warm for the night, but it is autumn and the temperature has dropped by the time we got out of the car. The open fire warms the house. Small rooms. Closed doors. The sitting room always feels lived in: the firewood stacked in the wooden rice bucket bought for him last Christmas, the woollen mandala made in my last year at school still hanging above the fireplace.

‘You both look cold,’ he says. ‘Sit by the fire while I pour you a glass of wine. There is no choice tonight — I’m offering a red or red.’

Sitting watching the fire, toes stretched towards the flames, makes me want to doze. A beetle — it must have come in with the wood — is crawling up the bricks. It reaches the small brick ridge that juts out below the mantle piece and stops, waves its
feelers in the air, touches the right-angle of the ridge and turns side-ways. It advances a centimetre, repeats the action and turns sideways again. It crosses the width of the fire place, rejecting at every stop the possibility of being up-side-down beneath the ridge. Odd how it brings home that there are some things we can’t change. It can’t change its body, perhaps it can’t bend in the middle, maybe its claws aren’t strong enough to grasp the surface that way, but the ridge is there and it’s not going to disappear. Just like the differences with Lachlan.

‘I think I’m going to put that beetle out of its misery,’ says Patrick as he scoops it into a piece of newspaper. ‘Burn it or save it?’

‘Save it.’

‘Good. You’re a girl after my own heart.’

Dad arrives with the glasses of wine, smiling. ‘Rescuing beetles. Now that’s a noble art. You deserve a reward. Tell me what you think of this?’

Patrick surprises me when he says, ‘It’s a shiraz isn’t it? Coonawarra or Hunter Valley?’

‘Coonawarra,’ says my father. ‘So you like wine, Patrick?’

‘The odd glass or two. Prefer reds to whites and I like them a little heavy and fruity. None of this quaffing Beaujolais for me. I like red meat and red wine.’

Marianne has come in with a platter of stuffed bell peppers and a roulade of smoked salmon and cream cheese.

‘But you will eat fish,’ she says.

Patrick draws in his cheek at his faux pas. ‘Of course,’ he says, ‘I eat everything. I was just thinking about the pleasure of drinking red wine. It goes well with red meat.’

‘Yes,’ says Marianne, ‘which is why we’re having roast beef tonight. Zoë, I’m just about to put the Yorkshire puddings in the oven. Do you want to help?’

‘Sure.’ Something must be wrong for her to draw me out to kitchen. ‘What’s up?’

‘What do you mean?’ she asks.

‘You drew me out of the living room. Does Dad want to talk to Patrick?’

‘No, but he’s as surprised as I am to see him here. What’s happened with Lachlan? He rang half an hour ago asking for you, then apologised for not being able to come.’

‘The weasel.’
‘What a Lachlan thing to say. Have you had a fight?’ Marianne has moved to the bench and picked up the stainless steel bowl of batter. She whisks the mixture, literally beating the batter then starts spooning it into the small muffin tray.

‘More than a fight. He’s suddenly decided he doesn’t want to have children.’

‘Many people don’t.’

And Marianne is one of those. This is not a conversation I should have with her. She will want to be understanding, but her tone is unsympathetic.

‘Yes. But we did have an understanding.’

‘But you love him don’t you? You seem so much happier than you were with that dreadful Terry. Having children isn’t always the answer.’

‘The answer to what?’

The tray is full. She almost tosses it onto the middle shelf of the oven and slams the door closed. This is so un-Marianne.

‘Surely your happiness with someone is the most important thing,’ she says as she rinses out the bowl.

There is usually such a comfortable bond between us, but she’s clearly upset and we’re heading towards a major clash. Closure on this conversation is needed, now.

‘Marianne, I moved out, this morning.’

She takes the sponge she is using to wipe down the bench and tosses it in the sink.

‘That’s certainly letting him know where you stand.’

‘Yes. And everyone else as well.’ So, dearest Marianne, there will be no discussion of my decision.

She doesn’t reply. Instead she is taking the plates from the cupboard and putting them in the sink. She turns on the hot tap, warms the top one briefly and passes it to me. Without knowing how it has happened, the tea-towel is in my hand.

‘So, who’s Patrick?’

Dad’s primed her to find out who he is. ‘Just a friend. Principal viola and he’s in the quartet. You don’t recognise him?’

‘I wish I could say yes.’

‘We were practising together this afternoon. I knew you’d be expecting Lachlan so I asked him to come. I didn’t want the meal to be wasted.’ The plates are finished.

‘I’d better not leave him too long with Dad.’
Being polite is necessary, but my anger at her lack of support has caused a hard knot to form in my stomach.

‘Dad, are you coming to the concert on Saturday?’
‘Yes,’ he says. ‘We’re looking forward to the Bartók. So, Patrick tells me you’ve moved into your aunt’s flat.’
‘This morning. I’ve created some cupboard space and my clothes are there.’
‘And how is it?’
‘Very run down. It’s pretty primitive, especially after Lachlan’s.’
‘I can imagine. You haven’t forgotten that we still have a cupboard full of your kitchen equipment. Why don’t you take it with you? Patrick wouldn’t mind helping you to carry the boxes up those stairs.’
Patrick looks at me and says, ‘So you cook.’
‘Ask her to make you ravioli.’
There is something in my father’s voice that says my child can do no wrong and let me show her off a little. This I don’t need.
‘Dad!’
‘You haven’t made me pasta for years.’
‘Okay. I’ll make some after I’ve sorted out the papers.’
‘You haven’t tossed them out yet?’
‘No. And I need to talk to someone about them.’
‘Not me Zoë. I’ve told you, there is absolutely nothing I can say about your mother’s life or those papers that would help.’

‘You cook,’ Patrick says as he dumps the third box of equipment on the table.
‘Do you want a reluctant yes or an ironical no.’
‘Neither. I think you owe me a bowl of pasta. I like your father.’
‘So do I.’
‘Can I do anything else?’ he says looking around. ‘Where are the computer and printer?’
‘In the second bedroom.’
‘The computer’s a real plus for you. You can have your own private connection to the world. Do you think she used it a lot?’
'For playing DVDs. She mentioned bookmarking. I haven’t turned it on yet. She liked videos too. I think she used to watch them in bed. The TV is in there, but it’s not working.’

‘Want me to look?’

‘Thanks. She recorded quite a lot of orchestral performances. Look at this.’

‘My God. A wardrobe of videos. What are you going to do with them?’

‘Probably work my way through them. Can you see what the problem is?’

‘Have you moved it?’

‘It seemed to be hovering on the edge of the chest, so I cleared everything off and put it back in the middle.’

‘The connection between the video and the TV seems to be loose. Pass me a video.’

‘How about this? Lantana. Have you seen it?’

‘No.’

‘Do you want to watch it?’

‘Now?’

‘Why not? There’s no rehearsal tomorrow.’

Patrick picks up the pillows, plumps them both, props them up against the bed head and jumps onto the bed.

‘Pass me the control,’ he says. He fiddles with it for a moment and the screen lights up the room. ‘There,’ he says patting the bed beside him.

The bed proves to be just the right distance from the screen and we sit rather stiffly at first until we both slowly scrunch down into the pillows and lean into each other as the tension in the film mounts.

‘Scared, are you?’ he says, squeezing my arm.

‘Tense.’

‘Yes. I can feel it. Remember, it’s only a film.’

‘And you’re not? Right. Let’s turn it off.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ he says. ‘Of course I want to see what happens.’

‘Ah, the power of a story.’

‘The power of friendship. You owe me. I’m really going to hold you to making me pasta.’

‘Sh, I want to see what happens.’
The film is longer than expected. By its end we are propped against each other and exhausted.

‘It’s eleven thirty,’ he says. ‘Got to go.’

Within a few moments, he’s gathered his helmet and bag and we’re at the door exchanging perfunctory moi-moi kisses past each other’s cheeks.

‘Now, you won’t be calling me tonight to tell me you’re scared will you?’ he says.
‘Of course not.’

He bounces down the stairs, juggling his helmet under his arm as he zips up his jacket.

‘Night,’ he says, as he turns to look back up at me.

He is such a good friend.

11.35 p.m. Another bloody call from Lachlan. Is he going to keep ringing all night?

‘Lachlan, what do you want?’

‘Zoë, where have you been? I’ve been calling everywhere.’

‘I know. I had my phone turned off. I didn’t want to be interrupted.’

‘That’s nice.’ He’s being sarcastic. How much more arrogant can he be?

‘I caught the habit from you.’

‘It’s rude not to return calls.’

‘Did you ring to discuss my telephone manners, or was there something else? Did I forget something? Leave something out of place?’

‘Don’t be sarcastic, Zoë, it doesn’t suit you.’

‘Are you saying that it’s fine for you to be sarcastic with me, but you don’t want me to be like that with you?’

‘Oh. For God’s sake, Zoë. Just come back. I don’t want you to leave. We’ll work it out.’

‘That isn’t enough.’

‘What more do you want?’

‘Family, a space where I can work undisturbed. A lot more than a view across the sea.’

‘If I sell this apartment, I’ll never be able to buy back in again.’

He simply doesn’t get it.
'Lachlan, I’m really tired. It’s been an exhausting day. Let’s think about things for a while. Maybe we should talk next week. There’s a concert on Saturday and I need my sleep. I’m going to bed.’

‘Zoë, wait.’

‘No, Lachlan. I’m not coming back tomorrow, nor the next day. You will have to wait. And don’t call. I’ll speak to you next week. Good night.’

And good night and good night.

Shit. Is this a really stupid thing to be doing? This flat is so depressing. There is nowhere to put anything, the chairs are uncomfortable. Did she ever sit in them? And now there are even more boxes to unpack.

Another sleep-torn night is absolutely not wanted. No stimulation, no mental exercise, nothing new. A repetitive activity is supposed to lull one into sleep. Where’s that old warming up exercise? No, imagine moving the bow evenly over the strings, feeling the small changes in the movement of the body, breathing slowly, releasing my weight into the bowing, listening to the changing modulations in the sound, releasing all my feelings into the night — that might be the answer.

Or a plan.

Open the curtains, raise the blinds, let the night in, enter into the sadness of leaving Lachlan, and sleep.
Chapter Ten

Could any bedroom be more alike, yet so different from Van Gogh’s painting than this room? The naïve simplicity — the cane chair, the wooden table with a single drawer, the bed with its solid wood ends, the small wooden framed mirror beside the window, the framed pictures on the walls — striking compositional similarities, but the colours? There is no scarlet, no butter yellow, no pale violet, no citron green, no blue, nor orange. Instead? The walls are a despairing grey with fine lines of pink where it has been scratched. And the woodwork — a chipped and faded cream. Van Gogh chose complementary colours to express restfulness — respite for the imagination. It’s difficult to guess why AC chose these. They may be quiet, but the room is not restful. Irritating would be a better word, or am I only looking at it through very Lachlan eyes?

The saving grace is the peppercorn. Even now, as the sun is casting the shadow of its leaves over the blind, and spilling like molten metal in around its edges, it’s the movement of the tree that brings life to the room.

It would be a good morning to be walking along the riverbank.

Grandpa Wallace lived on a riverbank, on the Murray near a small country pub. Those two visits are imprinted in my memory like the small indent on my thumb nail where my bow rests: walking along the riverbank, looking down at the gnarled roots of the red gums gripping the steep bank, trying to keep their foothold in the flowing water; looking at the water, wondering what happened when it lapped the top of the bank; Grandpa, constantly aware of it being too swift and dangerous for a child to be left alone near its edge, anxious, keeping me safe while Dad fished for a few hours; walking me over parchment soil which crumbled between my fingers, brushing off the dust sticking to my skin — like the dirt in those photographs.

‘There’s a war taking place here,’ Grandpa said, ‘but it’s not a war of bombs or rockets — there’s no napalm defoliating the forest — it’s a water war that is killing the trees and the river.’
He sees the world through the veil of the WWII, just as the riverbank is brought back to me through the timbre of his voice.

‘Look at this forest.’ His voice is deep and he gestures with his arms as we walk into the bush from the river’s edge. ‘This is where the water once flooded, giving these trees a long drink, bringing the waterholes back to life. See here!’ He stops and points to a small mound and chips into it with the toe of his boot. ‘It’s a midden of fresh water oysters and clams,’ he says, voice intense as he picks up a fragment of shell. ‘The Aborigines camped here, set their fish traps.’ He squats, his eyes levelling with mine. ‘Listen, do you hear that call? High. Shrill. The azure kingfisher. Watch for a flash of blue. Can you remember that colour, Zoë? Azure. It’s a beautiful blue, more blue than the sky, brighter than the sea. Come on. Let’s visit the old-man tree. Look at him. Over eight hundred years old. Feet in the water all the time, and over there,’ he continues, pointing to the opposite bank, ‘that’s where we’re going in the boat. Now, don’t forget, azure.’

The boat sat low in the water. He was a tall solid man, the breadth of his shoulders and his long feet anchoring his angular frame. The riverbank was more overgrown up stream with birds flying in and out of the bushes, wheeling over the canopy, and he rattled off their names like a rap singer: ‘Cockatoo, cormorant, kingfisher, kite, yellow-billed spoonbill and a pelican in flight.’ Like winged sailing ships, three pelicans wheeled above us, heavy bellied, their beaks like prows, circumnavigating the tree tops. ‘And here’s the choke,’ he said, ‘see how the river narrows. The water floods naturally over the bank into the forest. This is where we turn around.’

When he pulled the boat up onto the bank, he stepped into the water up to his ankles, immersing his R.M Williams’ boots with their scuffed toes and cracked uppers, so deeply creased where his toes bent the leather. His trousers — always hooked up on the tag on the back of the boots — were also wet.

‘Now, don’t get your feet wet,’ he said, lifting me high. ‘Your father won’t be happy.’ But he never told me not to help and inevitably they were soaked.

Returning home late in the afternoon, mud on my shoes and dust on my skin, drawing a stick the long length of the track leading from the riverbank to the house, tripling it over the corrugated tin of the shed and listening for the hollow and high sound where there was nothing stacked against the wall, leaving the bath dark-rimmed with the adventures of the day — that was holidaying with Dad at Grandpa’s.
At dusk, we sat on the verandah, deafened by the cacophony of the cockatoos, their piercing screeches filling the sky, their feathers falling as they squabbled and shuffled between the branches of the trees, white, cream, and Van Gogh’s citron green, the colours for the bedroom, the colours to make it luminous with summer light.

‘Shit and shit.’
The bloody car won’t start. What in the hell can be the matter? It was running this morning. It seems like the battery’s dead. Can a battery fall dead like that?
‘Do you need a hand, Luv?’
He’s standing at the letter box, old and rough looking — unshaven — pushing a shopping jeep and delivering junk mail.
‘I’m fine thanks.’
‘Has it got petrol?’
‘Yes. Thanks for asking.’
‘Might need a new starter motor,’ he says. ‘Do you belong to the RACV?’
What is it with these questions?
‘Yes. I’ll ring the RACV later. I can’t wait. I’ll have to get a taxi.’
‘Let me help you, Luv. You look mighty weighed down.’
My cello. Of course.
‘You don’t know a number for a taxi service?’
‘What about the hotel across the river? They’re coming and going all the time down there.’
He’s right.
‘Thanks.’
‘That’s okay, Luv. Don’t you worry, now. You’ll get … .’
Can’t wait to hear. Must be gone … running almost … it’s only across the bridge … hate crossing this bridge … everything vibrates … the cars … the trams … so up in the air … like a hot air balloon … there’s a taxi … pulling out ahead of me … can he see me waving? Yes … he’s pulling over.
The cello barely fits. He has the front seat pushed too far back.
‘You need the seat a bit forward,’ he says, adjusting it. Friendly at least.
‘Thanks. I’ll sit in the back with cello.’
‘You right now?’ he says.
‘I’m running late, and I’m due at the concert hall in twenty minutes.’

‘No worries,’ he says, doing a U-turn. ‘It’s three dollars extra, but if we take the freeway, you’ll be there on time.’

The freeway. There is no other option but to trust his judgement.

Patrick needs to know. Damn, my phone is at bottom of my bag. Damn. Now what? We’ve slowed down.

‘Is there something wrong?’

‘Don’t worry Miss. You’ll be there on time.’

It’s ringing but there’s no answer. No. He’ll have it on silent, but it will be in his pocket. Yes, he’s answering.

‘Patrick speaking.’

‘Hi. It’s Zoë.’

‘Where are you?’

‘On my way. Car wouldn’t start. I’m in a taxi. Just entering the freeway. Should be there in ten minutes. Is everybody there?’

‘Leonie’s been told to warm us up with the first movement, but we’re still missing a dozen or so.’

‘See you soon.’

Check the phone. Turn it onto silent. In the tunnel. Can see the cabbie looking at me in the rear-vision mirror. He wants to talk.

‘Handy, aren’t they,’ he says. ‘I insist my daughter carries hers, all the time. Feel like she’s always safe. She plays the violin. Very good too. Not that I like her music much. This is more what I like, but she tells me it’s rubbish. What do you think?’

He’s turning it up. Over the violins and accordion a man is crooning in Italian. It reminds me of the Dean Martin records Nan used to play, the voice soft and mellow, the harmonies sweet, rhythm more a rolling bounce, carried by the bass strings rather than the percussion. Definitely no thump-a-thump-a-thump.

‘What do you think?’ he says. There’s no time to answer before he says, ‘Bella, bella. Do you speak Italian? This is a love song. This man, he’s in love, but he’s separated from his lady who is … she is the most beautiful, more beautiful than the sunrise, more beautiful than a summer’s day. This is what it means to love.’ He starts to sing with the song — a heartfelt serenade — swept up in the passion as the strings swell at the end of the song. And he’s all smiles — pleased with himself.
More beautiful than a summer’s day — the words of a romantic, and certainly nothing Lachlan would say.

‘Is this the right place, miss?’

He’s pulled up at the stage door. Clever man.

‘Perfect.’

‘Twelve dollars. And tell me do you like this music?’

‘It’s very romantic.’

He takes the correct money and says as he pockets it, ‘She is bella, the music is bella,’ and adds as he watches me draw my cello from the back seat, ‘and so are you Miss. Molto bella.’ And now he’s pressing his gathered fingertips to his lips and tossing a kiss into the air. ‘You have a good day now.’

‘Thanks.’

Five minutes to spare. All the tension of the last twenty minutes has gone, but the melody stays with me until the sound of the orchestra tuning up overwhelms me at the stage door. The adrenalin is racing and the distance across the floor to my chair is enormous. It’s not that every eye is on me, we know each other too well, but our awareness of the limited opportunities to move within the orchestra means we all hide our weaknesses.

Most of us would love to toss the orchestra into the air, to see it fall randomly, to see some disruption of its well established hierarchy.

Patrick is shuffling his music as if my arrival is nothing. Then he turns, smiles and mouths ‘Well done!’

Leonie looks at me and raises an are-you-ready? eyebrow and plays A.

It’s remarkable. Each time the cello is tuned its character is revealed: the slight tremolo in the sound box when tuning the C string, the stiffness of the G peg, the undetectable imperfection in the bridge which means the D string has been replaced twice as often as the others. In tune, it is always beautiful. The simple pleasure of harmony.

Everyone is suddenly attentive.

A quiver of excitement invades the body in the long pause after tuning up — the anticipated pleasure of the music, the expectation of the performance or rehearsal being possibly more than it was before. It’s why we’re here. All those years of practice, all those rehearsals when we work to bend ourselves to Lucien’s vision, that chasing of the
illusive imagined ideal, it will pass like an invisible energy from us to them, the audience.

From my body to theirs — music.

‘Your stuff!’ Boldly written on a piece of white paper torn from an envelope. And some mail.

A black plastic bag full — dumped outside the front door. Everything’s been tossed in. What has he stuffed into it? Two whisks — purchased because he’s particularly fond of scrambled eggs — the mugs I bought in Queenscliff, my mother’s tasteless tea towels, the can opener with the ergonomic handles — ugly, but necessary when I had a strained wrist — and my cans of tuna fish. Even some packets of instant noodles he didn’t approve of. My God, it’s hard to believe he remembers who bought what. Designated ownership — how petty can he get?

It’s surprising how lists define us, the inventories of who we are. What would be my complementary list? His electric beater, the grey tea towels he bought to match the granite benches. He hasn’t included the special chocolate for the cappuccinos. Dolt.

And more toiletries: two atomisers of perfume — empty, a packet of double blade razors — as if he’s never used them, and four cakes of lavender soap — his preference being for something spicier, and the bath robe bought for him last Christmas.

‘It’s just too heavy and dark,’ he said.

Taste, touch and smell — his cupboards and drawers have been emptied of the differences between us. Not that he ever relinquished more than the smallest of spaces for me — his brief cleanout was perfunctory.

And to think my kitchen equipment has been kept in storage to please him.

‘Lachlan, where shall we put those things I have in storage at Dad’s house?’ It seemed such a reasonable question to ask at the time of moving in.

‘Why don’t you just get rid of them? You don’t need them,’ he said. ‘My kitchen’s equipped.’

Yes. To his style of cooking.

We adapt to change: relinquish, recreate, rehabilitate, restructure, rebuild, reclaim. What does the dictionary say about re?

*Re — a prefix indicating repetition, a prefix indicating withdrawal or backward motion, often figurative like ‘back’, applied often to stems used as words, as in revert.*
Will old habits be reverted to or will the established be tossed aside for some new? The best thing to do with this stuff is to put it all back in the bag and dump it at his door with a note:

*Dear Lachlan,*

*Feel free to ditch the lot. I have taken my things out of storage and won’t be needing them.*

Actually the soap and razors would be handy, and the whisk. Even the tea towels could be useful. The robe, yes, and the noodles — they were only bought for a quick lunch that wouldn’t leave a mess.

Mess. All this panic about mess. My mother, my grandmother, and Lachlan. The messianic-mess triplets — heaven forbid a mess — *Chicken Little ... THE SKY MIGHT FALL IN!*

And AC’s papers? Will not ditch them until the remaining few are read. And here’s segue and we have the same definition.

**segue**

_(a musical direction) follow straight on without break to link without interruption, or of one segment of music to another_

Words arrive, are suddenly in fashion, on the lips of commentators, in newspaper columns. Words that are rarely heard, but have always existed, pop like corks to the surface of community consciousness. Take segue, it’s alive in this time and place, letting us slide from one scene in the narrative of our crisis-ridden, mediated lives to another. We pass from executions and terrorists to reality TV where provocative girls with seductive smiles sparkle like the glittering grilles of new cars. We slip from Roman chariot races with horses circling the dusty laps of the coliseum to outback tracks being skimmed by four wheel drive cars, those iconic masters over nature that dominate our city streets.
Paul has brought his folio of photographs for me to choose from and has spread them across the floor. He wants me to choose three with a linking theme.

‘The theme should encourage a natural segue from one to the other.’

‘Don’t put them in straight rows,’ I say, afraid that the symmetry might over-ride the possibility of making the connections. ‘Paul, I think you should choose. You know what you were thinking when you selected them.’

‘But the context’s too intruding,’ he says ‘I can’t see them out of the context and they have to be iconic.’

‘Iconic.’

‘You know what I mean. They have to speak beyond the moment, of something larger.’

‘Right, then I would choose the banner at the head of the demonstration, the coffin being carried above the demonstrators’ heads and the effigy being stuffed. All are iconic. All are related to protest and they are familiar images. You need never say a word.’

I think of a cutting room floor, of all the little flashbacks and feelings that are left lying in the dust as we construct our sensible narratives, but who is doing the editing? Who is doing the manipulating? Who is constructing our reality? We segue without knowing why.

‘You don’t think they’re a little overused,’ he says.
'They won’t mean anything unless they are. You need the reader to bring their past with them if you want to build expectations. What would happen if we removed the foreshadowing?’

Paul doesn’t answer. I’m not surprised. He is such a man of the moment. He arrives without warning, plants himself in my life, acts as if he has a right to be here, brings me problems I find difficult to solve, even acts as if he has the right to tell me what to do.

He reminds me of Maxine, the way she assumed my life was a sort of political reverie that engulfed me in the world of protest. She was, supposedly, the sane one, but I knew that perfectly polite, attentive middle class smile she put on was inevitably a segue to a lie.

We liked swimming in the river. It was late spring and although we knew the water would be cold, as always — even in late Summer the water is cold — that day in November was unusually hot. Maxine and I went in her car, which she doesn’t remember, the rough surface of the winter ruts in the road making us laugh as the car rattled its age at us. Paul had agreed to meet us there because he was going to work immediately afterwards and needed his motorbike.

The deep embankment and waterhole were ours. We owned the sunlight sparkling on the water. Maxine and I headed straight to the waterhole over which a knotted rope hung from an overhanging limb of a large eucalypt.

I swung out first, feeling the tension in my arms, the air against my skin, the usual uncertainty as I let go and honey-potted to make the splash larger. Maxine followed, landing next to me but, hating the shock of the cold, she swam to the riverbank, picked up her towel and stretched out on the grass in the sunshine beyond the canopy of the tree.
I swam to the edge of the waterhole, clambered onto the narrow band of rocks separating the hole from the river, picked my way across them and through the nagging current, then swam across the deeper river to the other side. Out of breath, I held onto a low overhanging branch, hearing almost immediately the burble of Paul’s motor cycle.

The memory is vivid. He parks next to the car, takes off his jacket and the towel which he’s worn like a scarf and starts to flick it at Maxine. I turn away, distracted by a swallow diving and dipping in the slower stretch of water just downstream, start to swim back, breast-stroking, but suddenly my legs are aching and I’m starting to panic as I feel myself drifting in the current. I know I can reach the bank in the slower stretch of water downstream but I’m nervous and start to swim freestyle, kicking as hard as I can in the hope of getting to the bank more quickly.

‘Celia,’ I hear, but I don’t dare stop to reply. Finally, I reach the embankment, but by the time I find my way back through the bush they’ve gone, and so has the bike.

‘Maxine?’ I call, but there’s no reply.

I walk to the car and there’s a note wedged under the windscreen wiper. Paul’s taken me for a ride. Back soon, Maxine. I sit in the sun, absorbing the heat, waiting. Ten minutes, half an hour. I’m angry and annoyed. I hear the bike and start to pack up my towel. They arrive, flushed with the heat and wind.

‘Sorry,’ says Maxine. ‘I didn’t know we’d be so long.’

She was such a liar.

incite
to urge on
stimulate or prompt to action

Her papers are exhausting. Disturbing deposits of history that needed to be deleted or talked about. A good conversation with Mum over a cup of coffee is needed. She will be difficult, but AC’s label of liar makes me very uncomfortable.

‘Hello, Mum?’

‘Zoë.’

‘How are you?’

‘Fine. Stretched out on the couch watching the late news. Did you want to speak to Nan? She’s already gone to bed.’ The television is blaring in the background. ‘I need to catch the weekly forecast. We’ve invited Bill and Joan around on Saturday. Geoff wants to try out the new gas burner on the BBQ. He though he’d cook one of those quick Indian wok curries.’

The volume is high. Trying to start a conversation about AC would be pointless.

‘Mum, I need to talk to you. Can you turn the television off?’

‘There’s this wonderful item about the elephants. Listen,’ she says, ‘can you hear?’ It’s old news for me because it was on the radio this morning, but as it finishes she has turned the TV down.

‘Mum, did I tell you that I saw the elephants near your place?’

‘No.’

‘Three of them in the corner paddock diagonally opposite that vox pop of McDonalds, Red Rooster and Shell. It was quite other worldly. They were standing with their backs to me, in the middle of the paddock among the rolls of hay. They looked so hot. I felt really sorry for them. Did you know that the elephants at the zoo are painting? It’s to keep the muscles stimulated.’

‘Is that so?’

The volume has been turned up again. This time it’s a summary of the news headlines. The government has decided to send a ninety-year old grandmother back to China.

‘Mum!’ This is so exasperating. ‘I can’t believe they want to send her back.’

‘Now don’t provoke me, Zoë. There’s a queue and everybody has to wait their turn. Right. The weather’s finally on.’
Damn it. The opportunity has been missed. She’s back in her loop and all my concerns are draining into that black hole of unspoken experiences in the depths of my mind that my mother has never known about.

‘Mum, I want to catch up. I thought I might pop around for a coffee. Mum?’

‘Hold on. I’ve got another call.’

God — coffee is needed, but who knows how long this Mozart call-pending music will continue to crackle at me.

‘Sorry Zoë. Telephone sales. Do I want to re-mortgage? Now, what were you saying? Coffee? Too busy this week. The forecast is good, no rain, so we’ll be re-landscaping the area along the back fence. It looks far too scrappy.’

‘Okay. What about next week?’

‘Zoë, call me on Saturday. I’ll be better placed to make a decision then. Night.’

Turning the handle of the coffee grinder and listening to the beans crunching makes me think of feeding her into the grinder. What else can be done? There is nothing left to be done, or said. Just deal with that old, familiar feeling of being deserted and betrayed.

It’s odd how dark it is along the river. From the bridge there’s a black corridor of coolness. It takes time for the eyes to adjust, but even then, there is only the occasional glint, the reflection of a street light released by the moving branches of a tree. Bats screech in the Moreton Bay fig just below the flat. It’s scarcely sinister, but there is no horizon and no crystalline city in the distance, only a pervading sense that one could succumb to the quicksand of the night.

Being at one with the night makes more sense than being with either my mother or Lachlan. Why?

It’s the intimate moments that are difficult. With my mother the space between us is infinite. Even if we were jammed into the smallest box we would never intersect. With Lachlan, there are times when there is no space between us. No air, no breath, when the boundaries of our skin dissolve into bodily warmth and the differences between us disappear. But in many ways, we struggle to find a point of intersection. It doesn’t help that he has spent most of his time trying to make me walk on his line. And who has acquiesced?
Chapter Eleven

The morning air — autumnal, pungent, the cluster of rose quartz peppercorns swinging on the lowest branch irresistibly crushed between my hands. The wind speaks of the dampness of the decaying leaves carpeting the grass down to the riverbank. The poplars and willows — bright yellow, the blue plumbago — rampant, devouring the footpath, the wattles — rustling in the current of air running between the upright eucalypts, the mainstay of the riverbank.

It’s a new routine, walking to buy the daily paper instead of having it delivered. Mornings in the flat — so difficult. The four walls claustrophobic after Lachlan’s wall of sea and sky. But there are compensations: the myriad bird calls, the sweet cacophony of nature as Russell Yardley would say.

Can understand why he called his composition Morning Flight — such a twist on traditional expectations. Our performance of it, so well received. Standing ovations are rare, especially before interval. Such a shy composer. Full of praise for the orchestra, and Lucien. Patrick too, for his solo. Masterful. Last night, really exceptional: everyone feeling the tension beforehand.

And returning to the stage after interval — the silence of the audience when Lucien raised his baton was palpable. For once, there was no last minute coughing and the orchestra wanted the audience to be transported by the Mahler. And afterwards, a satisfying sense of completeness in the interpretation, exhilaration backstage, Lucien’s wide smile well exercised when thanking us. A feeling that we all owned and belonged to the music, that the past was truly living in the present. Patrick was so right when he said,

‘That’s what we work for — the audience and performers being at one within the music.’

Post performance exhaustion to be expected: shoulders a little stiff; legs needing to walk out the tension. The body as much an instrument as the cello, the vehicle, the
fatigue only to be acknowledged when the adrenalin has stopped and it sinks in that the moment has passed. May only have a dozen more opportunities in my lifetime to play those pieces again — and in that way. All that preparation. The review will be interesting to read.

The river looks oily this morning. Slow flowing, the surface shiny, viscous. Lachlan would swirl it around his wine glass to see if it would stick. Had never realised how deeply he had seeped into my life. Rather like the water-logged riverbank; darkly soaked and stained where the water has risen with a torrential downfall.

What is it about walking through an older part of a city? It’s not only the sounds — it’s the hardness of the footpath underfoot. My shoes are inadequate. Suitable for polished boards and cars, although my thongs suited the sand. Miss the sand. Miss the distant stretch of water reaching for the sky. Here buildings run up against the street. The pub and deserted shop are at the footpath’s edge, erupting out of the concrete.

Last night — the pub was full; people at the bar, groups playing snooker at the tables, the big screen shouting cricket over the top of raised voices. Can’t see myself going in, but maybe in a month or so will choose something from the blackboard menu above the bar.

Across the road, the six story red brick hotel and conference centre. Recessed entrance, glistening glass, taxis waiting. Shades of Manhattan, my own little slice of the USA: McDonalds, Seven Eleven, a hotel and a twenty-four hour florist. Did AC walk down here? Snack on a late-night hamburger? Eat at the pub? Stroll along the riverbank on a Sunday, walk this walk for a paper?

Might read the review in the hotel café just beyond the foyer which overlooks the river.

Conductor’s Programming More Than Inspiring

As resident conductor, Lucien Mann has been instrumental in the surging interest in new compositions by Australian composers following his decision to develop a concert program that premiers a new composition at each performance. This in itself is laudable, but should it be at the expense of the audience’s enjoyment? Has his decision to link these new compositions with the traditional repertoire, pieces that demand orchestral experience, stretched the
undeveloped skills of the many new members of the orchestra too far? Their addition, it was argued, would halt the general feeling of stagnation among the public and raise the orchestra’s standard, but the very evident lack of experience was telling, particularly in this interpretation of the Mahler.

Any performance of Mahler demands outstanding individual performances in order to do justice to his orchestral colouring and while most solo performances were adequate, few were outstanding. This resulted in a flat rather than lively interpretation. Although the audience was enthusiastic in its reception, one needs to remember that performances of Mahler are infrequent in this city.

As to Russell Yardley’s symphonic Morning Flight, this pastiche of croaking cries in a post-modernist swamp, this collage of percussive parries, did allow the new talent in the orchestra to show that traditional instruments can do more than meet the sweet demands of the traditional repertoire: the hum of early morning traffic, the screeching of trams, the rumbling interpretation of a train ride, even the percussive drumming that escapes the earphones of the adolescent passenger, were all technically brilliant, but was I moved? No. Even the lyrical viola solo by Patrick Kimble in the second movement failed to balance the cacophony of the first, and the frenzied dissonance of the third.

Lucien Mann needs to be kinder to his audience. I found myself stretched beyond my listening sensibilities. This was a performance where both performance and programming were lacking.

Richard Lachlan Barstock, a regular theatre reviewer, writes the programs notes for The Musical Society’s Sunday Performances.

The shit. The ignorant shit. He wrote the program notes for one year, the year he was secretary. Nominated himself, then lost both the job and the position the following year. He’s clearly been asked to fill-in because of illness. He has no respect for the preparation, no knowledge of the music and clearly hadn’t read beyond … it’s early
morning and as preparation for the day begins... in the program notes or he would have known that it was based on a dawn bombing mission. In Lachlan’s world, everyone else is parochial.

God, it’s awful. Is it revenge because he’s been left, or what? And that nonsense about emerging composers; he wouldn’t know one if he fell over one. He left the flat during the practice of anything composed after 1900.

Lambaste: to beat with the end of a rope. Really know what AC meant: to inflict a punitive thrashing. Patrick will not be flattered, he’ll be furious. And Lucien! We worked so hard to learn those new techniques. No wonder critics are held in such disrespect. He’s the worst sort: everything relates to his narcissistic ego; he knows nothing about the composer’s viewpoint or intent. He is AC’s cardboard cut-out of the one dimensional person who only sees things through the window of personal experience.

His phone has an old-fashioned ring tone. He doesn’t seem to be there and this is not something to leave a message about.

‘Lachlan Barstock speaking.’
‘Hi. It’s Zoë.’
‘Zoë, I thought I might be hearing from you.’
‘What in the hell do you think you’re doing?’
‘About what?’
‘That review. You’re supposed to be a professional critic, not using a fill-in opportunity to attack me by attacking the orchestra.’
‘Zoë, you flatter yourself.’
‘You’re supposed to be the experienced listener, to be discriminating, to be able to interpret a new work within the tradition of the old, and all you’ve done is attack Lucien. It’s not fair.’
‘What’s not fair?’
‘To attack him. There was a standing ovation both before and after interval, and you don’t mention it?’
‘Critics are supposed to look at the bigger picture Zoë. It’s not only the single performance that’s at stake.’

His ‘wise’ voice is so knowing. He has never been a bigger picture man.
'Lachlan, anyone with such a biased view is hardly interested in the bigger picture.'

'Zoë, it’s bigger than yours. You have to admit you never move beyond those moments of personal gratification.'

'That’s really offensive, Lachlan. You know a musician has to be in the moment of playing. It doesn’t mean we’re incapable of anything else. Logic and feeling can be embodied in the one person. They’re not mutually exclusive. Or perhaps, in your world, they are. You seem to have neglected the moment entirely.'

'You weren’t sitting in the audience. Don’t tell me you know how it sounded.'

'You are unbelievable. Lachlan, you might have been present, but you weren’t there. You didn’t even read the program notes.'

'Get real Zoë. As long as a review reads well, and it does, and as long as the copy’s in on time, the editor’s not going to worry. Classical music is a once-a-week-dead-end art form and nothing’s going to resurrect it. Why else do you think I was asked to review it?'

'You’re despicable. That’s like putting a knife into my back. And it’s not true. The audience didn’t stand up for nothing, but you don’t go often enough to understand that. It’s critics like you who alienate the public: you criticise unnecessarily, in ignorance, and designate it as passé. That’s the problem. What’s more, you don’t understand how being in the moment of creation is a pleasure in itself. You’re like my aunt, chain-mailed in language, a language that keeps you separate. And don’t think because you’re smart with words, and can write, you will determine the life and death of music. Go back to your books, your perfectly edited dead books. Live music speaks for itself. You don’t know what it means to give life to anything. And it’s not only children.'

'You’re a right proper bitch when you put your mind to it, aren’t you?’

'Yes.'

He’s hung up. Thank God he’s the one to make the severance this time. Damn. All this anger is going to muck up my practice. A cup of coffee and sitting quietly with AC’s papers might just calm me down.
the act of revealing or disclosing
something revealed or disclosed esp. a striking disclosure, as of
something not before realised
God’s disclosure of Himself and His will to His creatures
an instance of such communication or disclosure

Paul. I wish I knew when he was coming. His visits are so disruptive. Today he arrived as I was cropping my photographs of the Iraq War demonstration. I had been pleased with them because I thought they captured the serious mood of the march and the diversity of the demonstrators, but he soon set me straight.

‘The cropping won’t make a difference,’ he said. ‘If you’re trying to influence the public you can’t, not unless you contextualise. And you can’t choose where the magazine or newspaper will place them. If they’re juxtaposed next to the latest hike in petrol prices their effect will be totally nullified. You know John Berger’s photograph of the boy standing in the cherry tree laden with blossom. Not one out of nine people interviewed thought of him as he was — a young man standing in a tree near the White House trying to take a photograph of a demonstration of 400,000 people protesting against the Vietnam War.’

‘I still believe photographs can speak for themselves.’

‘And say what?’

‘That there is more than one view of the world to begin with. Look at these young people dancing around a fire in the middle of St Kilda Rd. That doesn’t happen without a reason. And what about all the parents with children who were marching? Look at their faces. Doesn’t this say
it wasn’t just a demonstration of radicals? This was a cross-generational, cross-cultural, everyman-march.’

‘You’re waxing the poetics of political correctness,’ he said. ‘Those photographs portray what was there, for that moment, but take that one of the father holding the child above the crowd, it could have been taken at any gathering on St Kilda Rd. You’re constructing a narrative that isn’t in the photograph. You could never use it as evidence.’

‘Those photographs we saw on television last night taken in the trenches at Gallipoli, that pile of bodies in the prow of the ship. Surely that said something. Weren’t you moved?’

‘Sure. Moved. Disgusted. Shocked. But who had time to photograph them? When was it taken? Did you notice that there were no bodies on the beach? And what about the special treatment the other photographs were given so they appeared three dimensional. It allowed me to feel more present, but adding depth doesn’t make them any more authentic, or let me experience what those men felt as they tried to disembark. What do you expect me to feel when most photographs taken are someone else’s emotional short cut to the past?’

‘I don’t know, but I want you to feel something. The truth is that most of us can’t watch the reality of death, particularly the brutal deaths that occur in wars. That’s why we only see the mopping up, the after-the-fact representation that is supposed to symbolise the action that has taken place off stage.’

‘Celia, that’s not new. Even Shakespeare killed and maimed off stage.’
'What are you saying, Paul? That because he did it we should do the same thing? By denying us the experience of death we continue to support something that’s inhuman. The Vietnam War protests came about partly because of the images. They were dreadful, but at least we knew. Now we see nothing.’

‘But Celia, surely this is what it means to be human: to deny the truth of death.’

I wish Paul would stay away. He confuses me dreadfully. He makes me doubt my belief in the photographs I have always held to speak the truth. He would argue that only the person who took these could know the truth, but I know my father didn’t and he could never see it.

In my father’s eyes, Paul and Maxine were simply joking with each other. They were ‘being a little ironical as they both liked to be,’ he said. He didn’t see the bedroom eyes that betrayed their true relationship. Certainly there is a truth in saying they were both smiling. But the question is why? Nor did he see the rope in the background. ‘Celia, I was taking photographs of you, not the tree. I didn’t even see the tree,’ he said. ‘It never occurred to me that it was in the photographs.’

It never occurred to him that the truth was in the photographs.

But, in spite of what Paul says, there is a truth. To the naked eye, the rope looks safe. Even enlarged, the rope looks safe. But it wasn’t. So here’s the essential contradiction: on the one hand the camera is recording the truth of what is there but, on the other, that truth is a lie or open to interpretation.
In the second photograph, the one submitted at the inquest, the rope is also evident, but again it is almost by accident. The frayed end is visible above the cabin of the ambulance. Although the back doors of the ambulance are open, the ambulance officer and family doctor are looking down at the ground. Paul’s body is completely covered by a towel, except for his feet which fall awkwardly. Maxine and I are standing apart, but our stances are almost identical; our heads are lowered, our arms are folded over our chests, but my right hand is hiding my eyes. The bonnet of Dad’s white two-tone Holden Premier — with its white trimmed wheels as Dad pointed out at the inquest — juts out beyond the back of the ambulance. Beyond that, on the right, Paul’s motor-bike stands as he left it and, further right, his parents’ car is descending the dirt track leading to the river. A cloud of dust is lifting from behind their car. The front chrome bumper is catching the light of the late afternoon sun. Everything looks calm, but in truth everything was in turmoil.

It’s hard to believe what she is writing, but there’s no more time for her papers now. Family History — The Alternative Version. More information still needed before it can be put in front of my mother. My grandfather was clearly there when Paul died, or whoever it was, but he’s just another brick in that wall of silence.

The need to finish reading these papers, and clear them away — so pressing. Sophie, James and Patrick will be here at two and they won’t want to see me distracted. They need to see me putting the demands of the quartet first and if they’re equally as enthusiastic about Mozart, then the cello will have a voice. Patrick is happy to compromise about composers as long as one of them is Shostakovich. They said they wanted breadth. Fingers crossed.

Why is it only in the depths of the night that one finally sees the day? If my day were a theatre piece, and reviewed, it would read like one of those avant-garde imitations of a standing still soap opera.
Musician Fails Endurance Quest

The day began badly for Ms Zoë Wallace. Who wants to start by defending one’s livelihood against an attack in a review written by her ex? Not Wallace. Although she handles the confrontation with poise and dignity she feels somewhat shaken inside. This sense of disequilibrium is reinforced when on reading about her aunt’s life she discovers that all of her family have been lying to her. For an opening scene, this captures the audience but the plot does seem a little weary: surely there are no family mysteries we haven’t heard before. Can we really expect a challenging denouement?

Act Two focuses on the quartet she has recently joined. Mozart and Shostakovich should be manageable in an afternoon one would think, except a close friend and colleague from the quartet, who clearly has some feelings for her, decides that he will not tolerate the behaviour of the ex who wrote the review, and leaves with intent of speaking to him. Our heroine, who had hoped to ask his advice about the family matter, is left after the tense rehearsal, torn between wanting to warn her ex. for whom there are some remnant feelings, and hoping that her friend will do some serious damage, like break his jaw. The conclusion to this act borders on farce and while Wallace’s performance was sincere it was not convincing. In our hearts we were annoyed with her ambivalence. A hardly done by heroine only holds our interest if she has suffered and moved on or if she is overcome by suffering.

Act Three finds our heroine alone among her aunt’s papers, soliloquizing about her future. Not only is she surrounded by her aunt’s rubbish, but reflecting on whether she will end up just like her: alone, wrapped up in
music instead of paper and taking dusk walks along the riverbank. She calls her father, who once again directs her to speak to her mother and encourages her to take heart. Her ex calls and says he’s going to sue her friend. She returns to her aunt’s desk and opens a new bundle of inherited papers, but after sorting out the cuttings and putting aside the aunt’s notes she decides she will never know the truth and the closest she might come to any truth is by making the landscape her true companion. The act closes with her frantically restacking the papers she has yet to read into a new pile in the hall. This denouement scarcely has the hallmarks of a tragedy, but there is a certain poignancy in this tragedy in the making.

The review is stodgy, segmented and lacks Lachlan’s acidic wit, but that is his trademark, his ‘branding’ as he defensively said when Patrick told him he deserved to be attacked for his ‘croaking cries in the post-modernist swamp’ comment. Of course, he would claim that my review lacks tension, that it has no universal theme, that it’s nothing more than an inflated personal history — and, after all, who really cares about individual resolutions when the world is falling apart?

There’s an echoing in the silence of this bedroom tonight, just as there was at AC’s desk. Odd. It feels like the slow drawing of my bow across the lowest possible note, the one played when the cello has to be taken into my heart and breathed with as one.

The possums are running over the roof, crossing between the eucalypt outside my window and the Moreton Bay fig whose overarching limbs touch the roof of the flat.

The night is black. The traffic is sombre. And my heroine wants to sleep and wake to another day.
Chapter Twelve

Nursing dreams. Holding onto the deliciousness of a forbidden kiss, but it slips between my eyelids and escapes into the sunlight falling on the bed. His face fades. It belongs to someone in my past, but the kiss lingers within me, waiting for the somnolent state between sleeping and waking to replay itself, and perhaps leave me on the stony path of an unwanted memories.

‘There were two in the bed and the little one said, roll over, roll over. So we all rolled over and one fell out.’ But his face will not roll over, or out. It languishes in my unconscious, lurking in wait for the drifting space between night and day to reclaim me.

My day has arrived. For once, there are no compelling demands. A quartet rehearsal this afternoon, but this morning I am at my leisure! And the choice is, despite my misgivings yesterday, to walk along the riverbank in the sunlight.

For autumn, the sun is warm, although there are hints of a lingering mist. Human traces are everywhere: plastic bags snagged on branches and twigs, and — these are the bags all tattered and torn that make the riverbank all forlorn.

What’s that across the river, something moving against the current — the end of a submerged limb? Possibly, but it seems to moving upstream. Taking a fix on where it is in terms of that small patch of reeds on the other side should tell me. It’s moving. It looks like a turtle — it’s too small to be a tortoise. Yes, it’s a turtle swimming upstream, so slowly that even a stroll at Nan’s pace would leave me winning the race. Now, that’s something I would never have imagined.

Trying to imagine this river as a site of death is difficult, but drowning occurs, even along this populated riverbank it could happen. Memories of that childhood visit to a river come back. The day is hot. My parents are standing each side of me, holding my hands and swinging me over the water. The riverbank is muddy and my mother is saying, ‘Keep her feet out of the mud. I don’t want her shoes spoilt.’
My shoes are red, my socks are white with small red flowers on their turned down tops. The river in front of me is calm near the bank but flowing rapidly over the not too distant rocks. Suddenly, the air rushes over my face and my feet are in the slurry of the river’s edge. My mother is sitting on the ground and my father is laughing.

‘It’s not funny,’ she yells. Her heel is stuck in the mud and she is trying to pull it free. My father lifts me onto the high, grass embankment and smiles. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘your shoes and sock are certainly muddy. Let’s take them off.’ He tucks them into his pockets and lifts me onto his shoulders. From this vantage point my mother can be seen stalking back to the car — if it’s possible to stalk with one shoe off — twisting her skirt around to inspect the dirt and yelling, no, screaming at my father in an unrecognisable voice, ‘I told you I didn’t want to come here. Why don’t you listen?’

Was that the riverbank? If it was the place, it must be visited. Perhaps Patrick would come with me, although it is a little tricky. What if he reads more than friendship into it?

Only a few more bundles to read, and the living room will be clear. It would be good to finish one more before the others arrive.

to tease

- to worry or irritate by persistent petty requests, trifling raillery, or other annoyances often in jest
- to pull apart or separate the adhering fibres of, as in combing or carding wool
- to raise nap on a (cloth) with teasels, teazel
- to give height and body to a hairdo by combing the hair from the end towards the scalp
- to flirt
The Monday was hot. Paul and I had inevitably discussed the effect of the weather on political activism the night before. If you were hungry and cold it would make sense to revolt, to burn anything not nailed down, something that was superfluous like an elegant chair, or a hoarding, effigy or flag. But I had no thoughts of politics on that holiday Monday which prolonged the weekend and gave me a last chance to swim in the river before the cooler days of autumn set in.

When I saw them come out of the bush and recognised the towel and shirt I was angry and hurt and in no mood for levity or teasing about my leap year birthday which had been the week before. I was twenty, not five.

Paul was not particularly strong — he had tired more quickly than I had when we were holding the banner during the demonstration — and I struck where it hurt most. ‘I would rather be five than short and weak like you. You might be twenty, but you can’t swing out on that rope and do a honey pot in the middle of the swimming hole.’

He wasn’t a particularly strong swimmer, and I knew he would find it difficult to hold onto the rope. He hesitated and I attacked again. ‘I thought you said you weren’t afraid of anything, not even going to jail if you were called up. Come on. Show me.’

Maxine was clearly furious and telling him not to listen to me, but I knew if I asked whether he was more afraid of the water than the drop from the rope it would be enough to make him take up the challenge.

The sun was hot and the water was cold. Do revolutions take place in the heat of the sun or does one wait until the sun has descended when the blackness of the night allows one to hide in the shadows thrown by the fires? In the daytime, there is always the danger that the sunlight will illuminate what has blended
into the shadows. And there is the anger and fear generated by what is seen, whether it be lovers or blood staining the water red.

Paul says he can never understand the popularity of red, the conflation of passion and blood.

How can someone’s words make me fearful? There’s an indulgence in her notes that is irksome. They make me anxious, force me to re-evaluate my life. Passion and blood. Terrorists depend on passion and blood. Their passion leads them to the act, and the blood makes me fearful. Even when it isn’t visible, it makes me fearful. Blood carries the life-force. If it escapes we die.

Damn. Someone’s already at the door. There’s no time to read more. Who would want to read more? Everything is maudlin.

‘Patrick! Hi, you’re early.’

He steps through the door and offers me a bottle of wine.

‘It’s to toast the future of the quartet. We need to pat ourselves on the back.’

‘Watch out for the bundles. I’m now putting everything I don’t want back into the hall.’

‘Right.’

‘Look, the sitting room is almost clear, save for the two bundles on the desk.’

‘Great.’

He’s looking awkward and I can’t help asking whether there’s something wrong.

‘No,’ he says. ‘But I do have a favour to ask. My sister-in-law’s sick and we’re short of three in the Trivia team. I know it is short notice, but would you help out tonight?’

‘Not if Lachlan’s there.’

‘I haven’t asked him. Who wants to speak to him, let alone see him.’

‘Okay. But I have a favour to ask of you. I want some advice about my aunt’s papers.

‘Throw them out.’

‘Yes. I’m beginning to think that’s what I should do, but I found several references to the incident that I think caused the rift between my mother and aunt, and my family are denying it completely. It’s difficult because everything’s in fragments.
It’s hard to piece together what happened, and my mother and grandmother insist that my aunt was the one who chose to separate herself.’

‘Do you really need to know?’

‘I want to know. I finally have an approximate date. It has to be in the late sixties, during the Vietnam War and on Labour Day in March.’

‘What about doing a search at the State Library. There might be a newspaper report.’

‘What a good idea. She supposedly worked there. I feel driven to understand why she left everything to me.’

‘I can see that. But it’s taking up such a lot of your time. Let it go. This place could be really nice if you got rid of her stuff. Just accept the gift and move on.’

‘You’re right. But I hate being lied to. I’m beginning to distrust my family and I’m feeling excluded. Why should I be the only one to not know?’

‘Have you really talked to everyone?’

‘Everyone, except my grandfather.’

‘There’s usually someone just dying to tell a family secret. Won’t he tell you?’

‘He might, but I’m nervous about the flack from my grandmother if she finds out.’

‘Then don’t tell her.’

‘God, you’re devious.’

‘Not really. They’re acting on a need to know basis, why shouldn’t you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you want me to come with you?’

‘Would you?’

‘Yes, but there’s a catch. You have to come with me tonight, and, I have to tell you, there’s no guarantee Lachlan won’t be there. He is one of the team.’

‘That’s a hard ask, Patrick.’

‘Two of us against one.’

‘Okay, okay.’

Sophie wants us to start by playing the K. 589 slowly — very slowly. It’s not just to pick up the interweaving of the melodic line, she wants to fine tune the intonation of each of us and pause at any point where ‘sloppy’ playing interferes with the nuances we are trying to develop. It’s so unfair to be critical given my limited experience with
quartets, but it’s the excitement of playing a piece that generates the stamina to play it through. That’s what it means to practice, not stopping and starting in this way. Mozart’s will be turning in his grave, or will he? Clearly, there is more than one way of doing things in the world of music.

We are all a little nervous, and hesitant to comment on the playing of each other, but thank goodness we have all slipped up and need to think about our interpretation.

But it’s tedious, annoying and constraining. The shadow of that teacher, the incompetent and hovering Simon Grant, lingers, like a spectre. Was a piece of music ever completed with him? Even before an exam, he never heard the whole piece.

This stopping and starting makes me feel like one of those push-and-pull animals. Can’t help shuffling on my chair and thinking about the liner notes Patrick quoted before we began: ‘Quartet playing is like a good conversation between friends.’ This is hardly a good conversation.

Patrick glances at me as we conclude and raises his eyebrows. Does he sense my irritation? This is our first rehearsal. Is he sympathising with me or thinking this is the way it should be? We have barely put down our bows when my irritation spills out.

‘Well, that was interesting!’

Sophie glances at me with surprise in her eyes.

Patrick says, ‘That was a good start. Let’s take a break and really play the music. Zoë, now, let me be mother. What do you want to drink? Tea, coffee, wine?’

Sophie and James are looking at each other. There is going to be a lot more discussion about how we approach the music before this rehearsal is over.

Uncertainty about my approach is new. The well-established rituals and routines which have brought me success are going to be questioned if Sophie wants to practise like this.

Stop! Be flexible. Be open. Don’t assume.

‘Drink, anyone?’ Patrick is heading for the kitchen.

‘Patrick, wait. I want to help.’ We can’t speak because the kitchen opens directly onto the living room, but my raised eyebrows, and the drawing of my finger across my throat, raises a smile and a nod.

‘Wine, tea or coffee,’ he yells out.

‘Wine,’ they both reply.
Good. It will be cheese and biscuits if we’re having wine. Ten points for buying them as well as a cake.

Sophie and James are leaning against the kitchen door-way when Sophie says, ‘When did you two expect to finish?’

‘I thought we’d probably work for a couple of hours today,’ Patrick says. ‘What about you?’

‘Two hours is fine,’ Sophie says. ‘I suspect we have different ways of working and need to talk it through. There are four parts and four voices. I thought we had a reasonable balance that time, but we might need to talk about the way we want to rehearse.’

So glad that my back’s to her and she can’t see what must be visible relief in my face.

‘Why don’t we do that before we run through the Mozart again?’ James says. ‘There are a couple of points of interpretation I want to discuss.’

‘Well, cheers,’ says Patrick, holding out his glass of wine. ‘Here’s to establishing ourselves as a new force in the music world.’

Clever Patrick. He’s drawing us together around our common purpose.

‘Cheers,’ says James. ‘Zoë, I thought you could play with a little more emphasis in the opening of the second movement. When I picked up the theme I thought I sounded too strong. What do you think?’

‘I’ve listened to two interpretations and both of them emphasised a sort of honeyed blending, but I’d like to try to more emphasis on the interweaving,’ says Sophie.

Here’s my chance to write my own script, ‘But I also think that playing it so slowly prevented the interweaving from being heard.’

Patrick jumps in with, ‘Yeah. How are we going to approach these sessions? We’ve chosen the music we want, but we haven’t talked through the interpretation or how we are going to achieve it. I think we need to come to these sessions prepared, play it through then go talk it through. I hope you don’t mind Sophie, but it’s what we bring here that we need to start with rather than one person’s vision. I’m sure there will be times when we disagree, but we have to enjoy this work, not just the competition performance or there’s no point. I want to win, but not if the lead up is torturous.’
Sophie looks a little uncomfortable. We all see it, but it’s James who says, ‘It might take a few weeks for us to find a way that suits all of us.’

‘Yes,’ Sophie says. ‘I was in a group for a couple months with a dictatorial monster who insisted we analyse every bar. I didn’t enjoy it, so I’m happy to try another way.’

‘Right,’ says Patrick. ‘Let’s get back to work. Zoë, you take a stronger lead in the second movement and let’s see what happens with the rest.’

This time, all our eyes are on Patrick. We’ve decided against having a leader, but it’s Patrick who taps us in. He follows my lead into the second movement, his head and eyes moving with mine then, as the melody passes to James, he turns to him. Again his eyes move from James to Sophie, before he glances at me during the extended cello note which is unpinning the harmony, and we are suddenly listening and responding to what each is playing. Patrick is remarkable. We’ve become a group.

‘Patrick, what are we going to do if Lachlan’s here?’

‘Zoë. Forget him. Take no notice.’

‘I’m really nervous.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t be so naïve. Feelings don’t disappear overnight, nor do habits stop.’

‘I thought you decided he wasn’t for you.’

‘I did. There’s really no place in his life for me. I’m the adjunct, the handbag, the perfect accompanist playing second fiddle to his notoriety and success. I’m introduced as Zoë instead of his partner, and if I’m asked what I do he answers for me. It’s as if I can’t speak.’

‘How insightful Zoë.’

‘Don’t be sarcastic. You don’t understand. It’s not so easy to put someone out of your mind. In some ways they’re like a piece of music. They linger in your memory, play with your psyche, turn an ordinary day into a nightmare.’

‘Well, get ready to face your nightmare. He’s here.’

‘Shit.’

And there he is, just as I first saw him; back upright, glass of wine in hand, looking towards the door and me, but he doesn’t smile. Damn. There are no spare chairs at the other end of the table, only next to, and opposite him.
‘Patrick, you have to sit next to him. Not me.’

‘Fair enough.’

It is my worst nightmare. The cacophonous babble in the room is hurting my ears. There are difficulties with the microphone and it screeches in between the MC’s, ‘One, two, three, four. Testing.’ At any moment my mind will have to close itself off, not only to the noise, but everything, particularly the pain of facing Lachlan.

‘Patrick. Zoë. What a surprise to see you both here,’ he says.

Patrick quickly replies, ‘I was just going to say the same thing to you.’

‘I on the other hand have absolutely nothing to say to you, Lachlan.’ It’s an uncontrolled blurring out, but too bad.

‘There, there pussy cat. Put your claws away and let me pour you a glass of wine.’

He’s out to impress. It’s a Coonawarra Shiraz. One of the special dozen he bought to put down. Patrick passes the glass of wine and puts the six pack of beer he’s brought on the table. He breaks one from the cardboard pack, twists off the lid and puts it to his lips.

God. In the time it’s taken Patrick to take off the lid, my glass has been emptied. Idiot. The wine’s gone immediately to my head.

‘More wine, Zoë?’ Lachlan asks

‘No thanks.’ Nothing will entice me to take anything else from him. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, Lachlan, nearly all the people at this table are parents. What are you doing here?’

‘I always respond to a call for superior knowledge, Zoë. I would never want to be a second fiddle to anyone.’

Patrick shakes his head and slams his bottle on the table.

Is it my imagination or is this a direct attack on my place in the orchestra? An attack is needed. ‘Well, your superior knowledge didn’t help you with your choice of shirt, did it? Who wears cranberry these days? For someone who’s supposed to be in the know, Lachlan, you’ve slipped up.’

‘It’s burgundy.’

‘Not Beaujolais? Look Patrick, Lachlan is wearing his Beaujolais Nouveau shirt.’

‘Stop it, Zoë.’ Lachlan is furious.

for Beaujolais? See Lachlan, six for cranberry and four for Beaujolais. Do we get extra points for this?’

‘For God’s sake Zoë, sit down. You’re pissed already,’ Lachlan hisses, as he reaches for my arm.

‘Yes, on your wine. Let me pour you another glass.’ It’s a new bottle and feels unnaturally heavy, but it pours beautifully down the front of his shirt. ‘Look, it matches perfectly.’

Standing up, he reaches for the napkins in the middle of the table. ‘You really are stupid,’ he says as he tries to mop up the wine dripping onto his pants. ‘Really stupid,’ he repeats as he walks away.

‘Don’t forget your wine,’ is my final plea, but he’s already beyond the door.

Patrick stands up to follow him, but changes his mind. He’s taken another handful of napkins and is mopping up the wine on the floor. His shoulders are shaking. With laughter. And the MC announces, ‘Two minutes everybody. Are you ready?’

‘Ready,’ the crowd yells back.

_Noise, noise, noise. Zoë, you have more weeds in your garden of sounds than I have weeds in my garden._ Stupid, Simon Grant. Damn. The sound system has a low incessant buzz. It’s going to annoy me all night.

Patrick is standing up with a wad of wine-soaked paper. My face must say it all, because he’s leaning over the table and saying in a very calm ironical way, ‘Are we ready Zoë? No. Don’t answer. Just come around here and I’ll pour you a fresh glass of wine.’

No. Not ready, and never will be, is my unspoken response.

Patrick has gone, finally. Was it a Trivia night or a trivial night? There is nothing trivial about sitting at my aunt’s desk. Now that the computer has been put into the other room, there is a clear view through the window. The desk chair is uncomfortable. The arms are too high and my shoulders are pushed up. To draw my arms inside its arms is to take on a shape that’s rather bound and mummified. The cushion padding the seat which is wrapped in bright red, blue, green and orange Peruvian fabric has been squashed flat. Wonderful fabric. Like one of those psychedelic paintings that plays with our perception.
To be sitting in her seat is to occupy her space. To breathe the air drifting in through the open window, as she might have done, makes me a stranger to my own body. To undo yet another bundle, is to be swept through the door of her life, to lose myself as she inhabits my body and usurps my place. It’s like being absorbed into a foreign country.

But this bundle is different from the others. There are no words printed across the top. Beneath the top sheet of paper, there is a fine white linen bag with a zip fastener across the top edge — and inside, a large, white leather-bound photo album. It’s heavy and bulky, as if additional photographs have been tucked between the pages, but its pristine state suggests it hasn’t been handled very often. It falls open naturally, at a page midway.

There are no photographs. Glued to the parchment paper of the right-hand page is a program and her ticket for the Beethoven concert the year before last. On the left-hand page, she has arranged the reviews. Just one concert would have been extraordinary but it’s not just one, every page is the same.

It’s unbelievable. My first performance with the orchestra was six years ago and that program is on the first page. The last program is from the concert the week before she died. She seems to have been to every performance.

Feeling torn between being pleased and appalled, flattered yet uncomfortable. To think she was in the concert hall, watching me, but certain her niece was totally unaware.

Feel trapped. Did she know that this would be seen by me? Did she intend to leave it as part of the estate? It’s not like the other bundles, and thinking about it, it was propped on the end of the bookshelf rather than the floor, but then she was updating it, often.

Was this what my life was to her? A series of performances in which she could share my love of music? By participating in my performance, she became an essential part of my life, a member of the audience, something my family never was, except for Dad. Did he ever see her there? Has he been lying to me too?

She must have known how it feels to be separated from someone you love, how difficult it is when all the fabric of daily life has to be rewoven. Did she feel like me in this moment of being separated from Lachlan, wrenched from someone whose presence is like a second skin and with whom every movement is shared?
Too, too much to think about. Need space outside the flat. Need to walk, even for five minutes, even if it’s only down to the bridge.

The lights and raucous farewells outside the hotel speak of the city, but looking up the river, the day retreats into the vacant darkness that holds me mid-bridge with my arms resting on the rails.

The bridge feels solid underfoot, but the light which sets my shadow on the footpath, falls and dissolves in the darkness of the deep space below. Soaking up the darkness. Feeling the cool air rise from the water below. Feeling part bird, part human. Hovering on the edge of flight, as if the instincts that once went with my non-human heritage remain with me, urging me to fly, urging me to leap into the dark possibility of flight, wings sprouting, lifting the body and soaring over the water, singing a song-line of lucidity, weaving between the wheeling fruit bats until the rattling tram passes over the bridge and draws me back to my arms resting on the rail.
Chapter Thirteen

The sky is dark then, in the rising light, overcast. A grey melange of light and dark clouds. Voluminous. Punching bag full as the sun rises. Tainted. Gold then pink — the world unfolds in a changing sky.

Time is standing still in the warmth of this bed. There is little wind on this hazy cotton-wool morning, but the air is filled with the pungent combination of peppercorn, Moreton Bay fig and eucalyptus, the boisterous laughter of the boys at the boat shed as they prepare to row, and the intermittent whooshing of passing cars. Whoosh. Whoosh.

The thin sound of metal wheels on the tram tracks as the tram turns the corner — piercing. Still feel the shaking bridge as the tram passed and see the passenger on the rumbling tram last night; the silent face of mummified fatigue, staring at me.

The phone. Who would be leaving a message at 7.00 a.m. Lachlan.

Miss you.

Want to text back: please accept decision. Reconciliation not possible.

Can’t bring myself to be so final. Yet.

Last night’s late calls need to be checked.

And, another message from Lachlan. Meeting imperative. Can I come to the flat tonight? Please answer. How can it be anything else but more of the same? Is there any sensible reason to listen to what he has to say?

Yes. Quartet rehearsal at 4.00, come after 7.30.

God, the flat is shambolic. Shit. Nothing can be done about it and no matter how it looks, he’ll give me a lecture on how tasteless it is, how useless, how un-saleable, and detail its lack of functionality. Regardless, AC’s papers need to be read before they’re discarded. That’s the primary task.

Only a single stack remaining beside the wardrobe. This bundle looks interesting. Flee. It reminds me of myself, of being in flight, of wanting to leave. Now, that’s a flight of fancy.
to flee

to run away, as from danger, from pursuers
to take flight
to move swiftly

flight

the act, manner of, power of flying
a number of beings or things flying or passing through the air together
a journey by air, especially by aeroplane
a soaring above or transcending ordinary bounds, a flight of fancy
the real of artificial feathers at the back of an arrow
a series of steps or stairs between two adjacent landings

flight

the act of fleeing, hasty departure

You can see she is running, her naked body taut as she stretches forward like a runner wanting to be first past the finishing line. Stretched out wide, her arms are caught mid-air, as if held by invisible treads, her elbows slightly bent so she seems suspended like a puppet above on the road. She is crying, the torn flesh of her body flaking, a child caught in the indiscriminate path of chemical flames. It’s the suspension of time that counts most, her body is trapped in a defoliated landscape, leaves and clothing napalmed off to expose the naked trunks of the trees and the enemy. Her silent scream folds back into her open mouth.

At least we saw that photograph, unlike now when all we see is the silent mopping up after the bodies have been removed. There is no visible war. Last week, Paul and I fought once again after the news report showing yet another bombing. It doesn’t matter who was responsible, the coverage is the same. But there was something new in this report that neither of us had seen before: the
undeniable aesthetic appeal of a large pool of blood-stained water. In the background there was the usual scattering of blood-stained clothes, a pair of shoes neatly placed together, soldiers and civilians stepping carefully around the unidentifiable pieces of debris, but in the foreground there was a large pool of pink and blue water. The presence of blood was undeniable, but so was the reflected sky. The camera settled on it momentarily as a soldier stepped through it, started to move away and as if drawn by some unseen thread returned. The colour was exquisite. Finding an aesthetic aspect almost makes them beautiful. The implications are sickening.

‘They learnt from the Vietnam War,’ Paul said. ‘An informed public can undermine policy. An informed public understands it must wear the responsibility for the sacrificing of lives and the horror of injuries, but the cause must be moral. The political unity of a nation may be assured if this is the case, but unjustified injuries can polarise a nation into action against the war. The newspapers are more reluctant now to run the really graphic images because it’s distasteful and it might deter advertisers.’

‘It’s all about selling’, he says. ‘The image sells the product and it’s the image that sells the war. Haven’t you noticed, it’s all about the dignity of laying wreaths at war memorials, not about the soldiers who return home damaged. Did you know they controlled the reporting of the most recent war by embedding the photographers among the soldiers? Military rules prevent photographs of the dead from being published until families are notified and by then it’s ‘dead’ news.’

‘How in the hell do we object to that?’

‘Write about its dishonesty. Write about the facts.’ Paul says. ‘Fifty million died in WWII, but I’m not convinced that the second fifty million who died in other twentieth century wars were necessary deaths, although we were convinced at
the time. The reasons have to be very good for a young person to sacrifice their life.’

We watch the late news to see if they rerun the segment, but there are no war reports at all. ‘Sometimes,’ I say, ‘I wonder whether I would be hungry for real news if war reports ceased to exist. There is a sense that death and violence is the real world and everything else is trivial. What if we rethought our priorities and placed something else at the top of the list, something other than sport because it too survives because of its gladiatorial ancestry, something like music? Would we be happier?’

‘You’re simplifying again,’ Paul says. ‘It’s far more complex than that.’

‘No, it’s not,’ I shout.

‘For God’s sake, think about your own history, it’s not just the facts that count. Their reception matters just as much as their interpretation. You can’t remove them from a context that inevitably has more than one aspect. Look at what you had to put up with, even when the truth was known.’

‘That was different. It was never accepted as the truth because someone lied.’

‘That’s what I mean. You have to show up the lie. Question the accumulation of stories.’

‘No. But it’s the accumulation of stories that often creates the “truth”.’

‘Not if you question those you know are lies. Tell them that you didn’t like the report and why.’

‘Sometimes you exhaust me. You talk as if my capacity for protest is limitless, as if I’m the only one capable of seeing and taking action.’
'Leave a post-it on the computer and think about it tomorrow.'

Sophie and James seem happier as they leave this time. Perhaps it was a mistake to have the rehearsals here. Does the flat give me an aura of unwarranted power, an authority conceived in the osmotic power of ownership?

Patrick has lingered behind.

‘You seem tense,’ he says. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Busy week. My aunt’s papers are exhausting. I’ve been trying to make space for my things and my shoulder’s sore.’

‘Not RSI I hope.’

‘No,’ I say, knowing it’s a lie. The searing pain has gone, but a dull ache lingers across the back of my shoulder.

‘You know what you have to do. Smaller rehearsal and performance periods. Routine hours. Regular breaks. No practising when tired. I know you. Performance perfection. You seem to think that every performance will make or break your future. Why don’t you come cycling with me to tune out?’

‘Sure. I can just see me on a bicycle, Patrick.’

‘Why not?’

How is it that we read sincerity in a face? Which are the muscles that move with genuine concern? He has a wonderful performance mask, but this is not it.

‘Patrick. Don’t worry. Look it’s not just the rehearsal. It’s Lachlan. He’s coming around tonight.’

‘Why? You’ve made the break. Stick to it!’

‘Patrick, it doesn’t just stop like that. After five years we have history. Not all of it was awful.’ A flicker of pain crosses Patrick’s face. ‘I don’t know what is going to happen in the future.’

‘What about the quartet?’

‘This has nothing to do with the quartet.’

‘Right. Well, I’ll be off. See you at rehearsal tomorrow.’

Shit. He’s miffed. But I can’t do anything about it.

Lachlan’s shock is written all over his face.
‘I never imagined it would still look like this. Run down, neglected. I don’t think it’s been touched since it was built, and she wouldn’t have bought it new,’ he says. And he’s only scanned the passageway. As we enter the living-room, he sees the bundle on the desk, and walks over to it immediately.

‘How can you be interested in the ramblings of someone you’ve never known, someone you never met? I don’t understand it.’

‘She left the flat to me. Why? Of all the people in, or out of, her life, why me?’

‘This is no place to be living, Zoë. How can you rehearse here and remain focused?’

He’s moved out of the living-room and is opening the bedroom and bathroom doors. Suddenly the chipped paint, the worn taps, the stains in the bath and general state of disrepair fall into focus in the foreground like one of those three dimensional drawings.

‘Through your eyes it must look chaotic.’

‘Tired and dirty. It’s your dead Aunt’s neglected, musty shell. You don’t have to wear it, Zoë. I simply don’t understand you. Sell it and come back.’

‘Lachlan, what are you saying? That you’ve had a change of heart? That you’re prepared to sell up and have a family?’

‘What is this? Blackmail?’

We’ve teetered out of calm into exasperation and my throat is already tight, my voice edgy. ‘No. I want us to be together, but we have to be together for at least some of the same reasons. Don’t we?’

‘I always thought love was enough.’

‘Life doesn’t stop with, “I love you”. It goes on, becomes something else. Not just sharing a beautiful apartment.’

‘So you’re going to throw love away for the possibility of meeting someone else?’

His tone is disparaging, disbelieving and, to me, disrespectful.

‘I guess I am if you can’t see the possibility of children in our future.’

‘It’s all shit, Zoë. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? Look at your aunt. You should be reaping the benefits of what you have here. For someone who’s always talking about being in the moment, you seem to have really lost track of what it’s all about.’

The logic in what he’s saying must be flawed, but I can’t see it.
‘Sometimes the dream calls. It has to be followed.’

‘You sound like one of those Age of Aquarius gurus. Maybe this is the right place for you, walled up in someone else’s fantasy.’

The most ridiculous image has come to mind. Marianne is standing next to a bucket of water with a stick in her hand. A cow’s horn filled with cow manure, which has been buried in the ground for seven years, has just been emptied into the water and, as it’s her garden the liquid is going to fertilize, it’s her privilege to stir it. At first the water simply moves in a circle but, as she stirs more quickly, a vortex starts to appear, deepening until the spiralling well reaches the bottom of the bucket. Marianne is emphasising the importance of the vortex — it is only by creating a vortex that the mixture can be effective. It’s the style of mixing that’s important, not just the combination of the water and manure.

‘There’s no vortex.’

‘What?’

‘I was thinking of Marianne and her biodynamic gardening. It’s the way we are together that’s important.’

‘I knew it. She the one who’s been in your ear. Grow up, Zoë. It’s time to think for yourself.’

There is a still point at the bottom of the vortex and it has captured me. At the still point there is truth, and the truth is that it’s time for him to leave.

‘Lachlan. We will not be getting back together. Please leave.’

Surely he must listen. He turns to leave, but turns back again. No. Surely not another last ditch plea. This is so much harder than I thought it would be.

‘Thousands, no millions of people throughout the world live in flats,’ he says. ‘Why do we have to do the house thing. We live the accidental dream of the big suburban block, a sort of booty derived from avarice, the taking of what belonged to another. Do we have to live on God’s little quarter acre?’ The acid wit. And he’s struck again at the possibility of what might be a different way. ‘Didn’t you tell me that Marianne’s friend, Benedict, grew up in Paris where apartment dwelling is way of life. European cities thrive, don’t they? Families are raised?’

‘Lachlan, it’s not just the house, it’s the commitment to another way of life. A willingness to consider changing the way we are. You don’t want to do that. You don’t want to make space for the music I must play. Your life is bound up in a world I
scarcely understand and we don’t seem to be able to enter each other’s point of view. I can’t keep trying to appease you, your sense of what is good music or bad, your sense of the world of the past being the one we must respect. The flat isn’t really the issue. I have to live in the present, to be in the moment, to rehearse in the moment, to perform in the moment. I can’t go on practising to fit your routine, to live your vision of the world. Our lives and values are incompatible. Lachlan, it’s not just the flat.’

‘You’re overly sentimental,’ Lachlan says. ‘Full of Romantic notions.’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘That’s what makes a good musician, makes the performance seamless, makes it natural, dissolves the clunky error of a human presence that reminds us that music is man made.’

‘God. You’re full of it, Zoë, so full of bullshit.’

‘What do you expect me to be? A little silver disk that you can play over and over at the flick of a switch. I might seem a little driven but, yes, I’m human for God’s sake. Let me put it to you, Lachlan. How do you think I feel at this moment?’

He’s like one of those selfish boys described in the music camp booklet, ‘A Guide to Adolescent Behaviour’: Unit One emphasised the importance of encouraging cooperative behaviour. If they are uncooperative, remind them that they need to consider the feelings of others. ‘Well?’

‘You’re yelling at me.’

‘Of course I am. I’m exasperated. I’m supposed to belong to the selfish generation X. You’re too old. But you’re the one who’s selfish. Or is that a function of your age?’

For once he’s shocked. It’s never occurred to him, or to me before, that he is significantly older and at this point it counts.

‘I don’t know who you are anymore,’ he says.

‘No you don’t. I’m no longer your Miss Muffet. Your deception has curdled my whey. Now I want you to leave.’

The front door handle is slipping in my moist hand, as if it too wants to compound my anger and irritation, and he’s reaching past me to open the door.

‘I can manage.’

He goes down the stairs without looking back. Standing on the landing, suppressing the welling tears, making sure that he has really gone, is the person who has asked him to leave — me. It’s almost unbelievable.
Need to walk. Need to gulp down deep breaths of the misty night air and stop at the top of the hill where the light from the lamp-post falls in deep yellow wedges, fragmenting the smoky night, and let the city wrap me in the blur of its coloured lights.
Chapter Fourteen

Rain is pitter-pattering and splattering on the window panes, rushing from an overflowing spout, bouncing off the window sill, drumming on the roof like an incessant kettle drum — echoes of trickling water tumbling through the down pipes.

Water pooling on the ground, the squish of tyres on the road, muffled cars engines. The whining brakes speak of slippery corners.

It’s slowing … and abruptly it stops. From the leaves of the trees, dollops of water are falling onto the concrete path, soaking into the ground and continuing to fill those accommodating puddles.

That’s me — an accommodating puddle of uncertainty dependent on the whimsical fluctuations of the wind, sun and rain-men of my world. Accommodating of Patrick’s uncertainty when he wanted to stay after the Trivia night, but annoyed that after lingering for more than an hour he was unable to muster up the courage to ask and left with his desire unspoken. So this week he’s all practice and interpretation; our relationship is about the business of making music. He’s detached himself.

Feeling exhausted — fed up with dealing with the feelings of others when my own can’t be managed. Sometimes think Nan is right: *in my day getting married was something you did without thinking. All this relationship business makes it so complicated.* But even she couldn’t shore up the institution of marriage, although she and Pops did sleep in the same bed for twenty-five years. And being unthinking certainly didn’t help my very divorced, please-don’t-mention-one-in-front-of-the-other parents.

7.00 a.m. Time for the news. The tail end of the weather forecast: more rain predicted. The river will be swollen. My missing of those grey sheets of rain sweeping across the sea from the west was not anticipated. The only warning of rain here is the darkening of the sky.

The phone’s ringing. Who could it be at this time?
‘Zoë.’

‘Lachlan.’

‘Zoë, please don’t hang up. Something awful has happened and I didn’t want you to see it in the papers first. Dad was found dead on the Black Rock beach yesterday.’

‘Oh, Lachlan. I’m so sorry. What happened?’

‘The police are saying that he simply swam out until he didn’t have the strength to swim back.’

‘God. How awful.’

‘He left a letter with his clothes.’

‘Where are you?’

‘At his unit, going through his papers, looking for the names of people I should phone. Everything’s so orderly, nothing’s out of place, but I can’t find an address book.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t have one. I remember you saying, “If only he had some friends.”’

‘He didn’t seem so depressed two weeks ago. Shit. If I had visited last week I might have sensed something, but I was reviewing your bloody performance instead.’

‘Lachlan, are you laying a guilt trip on me?’

‘No, Zoë. No. I don’t mean that. He said he was okay, when I spoke to him, but he was very drunk when my mother dropped in later after tea. And very maudlin. He couldn’t stop talking about his friend Bob, the one who was killed by a landmine. I don’t understand it. He was so sensible when I called at five, wanting to show me the letters he found in my grandfather’s shell case.’

‘Shell case?’

‘Yes, you know that old torn piece of metal on the mantelpiece. Why didn’t he call me? I would have come immediately.’

‘Perhaps he was already preparing for his death.’

‘Yes.’

‘Lachlan, where is your mother?’

‘With her sister.’

And there’s the rub, the rubbery-dub nub.

‘Would you like me to come around?’

‘Would you?’

‘Of course. I’ll be there in half an hour.’
Maudlin is the word. He could be like that after only a few beers and mawkishly sentimental. Communicating with him was so difficult. Rambling stories with endless details, angry tirades against the enemy and government were the norm. The past and the present so mixed up that it was difficult to follow what, or who, he was talking about. My chest constricts at the thought of him sitting in the backyard drying his hair – my last memory of him. He was a bit like AC – stuck in a past he couldn’t resolve. Poor Lachlan. No wonder he was always worrying about him, but he never spoke about the depth of his depression. The problems were always his eating and his loneliness. Was he too alone? Is that why he drank too much? Poor Lachlan. And he’s having to deal with my decision to leave as well.

He looks ashen. We hesitate to touch, then he enfolds me in a crushing hug. There’s a sense of dependency in his hesitation to release me, and his back heaves as he releases a single sob. A condoling pat is the wrong move. He pushes me away and holds me at arms length as he regains his composure and says, ‘Thank you for coming. Have you eaten? There’s only toast, but I’ve just made a pot of coffee.’

‘Coffee sounds good.’

Lachlan is right. Everything is in its place except for the pile of folded clothes on the couch. His brown, well-worn, heavy soled shoes are on top of the stack, socks folded together, pushed into the right shoe.

Even his book shelves have been sorted. Everything is alphabetical, and he’s separated the novels from the poetry and his war books from the histories. Like father, like son. Hopefully, only in their minimalist approach to acquisitions.

‘Here,’ Lachlan says, holding out a mug.

‘You’re right. He did put things in order.’

Lachlan is pacing, unaware that he keeps pausing at the pile of clothes as he tells the story of the clothes being found on the beach, of the alarm being raised, of a search being instigated and how, after his body was washed up yesterday, he had to identify him by the criss-cross of stitches running across his abdomen, his face being already bloated.

‘My mother wouldn’t look at him, and her departing comments were, “I didn’t think it was possible for him to cause us more grief than he already has and I will never read that letter, nor forgive him”.’
'I’m so angry with her,’ he says in a rasping voice. ‘Why can’t she understand my grief? She has absolutely refused to help with the funeral arrangements. Told me to do whatever I like. She’ll come, but that’s it. You’d think they’d never been married, that I came from nowhere.’

He’s moved to the mantle piece and is lifting down the old shell case.

‘Look,’ he says. ‘Look inside.’ He pushes the canister across the table so I can see the roll of papers inside. ‘Hold it for me,’ and using his fingers like tweezers, he draws the roll out, but the roll springs open as soon as it’s released from it’s dark prison.

‘A few papers and photographs, that’s all. Apart from his books, this is his life,’ Lachlan says with harsh matter-of-factness. ‘Birth Certificate,’ he says as he tries to press it flat on the table. ‘Swimming Certificate,’ he says, as he repeats the process. ‘Confirmation. Literature prize. Degree. Teaching diploma. Marriage certificate. Army discharge.’ As he places them one on top of the other, they stubbornly arch up, the memory of the coiled darkness springing them back into a roll. He takes the photographs and firmly winds them back on themselves, forcing them to sit in a listing pile between us. ‘Baby photograph. Scouts award. Family Xmas. The family trailer packed for camping. His dog. My grandfather, my grandmother. Playing football ─ taken from the fence line – probably cut from the local paper. Dad in uniform, between his parents. My mother, and me as a baby. The two of us when I would have been four, and then there are these,’ he says, lifting the remaining dozen and tossing them like playing cards over the table. ‘Bodies, body parts and more bodies. Bodies lying awkwardly, arms and legs bent at peculiar angles, bodies covered in dark blood. Bodies without feet, limbs without bodies, bodies without heads.’ A feeling of overwhelming revulsion makes me look away. ‘Can you believe this? Are they his? I’m sure he’s not supposed to have them. And he’s in this one. Look. He’s standing with the group looking on. He witnessed this. He might have even been responsible. No wonder he was depressed.’

‘They make me feel sick.’

‘And so they should,’ he says. ‘And then there are these.’ He’s holding up an envelope with his father’s name written in large letters across the front.

‘What are they?’
‘Letters from my great-grandfather to his father, written during WW1. They’re even in their original envelopes. And then there’s this,’ he says, handing an envelope without a stamp. ‘It’s Dad’s suicide note.’

‘Are you sure you want me to read it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Lachlan!’

‘Do you want me to read it to you?’

‘If you want to.’

Dearest Lachlan,

I hope you will forgive me and understand my motivation for what I am about to do. I can hear your pragmatic voice saying ‘only Romantics die for love’ but I was one of those who believed that nothing was nobler than dying for one’s country. With us having spoken so little, you probably didn’t know that I was one of those. The denigration of my war has always been difficult to deal with. I returned a hero to my comrades but a pariah to society.

My war was horrific and has so locked me into my memories that I cannot absent myself from my past. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is a wonderfully descriptive medical term but it tells you nothing about the barbaric acts I witnessed on my tour of duty, the remnant images in my head, the haunted world that consumes me. Medication does not help. I find myself unable to withdraw from my remembered world, hence my decision to end both these memories and my life.

Thank God you will never have to live through such experiences.

I have felt keenly my inability to reach out to you in a meaningful way as a father should. I have always been the absent parent, present physically, a drain on your mother and yourself, but absent. Your mother’s indulgence in film and theatre, a compensation for the companionship I couldn’t give her, has given you an interest that might not have been had I not gone to war. I feel relieved that this gave you a future that was not in the armed forces. Witnessing our latest wars, I see how we swing on the kite tail of another country’s policies, almost a whimsical afterthought, like a dangling fluttering bow. Why I didn’t see this, I don’t know. My father was a bully of sorts and I never had the courage to develop my own opinion, something that my absence has given you.
I am enclosing two letters that were found among my grandmother’s possessions. They express for me the closeness between father and son that should have existed between us, and I hope you understand through them the horror of war and the indelible nature of the experience, something I have been unable to speak about. Of course the photographs say it all.

I have loved you, always, and hope these letters will help you to keep me and my history in your heart.

Your loving father,

Gavin.

Lachlan’s hands are shaking as he says. ‘And these other two. Shall I read them to you as well?’

‘Okay.’ He opens them one at a time, his fingers parting the torn edges so gently, the fragility of the papers clearly evident in the worn folds of the letters. He lays them on the coffee table and runs his hands over them lightly.

Dear Da,

It was a good thatching we did the last time we were together. The ridge was long, but we kept it straight with you marking its line against the distant horizon. If you could see my horizon now you would be wondering where the God we love has gone. What I wouldn’t give to be up on the roof tops, looking down and across to the horizon. Most of my days are spent looking up. Today the sky is no more than a narrow band, its edges chipped by last night’s bombing and broken by the protruding arm of a man we cannot retrieve

I would give up all to be with you again, up on a roof from which the distant hills seem so near and the trees so sharp when they are without their leaves. There remains but one tree on our horizon. Here the sky is grey with dust, the bombings ceaseless unless a truce is called to collect the dead.

You will be sorry to know that Tommy Heath has gone. He succumbed to his shrapnel wounds on the battlefield. Do you remember his good humour as we struggled to finish our last thatching? How the wind and rain were sweeping in? ‘We must finish today,’ you said as we gathered the yealms of straw. Tommy was behind you, his bundle as long and round as him. As we braced ourselves on the ridge, the wind took his straw
as if the Devil himself had snatched it from his arms, whipped it into the air and span it high above the trees. And then he started to laugh.

I can see him sharpening his shears, readying himself for his trimming of the small half circles and diamonds which he’d marked out with split hazel. It was a good decoration he made with the peacock, plump of body, its head and crest set to overlook the oak. He brought his shears with him, and I have them now. The sharpening of them is a strange comfort to me. His hands were strong and his laugh catching. I miss them both.

Gallipoli Peninsular,

Your Ross

‘And this is the second.’

Dear Da,

This morning we went down to the sea. It’s been a good while since I’ve been able to indulge in such a luxury. We bathe, whether we can swim or not, sometimes under enemy fire. I wish we could go more often. I have learnt to dog-stroke and can manage the distance between the water barges six or seven times now. Fresh water is always in short supply. Normally we are rationed two quarts a day, but the storm last week tore the barges from their moorings so we have even less at the moment, barely enough to drink, let alone for a shave.

I have been sleeping most of the afternoon. Tonight it’s our turn for the trenches. We follow them for nearly a mile, up and down gullies, and by the end the sweat is dripping off. About three in the morning we usually get the word to stand to then at daylight we go back to our dugouts. I’m still not used to being awake at night and sleeping by day, not that we sleep much with all the fatigue work needing to be done. This week we have been building up a parapet, and digging deeper, sixteen feet below instead of eight.

Letters from my Adele arrive once a fortnight but it is yours I wait for. You take this war beyond these trenches and give it some sense. We watch the enemy through periscopes. Some days I see nothing but smoke and dust rising from a landscape of rubble. And the noise: all is a scraping and thumping, the constant reverberation of explosions, the groaning movement of stores and arms, the sound of rifle fire, the
ringing of metal against metal and the cries of the injured men. It makes me think that silence has gone forever.

_Twas a good decision to keep Thos’s shears and grinding stone. They keep my hands and mind busy. I am using them for shaving and, as I can now cut hair quite well, I am often in demand. From straw to hair — is that a step up or a step down? I cannot tell anymore._

_Anyhow Da, the horizon is now a ragged line against a pink sky as the sun hangs up its hat for the day. I hope that this is not my last letter by long chalks, and look forward to your next,_

_Your Ross._

‘Do you hear the love between them?’ Lachlan says. ‘It’s palpable.’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t remember sharing anything with my father. He was always locked into his own world. Watching. Reading to me for sure when I was young, but it was someone else’s world we were sharing. He would sit on the chair beside the bed, body tilted forward, the open book spread across the palms of his hands, and he would chant the words in his slow steady way, as if he were seeing the world through the wrong end of a telescope. Distanced. It was hard to be swept into that world. Perhaps it was the books. He liked a story with a plot. He was never one for sharing anything emotional. That was left for the reading he did alone. Look around you. They’re the novels of his youth. All well worn, nothing new. All read and reread, their words and phrases like threads holding his life together. You saw the way he sat reciting the words without looking at the page.’

‘I didn’t realise he was reciting. I thought he was talking to himself.’

‘God, Zoë. It’s such a mess. I have no idea who to ring.’

‘Call your mother. She must know.’

‘She told me to do it.’

‘Lachlan, she must be able to help.’

‘I know. She thinks I should have taken a more active role in looking after him. She wanted me to move in, take care of him, but I wouldn’t. Being his son, he was my responsibility. She always acted as if I were only my father’s child, not hers, and we had to make our way without her. In fact, that’s just what happened. She would check that
we were okay and disappear, often taking the early or late shift at the hospital. “I’m a nurse,” she’d say, as if that was her only connection to the world and we were just another ward to be checked on. When I was older, she would leave us theatre tickets. “Take your father out. He needs a break from the house.” But she never came. So in a way the letter’s a lie. He loved live theatre, too.’

‘Call her. Tell her you want to ring his friends. Didn’t he meet his friends at the pub each week? Go there. Ask the barman. Didn’t he go to the local RSL?’

‘I’ve arranged to meet her at the funeral parlour this afternoon. We have to choose the coffin.’

He seems so vulnerable as he sits on the chair, letters hanging loosely from his hand as he asks, ‘What do you think of these?’

‘Disturbing. His words make his pain real in a way that looking at him never did. We sat on your balcony, so many nights, looking at the sky, the sea, never thinking beyond that horizon. The closest we have ever come to seeing suffering is in the censored reports we see on TV, the occasional graphic film and the flickering images of old war footage. But even watching those I feel detached. The uniforms make the footage resemble period dramas and the reports are so fragmented that we have no idea of what is really happening. All we know is that the men are fighting, and to fight one must scurry. And recently, there have been so many re-enactments that they have almost no impact at all. Lachlan, my aunt was right. If we really saw what happened most of us would never tolerate it. Isn’t that what happened with Vietnam? The powers that be haven’t let that mistake happen again. I doubt that we’ll ever see another 9/11. They’ll close the airways and, as with the London underground attack, we’ll only see a repeated sanitized report.’

Lachlan is looking at me oddly.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’ve never heard you speak like that before,’ he says.

‘It must be Aunt Celia’s papers rubbing off on me.’ Lachlan is putting the letters on the table. ‘Lachlan, do you really need me? I don’t think there’s anything I can do.’

He has taken hold of my hands and is lifting them to his lips. ‘I’ll always need you Zoë. Come back.’ He’s drawing me to him. His aftershave and the freshness of his clothes are so familiar, like a second self and it seems so natural to lean into his body
and put my arms around him. We kiss and inhale the aroma of coffee we have just drunk.

‘Mm,’ he says,

‘It’s the smell of coffee.’

‘Lingering,’ he says. ‘Like love.’ And we are slumping to the rug.

‘We’re on the Afghan. The one he saved for.’

Lachlan starts laughing. ‘And well worth saving for,’ he says as he passes his hand over it. ‘Soft. Like you.’

It is like velvet. Soft to the touch like his kisses. His hand stops at the midriff space between my jeans and top, waiting for my consent and my push against him is inevitable — unable to erase the tracings of our love. And he is freeing my breasts, lifting and cupping them in his hands, kissing each nipple, drawing them between his finger and thumb, tonguing them until what we’re doing is quite beyond question. Between the tangle of clothing is the moistness of our lips, the weight of his love as he presses me to him, our arms reaching, fingers caressing — backs, buttocks, pudendum — our legs intertwined as the inscriptions of our past kindle the crescendo we know will come.

‘You are so deliciously good,’ he says, as my body arches into him.

‘And you’re so deliciously bad.’ My voice is hoarse as we fall back exhausted onto the rug. We are both a little breathless, but laughing.

‘God,’ he says. ‘What was that?’

‘It’s generally called a release of tension.’

‘Whose?’

‘Don’t feel guilty. The last week has been difficult for me as well.’

We are releasing each other, sorting ourselves out; the undergarments, the over garments, socks and shoes. My eyes are drawn back to the pile of clothes. A pang of guilt, a sense of being disrespectful is sweeping over me. Lachlan follows my eyes.

‘He probably took off his socks and shoes first,’ he says. ‘That’s not how they were found. He put them into a plastic bag with the note. I folded them. I seem to have spent my life trying to tidy him up. Surely you understand why I don’t want children. I haven’t been able to save this one. I don’t think I can face the burden of another.’

There are moments of truth, and this was his. And mine.
‘I’m really beginning to understand, Lachlan. The pain is unbearable. It’s not only your father’s death. I see what this has done to you, to us. I’m so sorry, but I think I should go. I will call you later about the funeral.’

‘I might need your advice about cleaning out the unit. Make use of your experience. He rented you know. Everything will have to go.’

‘Ring me later today. Or I’ll ring you.’

Neither of us wants to kiss each other goodbye. That we are ‘taken aback’, no, that’s too mild — ‘shocked’, is mutual. This is not the time to talk about our future. He remains at the table as my whispered ‘bye’ drifts back to him from the front door.

‘Bye,’ he replies.

My car, for once, does not offer womb-like consolation. Driving is not leading to sanity. How does one pass the day when everything’s so chaotic? Nothing that made sense last night makes sense today.

‘Go see a film,’ Dad would say. ‘There is nothing like a good story to make one believe in the world. A nice tight narrative will set you straight. In ninety minutes you will be renewed.’

*Water*, the third of the trilogy directed by Deepa Mehta: *Fire, Earth* and *Water*. Elemental. Universal. And *Water*, is certainly both. All the topoi of this morning unfold in luscious blues and greys: a widow commits suicide by walking into the river; she folds her shawl and leaves it on the bank. Water gives life and water takes it: there is a depressing sense of her being unable to change the traditional world she inhabits, of her being captured in a history not of her making. To die is to reclaim her will.

Her only comfort was the huge old tree whose spreading limbs witnessed the love that might release her and the changes Ghandi might bring, but it was also a tree that symbolized the length of time during which women have struggled against the rules and regulations that demean them. And Lachlan’s father was demeaned by a senseless war.

AC’s view suddenly has more relevance. In the heart of the most abusive situations, we can see the ugly made exquisite. AC insists it’s this quality that allows us to tolerate the pain. Like all those paintings of the crucifixion. The pain is there, we know it, but the beauty of the image allows us to bear the suffering instead of fighting to abolish it. If the widow had been shown burning on the pyre, if we had seen her
struggling under water when her lungs were exploding with their need for air, leaving
the cinema without anger would have been impossible.

And Lachlan? Our love making was a way of making our pain tolerable.

The riverbank is my pillow book. It speaks of the darkening sky, cyclists racing at
speed, the companionship of dogs, the pounding heart of the runner and an insidious
awareness of self-betrayal, of being fearful of the future, of being used to assuage
another’s loss.

‘How could you have moved out?’ he said. ‘How can you suddenly decide you
don’t love me?’

And there’s another rubbery-dub nub. Looking back, my words were well chosen.
‘It’s about reciprocity.’

‘This is not a partnership,’ he said.

And, that’s the truth.

The possums are eating the last of the fruit on the Moreton Bay fig. Its roots rise
above the ground in a twisting maze, the bark wrinkled — crevassed like an elephant’s
trunk — ageless, sacred, venerable, lasting like the inscriptions we have etched into each
other.

And there’s yet another text message. Funeral at 11.00 a.m. Tuesday. Am
exhausted. Won’t text back. Simply need to sleep and it’s only 7.00 p.m. Never mind.
The wind is biting. Lifting the duvet this morning was to slip from the loneliness of night into the chill of an autumn morning. The riverbank so silent. No rowing, the suburban hum of peak hour traffic drifting northwards, away from the flat. The flat also silent; silent enough to miss Lachlan’s breath.

But, Emily’s advice was good: ‘Walk the riverbank,’ she said. ‘Daily. The path is there. It’s not the sea, but it will have its own interest. It’s not like you to be maudlin. Sophie said you burst into tears after a quartet rehearsal last week. You need to get a grip as my mother would say. Get those endorphins moving.’

Walking the riverbank. Charlie Chaplin would have loved its many variations on the theme of a walker’s elbow: slack, jerky, relaxed, committed. Lucien could commission Russell Yardley to compose a retro symphonic poem: Rites of the Elbow, or Dank, the Riverbank.

The path changes daily. The poplar leaves have turned black — rotting slurps of mud along the edges of the footpath. The branches of the deciduous trees are almost bare — scribbled limbs across a smudgy sky and the leaves of the recalcitrant oak near the flat have finally turned a bright, luminous red.

Thank God for the quartet. Such a distraction and a pleasure, or will be if Patrick’s moodiness, and Sophie and James exchanging glances, can be managed. Sophie’s comment at our last rehearsal says it all.

‘Patrick has become quite difficult. What’s the matter with him, Zoë? You’ve taken more prods than a piñata in the past three weeks. He’s fine when we’re playing, but afterwards! James wondered whether he should say something.’

‘No. Leave it. I will.’

It would be humiliating to confess to her how uncomfortable Patrick’s made me feel since the funeral. He doesn’t offer to help anymore. Not even with putting up the music stands. And he’s reneged on his offer to set up the computer.
‘You’ll manage,’ he said, as he put on his helmet and headed towards his bike. Does he feel betrayed? He did stand up for me against Lachlan on the Trivia night and, in the light of that, my standing next to Lachlan at the funeral is probably inexplicable. It was far too awkward to explain — hate confessionals about sex — didn’t even consider telling Emily.

‘You what?’ She would have said. ‘Never thought you were a masochist.’
‘Mea culpa, mea culpa,’ would be my plea.
And telling Patrick would be completely idiotic.

Marianne and Dad keep asking when he’s coming for dinner again, but there’s no point in asking him given his rejection of my offer of tortellini à la crème.

‘Sorry, Zoë. Thanks for the offer, but don’t have the time at the moment. I told you when we started with the quartet that I was ambivalent. Riding is really important to me, and I didn’t expect to be rehearsing as much as we are.’

Quartet practice — Monday and Wednesday mornings, Thursday afternoon — our commitment to the competition in June is starting to pay off. Some wonderful moments when we are playing, the harmonies converging like fingers folding into a palm then spreading out into the melodic lines of each instrument as they move away from each other. We’re so clearly connected through the music. Patrick has been instrumental. He hears the music before we play it, and he’s so gentle in the way he guides us, so patient with my struggle with the initial memorizing which has always been difficult. Intonation and interpretation have always come afterwards, but he interprets as he plays, recognise[s] the emphases in the rhythm and the phrasing immediately.

It’s probably the same sensibility at work in his reading of relationships and he’s certainly backing away from our friendship: playing music, yes; socialising, no.

An invisible weight of repressed expectations occupies the space between us, a repression neither of us can speak of — if it is words that are needed. He fills in any pause that might give me a chance to ask for an explanation, he avoids any opportunity for us to be alone and remains with other members of the orchestra instead of gossiping over coffee during the breaks. Text messages are his only replies to telephone calls and inevitably say see you at the next rehearsal. It’s a peculiar sort of double speak, of acting naively as if there is nothing to be said, as if this change is natural, when clearly he has determined that our relationship should change.
The simple gesture, the laying of a hand on an arm, which once spoke of our mutual understanding, has been soaked up into this space. A sense of longing for his old self, my safe haven, permeates it instead. There is loss. Of companionship. Of friendship. Even the walls of the flat exude isolation. God, could AC’s lifestyle be contagious?

He has even become mean about her. Perhaps Lachlan has been talking to him. He was so echoing of him yesterday.

‘Shit, Zoë, you still haven’t got rid of this rubbish. You’re lucky the rehearsals are here. You wouldn’t want to be dragging your cello case past this rubbish too often. I don’t understand why you’re not chucking it into the recycle bin as you go.’

‘And, neither do I.’

Spitting back was the only way of dealing with being torn. Simply did not want to tell him that it was Lachlan who said it should all be saved or nothing. Only a few weeks ago, Patrick would have asked kindly how many more bundles remained.

‘A few’ would have been my reply, but there’s a reluctance to read them. Emily’s right. It’s prevarication. Once done, there will be no excuse not to make the flat my own.

to shed

- to pour forth (water etc.) as a fountain
- to emit and let fall (tears)
- to cast, give or send forth (light, sound, fragrance etc)
- to throw off readily
- to cast off or let fall by natural process (leaves, hair, feathers, skin, shell, etc.)

Blood flows like water, thinning into filigreed threads on the ripples, pulsing with his heart beat until his heart beat stops. Even from the thinnest paper cut, blood oozes in a thin line, thickens and coagulates. And there it was in front of me again tonight. The announcer gave the warning spiel: viewers are warned that the following images may be distressing. I was warned, but I chose to watch.
The bloody area is large, irregular in shape, beside yet another crippled car, a tortured mass of metal whose edges are ragged, torn like the flesh we do not see. The image insinuates itself so that even today it comes back, fresh like the blood on road which was a crimson red.

The short, nightly fragments are of cars, buses, buildings. Torn and singed, covered with the fine granules of the dirt that was once beneath them, or the powdered concrete of the walls they once were, they are the timeless images of the new grim reaper, the visible manifestation of the threat of invisible diseases. Death with his scythe, his black hood and skeletal face has been replaced by the bloody rubble of the aftermath. We no longer see bodies, no longer see a corpse, even at rest, there is merely the suggestion in a misshapen bag, or length of cloth, the anguished face of a stretcher bearer walking in haste.

Paul often arrives at this time. He wants to lay his ghosts at rest, but these veiled images flickering across my screen don’t help. He hovers on the edge of the bed, unable to sit in comfort as the drone of the voice-over repeats the words we have so often heard.

‘It’s a sort of contemporary litany,’ he says. ‘A modern reading of good and evil, an evil used to terrify us, to justify all those new policies the government wants to bring in.’

‘Fear is a powerful weapon. Something that my father would never accept. When it came to war, he was always black and white. The enemy is out there and he believed he had to defend us against it.’

‘The trouble is, sometimes people are evil,’ he says, looking at me with irritation as he stands at the end of the bed. ‘Soon, you’ll be sounding just like my father.’
‘That’s a bit unfair.’

‘You have to make up your mind, Celia,’ he says. ‘You can’t continue to sit on the fence. You can’t hover on the precipice and see which way history falls. You’re part of history. It’s your actions, as much as any others, that could make the difference.’

‘Now you’re really exaggerating,’ I said. But I often think about this. What if I had not gone to the riverbank? What if I had not dislodged his head from the rock? What if I had not dared him to swing out on the rope?

He turns back at the screen as the news item changes to the impending rise in interest rates.

‘You’re lucky to own this flat,’ he says.

‘Yes.’ I said as the anchor woman announces an urgent news report. It’s yet another explosion, the dust has already settled and the blood is brown.

The blood was never brown at the riverbank. Only red. Maxine and I screamed as we ran into the water, then stopped. ‘Keep his head above the water,’ she said. ‘I’ll toot the car horn for Dad.’ We both knew, that I was the stronger of the two of us, so I continued wading out.

I was terrified. I could see immediately that he was not moving. I didn’t want to touch him, but had to, his body was skewing sideways in the current, pivoting from his head from which the blood seeped each time it moved. I had to keep him still, stop him drifting, stop him from drowning. His face was wet but facing upwards and I could see the water wouldn’t be able to flow over it if his torso remained still. He was so heavy. I had to lean into him with all my weight, wedge my knees between the slippery rocks while shivering with fear and fright, listening to the SOS blare of the car horn and Maxine’s screams for Dad.
Dear Dad. Later, as the ambulance drove away, he did try to help me understand that I was not responsible by asking the doctor what the cause of death had been.

‘It was without doubt the blow to the head. Had he simply been rendered unconscious he might have drowned, but your daughter made sure that didn’t happen. Once his head was split by the rock, death was inevitable, and there were other injuries. Damage to his spine, to the pelvis. It should never have happened. I’ll be contacting the council. That limb needs to be cut off. I wouldn’t want to see this happen again.’

Father, who accepted this view of Paul’s death, was always impatient of my tears. ‘You were so brave, Celia,’ he would say. There was no point in sharing my distress with him, the doctor’s explanation was the definitive version of the event, and it did become a comfort of sorts, a sop to the tears being shed when I was alone. But even now, the thought of there being one point in the long continuum of that day when some action on my part might have changed the course of events continues to haunt me.

The August sun shines through my windows, although it’s still too cold to swim in any river, but the heat speaks of spring, like the wattles along the riverbank whose astringent, yellow patches mend the worn landscape of winter, their soft foliage quivering in the warm northerly breeze. If the music of last night’s concert could be embodied in the physical world, this day on the riverbank would realise it. The second movement of Saint-Saens Cello Concerto — ephemeral, spacious and filled with light, speaks of this moment.

Zoë was as intense as ever. I watched her every movement as if she alone were playing, and it was only by following her eyes that mine moved away from her to the conductor and orchestra. At the end of the third movement during the applause, I saw her cast a lingering glance at the front row, and tears welled
up in my eyes uncontrollably. There was my father, smiling with pride. I so much wanted to go and hug him, to hear his voice. To write about that day is to remind myself that he was always reasonable, that I only played one small part in the long chain of events. Why have I been living in this self imposed exile for almost twenty-five years?

As the layers of my life are peeled away, like the paper in a pass-the-parcel game, I see that my father was offering me a clinical view of events, but I have clung to my version, seen through an inconsolable prism of anger, resentment and loss. Perhaps it is time to put that tearstained prism away.

Damn. The bloody phone. It’s Lachlan. Again! What is this compulsion to answer the phone?

‘Lachlan.’

‘There’s no point in asking how did you guess it was me, is there Zoë?’

‘No. I looked to see who it was.’

‘Then I suppose I should thank you for answering.’

‘You could Lachlan, but I don’t think that’s why you called.’

‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine. Busy with quartet rehearsals. The competition’s only three weeks away.’

‘So the flat’s working out?’

‘It’s a great place to practice.’ Here we go. Yet another ridiculous conversation is about to take place. Need to draw it to a close. Lie if necessary. ‘In fact, Sophie and James will be here shortly, so we don’t have much time to talk.’

‘Right. Then I’ll get to the point. Zoë, my father’s death has really affected me. I’ve been thinking and I realise that I was never really more than attentive to his material needs. We were never close, and this is what worries me. I have no idea of how to make a good relationship with a child. I fear for any child we might have. The whole situation is depressing me and I’m suffering from some sort of invasive melancholia that refuses to go away. In fact, the doctor has suggested anti-depressants. He said that it was very hard to have lost both you and my father within such a short period of time. Please come back.’
‘Lachlan, I don’t know what to say.’

‘Zoë, you must understand how I feel about having children. So many of my friends are already divorced. It’s such an unstable world we’re living in. Besides, now that you have the quartet, there’s no time for you to have children.’

He is such a dick. ‘I have a lifetime for music, Lachlan.’ If he were here, he would be dead.

‘Zoë, you do understand what I mean. It’s not just about the flat.’

‘Of course I understand, but it’s very clearly your point of view. Not mine. And you’re right, it’s not just the flat. It’s also about not apologising for being who I am, not creeping around the flat in case I disturb you. Living here has been a revelation. I cannot be who I am and the person I want to be with you. And, really Lachlan, you cannot be the person you want to be with me. We can’t go back to the way we were.’

‘I don’t understand you. We were happy. There’s nothing wrong with that.’

‘Lachlan, we were living a lie.’

‘Zoë, please.’

‘Lachlan, no. Just stop calling.’

There is a pause.

‘Zoë, this is your last chance.’

And he’s threatening me.

‘Thank you, Lachlan. It’s so very good of you to offer me the last life-line, but I’m going to say a final, no-repeat-performance, no. And before any more words can be said, disconnect.’

And delete his number and block his calls. Marianne was right when she said, ‘He won’t want to lose you. You’ll be screening your calls.’ Will he ever understand the lie? Unlikely. He’s like my mother. She never understood that Dad was being honest to himself when he refused to continue living the lie of not being loved, of living a marriage based on acquisitions. She reminds me of Lachlan when he wanted the ‘Chloe’. As if it could ever be more than an image of love.

Tears. The all too familiar. Need a relationship guru. Dr Phil where are you? My life is becoming more like a soap opera every day. It’s not always easier for the one who instigates the break up. There’s a screaming shrew living in the back corner of my being. She’s the harpy, the angry, venomous bitch who wants to say, ‘Lachlan, it’s all your fault,’ but it isn’t.
Good rehearsals are rare, but today even Lucien was pleased. His broad smile irrepressible, catching, a swelling ripple passing between us. Then laughter as he said, ‘It is not good to be too confident. Remember, hubris was not invented, it is a human condition that precipitates downfall, and I want no sign of it this Saturday.’ And then he tripped as he was stepping off the podium.

‘Voilà!’ He said, straightening himself up. ‘I told you. But now I’ve broken the curse, you can relax.’

No one wanted to leave the stage. It was as if we were held by … the rare camaraderie? The release from the intense concentration demanded? But, turning back into the orchestra to share this unity with Patrick, unconsciously — a habit never acknowledged before — the moment was lost in his absence. He had slipped away behind me.

Emily was soon beside me. ‘Was that trip an accident, or deliberate?’ Emily asked.

‘Who knows.’

‘What’s wrong? You look upset.’

‘Did you see Patrick leave?’

‘You’re not interested. Leave him alone.’ Her voice is harsh, and has attitude.

‘What do you mean, leave him alone? We play together.’

‘Together? I don’t hear much about you playing together,’ she says.

‘What are you saying?’

‘Nothing. You need to talk to Patrick yourself.’

‘Come on. You can’t open the door and slam it shut like that. What’s he said?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Suit yourself,’ she said, walking away. Damn it. That’s another conversation that must be had.

Sleep is not going to come easily and it’s too late to walk. Sitting here at AC’s desk with the blind up is to share her world. Fog has descended, blurring the sparkling city, swirling through the amber cones of light spilling onto the bridge. The haze of her existence is pervasive. Even a simple gesture of moving her jug of pens from the left side of the desk to the right raises questions. Was she left handed? Beneath the jug there
is a circular stain. Was she careless with a hot cup? Going into the laundry to look for some furniture polish reveals that there is none. Of course there is none. This is not my mother’s house.

The fog has thickened and now nothing is visible beyond my reflection in the window. To return to bed seems futile — that empty bed decked out in blue floral linen. Florals. Those unopened packets. All floral. Perhaps my mother is right to have all those pillows and cushions, to set up the bed as a glorious place, the primary site of personal choice. For her the bed has taken on another meaning, it’s not simply about sleep, the bed tells a story, is a powerful narrative force, able to be reconstructed by simply changing the sheets.

And this floral bed, what story does it tell? It’s a dishevelled, crumpled scene of singleness in which the sheets are cold, and in the absence of another body, suddenly have a presence. With my eyes closed, the walls disappear and the hooting of an owl, the thumping of a possum on the tiles of the roof, and a human cry — a single voice in the wilderness of the unsleeping night — slip between the sheets to share the bed with me.
Crisp morning. Frost carpeting the grass all the way to the boat shed — crunchy to walk on if my lack of warm clothes wasn’t keeping me indoors. Warmer clothes — heavier track suit and a thicker jacket — will be needed. Appreciate more than ever the luxury of central heating. The gas heater only warms the living room.

The sky is so blue this morning, the city buildings liquid in the shifting shades of dawn and across their faces five hot air balloons are drifting. The bursts of flame disrupting the peacefulness of the sky.

A thin breeze is rattling the remnant leaves on the oak. Brown, clinging, waiting for a strong wind or a heavy fall of rain to dislodge them, like these papers. Only one bundle left, all her notes in a folder — so much of it an angry response to government policy. She was a political beast, a heavy weight and fiery Mars whereas me? The dismissed Pluto would be the best analogy: ephemeral and inspirational in its outer orbit, like music, like those hot air balloons.

What would my world look like from up there?

_There she is, that tiny dot scurrying between her flat and the concert hall. Have you noticed the obsessive morning walk, that small diversion she takes along the riverbank each day? But the flat is her anchor. See how her world revolves around its space. The quartet rehearsals, her orchestral rehearsals, her reading of those papers. If one traced her pattern of movements, they would form a very small asterisk with a few tiny spokes. Look at this pattern, which represents her life by the sea. Certainly it had a centre, but it spreads out in many different directions: the irregular paths of opening nights, visiting his friends, visiting his father. What has happened since she moved into that flat?_

‘You’re being self indulgent in a most unhealthy way,’ Emily said a few weeks ago — before she became cross with me. ‘Buck out of it. Stop prevaricating. You don’t
owe your aunt anything. You can be grateful, but you don’t have to be responsible for validating her life. Get rid of those papers and get on with yours.’

Buck out of it! There is only one more bundle. Read it and arrange to have the papers picked up. But it’s not that simple. Her story is my story. Its threads weave in and out of my life like the wool binding the sticks of my mandala: red is the deprivation of an aunt, blue the resident resentment of my mother and Nan, green the delight of my grandfather at my choosing the cello, yellow the determined separation of my father from anything to do with my mother’s ‘venomous side’ as he calls it. These papers have given me some insight into the ways my pattern was naively woven.

Last bundle. Hundreds of cuttings of war zones and military equipment. Tanks, guns, soldiers in camouflage, concrete slabs hanging like torn curtains, broken television antennas and skewwhiff dishes twisted like inside out umbrellas, crumpled roofs, bedrooms, bathrooms, classrooms with walls torn away. Then there’s the orderly display of tanks and military equipment, lines of guns, columns of tanks, rows of helmets, orderly grids of turrets breaking up the beige monotony of an arid skyline. But among them are the traces of daily life ─ a grey haired man pushing a street stall laden with melons and oranges framed by an orderly row of tanks ─ a child with dark hair wrapped in a pink blanket grasping a doll, the photograph taken from below the subject so the smoking rubble of a bombed building looms large ─ two children in blue beneath a looming tank whose caterpillar wheels remind us that the mechanical age is not an entirely spent force ─ a father carrying two children through water where a bridge has been destroyed ─ a bright yellow coffin being carried by a column of men whose path is littered with the debris of war, men with their eyes lowered, their sad faces being recorded by film crew.

But among them all, it’s the photograph of the man with a cart of oranges that is most arresting. His grey clothes meld with the innocuous beige of the buildings and row of tanks and while the caption describes the potential threatening movement of the tanks, it is the oranges that catch the eye. This photograph is not about the narrative progression of the war, it’s about the capturing of colour, the wonder of life among the machinery of death.

My aunt has educated me well.

And on the top of this bundle there is something else ─ a brown manila envelope. AC has scribbled across the front of it ─ don’t forget to remove. It’s heavy and jangles
like a bag of coins. My grandfather’s dog tags with his date of birth, his enlistment number and his blood group — all the essentials — and his medals. And she has tagged them: 1939-45 Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal. There’s a small square photograph of him standing with a group of men in uniform in front of an aeroplane. They are smiling, leaning casually on each other, arms on each other shoulders. It speaks of intimacy, of familiarity. Beyond the plane there are palm trees. This photograph marks his presence in the war on which he has remained silent.

Every Anzac Day spent at Nan’s house, watching him march on television, but apart from, ‘There he is’ nothing was said. Feel badly now that when he asked me five years ago to join him at the dawn service, my reply was, ‘too busy,’ but now there’s a need-to-know reason to go. Next year will be a must.

It’s odd that AC has his medals when he could still be wearing them, particularly given her stance against war. Another question for Pops! And he can’t remain silent on this.

Last bundle.

psyche

the human soul, spirit, or mind

Philos. by Homer, identified with life itself, by Plato, as immortal and akin to the gods, and by neoplatonism, as the animating principle of the body, but inferior to the nous and the logos

Paul visits unexpectedly at 5.00 a.m. on Anzac Day, bringing stale croissants and demanding coffee. ‘I had to buy them yesterday,’ he says. His mood is dark, he’s overwhelmed by the government’s dismantling of our universities, he is seething at the user-pay philosophy that will see student services cut and more students prostituting themselves to cover their costs.

I’m in the middle of taking out my father’s war medals which he gave me to wear on Anzac day. ‘Celia, I don’t need to wear them when I march,’ he said to me. ‘My presence at the march is sufficient. I lived the experience. No
amount of medals is going to pass this on to anyone else. But they are a reminder of a dreadful time which should not be forgotten.’

Paul is resentful.

‘My father gave his to my sister,’ he says. ‘Anti-war protestors apparently don’t deserve them, and I don’t understand why you’re sentimental about them.’

‘Paul, it’s not just the war. It’s the passing on of history. When there is no one to hand things on to, one’s life seems purposeless. The giving of such a gift is significant, one’s life is perpetuated. I took them because although I disagree with war as a solution, he needed to leave them to someone.’

‘Yes. Yes,’ he says irritably. ‘But his war medals? Why are you putting them on?’

‘Because I’m going to meet him. Remember, that’s how we met. On Anzac Day.’

‘I’m leaving,’ he says. ‘This is ridiculous. You’re betraying me.’

‘So leave.’

Paul visits, but Paul does not look after me. He argues, persuades and cajoles, that’s his charm, but his detached resilience to change is at the core of his personality, he will never see the other side of the war we fought against. But now I see that the possibility of fighting against the ballot, of choosing to fight not to be conscripted, made those who went pariahs when the war turned sour. It’s only now they have our respect. And it was easy for us, Paul’s birth date wasn’t drawn. He didn’t have to go. He didn’t have to fight for or against anything. He was one of the lucky ones who had the option of protesting on safe streets.
As I walked along the boulevard leading us to the Shrine this morning I knew the question I had to ask my father: what is the moral imperative that makes one war acceptable and another not?

He was so happy to see me and he looped my arm through his after and said, ‘Let’s have breakfast after the service.’ So we queued for the ration of eggs, bacon and sausages, roll and coffee and sat side by side on the steps beneath the Weary Dunlop statue watching the crowds disperse, finding it hard to talk with so much of the past lost to each other.

‘Do you want to talk about that day?’ he asked.

‘Is there anything more to be said? Is there any point?’

‘It hinged on the photograph,’ he said. ‘There was the evidence that you were telling the truth and we didn’t believe you.’

‘That’s right. You said I wasn’t being reasonable. But I had seen them when you were walking along the riverbank. I knew what that look between them meant.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘So sorry.’

That was all that needed to be said. I understood and accepted his regret. I watched him march, we had coffee afterwards and arranged to meet the following week.

Looking back at that day, I see that what hurt most was all denial of feeling. I was asked to write my statement in as impersonal way as possible. Feelings had to be excluded, even to say we were upset was a denial of the objective.
I felt sick. I felt responsible. I knew he had been with Maxine. When she and Paul came out of the bush, they were shocked to see me.

‘Your towel is such a lovely bright yellow, Maxine. Yellow. Like the wattle on the other side of the river. It really stands out against the green. No wonder they’re our national colours. What do you think, Paul?’

‘I don’t understand what you’re on about,’ Maxine says. ‘Not that I ever do.’

‘I wasn’t talking to you Maxine. I was talking to Paul. How much longer are you going to go on with this deception?’

‘What deception?’ Paul is moving away from Maxine and has flung his towel over his shoulder as if he is about to take a stroll.

‘Why are you doing this?’ I scream. ‘For all your talk about honesty in politics you don’t have much respect for it in your personal life. In fact, I’m beginning to think that underneath all your bravado you’re nothing but a coward.’

‘Coward,’ he says turning on me. ‘And what makes you so brave. The only thing you can do is open your big mouth.’

‘At least I’m brave enough to swim across the river, brave enough to swing out on that rope.’

When he died, Maxine did not know what to do because in everybody’s eyes he was my boyfriend. I was supposed to be the one who would be upset, but she was as shocked as I. I didn’t know what to say to her. I felt betrayed by them both. Paul’s disloyalty was understandable, but hers? I expected her to be loyal to me.
But love changes us. We become irrational in love. Reason flees us, makes us enemies of ourselves as well as others. And my father never imagined that we could be so unreasonable. He had been surprised to find Paul there, as I had been. He had brought his camera because it was such a beautiful day and he wanted to take photographs of Maxine and me.

Those photographs became the voice of reasoned truth. In the background the rope can be seen and it does not look frayed. In the photographs taken afterwards the rope is a thin, scraggly trace of what it had been. Under stress it broke. But in them was the emotional truth which my father denied. And I wonder whether in recognising the fallacy of thinking there can ever be a fully understood truth, we turn our back on the truth altogether.

We believe we are seeing the truth with each news flash on our screens, but I have lost my faith in them. My world has become unstable. Tonight a new search for a singing idol begins and I will be absorbed in the moment of each competitor’s song, watch the commentators play their good/bad roles, see the artificial fabrication of tension, suffer the anticipation of a glorious future, see the metaphor of our winner-take-all life played out in reality TV instead of a well-acted drama. And I will live the reality of this fabrication.

The millstone of her obsessive pessimism holds me to her desk. Sadness is inevitable. This is the only writing to suggest she had some contact with my grandfather and that they at least came to terms with that day. But if it is true, is it a secret? Do Mum and Nan know? Does my father?

This is the last piece of writing, another reading of her life ready to be filed away in a folder. Will talk to Pops about the medals. Does he want me to have them? As the only grandchild it would make sense, but the question must be asked.

Must bundle up the cuttings and put them in the passage before the others arrive to practice. Must also find a way to detain Patrick after Sophie and James have left. Would asking him to help me with a particular movement work? He has always responded before.
There’s the door. It’s too early for Sophie and James. And Patrick won’t be early. Can’t imagine who it would be. Only Dad would drop in, but even he would call first.

He’s such a large man, massive shoulders, overalls, cap, big boots.

‘Miss Paine?’

‘I’m sorry. That was my aunt. She … doesn’t live here any more.’

‘Moved already has she? She rang me several months ago and asked me to drop by about June. Said she’d have everything packed up by then. She had a load of papers she wanted to be recycled. I tried calling but there was no answer.’

‘Actually she was killed in an accident.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. I see the papers are still here.’

‘Yes, but they’re hardly packed up. But now that you’re here, would you have a look?’

‘I can give you a quote if you like,’ he says.

‘Sure. Come in.’

This coincidence is beyond belief. Things like this don’t happen in real life, or do they? It was a coincidence that my aunt teased Paul and the rope broke. And didn’t she cross the road at the same time as a foolish young man lost control of his car on the corner?

‘There aren’t as many as I thought there would be,’ he says.

‘Would you be willing to take them as they are. I would pay you for your time. I’ve finished with them.’

‘Looks like she was quite a collector.’

‘Yes. It seems to have been her life, but I can’t keep them and live in the flat. There’s more in the spare bedroom. Put your head around the bedroom door and you’ll find a few more.’

There is a deep feeling of regret that a choice must be made between documenting her life or living my own.

‘There’s no point in keeping another person’s junk,’ he says as he re-enters the passage, ‘particularly in a beautiful flat like this.’

‘Well, it’s not really junk. I keep finding fragments of writing that make sense, but it’s been hard to understand what really happened to her.’

He’s looking a little uncomfortable. Too much information as Dad would say.

‘Well, do you want me to take it or not?’
‘Yes.’

‘I could do it now if you wanted. I’m here and I don’t have another job this afternoon.’

So he was touting for work.

‘How much will it cost.’

‘I’ll make it a round one hundred dollars. Time, labour and disposal. A sympathy price. How does that sound?’

It’s sounds reasonable and, even if it isn’t, the moment to make a decision has arrived.

‘Yes. Yes, take it all. Will you accept a cheque?’

He pauses.

‘No cash?’ he asks.

‘Sorry. Didn’t know you were coming.’

‘That’s okay. Cheque will do. You can make a fresh start without all this.’

There’s no point in saying that the fresh start has already been made, that to part with them is more than a beginning, he’s already heading out the door.

‘Just going to get my trolley,’ he says.

‘I have some practising to do. Just knock on my living room door when you’ve finished.’

The last remnants are still on the desk. Will slip them into the passageway and close the door.

Empty, the flat is remarkable. The passage is so much wider than imagined.

The papers were absorbing all the energy. There’s a sense of breathing freely and he was right — it is a beautiful flat. If the carpet is taken up and the boards polished, the light will spill everywhere, just as it does from my cello onto the living-room wall. It’s such a release. Even my cello feels lighter.

And there’s the door again. Sophie and James.

‘Where are the papers?’ Sophie asks.

‘They’ve gone. A mere half hour ago.’

‘Well done.’ James is even turning in circles in the hall. ‘It feels so empty.’

‘Was it hard?’ Sophie. Dear empathetic Sophie.

‘Don’t ask. I’ve been playing my old exercises to console myself.’
‘Even the living room feels different,’ James is saying as he takes out his violin.

‘Where’s Patrick?’

‘He rang to say he might be five minutes late. One of his students has an exam next week. Look, I’m going to speak to him today, but I have to find a way to keep him here. You’ve seen how he’s just rushing out the door. I thought I’d say I needed his advice on that difficult passage in the third movement.’

‘I have an idea,’ says James. ‘Sophie came with me today, and I also have a student with an exam next week. I’ll say I need to pick up some music, so it would help me if we left a little early.’

‘Great.’

‘Yes,’ says Sophie, ‘What are you going to say?’

‘I’m going to ask him why he’s doing this.’ This is almost a lie, my suspicions are strong, but not something to share.

‘Well, there’s the door. Here he is. Lights, action. Let’s be natural,’ says James as he walks down the passage to open the door.

The words are muffled, but Patrick is equally surprised.

‘Congratulations. In a couple of days, even the smell will have gone.’

We all look at him. No one has ever mentioned this before.

‘Is it that bad? Why didn’t you say something?’

‘It’s not that bad,’ says Sophie. ‘Don’t take any notice of him. We know that Patrick’s changing his name to Mr. Complaint.’

‘That’s not funny,’ Patrick snaps.

‘Come on. She was just joking. We have to leave early today so let’s get started.’

There is silence as we set up the music stands and music.

‘We’re going to have to be lass dependent on these,’ Patrick says.

Here’s my opportunity. ‘As Sophie and James are leaving a little early, do you think you could give me ten minutes on that section in the third movement I’m struggling with. You always find a way to make it stick.’

He hesitates before replying and James cuts in with, ‘Yes. Your students are very lucky. You have such good strategies for memorising music.’

‘Okay,’ he says, ‘but ten minutes is all I have.’

‘Thanks. Well, let’s start.’
It’s not surprising that once we sit down in our small half circle the relationship between us changes. We are no longer the people we were, our instruments make the difference. They project us into the realm of sound.

Realm. What would AC write? Kingdom. Domain. It’s more than that. It’s a magical kingdom of transformation, a place where one speaks to oneself as much as to another.

‘Zoë! Look up. Where are you? If we’re going to finish early we must start now.’ Patrick is glaring. Clearly, he is not looking forward to staying behind. But even with his moodiness, he bends up the bottom right-hand corner of his music with such concentration and tenderness. Not too stiff a bend, firm enough to hold, but not permanently crease. Sophie has found a way of taping hers together so she only has to turn the page twice. James doesn’t care. He uses the crease he’s made, the corner sticks up. Eventually, it will fall off. He says the most important thing is to play. ‘Who cares about the music itself. It’s only a vehicle.’

‘You’ve got more money than sense,’ Patrick replied.

But James does have a point.

‘Zoë! Are you ready?’

‘Yes.’

And the four of us are still, breathing steadily as we wait for Patrick to nod.

‘So what is it about this movement you find hard?’ Patrick asks tersely as soon as Sophie and James have closed the front door.

‘And what exactly is it that makes it so hard for you to be polite to me? I don’t understand your moodiness. None of us do. Why are you being so distant and so rude?’

‘That’s a really ridiculous question coming from you. I thought we were really close friends, but clearly not close enough it seems for you to tell me that you and Lachlan are getting back together once you’ve finished sorting out this flat.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Lachlan.’

‘When?’

‘On the day of the funeral. He said it would take more than a row about a flat to keep you apart. He expected you to be back together within weeks. He said that you would never be able to live without him, that the two of you were just too hot.’
‘Too hot.’
‘Yes. Too hot.’
‘And you believed him.’
‘Body language says a lot Zoë. I could see the way you two moved together at the funeral. It’s uncanny. There’s an invisible thread between you. Did you know that?’
‘We were very close. Five years is a long time.’
‘Then he was right.’
‘No. He’s wrong and so are you. I haven’t seen him since the funeral and have no intention of returning. Do you think I’d be staying in this flat if I thought there was a choice? It’s dingy, sad and needs fixing up. It’s going to take years. But I’m not going back to Lachlan. And in any case, if we were getting back together, why does it mean you have to reject me?’
‘Are you really that naïve, Zoë? Do I have to spell it out. I have never seen you as just a friend. If you’ve finally broken with Lachlan, I want to see you.’
‘See me?’
‘Don’t be stupid. Take you out,’ he says.
‘Take me out?’
‘Yes. Tonight.’
‘Tonight?’
‘Would you stop repeating what I’m saying. I’m asking you out, formally. Let’s keep it simple. Yes or no?’
‘Yes.’
‘Right. Then I’ll make a booking at the Golden Pavilion for 7.30 and pick you up at seven.’
‘Okay.’
‘Now, what is it you want to go over?’
‘Let’s leave it. You said you needed to leave on time. I’ll work on it myself.’
There is still no smile as he says, ‘You do want to go out, don’t you?’
‘Yes.’
‘Good,’ he says, and turns to packing up his viola.
The other music stands need to be packed away, but leaves them. We are still not friends.
‘Right,’ he says putting on his helmet. ‘I’m off. See you tonight.’
How can life change so quickly? The flat is empty and Patrick has asked me out.

Need to call Marianne.

‘Marianne?’
‘Zoë?’
‘Patrick’s asked me out. Formally.’
‘He’s making his move,’ Marianne says. ‘I told your father he would. Men are rarely friends without being interested. And he’s not silly. He’s waited until Lachlan was out of the way.’
‘But formally! Marianne, he’s invited me to the Golden Pavilion, one of the most expensive restaurants in the city.’
‘What did you say?’
‘Yes. He thought Lachlan and I were getting back together.’
‘So it was jealousy.’
‘I’m not sure that I’m ready for him to be anything else but a friend.’
‘But he’s been a terrific friend hasn’t he? Didn’t you say he’d been really helpful at the flat, found the chairs and stands for you, helped to clean the papers out of the living room before the first quartet rehearsal?’
‘What are you getting at?’
‘It’s a bit more than helpful when he buys you dinner because you’re tired.’
‘Stop it, Marianne.’
‘No. You’re not appreciating how considerate he is. And for someone who’s been telling us how selfish Lachlan is, I’m very surprised.’
‘I like him, but … I don’t want to say he isn’t attractive … he is … he’s lovely … but he’s not the sort of person I would notice in a crowd … not someone I would look at and think of dating. I’ve never thought of him like that. And don’t forget, it was Patrick who introduced me to Lachlan.’
‘Well, he wants to keep you for himself this time.’
‘Marianne! That’s not helping. How am I going to get out of this?’
‘Get out of it! Don’t. Go out and enjoy yourself. Test the water. In a new environment he might be completely different.’
‘I don’t want to.’
‘Then cancel.’
‘I can’t. I’ve said yes.’

‘Zoë!’

‘I know. I’m nervous. I don’t want to lose him as a friend and I’m not sure I can be anything else.’

‘Why don’t you offer to cook a meal for him in return. Keep the relationship on a thanks-for-your-lovely-meal level.’

‘I don’t think that will work. Besides, I only cook pasta and he said no to that.’

‘He was going to say no to anything. Come on. I’ll give you a fail-safe chicken recipe.’

‘Thanks. I’ll see how it goes.’

‘Zoë, friendships can become something else.’

‘Maybe.’

‘I’ve got to go. Let me know how it goes.’

Marianne. She’d have us married tomorrow, even if hand holding was an issue.

Talk about formal. He’s walked me to the door and clearly has no intention of coming in unless asked.

‘Can I offer to cook you a meal to say thank you?’

‘Zoë, do you really only cook pasta?’ He’s laughing at me.

‘Yes. But Marianne found a recipe she said anyone could manage.’ It’s so cold.

‘Look, I’m shivering. Would you like to come in? My grandfather has given me a copy of a fifties version of the Mozart.’ This is ridiculous. Five weeks ago he would have barged through the door.

‘Thanks,’ he says. ‘You like Marianne, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What happened with your parents?’ He says, walking straight to the heater and turning it on. The tape of the Mozart is already in the boom box.

‘My father said it was a rebound marriage for my mother. He was always more in love with her than she with him. My mother says they were too young, especially to have a family, namely me. Great isn’t it. They bumbled along for ten years, bickering and shouting until they divorced. Nan says my father’s one dimensional, the classic librarian, his head the only functioning organ.’

‘That’s harsh. I wonder what she said about your aunt.’
‘Don’t ask. She has a wicked tongue. But my father can also be insulting. I heard him say, when he didn’t know that I was listening, that my mother purrs for money. And Nan could never stop herself dancing to the jingling of it either.’

‘I’m not sure which is better, the separation you have or being stuck together with sentimental glue. In my family, a person can’t sneeze without someone ringing to say God bless you. And we all look alike. Do you?’

‘Funny you should ask that. Look at these. I picked them up this afternoon after you left. They’re prints of the negatives I found in the laundry. I had no idea black and white was so expensive. See, these two are of my mother, my aunt and Paul, the boy who died. You can see that it’s Paul. He’s the one in the photograph of the demonstration. Now, the big question is, how would you interpret these two photographs? This is the first.’

‘Which is your mother?’

‘She has the long hair that’s tied back.’

‘You’re clearly her daughter, but your hair is more like your aunt’s.’

‘I’m a throwback. I have my grandfather’s thick curly hair.’

‘They’re so serious. And so young.’ All three are looking past the camera, their clearly defined faces dominating the background of a tree trunk with rough bark. AC and my mother are not alike. My mother has long fine blond hair, a deep fringe, an angular face. ‘Your mother’s hair is shorter now, and her cheekbones more defined. She was quite striking.’

‘Yes. My aunt is the plainer of the two.’ And shorter. Her face is round and her thick, dark, curly hair is cut shoulder length, rather as mine is now. Her eyes are large and speak to me immediately. ‘Look at the way my aunt’s lips are pressed together. Now, look at the second. See how they are placed? Quite differently. My aunt is in front of my mother, Maxine, and Paul. She can’t see the way they are glancing at each other. How would you read that look between them?’

‘Intimate? There’s clearly a connection.’

‘That’s what I think. She saw them making love from the other side of the river.’

‘No wonder your aunt looks serious.’

‘And in the background, you can see the tree, the rope that broke and the far bank in the distance.’

‘And Paul was your Aunt’s boyfriend. Show me the others?’
‘You can see what happened afterwards. Everyone was there, my grandfather, the police, the ambulance, even his parents arriving. It’s sad.’

‘Yes, but the person I feel most sorry for now is you,’ he says as he slips one behind the other. ‘Zoë, do you really care what happened?’

‘Yes. I hate them lying to me. I’m sure there was ‘a Paul’ who died, but my mother says there wasn’t. My aunt spent her life writing about ‘a Paul’ who is supposedly dead. I want to know what happened. I want to take these photographs, and some of her writing, and confront my mother and Nan. I want to know the truth. Even my father knows more than he’s saying.’

‘Zoë. Calm down,’ he says, placing his hand on my shoulders.

‘It’s such a relief to be able to talk about this.’

He has started to massage the muscles at the base of my neck. His hands are so gentle, caressing, acutely present on my skin. A massage for fatigue after a long rehearsal is not uncommon. We all do it for each other. But this is different.

‘Better?’

‘Yes. Thanks. Can I show you something else?’

‘Sure.’

‘I found the statement she made for the inquest last week. It’s quite awful. Shall I read it to you?’

I was teasing Paul, and I dared him to swing out on the rope. He took up my dare, grabbed the rope and climbed up the knots until he had a good foothold with his feet. Then he started to swing, backwards and forwards until the rope was almost parallel with the branch. As he swung back over the river, the rope broke. He seemed to fly with it for a moment, his legs and arms flailing then he stopped mid-air and dropped straight down onto his back. As he hit the shallows, his body seemed to collapse. He didn’t move and he lay awkwardly, partially over the rocks and partially in the water.

Maxine and I both jumped into the water, afraid that he would drown. Being the stronger swimmer, I tried to help him while Maxine ran to my father’s car and held down the horn.
When I reached Paul he was very still. He seemed to be looking at me, but then his eyes glazed over. Blood was flowing from underneath his head. The current was strong and I tried to stop his body drifting sideways. I put one hand underneath his head to try to stem the bleeding and felt, not only a deep depression, but what I imagined to be a sharp piece of bone. I tried to feel for his pulse, it was difficult because the rocks were very slippery.

Dad came quickly and immediately came to help me with Paul. Maxine drove to the nearest house to call the police and ambulance. My father felt the back of Paul’s head and concluded that it wasn’t just a gash but a deep wound and that he had landed on a sharp rock which had entered his skull. He felt for Paul’s pulse and said, ‘I don’t think there’s anything we can do.’

He didn’t want to move him until the police had seen him. We had to work very hard to keep his body where it was because the current was strong and dragging at his body. Each time it moved, more blood was released. His flesh, which was warm when I first went to him, became very cold.

The ambulance arrived about fifteen minutes after Maxine left and then the police. After the doctor had declared him dead, the police lifted him off the rocks and lay him on the riverbank. Paul’s parents arrived shortly afterwards, and immediately said we had been negligent in not bringing him out of the river. I tried to explain that he had landed face up, that the water had never been over his face, only over his right shoulder and below the waist. His parents couldn’t understand why he would swing out when he wasn’t a swimmer. He had been swimming with Maxine and me several times and while he wasn’t a strong swimmer, he had swum across the swimming hole a number of times. As far as we knew, he could swim.

This is a true and correct statement of events.

Celia Paine
'I see what you mean. It’s very stiff and stilted. It almost feels false.’ Patrick says.
‘Yes, but it doesn’t tell the whole story. In her notes, she constantly refers to that
day. Almost everything she wrote was in some way connected to her relationship with
Paul. She loved him.’
‘Has your family read them?’
‘No, although I think my grandfather knows. He told me to leave the past alone.’
‘And your mother? Isn’t she Maxine?’
‘Yes. I’m going to show this to her.’
‘She’ll be on the defensive.’
‘Do you think I should leave it?’
‘It’s up to you. You have to make that decision yourself.’ There’s an awkward
silence. It’s so Patrick to leave the decision with me. And the Mozart has stopped.
‘Well. I’d like to listen to the Mozart again, but it’s time for me to go.’
‘Okay.’ My voice sounds a little thin and girly, and my cheeks are flushed.
‘You know that’s not what I want to hear, don’t you? I want you to ask me to have
another drink, for us to be more than friends. But you keep pushing me away.’
‘I know. I feel really mixed up.’
‘Mixed up! You either like me or you don’t.’
‘Of course I like you, but I have to think about us working together. What happens
if we decide we don’t want to be together?’
‘Are you saying that you’re too frightened of things not working out to even try?’
‘I don’t want to lose your friendship.’
‘Oh, for God’s sake, I’m going home. If you ever want to talk about how we might
handle not being friends and working together, call me.’
‘I thought that was what I was doing.’
He is looking at me steadily, then laughs. ‘You’ve tagged it. I’ll see you the day
after tomorrow. Mozart with Lucien at ten isn’t it? Let me take you out to lunch.’
He’s caught me off guard again. He’s smiling, and clearly expectant of my, ‘Yes.’

A wintry blast of wind from the South Pole swept through the door as he left and
now another is rattling the bedroom window. Beyond it, the branches of a bare tree is
rocking against the moonlit clouds. Frayed edges trailing across a cold and distant sky.
Tonight the bed’s familiar enough to be a comfort. Thoughts keep returning to Patrick. The thing about Patrick is that he understands mutual respect. And he’s on my side — even when he doesn’t want to be. Sometimes we sense so clearly who we are with another person. With others, we hold back. His touch was new. Exciting. Renewing. But it’s difficult at night, the baggage of the past looms and threatens to spill its worn contents all over the potential.

Sophie left the publicity shots for the quartet today. There are four or five quite flattering shots, but there is one of Patrick looking at me and my eyes are meeting his. It’s so like that photograph of my mother and Paul — the same quick exchange, the sense of intimacy in the space between us. The photographer has captured the invisible. No, not invisible, it was recognised as a shared significant moment, but not love.

This is something to think about. Think? No. To acknowledge and feel. His touch was felt.
Chapter Seventeen

A sleepless night and it isn’t just the anticipation of the competition. That drumming rain — a welcome relief from the drought — but the torrent in the bathroom was enough to wake anyone. It’s hard to believe the water from an overflowing spout could be blown back onto a wall, run across the top of a window, down an interior wall, and leave brown streaks running from the window to the floor.

And the river is brown too. All the mud stirred up. Bottles, plastic bags — even a beach ball — bobbing in the rapid current, some of it already trapped against the landing and wedged among the lower branches of the overhanging trees. And rats, scrambling over the debris in the rubbish trap near the bridge. Storms have a way of flushing out the unwanted. Can’t help wondering what will happen this afternoon when Mum and Nan see the photographs and hear what AC had to say. They will be like the exposed roots of those trees where the embankment has been washed away.

And tickets for the performance tonight — it’s unlikely they will want any. It’s difficult to believe they never saw her there. Was that why they stopped coming? Or was it Marianne? Or is my expectation that they should come just another of unrealistic wish?

‘Why should your parents come to anything at your age?’ Lachlan said, but his position was always defensive, his tone bitter when it came to family. ‘Besides didn’t you say they disliked classical music.’

Not always. Family eruptions do have a way of changing what we do.

What is this wanting to take another person with you into the deepest part of yourself? You share, and the moment is gone.

Patrick says we continue to carry it with us. All those traces of the first music we played, the first songs we sang, they erupt when we least expect it, lay hidden until sought, are interwoven into the body as we play and form part of the feelings we express.
‘Can’t you see the depth of pleasure we’re going to give? That’s sharing,’ he said at lunch after our final rehearsal.

‘Yes. Yes. But when the people you want to share it with don’t want it, it’s difficult.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Sometimes we just have to accept things.’

Was that a double message? Was he talking about himself or me? He’s suggested supper with my grandfather after the concert tonight. It’s all a bit too … claustrophobic.

The garage door is opening. Geoff is leaving. Good. It will be much easier without him present. He’s waving with his I’m-acknowledging-you-although-I-don’t-want-to-speak-to-you shotgun finger which he’s pointing into the air. If only my finger was a long, long whipper-snipper. Off it would come.

And now the garage door is closing. Of course, my old car should be parked in the street, after all, then anyone could own it.

‘You can be really vicious,’ Patrick said when Geoff came up in the conversation.

‘Nothing would make him happier than being reincarnated as a dog. That way he could legitimately brush himself up against everyone.’

‘Did he do that?’ Patrick asked.

‘Once. That’s when I told him I wanted a whipper-snipper for a Christmas present and he was going to be my trial patch of grass.’

‘Ouch!’

‘Yes. He hasn’t brushed against me since.’

Geoff. There goes half the tension out of the house. Gosh. Even the door bell is immaculate. Not a single finger smudge. It’s nice to be somewhere so crispy clean after the flat. And here come Mum’s brittle steps clipping over the tiled floor.

‘Hello,’ she says. ‘Just in time for lunch. Nan’s made a quiche.’

‘Hi.’

It’s moi-moi kisses, but Nan always gets a hug. Can’t get past those lovely childhood memories no matter how silly she is now. But even with Mum’s brittleness there’s a peculiar sense of being at home. There are flowers on the table, and a view of the new garden — a dark green hedge of camellias — they make me nostalgic for order and give me a childish sense of being looked after.

‘Sit down,’ says Mum. ‘Everything’s ready.’
She’s set the small circular breakfast table next to the window, and she is placing the quiche next to her famous five-lettuce garden salad.

‘It looks delicious,’ and Nan is smiling at my words.

‘Goat’s cheese and tomato,’ she says, as if she’s reading my thoughts. ‘You’ve always liked quiche.’

That warm feeling of being loved is coming over me. Dear Nan. She rarely misses the opportunity. And that’s why it was odd for her to stop coming to the concerts.

‘Nan, I have three spare tickets for tonight’s concert. Would you like to come? Mum? You haven’t been for ages.’

Nan looks down. So the answer is no.

‘Sorry darling,’ Mum says. ‘Geoff’s at the football, and we’ve already bought tickets for the 4.30 session of that new Nicole Kidman film. You know the one! There was a photograph of her in the paper yesterday.’

‘Sorry, not up with the latest films Mum.’ They are a rare treat, not part of the weekly feast Mum and Nan indulge in. The quiche is served, and Nan’s passing me the salad.

‘Talking of photographs, Mum, I had some negatives I found at the flat printed. There are two photographs of you, Celia and a young man on a riverbank. Was his name Paul?’

Nan drops her cutlery onto her plate. ‘Where are they?’

‘In my bag, Nan.’

‘I would like to see them,’ she says.

‘I’ll get them.’

Mum’s whispering is barely audible from the living room, and stops as soon as she sees me.

‘Here they are.’

Nan is pulling her chair towards mine. ‘Let me see,’ she says.

At first she places them on the table and runs her fingers over Celia’s face then, as tears well in her eyes, she draws them to her. ‘Where did you say you found these? I thought all the photographs of her had been destroyed.’

‘In the laundry cupboard.’

‘Maxine, do you remember these?’ Nan says.
‘How could I forget them?’ she spits without looking. ‘And Zoë, I’ve told you, I have absolutely no interest in looking at anything from that flat. There’s simply no point.’ Her face is taut, as ever, an impenetrable mask of containment, but her fingers are stretched over and pressed into the edge of the table.

‘She wrote about you, Mum.’

‘And what sort of nonsense would that be? One look at those bundles of papers was enough to tell me that she’d lost the plot.’ She’s turning to Nan, wanting her support, but Nan’s turned her face to the floor. She wants to know, and asks.

‘What did she say?’

‘That you were disloyal and mischief making. That you betrayed her trust and lied. I find that really hard to believe, Mum. What happened at the river?’

Without looking up, Nan says in a voice with none of her ironical overtones, ‘It’s up to your mother to tell. She was there, it’s her story.’

‘Mum, is there a boy called Paul in this photograph?’

She turns away with that habitual matter-of-fact abruptness she uses to dismiss me — or anything else for that matter — but I am going to sit at the table instead of fleeing the room. It’s time to take up residence in the hall of family myths. Nan gently takes the photographs and turns them towards the window.

‘Yes that’s Paul. He was so handsome, and she was so beautiful,’ she says quietly. ‘I’ve missed her every day of my life.’

My mother is stunned, and says, ‘You have never, ever said that before. Why are you saying it now?’

‘Because it’s the truth, Maxine. Your daughter is entitled to know the truth. Celia wasn’t just your sister, she was my daughter. How could I not miss her? I tried everything to bring her back. Finally, there was no choice. She never forgave me for taking your side and I have never stopped being angry with myself for not understanding her side of the story. Don’t you think it’s time to speak what we know and try to forgive ourselves for being so judgemental?’

‘I want to read you both something she wrote.’

‘So, what’s this? True confessions, now?’ Mum has pushed herself back from the table and folded her arms. She is so resistant, and ridicule has always been her favourite weapon.
‘I’d call them fragments of memories. They were interspersed among the bundles, but you would never have found them unless you looked through everything.’

‘I will never understand why you bothered.’

Patrick was right. There’s resentment.

‘I bothered because she’s been to every concert I’ve ever performed in and she left everything to me. And it wasn’t just the material possessions, it was her life. She wanted someone to recognise it. I think it was going to be her way of forcing you and Nan to think about her. So, I’m going to read this and I want you to tell me what happened.’

It’s odd how the sunlight illuminates what would otherwise be hidden. Beneath the overhanging branches, deep in the shadows of the wattles on the embankment where the sunlight falls in long shafts from broken clouds, I can see the entwined limbs of two figures. The sunlight fades and the couple dissolve into the bushy embankment, but having been seen, they remain defined. I watch them stand up. The woman puts on a yellow top. He seems to simply throw a citrus yellow towel around his shoulders. In any case, their arms clearly move around each other’s waists as they disappear into the bush. There is something familiar about them; the symbiotic closeness of a couple marked by the inclination of their heads towards each other and the easy gait of a unified step.

They exchange glances then my mother’s eyes lower. Nan’s eyes remain round and it’s she who’s the first to speak.

‘Go on,’ she says.

‘That’s all. This piece was in the bundle labelled fornication. Do you know what she wrote about fornication? It’s a harsh word — a bitter way of describing love. What’s the matter, Mum?’

Even clasping her hands around her coffee cup hasn’t stopped her hands shaking.

‘Well, Zoë, you’re the one who’s raised this. What do you think this means?’

Sometimes it’s hard to be sincere, to keep the sharp point of irony in check when you feel an injustice has been done.

Nan looks at me, then to Mum and says, ‘It means your mother lied to me. You mother was wearing the new yellow shirt I bought for her the day before Paul died. I bought her a yellow and Celia a red.’
My mother is rising from the table and glaring at Nan, ‘It doesn’t mean she didn’t know what she was doing when she taunted Paul into swinging out on the rope. He wouldn’t have died had she not done that.’

‘Maxine, as your father said, the simple truth was that the rope was at breaking point and no one could have known by looking at it. There was always going to be ‘the next person’ on the rope. It could have been you. And it seems now that Celia did have a reason to taunt him. He was cheating on her and she saw you.’

‘Cheating on her! He was cheating on me. He loved me. He just couldn’t break up with her. Every time he tried, she pulled him back into that political compost she thrived on, that crazy revolutionary world of the Little Red Book. I’m the one who was entitled to feel aggrieved. We had been together for weeks. He hated sleeping with her. He felt trapped. For God’s sake, he didn’t want to be with her.’

Nan’s lips are tight. Her anger held in, but she can’t contain it. ‘Were you aware that she knew?’

‘She muttered something sarcastic like, so that’s why you didn’t want me to come swimming as she climbed out of the water. I had the feeling she knew, but I didn’t know.’

Nan’s in tears. ‘You knew. On that day you knew. I can understand you not admitting it on the day, but a week later when you could see how upset she was, how upset we were because we thought she was indulging in lies because she felt so guilty? How could you let us go on thinking that?’

‘She wasn’t supposed to be there. Paul and I had arranged to meet there the day before and then she wrecked it all by deciding to join me. Dad offered to drive us down after she had finished work. Paul didn’t know she was coming and we thought we couldn’t be seen.’

‘Maxine, I took your side. Ridiculed her for being childishly petty and jealous. Even accused her of telling lies. Why didn’t I see it? This is dreadful. You know Paul’s death and what followed was instrumental in your father’s and my break-up. Your father always said I was doing the wrong thing in supporting you.’

‘So, what are you going to do about it now?’

‘Do? There’s nothing to do. I have to live with it. And so do you.’ Nan’s looking at the sheets of papers still clenched in my hands. ‘Zoë, don’t throw her papers out. I want to see everything. After all this time I want to know who my daughter was.’
‘Nan, there’s not very much left. Almost everything has gone.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just that. She had already booked someone to take the papers away. I had finished looking at them, so I let them go.’

‘So what’s left?’

‘A folder of her notes. Her ramblings. Paul occupied her life. In every bundle there were snippets of conversations with Paul. For her, I don’t think he was ever really dead.’

‘I thought those bundles were nothing but newspapers, her discarded crosswords.’ Even in these circumstances, my mother’s voice has a dismissive tone.

‘I didn’t find any crosswords. No. Most of them were newspaper cuttings and photographs related to war.’

‘She was always obsessed. Totally, with whatever she touched. To the point of stupidity. Remember her bedroom? You couldn’t open the door.’

Hoping to hear a note of regret in my mother’s voice is futile. Perhaps the repercussions of the past are simply too large for her to deal with.

‘She couldn’t have been too stupid or she wouldn’t have owned that flat. Or worked as a librarian the way she did.’ Nan says.

My need to defend her is inexplicable, but compelling. ‘All I know is she wrote about the things that concerned her: violence, war, the way the public is manipulated, the dangers, the waste.’

‘You see!’ My mother is yelling. ‘Obsessed with protesting! Who wants to waste their life doing that?’

‘She did!’ Rage fills Nan’s voice and tears fall over her wrinkled cheeks. A gnawing silence falls over the table. We flounder in this vacuum of hurt, unable to move beyond the disruption the truth has wrought.

Nan breaks it when she says, ‘I want to read what … is left … to make her life sensible after all this time.’ She hesitates and looks at me directly. ‘I’m not sure I will ever be able to tell this story in a way that will allow you to forgive me.’

‘Why should I have to forgive you, Nan?’

‘I denied you the chance to know your aunt. I think she left everything to you because you were the daughter she wanted to have. I am so sorry she was never able to move beyond Paul.’
‘We don’t know that,’ my mother snaps.

‘No we don’t.’ I say. ‘And I don’t think there’s any point in speculating. I would like to have known my aunt, Nan, but I won’t leave these papers and photographs here. If you want to come around to the flat to look at them sometime you can.’

‘That’s very harsh, Zoë,’ Nan says.

‘Probably, but I want to hold on to them for the moment. So that’s what I’ll do.’

The applause is deafening. ‘Bravos’ and ‘encores’ come with the standing ovation. Lucien bows, raises us to our feet, claps us, turns back to the audience and we sit down to applaud him in return, but he will have none of it and insists that we stand. We sit as he exits, smile and the applause rises again to draw him back on stage. He is smiling and so are we as he accepts a large bouquet of flowers. We have done well.

Patrick has fallen in behind me as we move off stage.

‘Supper Zoë?’

‘Some of my family are here.’

‘Mine too. Can’t we give them the brush off tonight?’

‘It’s my grandfather I don’t want to ignore him.’

‘Then bring him.’

‘Patrick, I’m not sure.’ Patrick’s looking slightly hurt. ‘Let me speak to him first. Look Patrick, I haven’t had time to tell you about today. Nan will have called him and he’ll want to speak to me. Just give me some space.’

He turns his back on me, bangs his viola case closed and snaps, ‘I’ll wait for you outside.’

‘Don’t bother.’

‘I’ll see you outside. I’m going to get my helmet,’ he says and walks away.

Emily has been watching and comes over. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Fine. It’s the fallout from inheriting the flat. It’s been a difficult day. Sometimes my family…’

‘Look after yourself, Zoë. Don’t let them get between you and Patrick.’

My God. Have never thought of it like that. Patrick. Need to catch him. There he is, at the door, putting on his helmet.

‘Patrick. I’m sorry. Let’s go ahead with what we planned.’
He opens the door for me and gives me a there-there pat on the back on my way through. Outside at last in the winter cool air. We take a few steps forward then pause, and suddenly our families are hub-hubbing around us. Patrick starts the introductions and their curiosity at the novelty of meeting other devotees is evident — after all we have been playing together for some six years now and this has never happened before — then they start to drift away until only my Grandfather remains.

‘I need to speak to you, Zoë. Your grandmother called.’

‘I thought she might.’

‘Can I drop around tomorrow? We could take a walk along that riverbank.’

So he’s been there before. ‘That’s fine, Pops. In the afternoon? After two.’

‘Good girl,’ he says.

Walking away, among the thinning crowd of family and friends, he looks older. He is more stooped, his clothes — his reefer jacket, white shirt and plain tie — while smart are dated. No open neck check shirt or casual jacket will ever hang in his wardrobe. He lives with his confirmed habits while Nan drifts on the tide of fashion in my mother’s house.

‘Zoë, are you ready?’ Patrick — once again tolerant.

‘Yes. Where are we going?’

‘Your choice,’ he says.

‘Fancy some tapas? You know the bar on the other side of river. It’s only five minutes away.’

We both know the way and fall into step with each other. He is pushing his bike, and we are strolling at an easy pace across the bridge leading to the square.

‘Let’s stop for a minute,’ he says. ‘I love the city at night. I consider it one of the perks of our job to see it at this time.’

The reflected lights are bobbing in the swollen river which is lapping the concrete embankment. Is this where AC and Paul stood on that Anzac day?

‘I’m beginning to appreciate the view from my aunt’s flat.’

‘Do you ever think you will call it yours?’

‘I’m still dealing with her life. Or her death. There are a few things left. The computer, her books and CDs. I’m not sure that I’ll keep them all.’

‘Do you still need a hand with the computer?’

‘Is that a second offer?’
'What about tomorrow?'

‘Right. In the morning. Pops is coming in the afternoon, and didn’t James arrange for us to have a practice in Queen’s Hall tomorrow night? We need that before the competition.’

And that’s the day gone. There will be no painting of any wall citrus yellow. Citrus yellow. Is that a warning or a simple coincidence?

Shivering in the acid cold from Antarctica, but these fleecy pyjamas will soon warm me up. More rain is forecast, but who knows whether it will come. Those heavy falls are unlikely to be repeated and they did nothing to help with the shortage of water. Drought. It’s on everyone’s lips. Even Patrick launched into the banality of the weather tonight.

‘We haven’t had enough for me to understand how to handle slippery roads. I need to be careful.’

Tapas was a good idea even if the hot chocolate and donut sticks with wine seemed odd. Lachlan would never have considered it. How we skirted around mentioning his name, although he was clearly on both our minds, and this was so evident in his response to my meeting with Mum and Nan.

‘I understand a little how your mother must have felt. There’s nothing worse than having to stand by and watch the person you love being with someone else. And she knew he was two-timing. Celia didn’t.’

‘Yes. But she didn’t have to lie. Why do that?’

‘Anger. Despair.’

‘I think my aunt loved him in a different way. Through politics. From what she wrote sex was not the driving force between them.’

‘Yes. It’s really hard to see what connects some people.’

How many times has he said that to me? Whenever a little whinge about Lachlan has escaped me he’s said, ‘I’ve never understood what keeps you two together.’

No. How could he? One doesn’t go around saying ‘Sex and more sex is simply wonderful.’ And it was never as simple as that. Our physical closeness was so pleasurable, but there were always those niggling conflicts — our bodies and wishes simply don’t go together. Is it something to do with being a woman, this desire to have children? But men feel it too. The poetics of our sexuality is so subsumed in the
idealized glamour of all of those bla-bla glossy magazines that we become disconnected from other possibilities.

Tonight the flat breathes with me. The bed is finally warm, the wind is moaning in the trees, the windows in the living room occasionally shudder, the bathroom door is opening and shutting with the current of air coming in from under the front door — a sort of perpetual wind quartet, something to hum across as sleep enfolds me.
Cold morning. Clear sky. Lingering in bed a temptation. Resistance. What did she write? *To overcome with one’s will.*

The success of last night is still a warm patch above my heart. Standing ovations — they compensate for all the tensions associated with rehearsing. Warmer getting-out-of-bed clothes needed. A tracksuit — hate them — equally a dressing gown. Perhaps one of those brightly striped rugby jumpers — scarlet and a deep, not dark, green. Probably need to compromise about the track suit pants for walking. Lachlan’s flat and the seashore were never as cold as this flat and the riverbank in the morning.

The riverbank, flooded with people — an early film shoot. Crew and casting spilling onto the footpath below the pavilion — that will slow down those rabid cyclists — and me. Two young girls being rehearsed on the bench overlooking the river. One is sitting reading, the second girl approaches her, takes her by the hand, leads her away and as they walk they turn and whisper to each other. The skirts of their apple green dresses flutter as they walk, and their backless shoes, with their sequined toes, glitter in the sun. Someone with sense has decided that warm dark blue jackets — they look padded — need to be worn over the top during rehearsals.

To rehearse. To repeat over and over. Can't resist watching as they rehearse the scene five times. Take one — they exit right. Take two — they exit left. There is laughter and concern as they trip over the orange plastic hat meant to redirect riders and walkers around the scene. Take three — as they pause to speak to each other, the inclination of their heads is perfectly childlike. Take four and five — they repeat take three perfectly.

Last might’s performance was a perfect take, but the late night scene with Patrick was flawed.

If only rehearsals were possible in life. If only we knew which scenes were going to affect us in the future. Patrick may not want to repeat his attempt to alter our
relationship. Clearly, he wants more than friendship. He’s right. To continue with the quartet will be difficult if we can’t resolve this change amicably.

The difficulty is convincing him that it will take time to separate from Lachlan. There is no editor who can rationalise my feelings by cutting parts of them out and tossing them on floor. Do not want this to be a rebound relationship, which it could so easily be.

And there’s the turtle swimming upstream — that’s twice now — it’s swimming so strongly, head above the water, at its own steady pace, forging upstream against the stronger current. The riverbank — a portrait of survival and decadence. The Tortoise and the Hare, the turtle and the plastic! All those hundreds of plastic bags caught in the lower limbs of the trees being exposed as the river falls back to its normal height. What would my aunt have written? That we need to understand the significance of what is below the surface.

The door bell. Patrick at last. It’s not like him to be so late.

‘Coming.’ Could write an Ode to An Empty Passage given the pleasure the emptiness gives me.

Ah for the long sigh of pleasure,
when the winter sunlight falls
the length of an empty passage
where the padded footfall falls.

And Patrick’s helmet is silhouetted on the glass.

‘Hi, Pat … my God! What has happened to you?’ His left knee is bandaged, his right wrist is strapped with gauze and his left elbow is taped.

‘My wheel jammed in the tram track, and I just sailed over the top of the handlebars.’

‘Are you all right?”

‘Grazed, nothing broken. A car was pulling out from the curb, I swerved to go around it, cursing the driver of course, not watching the road and the next thing I’m flying in the air. Someone helped me up and drove me to the hospital. When it was clear that there were no bones broken they cleaned me up. The bike is fine. See, not a scratch.’ And it does look pristine propped up against the balcony wall.

‘Are you sure I can’t do anything?’
‘Make me coffee.’

‘Look, let’s leave the computer for another day.’

‘No. I need the distraction. Just make me coffee. I’m fine.’

He looks pale, shaken, but he’s going to push it aside. If it were me, he would be fussing and insisting that recuperation time was needed.

It’s one of those days when the noise of the traffic is like the sea — ubiquitous — and over it there is the grinding of the coffee, the hum of the jug, the rattle of a spoon in a cup, and from the bedroom, the puck of plugs being pulled in and out, sudden flurries of tapping on the keyboard. And Patrick’s humming. Every sound is so sharp now that the papers have gone.

‘Here’s your coffee.’

‘Thanks. You were right. Your aunt must have used this computer mostly for watching DVDs. There’s no email account, but there is a list of bookmarked sites, mostly news sites, and a single Word file called Memoir.’

‘What’s in it?’

‘Have a look.’

Memoir

It is only a photograph, but within it lies the truth and in the detail lurks death.

I have always been battling death, a daily companion mediated through the radio, television and film. The grim reaper strides among us, slicing his scythe as if he were in a paddock of ripe wheat, letting the beheaded sheaths fall to the ground before marching into our living room, vamping his violent message across our screens, warning us about AIDS and rekindling our fear of sex.

He has travelled with me on my daily journey across the tight-rope of luck and chance.

Paul has left me, finally: the silent companion of my shadow, the shifting spectre that wrestled with our passion for politics, our acute awareness of the manipulation of truth, the remnants of what we shared together. Not love. Not
the ephemeral sweetness of the kisses he shared with Maxine, but the legacy of wanting to understand the representations of the world around us.

There are only four more bundles to review. Finally, they are ready to be taken away. I see my story writ large now, the material for the book lies within me; those pockets of experience, those reflected upon images have been absorbed and are waiting to be forged into a new narrative.

Paul died. We all die: many at the hands of others. Do we remain locked in these histories, unable to move away from past recriminations, faulty reconstructions fought for by fickle minds and decaying bodies, frail in our fear of death, or do we step into a new day, seeking to fulfil the miracle of man, each man in his capacity as a human, fulfilling the promise of a moral future, respecting the past of others.

The photograph has a new meaning. I was not innocent. I had known intuitively, for several months that he wasn’t mine, but not that he was hers. I was provoked and I challenged him to tell the truth, and he chose to continue pretending that he and I were together. He caused Maxine and I pain. She too was waiting for him to speak. But I challenged a frail boy who would find it difficult to hold the rope, who I knew would fall, humiliatingly.

But, I did not know the rope was frayed. I take out the photograph again and again, looking for a telltale mark of a split end or a loose thread, but there is nothing. I did not understand the fickleness of death.

Would Paul have told the truth or continued to lie had he lived? Maxine and I have lied. We used his death to hurt each other, to leave unresolved the truth of our relationship, one of jealousy. We have hidden behind our versions of that day and become enemies, deprived of love, denying the inevitability of death and failing to beyond the inhibiting past and create a future for ourselves, and others. We have created mayhem.
The photograph speaks of this more clearly than anything else. There is no longer any truth in the image, or rather the photograph is now like the texts we have so wanted to believe. Like novelists, photographers are magicians, but instead of weaving fabrications with words, they weave a fabrication with pixels. Those tiny dots have the capacity to destroy the truth and make us uncertain of visual representations, and behind the image there is no ethical code governing such magic. The imagination has no moral or ethical boundaries. Or does it?

One of Paul’s favourite paintings was Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*. He believed in the power of the image to lead people into war. He would liken it to the Vietnam images. Even surrounded by the dead, she convinces us to follow her. Who questions the forward thrust of heroism? Our ancient myths extol its virtues. But Paul believed it was open to interpretation, he understood that images were often duplicitous. I followed him, but he betrayed me.

Now I understand that we must seek out the lie, and understand the lie, in order to see the truth.

‘This is incredible Patrick. For the first time, I feel that she wasn’t the miserable person my family has made her out to be. The writing’s quite different isn’t it? There’s a sense that she wasn’t just writing in the moment but constructing something that she wanted to say. The notes are such a mixture. Sometimes a confessional diary, many commentaries on photographs, snippets of her story, and all those imagined conversations with Paul.’

‘Zoë, did you ever believe he existed?’

‘Yes, and then no. He was an indelible presence, and she made sense of the present through him.’

‘Look at the date of this file. Isn’t it near the time she died?’

‘The month before. I feel relieved that she finally laid Paul to rest, that she had some sort of resolution.’

‘She does seem to have done that.’
‘I’m going to give it to my grandfather this afternoon. He will want to read this. It will make him happy.’

‘You’re really concerned about him, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. And my grandmother. I will give her a copy too if she comes to visit.’

‘Do you really think she will come by herself? Isn’t that a bit mean?’

‘I want her to take the first step.’

‘How old is she Zoë?’

‘Eighty-two. I can’t help being angry with her, and don’t ask me why I see my aunt as the underdog and take her side. I don’t understand it either.’

‘The printer’s working now. Do you want one copy or two?’

‘Two.’

The clunkety-clunk of the printer tells me it’s old and slow. The blackness of the type is a little uneven. No wonder she wrote by hand.

‘Perhaps it needs a new cartridge, or it needs a little more use. At least you can read it. I’ll check it out another time. It’s time to go.’

‘I don’t know how to thank you.’

‘Let me leave my bike here. I’ll pick it up after our rehearsal tonight. I am feeling shaky.’

‘Can I drive you anywhere?’

‘No thanks. A quiet ride on the tram will be good.’

‘Are you sure.’

‘Yes, Zoë. Stop fussing over me.’

‘Right. Then can I see you to the door?’

‘That you can do. By the way she has some very interesting videos and DVDs. Did you notice she has Little Dieter Needs to Fly?’

‘Yes, but I’ve never seen it.’

‘I’ve been told it has the most extraordinary bombing scene shot from the rear of a plane. Apparently, you can see the bombs falling and exploding into these voluminous flames that consume the houses, the trees, everything in their path. I’m not surprised she has it. From what you’ve said about her comments on war photography, it reflects the essential contradiction. It’s exquisite, but deadly. We’ll have to watch it some time.’

‘Yes. Well, I’ll see you tonight.’
Pops is here, whistling as he walks up the steps to the balcony.

‘Hello.’

‘And hello to you too,’ he says. His arms are wrapped around two beautiful pot-plants. ‘For you,’ he says. ‘One of herbs, the other pansies. They will love being on this balcony in the winter sun. I hope you like them. I remember how you used to help me garden when you came to stay.’

‘Thank you. I used to love staying. Your house has always been warm and inviting, Pops. Did you ever play the cello with me?’

‘Yes. I did. And before you ask, it was Celia’s.’

‘I was really upset when I found out that she played, that I had been given her cello. I felt as if everyone had projected her on to me.’

‘No. It was never like that. No one expected you to continue with it, but when you did and you grew, it seemed criminal not to pass it on to you.’

‘It still feels odd.’

‘Yes. It must. Nan said you found the photographs. Where did you find them?’

‘The negatives were in a box underneath the trough in the laundry. Do you want to see them?’

‘Yes,’ he says as we move into the living room. ‘I can’t believe how different this room is. So this is where you practice?’

‘Yes.’ The photographs are still in my bag. He hovers, hands ready to take them as soon as they are free.

‘I took five on the day.’

‘There is more than that.’

‘Let’s spread them on the desk, shall we?’

There are twelve in all. Two of Paul and AC with tins of paint in their hands in a suburban backyard. They are laughing as they hold the banner up between them. Three taken at various times during the demonstration. One taken looking back down the hill at the demonstrators, one of Paul standing in front of a cannon making a peace gesture, and one of AC standing in front of a group of young people, both hands directed towards a banner which says, ‘MAKE PEACE NOT WAR.’ The last five were taken at the riverbank.

‘They were taken with a little instamatic, the equivalent of a cheap digital camera, but they are so clear. She could be so effervescent. It seems clichéd to say Paul’s death
changed her, it seems self-evident, but it did.’ He’s gathering them up, putting them back into the envelope. ‘I simply didn’t understand how much she was hurt. Did you show these to Nan?’

‘Only those taken at the riverbank.’
‘She said you were outrageous.’
‘I suppose you could label revealing the truth like that. Mum’s been at her.’
‘Yes.’
‘Is this why you and Nan divorced?’
‘In part. The more your mother spoke to Maxine … the more superfluous I became. In the end, conversation between us stopped altogether. The tension was unbearable. I loved your mother, Zoë, but she did the wrong thing.’
‘You know AC forgave her.’
‘Did she?’
‘Yes. And she had arranged to have all the papers collected. I have something to show you. Patrick set up her computer this morning. Connected the printer. Look at what we found.’

He takes the sheet of paper and says, ‘She wrote this?’
‘Yes. It was the only file.’

His hands are shaking as he reads, then taking his handkerchief from his pocket, he dabs at his tears.

‘Zoë, don’t misunderstand me. These are tears of happiness. She contacted me a couple of years after you started playing with the symphony orchestra. We started meeting, taking walks along the riverbank, talking of course about the past, trying to make sense of what had happened. She had completely retreated into that shell of papers you inherited when we met, was struggling at work with the shift from print to electronic resources. She had loved perusing newspapers and hated search engines. But in the last few months before she died, she was starting to look beyond the past, had enrolled in a photography course at the beginning of last year. We were looking at cameras. She wanted two, one digital. She did mention throwing the papers out. She was even thinking of retiring, but didn’t have quite enough superannuation. You know she left that to me and I’m going to give you enough to have this flat painted.’

‘There’s no need, Pops.’
‘Yes, there is. I could have helped you with cleaning out the flat, but couldn’t face it.’

‘It was difficult, but I don’t have to live in the clutches of my aunt’s pain, nor my mother’s and grandmother’s. But I found something of yours that I think I should return, your war medals.’

‘My medals. It was an odd thing, I know I did the right thing when I fought in the Second World War, but finally she convinced me that war was not always the solution. She accepted that my war was just and I gave them to her as a gesture of faith. And now they’re yours. Keep them. Pass them on if you have children, or bury them with me. It’s up to you.’

‘Wouldn’t you like to choose for yourself?’

‘Zoë, I hear your father’s voice. Why don’t we both think about it for awhile? The thing is, as Celia said, respecting my past is one thing, but revering those medals, for a lot of people, means glorifying war. I don’t want to do that. Enough for now, Zoë, are we going to take that walk along the riverbank?’

‘Yes. Have you ever seen it after a flooding storm?’

‘No. Why don’t you show me.’

Lucien is here already — and Sophie and James. They have already set up the chairs and music stands.

‘This is right, isn’t it?’ James asks. It’s usually Patrick who sets them up, insisting on the closed semi-circle. ‘Zoë, have you seen the publicity shots? Lucien, have you?’

‘No, let me see,’ Lucien says. He looks at them slowly and finally selects one from the set. ‘I like this one. It shows the strong connection between you, particularly you and Patrick, Zoë.’ He holds it out to me. It’s the photograph where we are looking at each other. So it’s not just my imagination. He can see that there is something between us. Why couldn’t my family see the truth in that photograph? AC is right, they had other reasons for not wanting to.

Sophie comes and stands beside me. ‘It’s the one I chose too. Where is Patrick?’

‘I’m here,’ he says walking through the door. ‘Well, the hall might be cold, but we can’t complain about the acoustics. Sophie, I could hear every word.’

‘We’re just looking at the photographs. We all like this one of you and Zoë looking at each other.’

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‘Let me see. Ah! The implied intimacy created through music. The romance of the group. Is that what we’re selling?’

‘That’s a bit cynical.’ says Lucien. ‘And if it does say that, I still prefer it to those sexy stances on some of the newer CD covers.’

‘Lucien, I have never thought of you as a prude,’ says Sophie in a flirtatious way that says much more than the words suggest.

James and Patrick are the ones to exchange glances now. Like a memory flash in a film, where a brief glimpse of a character’s past explains the present, all is revealed. There is ‘something’ between them. We have all been wondering why Lucien has been so supportive.

‘Look everyone, can we get started? I’m voting for the schmaltz, particularly if it will sell a CD,’ says James. ‘But, there’s a sick child at my home so I need to finish as quickly as possible.’

We forget that he’s married, that he has a child. He so rarely discusses his personal life.

‘Patrick,’ Lucien says as he watches us walk up the steps onto the stage, ‘are you limping?’

‘Fell off my bloody bike. I was the tumbling act for the wedding party coming out of the cathedral.’

Lucien laughs as he chooses a seat in the front row.

Sophie whispers to me, ‘What have you done? His sense of humour is back.’

‘I’ll speak to you during the week.’

‘Come on you two. There is no place for secret women’s business here. In fact, hurry up.’

James is seriously impatient, and we all respond by taking our places and opening our music without another word. He plays A, we tune up and look to Patrick.

‘Are we ready?’ Patrick asks as he scans the group, takes a deep breathe and nods.

We are beginning to know the music well and as we play we are sensing the subtle changes in the weight of each part. Sometimes James ups the tempo a little and our concentration intensifies as we follow his lead, but Patrick brings us back by raising his eyebrows and putting his head at a questioning angle when he looks at James. We have discussed this. James knows he must stop being a galloping horse. And all of us are aware of Lucien — Sophie more so. She is playing with such precision and with an
unusual lightness that gives the music a vitality it’s lacked before. Patrick looks at me and smiles as the lead passes to me. Concentration needed to emphasize the sweetness of the melodic line as it swoops down. The bowing always difficult here as the triplets take the melody back to the first violin. The harmonies are clearer, more potent and more fragile. We have entered the spell of the music. A group sensing of the music hovers in the space between us, wraps itself around us, denying the physical boundaries of our skin, our fatigue and pain. The experience is simply one of joy.

James is drawing us into the final bars and suddenly we are all aware of Lucien. Almost in unison, as the resonance of the last note fades, we look to him and see him uncharacteristically, applauding.

‘It’s wonderful,’ he says. Patrick turns to me, and the unspoken intimacy that exists between us is there. The rush of feeling for him undeniable, but is it the music or love?

The air is cold, but stepping from the balcony into the flat does not help.

‘This flat is freezing. I’ll turn the heater on.’

‘Don’t bother just for me,’ Patrick says.

‘No. I’m cold. Are you going already?’

‘I’m exhausted and I have to chase up some music for one my students by early tomorrow.’ As he turns to pick up his viola he says, ‘That rehearsal was something …’

‘Something else.’

‘I can’t see how we can sustain that every performance.’

‘Perhaps not. But we know we can reach it. I think it’s your leadership of the group.’

‘Flattery, Zoë?’

‘That’s unkind. I’ve really come to a different understanding about practising since we’ve been doing this. I’m less tense now. More focused on the music. No longer thinking that it’s just a matter of time spent rehearsing and the timing.’

‘I could say the same thing. And it’s Lucien as well. He’s being very supportive — even if it is because of Sophie. Wasn’t that a bombshell? And wasn’t it a pleasure to play in such an acoustically sound space?’
‘Yes, and yes. Some of the phrasing in the second movement took on a significance I’ve never heard here. I’m wondering whether we should find another place to rehearse.’

‘We have to think about James. What would it cost if we had to pay?’

‘That’s what I like about you, Patrick, you’re always considerate.’

‘Thanks. I’m not sure it was such a good idea to leave my bicycle here. Feel almost too tired to ride.’

‘You could always stay here?’

Patrick is standing quite close to me. It’s so natural to reach out and touch him on the shoulder. He follows my hand with his eyes. He doesn’t look at me, but stands very still as if any movement would frighten me away. His stillness reminds me of the end of our performance, when we sit, the space of the fulfilled dream hanging between us, the audience holding back their applause, absorbing the last resonances of sound before they break the spell we have woven.

And we are in that infinite space, waiting for the completion of my caress which is not the withdrawal of my hand, but his hand moving to mine.

Which it does.

And in this still point of moving from being friends to lovers, we turn into each other.

Patrick sleeps.

Bodies. They’re all flesh and blood, but he is so angular, the skin on his hands dry — probably chapped by the wind — the hair on his body wiry, although his legs are smooth — shaved for God’s sake. This is a different version of masculinity, but he has such a gentle way of touching me, of responding to me. And he makes those small guttural noises that suggest everything we do gives him pleasure.

And he talks. We talk. And he sleeps in my bed.

Most of our clothes and shoes are in small untidy heaps, some of them are spread around the room, our mugs and plates are resting on top of the television.

‘Now it looks just like my apartment,’ he said, as we sat up in bed after making love. And it does. His apartment brims with clutter and neglect, droppings and discardings. Dirty dishes. Washing left in tidy heaps. ‘But it’s only like that because I’ve been tumbling between work, performances and teaching.’
‘And don’t forget cycling.’

‘It was a distraction, Zoë. A displacement exercise. You know the sort, the one where you ease the pain in one area of your life by creating it in another. And some of the riders are a tad too aggressive for me. And after today, I’m not sure I want to risk a broken limb or finger. I was lucky. I landed on my head. The helmet saved me.’

After weeks of living on my own, his presence in my bed is an intrusion. He has loved me for months and he says he wants children and there was truth in the moment of his speaking.

Transitions are never easy. Sometimes we just sense the way we are with another person and act. It’s so easy when we’re angry, but in the tenderness of love there’s a vulnerability, a sense of exposure to the pain that might follow if things don’t work out.

AC might have argued that we don’t think about the pain of war when we enter into it. In war, there is the salve of being a hero, or of rescuing justice and truth from the gutter of the enemy, but with love we are alone with the uncertainty of its strength and possibilities.

He sleeps quietly. His breathing is deep and slow. Outside the air is still and the last tram is rattling the closure to the day that sleep brings. And — his elbow is bony.
Exegesis
Section 1: Finding the Boundaries

Introduction

The Ontology of Writing a Novel (and Exegesis) arose from a desire to further my understanding of fictional writing and academic writing within the context of practice-led research.1 As an Academic Skills Advisor, I both teach and advise research students engaged in practice-led research. By researching my writerly identity during the writing of the novel and exegesis, I have sought to gain insights which will enable me to write and teach more effectively.

Background to the project

My early writing drew on a habit of writing poetry in moments of angst and the naïve belief that university studies in English and Education were a sufficient foundation for fiction writing. Surely, the novel stemmed from the writer’s inner self, the imagined and reading experiences?

The first novel I wrote was plot driven, used third-person ‘focalization’[sic] (Porter Abbott 2005, p. 190) and located the characters in their personal and historical worlds through description, imagery and voice. A shift occurred in my second. I became interested in first-person focalisation and writing about the contemporary while embracing the historical, representing women’s changing role in society and their negotiation of this within their relationships. However, writing about these interests in predictable novels with closure was challenged by a growing interest in writing literary fiction. How was I to do this?

1 Surveying a range of texts using the term practice-led research revealed that there are three ways of writing the phrase: practice-led research, Practice-Led Research and Practice-led Research. I will use the lower case form, as one would write quantitative or qualitative research.
The canon confronts every writer wishing to write a literary novel. Each new and distinct voice contributes something significant to this body of literature. I wanted greater depth, the text to be multi-layered, to address the issues women face in contemporary life through lyrical and melodic language, but was it simply a matter of acquiring knowledge, experience and skills?

The advice given to writers about writing is conflicting. H. Porter Abbott in his discussion of narrative states: ‘… most stories if they succeed — that is, if they enjoy an audience or readership — do so because they [the writers] successfully control the process of story construction’ (2005, p. 19). In contrast, there are writers who do not want to ‘… know exactly what their books are about when they begin’ as Michael Ondaatje revealed in an interview: this ‘… seems incredibly boring to me. I am much more interested in how the writer evolves in the writing, so that the novel evolves as well’ (2007, p. 26). Such an evolution is excluded from Stephen King’s view: writers can not be made ‘either by circumstance or by self-will’ (2001, p. 18): ‘good story ideas … come quite literally from nowhere’ or ‘two previously unrelated ideas come together’ and the writer’s job is not ‘to find these ideas but to recognise them when they show up’ (2001, p. 37). Unlike King, Elizabeth Jolley considers the writer a cultural sieve who in respecting the reader ‘needs to exercise judgement in order to select and choose, to concentrate and refine and to reject non-essentials, so that the best material is offered in the best possible way’ (1999, p. 97).

These views reflect some of the many contradictions inherent in descriptions of fiction writers, both of their processes and writerly identity:² we are in control of what we do — we are not in control; we have to find accidentally — we must exercise control and judgment and plan; we have to be constantly alert — we must relinquish ourselves to the unconscious; we are the recipients of stories — we are the purveyors and conduits of culture.

² I have used the phrase ‘writerly identity’ because, while my state of being when writing is explored in the project, there are many other things which have informed and influenced the writing of the novel and my writing process which will be discussed in this paper. Writerly identity, I felt, was a more encompassing phrase than writerly being.
By repositioning the novel as research, I realised that this conflict would need to be addressed. My belief is that writers mature, that there are skills to be honed, that within the genre of literature there are characteristics to be understood. However, there are also questions about the subjectivity of the writer within these opposing views. Is the writer just a well-spring, the vehicle of the muse, a multi-faceted ball of mirrors reflecting their culture and society, a creator of imagined worlds which are simply unfolded through description, or a biological bundle of neur ons whose unique connections lead to what Harold Bloom, in his review of his greatest writers, calls ‘genius’ (2002)? In order to speak to the reader in a new way, there was more to understand about my own writerly identity.

As a Learning Skills Advisor, I had advised a number of honours and postgraduate students who were experiencing difficulties with writing the accompanying paper to their creative practices in the visual arts and dance. Their practices varied within, and across, their genres and reconceptualising the visual and kinaesthetic as research was difficult as they tried to theorise, contextualise and objectify their creative work in language.3

Creative practice is often a highly subjective and personal experience (Barrett 2007). The exegesis, on the other hand, asks practice-led researchers to situate their practice within the ‘domain’ of their practice and the ‘field’ of the academy.4 Practitioners, by presenting ‘a sense of the creative decision-making process(es) within the context of the research’ see beyond the habitual (Goddard 2007, p. 119). By way of critical reflection, the researcher is placed on the ‘borderlands, crossing between time and place, personal practice and the practice of others’ (Stewart 2007, p. 128). Here, the practitioner must discuss the emotional and subjective dimensions of their work objectively (Stewart 2007). The students I saw found it difficult to write about their work objectively and to see it through the interpretive frames of other practitioners and theorists.

How do practitioners move in and out of their creative practice, reflect on and objectify their work and processes? How do they identify and position the particularities of their

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3 I am exploring this problem in a PHD comprising a preface, artefact and exegesis. However, although the papers I saw were shorter, similar demands are made.
4 I have adapted these two terms which are used by Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 48) in his discussion of creativity.
practice within larger cultural frameworks which may include theorists from many domains? How can the unpredictable insights and emergent shifts that inform creative work be juggled when writing academically? How does one develop the academic writing skills to elucidate this experience? How does one write a chronological and reasoned paper within a research paradigm that is ‘open-ended, exploratory’, and ‘inductive’ (Lofland 2002, p. 152)?

Capturing such knowledge and insights in words, those ‘moments when our raw sensations become perception’ (Chatman 2005, p. 38), is one of the problems practice-led researchers face. Deciding where to locate and discuss these insights in an evolving text such as an exegesis is not self-evident. Guy Claxton in his summary discussion of the ‘phenomenology of decision making’ writes: ‘we see ourselves making decisions, and then we see decisions ─ images, thoughts, regrets, fantasies ─ welling up into consciousness by themselves. We see a mystery’ (2005, p. 348).

Writing fiction is often a mystery. Ideas, words, metaphors, images, insights and solutions to problems do seem to come from nowhere. They occur during the night, under the shower, as a flash of pattern recognition, or in un-associated contexts. Even though language is my creative medium, my creative process contains inexplicable elements which are difficult to articulate. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that ‘the creative process starts with sense that there is a puzzle or a task to be accomplished’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p. 95). This nebulous beginning, which I had experienced, is a difficulty in a research context that traditionally demands clarity of vision and specificity in the research question and process. Although my experience was with creative practitioners in non-language based art forms, I believed the problems of articulating aspects of my creative practice made it an equally suitable medium to be explored in seeking to understand the difficulties a student might have in theorising and writing about their practice.

As a performative researcher, I have to acknowledge that, for me, the physical act of writing fiction is often an embodied state. There is a sense of being at one with the process, of writing ‘in flow’ (Burzik 2004, Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 2002) as my fingers touch the keyboard. I seem to enter bodily into a character from whose point of view I
am writing, to hear their voice, to live within their imagined form, and feel as they might do when I am writing dialogue. To an extent there is an imagined being in residence. It also feels as if I am capturing the ‘resident’ unconscious as I become conscious of it. This process of capturing the complex ongoing flow of thought in the moment of its gestation is generally referred to as ‘stream of consciousness’ writing.\(^5\)

How do I write about or objectify this very internal experience? When I started this project, I was aware of writing in different states and identified my stream of consciousness writing as falling within the ‘flow’ state as described by Andreas Burzik (2004) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997, 2002). Flow, as described by Csikszentmihalyi, is the optimal feeling experienced ‘when things were going well as an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness’ (1997, p. 110), ‘the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter’ (2002, p. 4). In this state, nothing else enters my consciousness, time stands still, I become stiff with concentration and some of my more poetic writing emerges. However, how relevant would this be in the writing of the exegesis which, from my experience, demanded a more objective, planned and theorised engagement?

This project sought to explore these questions through a performative research model (see below) which accommodates the emergent and places me at the centre of the research. Personal experience is central to this project. My experiences as a writer and teacher of both fiction and academic writing were embedded in fabric of the novel and reflected upon in a working journal from which insights emerged. These provided the basis for further reading which provided paradigms within which I have contextualised, discussed and theorised my insights.

Critical reflection during the writing of the exegesis has been used to review the ideas embedded in the novel, my theorised insights into creative writing and my emerging insights into exegesis writing. As an example of practice-led research, this reflects Brad Haseman’s performative research paradigm in which the knowledge gained is based in what the researcher’s practice brings into being and articulates (2007). Consequently, the exegesis could be thought of as a limited autobiography of my research, reading

\(^5\) The phrase is also used to describe a writing style which has more recently been called interior monologue or free direct discourse (Porter Abbott 2005, p. 195).
theorising and practice, a hybridised paper which ‘includes the story of the practice-exegesis relationship’ (Stewart 2007, p. 126) and reflects the particularities and progression of this practitioner’s research and their writerly identity.

**Seeking a research paradigm**

In practice-led research, ‘each person’s inquiry approach will be distinctive’ and, unlike in other disciplines, ‘cannot be cloned or copied’ (Marshall 2001, p. 433). I explored and considered a number of qualitative research methods, particularly the heuristic because of its ‘process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience’ and ‘experiences growing awareness and self-knowledge’ (Moustakas 1990, p. 9). The overall process of initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination and explication, and creative synthesis (Moustakas 1990, pp. 227-31), reflected the process of developing an idea for a novel, writing a novel, keeping the working journal, reading, reflecting and writing the exegesis. However, the ongoing emergence of insights, even during the writing of the last draft of this exegesis suggested that it was not as suitable as first thought.

During the course of this project, a number of publications which focused on practice-led research were released, including Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt’s *Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry* (2007). In *A Manifesto for Performative Research*, Brad Haseman (2007) argues that practice-led research should be designated a third research paradigm which would sit alongside the quantitative and qualitative models. Within this paradigm he argues for a performative research model within which creative writing can be aligned with other forms of creative practice.

In performative research, it is in the course of performing, in this case writing, that knowledge is gained and comes to be understood as the practice is furthered. Haseman suggests that the research model may be drawn from the specific methods of the practitioner (2007, p. 3). Adapting to the practice/research being undertaken, it can thus be ‘defined in relation to the practice it seeks to elucidate’, as Stephen Goddard states (2007, p. 113).
Haseman includes in his discussion five criteria which validate the methodology: a clearly established problem; a clearly articulated method; the location of the study within its field of inquiry; socially responsible reporting of the findings; and the availability of the findings for peer review (2007, pp. 5-9). I believe these criteria have been fulfilled in the course of this project. For these reasons, the term ‘performative’ has been adopted as the overarching term to describe my research methodology. It forms the backbone of this project.

In traditional research, the Review of Literature, situated at the beginning of the research paper, provides the theoretical underpinnings for the research question and forges the conceptual paradigms for the research. The research, as written up in a thesis, appears linear, chronological and embedded in the external world, in spite of the many practical variations that occur. However, in this project, the emergence of questions, insights and reflections from the work in progress has led to an exegesis with a different structure, one that attempts ‘to integrate a creative research project with an exegesis … an extension of the practice, contextualised across a series of fields’ (Goddard 2007, p. 119).

Csikszentmihalyi argues that five steps comprise the traditional creative process: immersion in an area of interest; incubation when unusual connections are made unconsciously; insight leading to resolution; evaluation of the insight; elaboration when the hard work of realisation takes place (1997, p. 79). However, as a number of insights, periods of incubation and evaluations may occur, creative practice is often ‘recursive’, ‘iterative’ and characterised by many ‘loops’ (1997, p. 80). This recursive quality which characterises creative practice may also characterise the research in practice-led research and offers an alternative model to the logic of cause and effect in which the research question is framed in the traditional Review of Literature. I have contextualised my insights within the experiential, the domain of other creative writing practitioners and the emergent insights within their relevant fields within academia which mirrors the process Csikszentmihalyi describes as essential work in successful creative practice.

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6 Rob Pope in *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (2005) surveys in depth past and present perceptions of creativity. Csikszentmihalyi’s model was of interest to me because of its focus on the creative process and the traits of creative people.
It has been this research process, rather than a traditional Review of Literature, that has informed the project. The insights and issues that emerged during the writing of the novel and exegesis could not have been ‘foreshadowed’. The iterations that characterise creative practice also needed to be accommodated as well as the ongoing process of questioning and reviewing that which was written. Additionally, there was a need to accommodate ‘the intrinsically emotional and subjective dimension of the artistic process’ (Barrett 2007, p. 135). The ongoing situating of such dimensions which link ‘experience, practice and theory to produce situated knowledge, knowledge that operates in relation to established knowledge’ (Barrett 2007, p. 145) occurs throughout the exegesis. In this way, the Review of Literature which explores, maps, plots and scopes the knowledge and theories informing the research (Martin & Adams 2007) has been ongoing rather than clustered in a single chapter at the beginning of the exegesis.

In addition, knowledge has not only arisen from the theorising of the experiential, and critical reflective thinking, but from the continuous act of writing itself. Laurel Richardson argues that writing in itself is a method of inquiry, discovery and analysis. ‘By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it’ (1994, p. 516). The act of writing the novel, keeping the working journal and writing this exegesis have been instrumental in bringing new understandings into being.

These multiple forms of writing also reflect the dialogic nature of my research process. The multiple voices and registers reflect the differing positions the researcher must negotiate in the construction of the overall research narrative. They also reflect ‘a distinctive methodological approach’ in which ‘the development of the practice-exegesis relationship generates a mutual inter-dependence and correspondence between practices’ (Goddard 2007, p. 120), one in which one lives within the inquiry, practices new behaviours, ‘conceptualizes [sic] new learning about one’s identity’ and ‘stays present to a range of emotional responses’ (Marshall & Mead 2005, p. 241).

Julia Kristeva when dealing ‘with concepts borrowed from various disciplines … fitted them to the object of her investigations’ as I have done with this research model. She advocated ‘allowing practice to test theory, letting the two enter a dialectical
relationship’ (Roudiez in Kristeva 1980, p. 1). The ideas informing the two narratives in the novel have been ‘tested’ against the experience of writing the novel and exegesis.

The dialectical nature of my research process was reinforced when I read David Brown’s discussion of the role of narrative in the experience of belonging. He wrote: ‘one experiences “belonging” to the extent that one is able to interweave interpretations of self with the interpretations of others through narrative discourse’ (1997, p. 109). The concept of ‘interpretive interweaving’ has informed the writing of the exegesis. It has been critical in making the knowledge of others my own and in placing the experiential within the theories and interpretations of others.

Within my discussion, both the novel and exegesis are described as narratives. The decision to describe them both as such was influenced by Richard Kearney, who in his discussion of the role of narrative in historical truth writes:

… what narrative promises those concerned with historical truth is a form of understanding which is neither absolute nor relative, but something in between. It is what Aristotle called *phronesis*, in contrast to the mere chronicling of facts or the pure abstraction of scientific *thoeria*. It is closer to art than science; or, if you prefer, to a human science than to an exact one. Like the architect’s ruler, it is approximate but committed to lived experience (2002, p. 150).

The novel and exegesis are sites of my lived experience, my history, a story told in two very different narratives. Kearney believes narratives carry their own truth and that historical truth can be established through multiple retellings. I suggest that the novel and exegesis, each in their own way, not only reflect two ways of telling, but reflect a contemporary way of negotiating the truth within the context of our time. Within the lived experience of writing there is a type of understanding ‘specific to narrativity … a form of practical wisdom capable of respecting the singularity of situations as well as the nascent universality of values aimed at by human actions’ (Kearney 2002, p. 142).
While persuaded by this, I have also tried to be as truthful to my experiences as my understanding of the nuances of language would allow.

Three threads underpin my performative research process: writing as a method of inquiry, the potential for discovery through dialogue, and the inherent truth in narrative. In a sense, my research process is ‘an amalgam of processes and procedures … a bricolage’ (Stewart 2001, p. 3). It can also be described as emergent, participatory, action research which is characterised by many iterations. As Csikszentmihalyi points out, the number of iterations in creative practice will depend ‘on the depth and breadth of the issues dealt with’ (1997, pp. 80-81). Even as the final draft of the exegesis was being written, new insights into my writerly being and processes continued to emerge and I realised that both reflective critical thinking and the iterative process permeate the entire project.

The metaphoric image that most clearly mirrors the writing of the novel and exegesis is one of setting out on a journey down a chosen river. As one drifts down the river, one discovers many features needing to be explored: the current, the topography, the foliage on the riverbank, the fish in the water, the birds in flight, the human traffic. One seeks to understand what it is the senses have experienced, to explore, identify and understand how others have understood such experiences, how the discoveries sit within the community of other writers and the academy. The effect is an expanding ripple of situated knowledge, a deconstruction and re-evaluation of what has been understood before with concomitant insights, questions and surprises. As Day (2002) suggests, the circular dynamics of the research process influences the writing, yet the writing, in turn, influences the research.

Within all research projects there are embedded assumptions and practices and I have identified the following as mine. There was an implicit belief that some aspects of my writing would emerge as more important than others; that in seeking to resolve problems arising during the writing of the novel that the practices of others would become considered; that new ways of writing might be opened up to me and that my awareness of my being as a writer would be enlarged; that the ongoing reading would influence the writing of the novel. These assumptions suggest a changing rather than
fixed writerly identity and emphasise the importance of the research method as a framework for the project. It is this research method that has facilitated a review of my initial knowledge in the light of new, and enabled the dialogue between the experiential and the read, and the emergence of new knowledge from the experiential.

**The working journal**

Practice-led research ‘differs from conventional scholarly work’ and encourages the production of ‘forms of knowledge that may not be available using traditional and scientific methods’ (Grech 2006, p. 34). My working journal was the site where self-reflective practice, ‘a necessary core of all inquiry’ (Marshall 2001, p. 433) took place when writing the novel.

In my working journal I recorded the experienced, planned and brainstormed aspects of the novel, reflected on my writing process, noted and queried the ideas of others; in other words, engaged in critical, reflective, dialogic thinking. It reflects what Judi Marshall describes as ‘engaging in inner and outer arcs of attention’ and moving between them (2001, p. 433). It facilitated the task of identifying and ‘evaluating the theories underlying and shaping’ (Stewart 2003, p. 1) my practice and inquiry. It documents both the ‘enquiry cycle’ (Haseman 2007, p. 152), in which tacit knowledge becomes explicit, and the cyclical ‘self-critical movement between experience and reflection … as practice and experience are systematically honed and refined’ (Reason in Haseman 2007, p. 152). This symbiotic process led me ‘beyond the closed ego towards other possibilities of being’ (Kearney 2002, p. 13).

As an example of ‘reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action’ (Haseman 2007, p. 153), the journal has enabled a deeper understanding of my writing process and has been foundational to this project which, as Goddard suggests, is in itself a ‘combined and reflexive research praxis’ (2007, p. 113). The engagement in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action allowed me to become aware of the ‘frames’ (Reason & Torbert 2005, p. 19) which informed my creative writing and guided my subsequent reading.


**Shaping the novel**

My original purpose in writing two first-person narratives was to explore through them the differences between writing from a subjective and objective position. Working with two first-person narratives was not new. I had worked previously with alternating voices and been struck by A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1991) in which the frame-tale has a very different voice to the inner story. Juxtaposing two voices, one syncopated (Hecq 2007), would allow me to use tone, structure, narrative style and innovative uses of language to realise the differences between a subjective and objective position.

The decision to write two first-person narratives was also influenced by James Kelman’s novel, *How late it was, how late* (1994). Kelman interweaves a rhythmical Scottish accent with a playful use of language and sentence structure, and portraits his central character through first, second and third-person focalisation. This struck me because we do objectify ourselves and our world in many contexts through third-person focalisation, particularly in academic writing. Within the context of practice-led research, the engagement of the practitioner in ‘reflexive methodologies that examine their own procedures and operating assumptions’ (Goddard 2007, p. 120) leads to the theorising of creative practice which is integral to the research process (Prentice 2000). In this process, personal knowledge becomes objectified.

Bringing the subjective, the experiential, into language is often difficult, although language is my creative medium. My creative writing process, as noted, draws on stream of consciousness writing, research, the imagination, memory and the senses. It allows a freedom of expression that the logic and reasoning inherent in much academic discourse curtails. Zoë’s narrative would reflect this. Celia’s narrative would reflect the demand to contextualise my creative writing practice within a writing of other theorists which I felt undermined the novel, in itself, as a form of research. Linda Ruth Williams’ discussion of psychoanalysis and the literary subject (1995, p. 83) expressed my concern, albeit in another context: that the exegesis would impose already fixed epistemologies onto the creative artefact. Definitions, drawn from a dictionary, would reflect the constraint of historically defined academic language and the ‘univocality of logic in the western tradition in literacy which claims it can completely disambiguate the word’ (Ulmer 2005, p. 7), an ambition which is also reflected in the omniscient use
of ‘one’ when writing academically in the third person. Celia’s narrative would also reflect the difficulty of making sense of the larger world when one’s personal inscriptions dominate one’s world view, thus creating a barrier to objectivity and gaining insight into one’s own practice.

The decision to juxtapose a chronological against a broken narrative was based on my perception of the differing writing processes demanded by the novel and exegesis. In the novel, past and present, the researched, the experiential, memories and the imagined are sewn into what is finally a chronological narrative, reflecting the process by which we make sense of our lives (Stern 2004). In the exegesis, the unpredictable development of my creative practice meant an often fragmented research process. Other writers’ ideas, which frame and limit the discussion, are interwoven into a sequential research narrative which is only resolved at the end. Unlike the novel, the research narrative ─ the exegesis ─ is not constructed as a self-contained world. It depends on the theorised world of others. Referenced material reflects the important role other writers play in adding to, clarifying and validating points of discussion and emerging ideas.

In addition, my interest in juxtaposed texts had been stimulated by several writers whose work featured juxtaposition: Sheman Alexie in his short story, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1994), juxtaposes past and present episodes of an American Indian’s life; Jacques Derrida’s Glas (1990) circumnavigates the subject rather than approaching it in a linear or chronological way; Renate Klein’s story, Mary Immaculate (1996), features factual margin notes which undermine the fictional text. Disruption is the shared element in these texts.

Within the two narratives, a single story is interwoven. The novel reflects the dialogue between practice and theory, tacit and explicit knowledge and sets the experiential in the present against the force of past epistemologies.
Section 2: Discovering the Unexpected

Our house is the corner of our world

During the writing of the novel I gained new insights into my writerly identity. It was more complex than I had thought. In the following section, these insights will be contextualised within the domain of other fictional writers. There were six areas into which I gained insights that led to a fuller understanding of my writerly identity: my personal inscriptions, my creative process, the influence of other writers on my perception of what it means to be a writer, my understanding of the novel as a form of writing and my writing process.

Personal inscriptions

Practice-led research ‘operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge but also on that of tacit knowledge’ (Barrett 2007, p. 143). Tacit knowledge informs my creative writing. It includes inscriptions arising from childhood experiences which, like Gaston Bachelard’s childhood house, formed my ‘first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word’ (Bachelard 1994, p. 4). The emergence of my early cosmos often occurred without warning when I was writing.

The sudden appearance of childhood nursery rhymes when I was engaged in stream of consciousness writing led me to ask, is there an originating matrix of associations from which my writing originates? Jacques Derrida, in Veils, describes the linguistic matrix permeating his writing which originated in his childhood experience of keeping silkworms:

… the word mulberry was never far from ripening and dying … he cultivated it like a language, a phoneme, a word, a verb (green [vert] itself, and greenery [verdure], and going green [verdir], and worm [ver] and verse [vers] and glass [verre] and
rod [verge] and truth [vérité], veracious and veridical [vérase ou véridique], perverse and virtue [pervers et vertu], all the crawling bits of words with ver- in even greater number, that he will celebrate later and recalls here, one more time, without veil or shame (Cixous & Derrida 2001, pp. 90-91).

Similarly, the following architectural inscriptions give shape to the house of my creative practice.

**Scattered books and sewing**

The sounds of words, the rhythm of sentences and the cadence of voices lift me into an imaginary world. Sometimes the accent is Australian: a soft, flat male drawl. Sometimes lyrical and female: a Welsh-informed English accent. Slowly the sounds merge with text and illustrations. And then the words become silent understandings clenched between my hands to be read over and over in silence.

Books are remembered for their words and illustrations: *The Child’s Book of Prayer* edited by Louise Raymond, *Nursery Rhymes* illustrated by Margaret W. Tarrant, a children’s edition of Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha*, Enid Blighton’s *Don’t be Silly Mr. Twiddle*, Lucy Fitch-Perkins’s *The Eskimo Twins*, Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, *Brer Rabbit* — probably a Joel Chandler Harris rendering, the Brothers Grimm and Hans Anderson fairy tales. Books are remembered for the feelings aroused: I lived bumping down the stairs as I read Joyce Lankester Brisley’s *Milly Molly Mandy*.

*And my mother was sewing.*

*Bundles of piece work arrive in deep cardboard boxes, tied together with scrappy tendrils of fabric. The pieces are small, irregularly shaped, meaningless until stitched together.*


*I stand on the fence overlooking the straw-grass.*

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*I remember these books, but no longer have copies of them. I traced the titles and authors but, because of the many editions, I have omitted the publishing dates and these works from the reference list.*
A war begins: I am torn between the dry Australian landscape of Mary Grant Bruce and the dank riverbanks at the far end of English gardens. I live beneath a blue sky and a hot sun next to a vacant paddock of yellow grass. There are no lanes, no teddy-bears trailing behind me on stairs, no afternoon teas and few adventures in the backyard of the last house in the street, except in my dreaming of the drifting clouds and the rustling grass which speaks of the wind. In the distance, the hedge-locked paddocks of the distant hills foreground the lavender mountains.

Fabric is all important. Feel the cotton: the smoothness of the right side, the roughness of the wrong. The fabric is spread over the blanket on the table and the pattern laid on top. At Brownies I enjoy tying knots.

We cross the vacant paddock, thread daisy chains, and visit our neighbours who have Bugs Bunny and Donald Duck comics. They also have a Girl’s Own Annual.

At the factory, scissors slice the fabric, pinking shears gnaw its edges, machines purr and chatter. At the finishing table, the loose cottons and threads are snipped away. At my confirmation, the white, pin-tucked organza twirls. At my first school social, my floral silk dress overhangs my leaf green shoes.

Reading becomes an escape in the maelstrom of clothing production, a page-turning, private world of tension and adventure with Edgar Rice Burroughs, W.E. Johns and John Steinbeck. Then, the romantic short stories of the Women’s Weekly infiltrate an identity saturated with heroes and heroines populating colonial outposts and hockey fields. The tension of high adventure is replaced by the possibility of transformation — not through transubstantiation or devotion to the Trinity which is rejected — but through love: from angst to happiness in an apocryphal kiss — and another fantasy is inscribed.
Cottons and threads, pins and needles, zips and buttons, tapes and chalk.  
Silks and satins, poplin and wool, chiffon and taffeta, lace and twill.  
Broderie anglaise, denim and lawn.

I write a poem, a play, yet struggle with essays and précis. Chaucer, Shakespeare along with Greek and Latin roots pry open the door to our changing language. Novels, poetry and plays become literature: Alan Marshall, Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence are remembered in a world that separates the sciences from the arts.

Take a piece of fabric. The shape emerges from the imagined.  
No pattern is required.

And the sonorous musicality of language lingers. The tension between the Australian landscape and my past fictional world remains an irreparable fissure, and the dream of realising the ephemeral echoes in my writing process.

**Creativity — books without boundaries**

What is creativity? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines creativity as ‘a process by which a symbolic domain in a culture is changed’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p. 80). Based on his research into the practices and work habits of ninety-one creative people, he argues creative people have the following traits:

- an abundance of physical energy although they are often quiet and at rest,
- are smart, yet naïve,
- are playful yet disciplined, responsible yet irresponsible, extrovert yet introvert, humble yet proud, passionate yet objective,
- alternate between the imagined and a grounded sense of reality,
- to a certain extent escape rigid gender role stereotyping,
are rebellious and independent although they have internalised the domain of their culture,

— are open and sensitive which exposes them to suffering and pain yet also a deal of enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, pp. 55-76).

Inherent oppositions in the creative-writing process have also been identified by Kevin Brophy within the context of creative-writing courses:

Spontaneity or planning, original or copy, art or craft, new or old, uncanny or familiar, play or work, self-expression or chance, Dionysian or Platonic, personal or impersonal are only some of the oppositions that come into play when we approach a creative task (or approach a task creatively) (Brophy 1998, p. 11).

Creativity, for me, was linked to the creative act itself, to the embodied experience of creating the work, to the process of realising the imagined and an expressive original outcome. This view, I now see, located me among writers such as Dorothea Brande (1981) and Brenda Ueland (1987) who locate the source of creativity in the unconscious. Brande, for example, advises writers to let their ideas percolate freely, to recognise the force of their dream life, to hitch their unconscious mind to their writing arm (1982, p. 69). Although the works of Brande and Ueland were first published in 1934 and 1938, respectively, the more recent writings of Carmel Bird (1988), Julie Cameron (1995) and Natalie Goldberg (1998) echo the emphasis of Brande and Ueland on the role of the unconscious in the creative process.

Guy Claxton, in his discussion of the human mind, locates this focus on the unconscious within the Romantic tradition which nurtures a belief in ‘a profound intelligence’ accessible only ‘through surrendering to one’s own incomprehension, creating space for the unconscious to speak at its own speed, and in its own imaginative, symbolic way’ (2005, p. 150). This tradition validates other activities based in a belief in the unconscious: the interpretation of dreams, the decoding of symbols, automatic writing, psychotherapy and the recognition that the mystic counsellor’s wisdom comes, not from
the gods, but from within. With the psychologising of the soul, humans have turned to searching their own minds for explanations but, Claxton argues, the unconscious is not the “locked ward” or fetid jungle of Freud, nor even the Nature-resonator of the Romantic Sublime. It is simply the wellhead from which all form and motion bubbles forth’ (Claxton 2005, p. 152).

This view of the mind supports Ueland (1987), Brophy (1998) and Cameron (1995) in their emphasis on the unconscious. However, they differ on the nature of the unconscious and its role in creative writing. For Ueland, the writer must help the unconscious to break through. Brophy maintains, in his discussion of creative writing as a replacement for the confessional, that the unconscious is a source of hidden truths. Cameron vacillates between speaking of the unconscious as God, or as a divine energy flowing through writers which can be released through stream of consciousness writing. These ambiguities permeated my writerly identity when I began this project.

If consciousness is the ‘dashboard of the mind’ (Claxton 2005, p. 344) and beneath the bonnet, unconscious activity continues, it is not surprising that we unexpectedly gain insights, ideas or solutions to problems from this always purring motor. These ‘non-rational’ aspects of our experience are referred to by many writers in descriptions of their writing process and, at the beginning of this project, I was often dependent on them to further my narrative. I awaited their arrival, anxiously, pen and paper in my bag and at my bedside.

What else characterised my creative process? I had a broad, ephemeral plan, but it was open to change. If, when writing in stream of consciousness mode, a new idea arose, integration was preferred to rejection: all writing was precious and I was reluctant to discard my words. Researching the styles of others occurred when I thought other writers had solved the problems I was experiencing. When editing, I was sufficiently critical and objective to search for more effective verbs, change and delete words, and move chunks of text to develop narrative flow.

My process mirrored Enza Gandolfo’s description of fiction writing as ‘a synthesis of both the intellect and the imagination’ (2006, p. 64). Inherent in this synthesis is the
movement between conscious and unconscious activity which occurs when I am solving narrative and logistical problems. Reason plays a role when characters have to be located in narrative time and space. On the other hand, when my writing depends on ‘more personal, emotional or even spiritual forms of knowing’ (Claxton 2005, p. 135) and I conceptualise the novel as ‘mine’, as ‘my’ vision, ‘my’ process, I draw on the unconscious. I am now asking whether it is the capacity of the writer to move between the many binary states noted by Brophy and Csikszentmihalyi that is a key factor in the creative process.

The unknown, unpredictable and inexplicable aspects of writing, which reflect the ‘wayward mind’, continue to invoke the unknown and the mysterious for me. In acknowledging the role of the unconscious in my writing, I find myself acknowledging something not fully understood when, within a more traditional academic context, all should be apparent. In addition, when I think consciously about the imagination, I have few explanations. Ideas and words arrive unexpectedly, in odd syntactic structures. They insinuate themselves in stream of consciousness writing, surface in the scribbles of mind-mapping and leap out from seemingly disconnected fields.

When I began the novel, my view of creativity was based in the experiential. It was supported by those texts which emphasised the unconscious as the primary source of creativity. My enlarged understanding of my practice and alternative views of creativity have led me to question whether my earlier view either suited my temperament or was sustainable if I wanted to write a literary novel. My original interests bespoke intention. By not understanding my dependence on a stream of consciousness approach, I created a problem. This problem was partially solved when, during this research, I encountered the processes of other writers, some of which I adopted.

**The writer — and the writing self**

A growing awareness of my own writing process, furthered by the insights of other creative writers, led to a review of the novel as a vehicle for personal expression and a repositioning of it as a creative artefact demanding some very conscious decision
making. As a fellow writer so cogently said: ‘It’s no longer about the ego: it’s about the work’ (Marshall, 2007).

As previously noted, stream of consciousness writing is characterised by an outpouring which captures the emergent and the psyche of the writer.\(^8\) My belief in the pivotal role of the unconscious in creative writing was embedded in Zoë’s narrative just as my belief in the necessity for a more conscious, objective approach to writing in the exegesis was embedded in Celia’s. Yet, the juxtaposition of two narrative styles, in itself, reflects a very conscious approach to characterisation and structure which is at odds with my emphasis on stream of consciousness writing. This contradiction led me to question the veracity and usefulness of the values I brought to this project, including those of which I was unaware.

I was unaware that stream of consciousness writing was my primary process. When I began writing I used it. Subsequently, I was encouraged to use it when undertaking a Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing. When teaching creative writing, I asked students to keep a stream-of-consciousness writing journal and promoted the improvisation process recommended by Kate Grenville in *The Writing Book* (1990, pp. 1-17). As a mother, teacher and writer, I identified with the stance of Carmel Bird (1988) and Brenda Ueland (1987) who recommend the process as a way of overcoming the difficulties women face when they want to write. Such difficulties are reflected in Margaret Atwood’s statement, ‘the doomed female artist is far from dead’ (2002, p. 89) and an article by the Australian writer/journalist Jane Sullivan, ‘When motherhood is just and write’ (2008), in which she notes that writing is identified as a vocation by some writers which would necessarily exclude parenthood.

However, the focus of Bird and Ueland on the difficulties many female writers face, and their advice to simply sit down and write, while stimulating my courage, was challenged as I tried to deal with some of the complex problems associated with writing *The Fragility Papers*. These included structuring the larger story within two separate narratives, negotiating shifts in time, maintaining two consistent voices, writing with

\(^8\) The definition in the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms is the continuous flow of sense-perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories in the human mind; or a literary method of representing such a blending of mental processes (Baldick 2001).
greater depth, avoiding clichés, and embedding two views of the world within the narrative and narrative voices.

Another belief, that ‘the creative work itself holds all meaning in isolation from any context and that its discourse is distinct from any social function’ (Freiman 2007, p. 7), was also challenged by my driving wish to comment on the Iraq War in the novel. Jonathan Franzen writes of the conflict between addressing culture and his wish to write about the things closest to him, his wish to lose himself within his characters and locales. This conflict led to writer’s block which he resolved when he jettisoned his ‘perceived obligation to the chimerical mainstream’ (Franzen 2002, p. 95). However, accommodating my interest was resolved by developing a sub-plot around Lachlan’s father. As Freiman (2007) argues, the expressive act of writing is not the only world of the writer. Reflecting social issues and the deliberate management of a developing text may be equally important. Francine Prose would agree with her. In *Reading Like a Writer* (2007), she opens her discussion of the creative writer’s process with a discussion of word selection and intentionality.

As I became more conscious of my process, I recognised that there was advice which I chose not to follow such as reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of my process, and identifying my ‘native gifts’ (Brande 1981, p. 85). I also ignored some advice about the use of dialogue. I use dialogue to forward the narrative, a technique Brande criticizes through the voice of Edith Wharton: ‘The sparing use of dialogue not only serves to emphasize [sic] the crises of a tale, but to give it as a whole a greater effect of continuous development’ (Wharton in Brande 1981, p. 92). My use of dialogue in the novel is not sparing. Although I have used dialogue to serve a number of established functions, I have also used it to realise of particular aspects of the novel.

Kate Grenville (1998, p. 102) notes that dialogue enables a more lifelike representation of characters and the representation of events in real time. The latter function was important as I tried to embed the embodied and experiential in the primary narrative. Stephen King argues that dialogue shows rather than tells and furthers the individuation of characters through accent, rhythm and syntax (2000, pp. 180-185). These latter characteristics reflect a sociolinguistic aspect of dialogue rather than its potential for
having a psychological effect (Mullan 2006, p. 134). The sociolinguistic is evident in the accent of the taxi-driver, in the syntax and vocabulary of the great-grandfather’s letters and Lachlan’s reviews which are distinguished by their tone, vocabulary and syntax. However, the psychological effect, which is important to me, rests within the tension generated as the characters speak to each other. The reader lives though the unknown, but anticipated outcomes of the verbal exchanges between them.

A writer cannot predict the response of a reader, but a greater sense of reality and a psychological effect was sought through the inclusion of phone conversations, especially the demanding, late-night conversation between Zoë and Lachlan. The wish for my reader to experience distinct voices was furthered by contrasting the experiential, real-time sections of dialogue in Zoë’s narrative with the more reflective passages in Celia’s. Within the dialogue, I also sought to create a stronger sense of immediacy for the reader by minimising the number of ‘reporting clauses’ (Mullan, 2006 p. 135) such as ‘she says’. I wanted the reader to be existentially within the dialogue and for the tone of voice to be implicit in what was said rather than being described.

Dialogue, Grenville suggests, ‘is not a good place to convey information’, nor is it a ‘suitable disguise for a philosophical argument’ (1998, p. 102). However, dialogue was used to convey information, to reflect Celia’s state of mind, to challenge the reflective writing style that usually characterises journals and to present different philosophical positions on war. It also allowed me to overcome the limiting characteristic of not being able to enter into the mind of another character when writing in the first person: through dialogue we know how Lachlan feels about his father’s death, how Zoë’s mother fails to respond to Zoë’s needs.

A great breadth of advice for writers is written by writers. Kate Grenville (1998) offers advice based on traditional descriptions of the novel and the writing process. For Brande (1981) the craft is important. Nadine Gordimer (1996) identifies characters as representations of the link between the ‘material and immaterial’ world of writers who are spread-eagled between their inner and outer realms of being. Brenda Ueland (1987) recommends writing microscopically and truthfully, Milan Kundera (2005) emphasises the role the novel plays in society, whereas, for Italo Calvino, ‘the important thing is
that story provide the reader with imaginative materials that chime with his own particular language, that provide reactions and objections within him’ (1997, p. 37).

Reviewing the advice of other writers, in conjunctions with identifying and questioning my process, has led me to ask whether a meta-language about creative writing processes would be helpful to writers. P. Reason and P. Torbert advocate a meta-language for action research and identify three areas for reflection: content, process and premise (2005, p. 25). Using meta-cognitive techniques such as juxtaposition, mind-mapping and other cognitive processes to develop originality or problem solve is advocated by T. B. Ward, R. A. Smith and S. M. Finke (2002). While I occasionally used mind-mapping, and juxtaposed two narratives in the novel, thinking about deliberately using such strategies was new. Their use reflects a more rational, objective, intentional and distanced approach to creativity, one that focuses more on the creative artefact than personal expression. However, will this awareness enable me to choose more relevant and appropriate processes at different points in my writing practice in the future?

**The novel**

The literary genre has high demands: fully rounded characters, transformation within a moral code, facility with language, narrative and structure. Today, within the academic context, the genre is frequently contextualised within post-modern cultural theory which leaves open the possibility of numerous interpretive prisms and hybridised genres. My focus in *The Fragility Papers* has been to write with greater depth and explore innovatively the use of first-person focalisation. However, the development of a distinct voice is uncertain when my writerly identity carries within it the voices of other writers.

Two novels by Marguerite Duras, *The Lover* (1985) and *The North China Lover* (1994), were very influential because they are characterised by broken rhythms, phrasal sentences and direct, present tense statements through which the world is objectified. While the phrasal sentences interested me, the broken rhythms created an angular awkwardness that distanced me from the text.
This is the river.

This is the ferry across the Mekong. The ferry in the books.
On the river.
There on the ferry is the native bus, the long black Léon Bollée
cars, the North China lovers, looking (Duras 1994, p. 25).

The distant narrative hangs in tatters, small fragments flapping in the wind. James
Kelman’s *How late it was, how late*, on the other hand, with its drunken Scottish
brogue, and his ‘jesus christ he needed to concentrate to bloody concentrate. He needed
to get things sortit’ (Kelman 1994, p. 118), denied me any separation from the character,
even though the character often speaks of himself in the third person. Beverly Farmer’s
*A Body of Water* allowed me to dream of incorporating cultural references to the arts in
a text. All three made me feel that fictional texts have no boundaries other than the
extent to which the writer can draw the reader into the reality of the text. Italo Calvino’s
*Cosmicomics* (1993), and a little later W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1999) also
convinced me of this. The seismic shifts in Sebald’s narrative, is reflected in the key
word summary of the ‘Contents’ of his first chapter:

In hospital — Obituary — Odyssey of Thomas Brown’s skills —
Anatomy lecture — Levitation — Quincunx — Fabled creatures —
Urn burial (1999).

These works reinforced my view that writing novels is about developing a voice, style
and narrative that is so convincing that readers can do nothing else but relinquish
themselves to the created world: the reader is enabled through the writer’s voice and the
medium of language to inhabit existentially an alternative reality.

I did not want to simply engage my readers in two interwoven first-person narratives,
but to challenge them in Celia’s text with reflective papers that were more complex than
a journal. However, unlike Byatt’s (1991) frame-tale which encloses a separate inner
narrative, I wanted to thread the second narrative throughout the novel. I noted in my
journal: ‘papers, perhaps chronologically sequenced, without a formal structure such as
a diary, journal’, and I asked, ‘but can this be’? Disorganised papers opened up many narrative possibilities: chronological disruption; infiltrating one narrative with another; using two homodiegetic narratives (Porter Abbott 2005) — one a frame-tale for the other; portraying generational differences and different ways of being in two worlds within Australia. Papers would open the door to many registers and the language of the broken text could influence the primary narrative and, in this way, reinforce the power of the limiting and closed nature of shared meanings and historical constructions.

Duras and Kelman were instrumental in breaking the bindings of the formal sentence structures which had dominated my writing, encouraged me to play with language and to create a rhythmic text that echoed improvised jazz. I intentionally used more fragmented sentences, single words, phrasal sentences, very short and long paragraphs and played with shifts in time. I wanted Zoë’s voice to capture within it the non-linear and often erratic realisations of thought and remembered experiences in language. The omission of ‘I’ was an attempt to create an immediate experience for the reader, one which demanded their engagement and concentration as Kelman had demanded mine.

John Barth’s *Tidewater Tales* (1988) and Anna Kavan’s collection of short stories, *Sleep Has His House* (1981) gave me insight into how the placement of the text on the page could emphasise rhythm, meaning and the poetic elements of a text. Sonority rather than metaphor was important to me. Each word is sonorous, not only in terms of its vowels and consonants, but its syllabic combinations, and its sonorous relationships to other words within a sentence. These qualities were important in establishing Zoë’s voice. When reading Kate Grenville’s novel, *The Secret River* (2005), I felt the narrator’s voice was slow and controlled. The pall of death seemed to breathe within it and complement the slow and deliberate unfolding of a denouement that foreshadows the genocide of a nation. Such tonal consistency was needed in Zoë and Celia’s narrative voices if the contrast between the two voices was to be effective and the reader was to experience the differing psyches of the two characters.

Several novels directed me towards the craft needed when building a consistent first-person voice. For example, craft is evident in the use of punctuation in Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001). Comprehension is dependent on rhythm,
punctuation and spelling which lets the reader hear the Australian accent, as in Kelman’s *How late is was, how late* (1994). Integrating research, as evidenced in *March* (2006) by Geraldine Brooks, also demands imagination and craft.

I was also influenced by Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2007), Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2002), Anne Tyler’s *The Amateur Marriage* (2004) and Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (2005). Through these novels, these writers portray the deep pain of family life, the embodied experience of change and, like Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997), use language in original ways by referencing the contemporary. I found these novels compelling reading and was impressed by the strong poetic and narrative qualities.

I also realised that other writers had influenced my relationship with the reader. Achieving a balance between writing as I wanted, challenging the reader and engaging the reader was an ongoing concern. In several short stories I had used a skeletal structure of key words as subheadings to bind the narrative. Characters in these stories were less important than the form in which chronological time was discarded. These stories drew on the intensity of a moment, the pivotal point around which the stories were developed. I used this technique in Celia’s narrative, but I was aware that it might be difficult for the reader.

Roland Barthes’ words ‘… the text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination’ (1987, p. 148) places the reader centre stage. Although Barthes was referring to the meaning of a text, his comment puts authors in the odd position of knowing their readers will reconstruct a text in the light of their own experiences of language, even though texts are written in the light of the writer’s experience. Advice to writers about their relationship with the reader is ambivalent. ‘One writes only for the reader’ writes Eco (2006, p. 334). On the other hand Ueland suggests that ‘when you get down to the True self and speak from that, there is always a metamorphosis in your writing’ (1987, p. 102). Both comments suggest the writer has supreme control over the text, that the writer remains centre stage, at least while writing. Being more conscious of my reader, I tried to balance maintaining reader interest by using a romantic frame-tale as a narrative
hook while laying down a challenge with a very fragmented narrative. I also clearly mapped Zoë’s days and used a distinct font to separate the narratives.

The need to challenge myself as a writer also fulfilled my wish to challenge the reader. Playing with time, including large sections of un-ascribed dialogue, listing dictionary definitions which border on the boring, and asking the reader to tolerate the enigma of Paul were also writing challenges. However, these challenges demanded that I be more objective in the editing process: the shifts across time and within each chapter had to be logical otherwise readers might question the veracity or possibility of the text.

One of the difficulties when considering the novel within the context of my writerly identity is the number of frames through which it can be viewed. Each writer brings a personal and unique perspective to the pool of advice given to writers, a pool which includes not only advice on approaches to writing (See p. 241) but differing interpretations and emphases on the essential characteristics of the novel. The relationship between the writer’s life and their writing is also unique. This suggests that the inherent possibility for innovation within the novel makes it a unique genre of writing.

Reading the above works has broadened my writerly identity and, through critical reflection, I have become more cognisant of where my practice is situated in terms of their processes and interests. However, although I am able to describe some aspects of my voice, I am still struggling to objectify it.

**The writing process**

_What happens in the creative space – what is the imagined space between the sub-vocalised word, the sound of the word, and the context it is given on the page, and what happens in the writer’s imagination at the point of sub-vocalisation (Journal entry, 13 November 2004)?_
Reflecting on my writerly being and contextualising my insights led to the following: an awareness that my creative writing process was not as I thought it was; changes to my writing process; an awareness that, although my creative process and my state of being when writing are interrelated, they are usually discussed separately — the latter often neglected.

**The reality of the writing process**

Writing my first novel was difficult: the unimagined struggle of the writer was not part of ‘the dream’. My ‘dream’ was reflected in Atwood’s (2002) vision: writing is innate, unconscious in its source and fuelled by the combustion of motivation and creativity. When I began *The Fragility Papers*, I was unaware that my ongoing and deeply held assumptions about creativity encouraged what Freiman calls ‘dangerous dreaming’, a romantic view in which creativity and originality, while breaking cultural boundaries, deny both the existence of the reader and that learning can occur through rewriting (2007). My reader was not totally neglected, but the annoying work of rewriting stream of consciousness material I called ‘editing’ not ‘a learning process’. Brande’s (1981) belief in training the body to access the powerful unconscious on demand, through a meditative technique which hastened the incubation process, would have been persuasive. Although, Brande also advises reflecting consciously on the written material: such advice is now of more interest to me.

Before starting *The Fragility Papers* I drew on a quintet of resources when writing creatively: direct personal experience, research, memory, the imagination and the unconscious. My expectation was that narrative and characters would naturally unfold in the simple writing of sequenced sentences. Although I had a general structure and intent, my writing was mostly unplanned and progressed in a stilted fashion. This was an emotionally difficult and frustrating process: I was often stuck because I was dependent on serendipitous insights arising from the unconscious for solving a range of narrative problems and these rarely arrived in a timely way.

However, there were many conscious activities which I did not acknowledge as instrumental in my process such as negotiating time. David Lodge writes that ‘the novel is arguably man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human
beings moving through space and time’ (2003, p. 10). Time can be represented in many ways (Porter Abbott 2005). I was familiar with eliding time between paragraphs and chapters, standing still and dwelling in the moment, or using dialogue to locate the reader in near real time and locating the reader with time-marking phrases, such as ‘in the afternoon’, or ‘at breakfast’. However, in The Fragility Papers, I consciously rejected marking time with them. Instead, I situated the characters and readers in time and place by referring to light, the seasons and shrubs and flowers in bloom: by implication rather than direct statement. Zoë’s narrative was to be experiential, impressionistic and located in her time and place rather than explanatory. The research underpinning this writing included going to particular locations and being attentive to my responses to the particular habitus.

Time was also consciously marked through the chronological frame-tale and the non-sequential narrative which frequently returns to a pivotal point in time. Other significant markers of time were used in the narrative structure. The reader was being fast-forwarded through a series of incomplete days and forced to leap across weeks between chapters. The repeated structure of each chapter, the beginning and end of each day, had two purposes: firstly, to transport the reader in time over a period of several months and secondly, to allow the reader to linger in those points of the day when we move between a conscious and unconscious state. Once again, this very conscious planning and negotiation of time was not acknowledged consciously as part of my writerly identity.

As the novel evolved, references to photographs and television images in my daily life were consciously included to represent the power of visually mediated experiences, experiences which I drew upon when writing, experiences which, I believe, can be as powerful as language in constructing meaning.

Writers vary in their use of conscious and unconscious activity in their writing process. Umberto Eco (1985) prepares and plans in great detail. Michael Ondaatje prefers to let his novels evolve (2007b, pp. 26-7), although one drawback of this method is that the narrative can become difficult to manage. When the idea of Zoë deliberately spilling wine on Lachlan unexpectedly emerged in a stream of consciousness writing session, I had to consciously choose whether to develop or delete it. The wine incident verged on
the burlesque, I liked it, but was Zoë like that? I had to consciously rewrite an earlier passage to foreshadow Lachlan’s taste in wine for it to be effective. The idea of using Anzac Day originated from a television program and led to Lachlan’s father being a veteran of the Vietnam War. Both, I hoped, would resonate with the reader because of media coverage of the Iraq War. This required planning, although the dawn walk through the mist to the Shrine of Remembrance, which was based on personal experience, emerged as I was writing.

Eco in his *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1985) suggests that writing a novel is a cosmological matter in that it demands the construction of a world from which the story and style must emerge. He recommends that writers set themselves problems, recognise that a novel has laws of its own, internalise the rules, research to gain a knowledge of the time and place in which the novel is set, observe the constraints of the logic of the world created, consider the breadth and pacing of a novel be it consciously or unconsciously, be conscious of the reader, solve problems as they emerge and adapt and adopt other models of writing. Many of these strategies require deliberate and conscious planning.

Conscious activity is reflected in the researching I undertook for *The Fragility Papers* and it took many forms. I read Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) and Berger & Mohr’s *Another Way* (1982). I looked at war images and news reports. I researched and listened to Mozart’s quartets, viewed video tapes of orchestral conducting and watched *Jazz on a Summer’s Day*, several times. I learnt to play the cello. I drove around the city and countryside researching locations. I attended classical concerts, I walked and noted seasonal plants, the smells in an area and the characteristic and non characteristic activities such as film making. I listened to cello performances, the sounds of the city, the riverbank and the sea. I reflected on memories and feelings; I watched other people. Some of my experiences were direct, others were mediated though film television and books. Some research arose from the developing narrative, some arose from unexpected experiences, a lot was planned. Regardless, the knowledge and experiences were transformed in multiple ways as they were woven into the novel. Sometimes a small detail, such as the light on the cellist’s back was used, sometimes a
complete beach scene. In both cases, they had to become part of the character’s psyche, and mine, in this transformational process.

My combined use of stream of consciousness writing and conscious activity has become evident in this review of my practice. Grenville refers to the writing process in three chapters: ‘Getting Started; Sorting Through; Revision’. In ‘Sorting Through’ she suggests sorting through one’s many pieces of stream of consciousness writing and making piles based on ‘categories of one kind or another’ (1998, p. 18). This method draws on both conscious activity and the unconscious. Carmel Bird focuses on the experiences and memory of the writer as a primary source. Inside every writer, there ‘is a warm dark cave full of ideas … an Aladdin’s cave. New ideas are forever being added to the store and writers go into the internal cave where they decide which ones to use’ (1988, p. 117); the imagination and the experiential work in tandem with intentionality.

**Awareness and associated changes**

Critical reflection and contextualising my insights meant engaging in a dialogue with other writers about my practice which led me to look beyond my interior voice and make changes to my writing process.

I had struggled in my early writing with managing transitions between paragraphs and section breaks, especially when dealing with time and moving characters from one location to another. John Banville identifies this as a beginner’s problem to be dealt with by realising ‘that action in a novel is not a matter of stage management but of artistic concentration’ (1993, p. 111). Reflecting on what Banville meant by ‘artistic concentration’ led me to focus on and develop moments in time, to narrow the plot and my characters’ actions, to plunge more deeply into a character’s state of being at a particular moment. Developing these skills has meant a change in process which involves greater reflection and concentration on my personal state of being when researching particular aspects of the novel. It meant, for example, viewing *Jazz on a Summer’s Day* and analysing the effect of the play of light on a human body. It led me to standing on a bridge, high above a river, and noting my feelings about that space as the tram rumbled by. I also became aware of the need to make such lingering concentration relevant to the narrative.
Learning from another writer in this way differs from the accidental learning that has clearly occurred when I have been editing or, as Enza Gandolfo calls it, rewriting. Rewriting, as Gandolfo notes, arises from many writing programs in which students are encouraged to write in a stream of consciousness style (2006). This emphasis, which I had experienced as a student and encouraged as a teacher, is exemplified in Natalie Goldberg’s timed exercise: ‘You must commit yourself to it [writing] and for that full period’; the writer must keep the hand moving, not cross out, neglect spelling, punctuation and grammar, lose control, not think or be logical and go for the jugular (1998, pp. 15-16). These very different approaches in these two learning contexts, emphasised the difference between a conscious and unconscious approach to writing of which I had become more aware after reading Eco’s *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1985).

My awareness of these differing approaches also led me to use more mapping and planning. A stream of consciousness approach delivered the first two pages of the novel which subsequently became a map for the whole novel. I subsequently wrote what became chapter 6, followed by chapters 1-5, 13-17, 7-11 then chapter 18. I used a stream of consciousness approach and followed my loose plan until the end of chapter 5 when I realised that I needed to know the ending in order to write chapters 7-11. I wrote 13-17 using a more planned approach, but chapters 7-11 were mostly mapped in advance. Sometimes I wrote several pages and then developed the chapter or section from them even when writing dialogue. Once I knew the general direction of the narrative, or the narrative function of the section, I was able to write in stream of consciousness mode with that in mind.

Another change that occurred was in the research undertaken for the novel. Reflecting on my process made me aware that I drew on feeling states. Bird emphasises the role of childhood because it is filled with ‘wonder, joy and dread’ the qualities needed in fiction: ‘you need to go further … and deliberately search your memory for a very painful incident in your early life … feel again … the very painful things that shaped you …’ (1988, p. 44). While I did not linger in the painful incidents of my childhood, I came to recognise feeling states were important as I sought to write from an embodied
position. The process suggests a projection of the personal ‘into’\(^9\) the imagined. It echoes John Gardner’s emphasis on the writer’s mind and heart in his introduction to Dorothea Brande’s *Becoming a Writer* (1981). Bird too argues that if you take care of the heart the technique will follow. But does taking care of the heart mean that childhood experiences are the only valid source of ‘felt’ material? The strength and force of many of my felt inscriptions have been a valuable resource for my writing.

Reflecting on my process made me conscious of the many voices in my novel: my writing voice with its style and rhythm, the voices of those characters through whom the narrative is focalised, and those characters in dialogue with them. In considering the relationship between the writing process and the development of my personal voice—or style, the role of the unconscious and conscious activity is again raised. My sense of dwelling within the character, when writing in the first person, facilitated the emergence of the psyche of a character unconsciously when writing, but I became aware that conscious processes also had a role to play.

Umberto Eco also enters his character’s world. In his *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* he writes: ‘I decided not only to narrate about the Middle Ages. I decided to narrate in the Middle Ages’. To do this he read many medieval chroniclers ‘to acquire their rhythm and innocence’ (1985, p. 19). In fact he ‘spent a full year … without writing a line’, mapping out his fictional world so precisely that he knew how long it would take ‘two characters in conversation to go from one place to another’ (2006, p. 314).

Similarly, Margaret Atwood enters another world. For her, writing is like passing ‘through the looking glass’ into a state where one is totally connected with what one is doing. This ‘in flow’ state of immersion, what I thought of as ‘writing’, is very different to the intense concentration that accompanies critically reading and reflecting on one’s work. This process, ‘editing’, was ‘not writing’. However, as the writing of the novel progressed, I came to recognise that both are important in my writing process and view them now equally as ‘writing’.

\(^{9}\) I have used into rather than onto because I do not want to suggest that the imagined came first. I see the process as a mutual merging of the personal and imagined.
Part of this transition is reflected in the conscious decision to write Zoë and Celia’s narratives separately. This was reinforced by my recognition of the range of linguistic features used intentionally by writers, in particular by Peter Carey, to establish a character’s voice. Carey distinguishes Ned Kelly’s voice in *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001) by using grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, rhythm, omissions and the repetition of particular phrases. Kelly’s voice, based on the Jerilderie letter (1879), reflects a conscious approach to voice, a very different process to drawing on one’s childhood, as suggested by Bird.

These changes in my writing process reflect a decrease in my dependency on unconscious processes, a more intentional and active engagement in planning and a more conscious awareness of the role different aspects of writerly identity might play when writing.

**Emergent considerations**

The existential state of the writer may be referred to in numerous ways. It is implicit in the discussion of subjective and objective approaches to writing and in references to the role of the unconscious and conscious activity in the writing process as in Bird, Brande, Csikszentmihalyi, Dillard, Forster, Goldberg, Grenville, King, Lodge, and Wharton. Burzik and Csikszentmihalyi refer to it in their discussion of flow. When Grenville acknowledges the possibility of a character taking over, a concomitant loss of control by the writer is implied. In discussions of intentionality, as noted by Lodge, and in discussions of fictional ‘truth’, the focus of Bird, the state of being of the writer is central. This focus on the writer’s existential state is also reflected in Atwood and Kundera’s discussions of motivation and agency and the encouraging words of Brande and Goldberg which acknowledge the angst and uncertainty a writer may experience. What insights did I gain into the relationship between my writing process and my state of being as I wrote the novel? And further, what is the relationship between the writer and his characters? What is the point of separation between the author and narrator?

In Eco’s discussion of the voice of the narrator in *The Name of the Rose* he notes:
... in doubling Adso I was once more doubling the series of interstices, of screens, set between me as a biographical personality, me as narrating author, the first-person narrator, and the characters narrated, including the narrative voice. I felt more and more shielded, and the whole experience recalled to me (I mean physically, with the clarity of madeleine dipped in lime-flower tea) certain childish games in which I pretended I was a submarine under the blankets and from it sent messages to my sister, under the blanket of the next bed, both of us cut off from the outside world and perfectly free to travel like a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas (1985, p. 33).

Such separation of the self from the text would not be the advice of Bird, Brande or Goldberg. Eco wrote: ‘Art is an escape from personal emotion, as both Joyce and Eliot had taught me’ (1985, p. 34) and, even though, the writing of a novel may evoke past memories and feelings, they must not intrude into the novel.

In contrast, I viewed drawing on past feelings, memories and paying attention to the felt as a research technique because I wanted to write about the embodied. However, although Eco writes of removing passages that arouse his feelings, he also admits that he found himself unable to stop typing in order to draw on his sources because he was following the rhythm of his character’s lovemaking as he typed. In this experience he identifies writing as a physical, material act, but it was his character making love, not him (1985).

The separation between the narrator and self is blurred. Porter Abbott writes that ‘the narrator is variously described as an instrument, a construction, or a device wielded by the author’ (2005, p. 62). However, what does the writer feel during the writing process? Eco’s description does not make this clear, and based on my experience, I have no clear answer.
In the writing process many things are felt, some of which find their way into the narrative and narrative voice of the novel. As with other resources, there is a commingling with imaginative flight that subsumes the personal within it. However, I do see a difference between those, like Bird, who advocate the use of past feelings, even one’s pain, in order to write authentically and those like Eco who suggests that the authenticity of novel arises from the research undertaken and the writer’s ability to create an authentic world within the novel. Mario Vargas Llosa in his discussion of his second draft of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, in which he based a character on his own life, wrote:

> It was a very instructive experience for me … because it was the only time in which I have tried to be totally truthful in the writing of a novel … in which I have tried not to invent but to remember and report my recollections objectively. I discovered it was impossible, that you cannot do this if you are writing a novel, that fiction is incompatible with the objective reporting of living experience (1991, p. 112).

These views create an interesting dilemma for the novice writer. Is there a need for fictional truth? If there is such a thing, does it arise ‘naturally’ from the unconscious, from the writer’s experience, from the researched experience which becomes the part of the writer’s psyche, from the internal logic of the created world, or from all of them? The advice given to writers is very confusing.

This exploration of my writerly identity has led me to believe that the writer is subject to many influences, has many choices and, just as the novel is a work in progress in which the writer must adapt to the novel being written, the writer, too, is a subject in process. Brown’s (1997) concept of interweaving interpretations of the self with those of others to establish a sense of belonging implies a process that may be equally applicable in constructing a new interpretation of the writing self: by interweaving understood and acknowledged inscriptions which have shaped the self with new epistemologies and possible ways of being when exploring new ways of writing in a new novel, the subject is open to change. In my enlarged understanding of my writing
self, I would now argue, there is a role for intentionality. However, this interpretation of
the self undermines my initial conceptualisation of Zoë whose narrative represented the
subjective experience which I located in my stream of consciousness writing.

The idea of the writer being a subject in process was initially encountered in Julia
Kristeva’s writings on intertextuality. Developed from M.M. Bakhtin’s originating idea
that all discourse is dialogic (Allen 2006, p. 211), including literature which depends on
and plays with other literary texts, Bakhtin saw the ‘literary word’ as

an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed
meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the
writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or
earlier social context (Kristeva 1986, pp. 35-36).

Kristeva argues that this ‘open ended play between the text of the subject and the text of
the addressee’ (Moi 1986, p. 34), means that all texts are influenced by other texts. Eco,
too, in On Literature (2006) embraces this post-modern concept of intertextuality in
which any text is in dialogue with all others because all language serves and is
inseparable from its social functions. Personal experience has confirmed that not only
was my novel in dialogue with other novels, social events, the extant, the remembered,
mediated and historically documented, but so was I as a writer. In this sense, my
writerly identity is dialogic, multi-faceted, multi-layered and, as a writer undergoing
change, in process.

Given the breadth of experience that writers draw upon, I would like to propose that
writers are in dialogue, not only with other texts, but with reason and inspiration, the
emergent from the unconscious and consciously planned, the recently experienced and
the remembered, the immediately sensed and the mediated, the personal and the
cultural. This dialogic process is also in play as writers negotiate the binary aspects of
creativity noted by Csikszentmihalyi and those inherent oppositions within creative
writing noted by Brophy. I would also like to link this dialogic process, which suggests
movement and change, to Laurel Richardson’s concept of writing being a method of
inquiry and Elizabeth Grosz’s belief that writing as a way of being, is a ‘mode of becoming’ (Grosz 1994, p. 210).

Mansfield, as he traces the history of subjectivity, describes the effect of Descartes’ proposition — Cogito ergo sum — ‘I think therefore I am’:

firstly, the image of the self as the ground of all knowledge and experience of the world (before I am anything, I am I) and secondly, the self as defined by the rational faculties it can use to order the world (I make sense) (2000, p. 15).

This, Mansfield argues, reflects the belief that selfhood is ‘most perfectly expressed by consciousness’ (2000, p. 15). While the demands of this exegesis have drawn on my rational faculties, the writing of The Fragility Papers depended on more than rational thought. It depended on the Freudian concept of selfhood which ‘named part of the mind as the unconscious’ (Mansfield 2000, p. 15).

Further, my fictional writing has drawn on the experiential, the mediated, memories and experiences unknowingly inscribed which include not only the read, but the seen, heard and the felt. Intertextuality acknowledges the inscribing power of texts and ‘foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life’ (Allen 2006, p. 5). It has broadened since its original conception to include the languages of cinema, painting or architecture. New texts include ‘complex patterns of encoding, allusions’ and they may echo and transpose ‘previous systems and codes’ (Allen 2006, p. 174). Theories of intertextuality have also influenced the concept of authorship: the author became a bricoleur whose tools comprise the extant texts of others. Consequently, ‘theorists often claim, it is not possible any longer to speak of originality, or the uniqueness of the artistic object, be it a painting or a novel (Allen 2006, p. 5).

Reflecting on my writerly identity has revealed that the encodings I reference when writing include sensed inscriptions from my past. Through the language of my culture, the sensed is realised imaginatively. In doing this, I would like to argue, writers are able
to establish a unique voice within the realm of literature. Such an acknowledgment would question the dismissal of originality in the production of literary texts and enlarge the paradigms within which the writing process could be discussed.

In order to theorise this combination of the sensed and imagined, and to have it acknowledged in discussions of the production and interpretation of texts, I would like to propose the term intertextual, which acknowledges both the symbolic, representational and social functions of the spoken and written word, be written as intertextual in order to acknowledge the multiplicity of private, sensed experiences and inscriptions imaginatively referenced in the creative-writing process.
Section 3: Writing as a Way of Coming to Know

Introduction

The path of practice-led research is indirect: past knowledge is often subsumed into new; newly encountered ideas displace old. ‘Discovering the Unexpected’ was written in the light of journal entries and related reading. Further interpretations of, and insights into, my writing ‘lifeworld’ (van Manen 1997) have resulted from subsequent reading. Max van Manen asks, ‘How do we experience the lifeworld?’ ‘On the one hand it is already there; on the other we take part in shaping and creating it’ (1997, p. xi). Tracing, reflecting on, and contextualising the experience of my writing lifeworld has led me to focus on two concepts which now sit centre stage in this third section of the exegesis: firstly, intertextuality and secondly, that writing is both a method of inquiry and a mode of becoming. Both the novel and exegesis reflect the change my writerly identity has undergone, albeit in different ways.

The writing of Elizabeth Grosz led me to consider the role of corporeality in the writing process, particularly the idea of the inscribed body, which she acknowledges is subject to cultural change. In arguing for the unity of the mind and corporeal she draws on Jacques Lacan’s use of the model of the Möbius strip — a continuous strip of paper, twisted and joined so that when one traces the line on the surface it moves inside and outside of the circle in a single continuous line (Grosz 1994, p. xii). The model enables the subject to be understood as a surface ‘whose inscriptions and rotations in three-dimensional space produce all the effects of depth … and for materiality to be extended to include and explain the operations of language, desire, and significance’ (1994, p. 110). Grosz explores but refuses to wholly accept the ideas of Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva, Merleau Ponty, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who in various ways, she argues, deny the distinct, but for her wholly relevant, influence of female physiology.
Her questioning of the ideas of such influential theorists is supported by David Lodge for other reasons. As a fictional writer and former academic reflecting on cultural change, Lodge argues that these twentieth century theorists have ‘deconstructed but not demolished the Christian or liberal humanist ideas of the self’ (1992, p. 183) who is responsible for her or his own actions. It is this socially constructed ‘responsible self’, he argues, that underpins novels that continue to be valued ‘for the light they throw on human motivation’ (1992, p. 183). In two recently published novels, through the key protagonists, Florence and Edward in Ian McEwan’s On Chisel Beach (2007), and William in Kate Grenville’s The Secret River (2005), the reader is offered ‘more or less convincing models of how and why people act as they do’ (Lodge 1992, p. 182).

However, the lack of focus on the personhood of the narrator in W. G. Sebald’s Rings of Saturn (1999) and the presentation of the subject through flawed representations of history reflect, in my view, the abandonment of the liberal humanist concept of the self which Lodge fears. My view of the self and its representation is in transition, and this probably sits beneath my questioning of the Romantic view of the self within the writing process.

Further changes to my lifeworld have resulted from my review of my understanding of Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow which I initially linked to my experience of stream of consciousness writing. However, for Csikszentmihalyi, flow is also the result of the merging of knowledge, planning, problem solving, mastery and knowledge of one’s domain and field during the creative process. Umberto Eco’s emphasis on detailed preparation and planning before writing supports Csikszentmihalyi’s emphasis on the role of planning and problem solving and the value of conscious action and intention for some writers in the writing process. The consequent re-examination of the balance of unconscious and conscious activity within my academic and ‘fictive’ writing led me to question my view of the creative writer as a one whose creativity needed to be released from the deep well of the unconscious. Was this the only way of conceptualising my writerly identity?

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10 I first encountered the term ‘fictive’ in Mario Vargas Llosa’s The Temptation of the Impossible (2004) early in 2008 and then noticed it again in a re-reading of Kevin Brophy’s Creativity. For me, it is more effective as a descriptive term than the nominal ‘fiction’, or the adjectival ‘fictional’ which has other connotations.
Questioning this balance has also arisen because the writing of the exegesis has proved more difficult than anticipated. My belief that it would be a planned conscious elaboration of sequenced ideas has not been my experience of writing the exegesis. Although my research model implied that writing my exegesis would be more than reporting, its true nature was unknown. In seeking to describe and theorise the experiential, writing has become a method of inquiry, an essential element in clarifying my ideas in an iterative process. The iterative process has also led me to, as David Evans suggests, ‘almost inevitably change’ the ‘structural scheme’ (1995, p. 10) of my exegesis.

Towards the end of writing my first full draft, some of the characteristic processes, strategies and experiential aspects of creative writing emerged during the writing of the exegesis. As the many written sections, formal papers, presentations and notes were honed into the exegesis, I was surprised to find that I was writing ‘in flow’, experiencing unexpected insights, finding problems being solved overnight and ideas and insights emerging in the shower. The exegesis, like the novel, became an ever-present backdrop to the drama of my daily life.

David Lodge suggests that fiction writing is an interiorised rendering of experience (1992). Is this also true of academic writing? The drafts of the exegesis reflect a growing understanding of my writerly identity through theorising the experiential within ideas of other. I would like to propose that when all the knowledge, ideas, theorising, and a mastery over the genre characteristics and academic style of writing, are sufficiently inscribed and interiorised, writing ‘in flow’ is possible.

In terms of my writerly identity, what does this insight mean? The novel explores a number of registers: letters, reviews, dialogue, literary writing. These socially inscribed forms were learnt experientially. However, I feel my academic writing has been for the most part consciously learned during the preparation of a number of papers, which I now consider part of the drafting process for the exegesis.

Writing the exegesis has been the process through which knowledge and insights have been gained and reframed. Graham Allen in his discussion of the history of
intertextuality (2006) writes of a theoretical shift in Kristeva’s theorising of intertextuality which I believe reflects my experience. ‘Texts do not just utilize [sic] previous textual units but they transform them and give them what Kristeva terms new thetic positions’ (Allen 2006, p. 53). I had thought of the exegesis genre as a text dominated by formal writing devices, logic and reason, and this has been so, but the process of arriving at a new thetic position has resulted from their application in an ongoing dialogue between my critical reflection on the experiential and the ideas of others.

In writing the novel I sought to explore my perceived differences in creative and academic writing through first-person focalisation, voice, character, language, structure and imagery. The novel and exegesis were polarised around the view that informative and ‘imaginative writing are different forms of knowledge, demanding different skills and wholly different attitudes to language’ (Alvarez 2005, p. 15). My journal writing confirmed the role of the sound of language in my fictive writing and the writing of the exegesis has confirmed my engagement with the thetic. Academic writing shares the writer’s knowledge through a community language; whereas, for me, creative writing draws on the irreverent and revolutionary (Kristeva 1986) and personal. However, the texts of others have proved to be relevant in the production of both texts as has the movement between unconscious and conscious activity. In the writing of both, my writerly identity has changed.

Based on the exploration of my fictive writing process and the experience of writing the exegesis, I will now explore more fully the differences between writing the two genres and some of the issues and insights that have emerged during this process. This section will discuss:

1) the differences in my writerly identity in both genres taking into consideration those areas in which the differences have emerged — the personal, first-person focalisation, voice, language, conscious and unconscious activity;

2) the embedding of my early understanding of the differences between the novel and exegesis within the novel and my view of the differences now;
3) Intertextuality and the voice of the female writer.

**The personal**

**First-person focalisation**

It is through the first-person singular, an agglomeration of both conscious and unconscious ingredients’ (Claxton 2005, p. 348) that we express our subjectivity, a subjectivity that is not simply ‘a salon of Reason brightly lit’ but one of emotions which are ‘an essential aspect of the brain’s intelligent functioning’ (2005, p. 250). Because the self includes feeling states which are embodied, and because fictive writers may draw on these, I tried to write Zoë from within her body, drawing on her felt and sensed experiences, without ‘I’.

Celia’s story, characterised by the first-person singular ‘I’, is negotiated through her complex personal history. By locating her sense of self within her past, I aimed to represent the process of contextualising my insights into a body of previously written text. I also envisaged an exegesis which theorised the novel within limiting constructs. However, I did not anticipate, as I tried to resolve Celia’s story and reposition her in the present that, similarly, new thetic understandings would emerge as my insights were renegotiated within the theories of others. Contextualising my insights allowed me to reflect on the dual role of history which I now view as both restricting and informing in the emerging of the new.

The intratextual nature of the research project is reflected in the intertwining of the two narratives. Just as my reading for the exegesis influenced the novel, Celia’s life influences and shapes Zoë’s. I was very influenced by Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, and the concept of a ‘habitus’ that inscribes our psyche: the house of our childhood infuses our memories and unconscious with surfaces and textures (Bachelard 1994). These corporeal experiences live within us, our identity is shaped by our physiological accommodations, modus vivendi and creativity within the space. Lachlan and Celia’s flats and Zoë’s responses to them, and their environs, reflect this influence. The concept is also explored through Celia’s clutching memories, her fantasy of Paul’s
presence, and her many reflections on the photographs taken at the riverbank. The reader is led through the physiological, psychological and historical impact of ‘habitus’.

Zoë was not visualised, nor did I want to bring her to life through ‘direct characterisation’ (Rimmon-Kenan 1989, p. 50) or by describing her dress or physical qualities, rather I wanted to represent her ‘indirectly’ (Rimmon-Kenan 1989, p. 61) through her experience of space, sensations and feelings as when she stands on the bridge. The intensity of the moment for her reflects her character.

Researching for the novel included initiating lived experiences. I thought of this as seeking knowledge, of researching, as I did for the exegesis. However, incorporating this experiential knowledge into the novel required considering how the characters might be developed through these experiences. Attending to and reflecting on the experiential, interiorising my researched experiences so that I might draw on them as Lodge suggests, and adapting them, was part of the process of writing Zoë, as was finding the words to express the experiential.

Research for the exegesis has demanded close and attentive reading, the critical analysis of the ideas of others, assessing their relevance and relationship to my experience and negotiating them within a formal and controlled discourse. While I have listened to the sound of the text, it has been subservient to the logical development of the discussion. Adapting the experiential imaginatively and using language expressively has not characterised the writing of this exegesis.

Celia’s narrative is characterised by flashbacks, ‘narrative scattering’, ‘narrative anachronies’ — discordance between two temporal orders in a story, and ‘analepses’— evocation after the fact of events taking place earlier in the story.\(^{11}\) Her broken narrative, and her slippage between the present and past, questions the linear convention of story-telling and suggests the zigzag, yet compressed movement between old and new ideas as we seek new understandings. Traditional research is reported in a linear temporal order. While this exegesis is chronologically sequenced, it evolved from a

\(^{11}\) These terms are discussed by Rimmon-Kenan. His preferred use of Gérard Genette’s terms stems from the confusion arising from terms like flashback and retrospection which are commonly used by other media.
series of fragmented documents, papers and notes into a first draft of sixty thousand words which was reduced to just below thirty by the fourth draft. The construction of the exegesis narrative from additional insights, readings and revisions, which emerged and took place during a series of iterations rather than in chronological time, is mirrored in Zoë’s reconstruction of Celia’s past.

In Celia’s narrative, the mediated coverage of the Iraq War is contextualised within the very telling coverage of the Vietnam War. Reflecting on one war through another war mirrors the shaping of our ideas by previous experiences and the theorising of my creative practice. Celia’s story acknowledges the hermeneutic and inscriptive power of the past over making sense of the present. Understanding the present demands the deconstructing lens of critical reflection through which I have sought to clarify the ‘experiences’ which have shaped my writerly identity.

The idea of seeing through a lens is attractive because being objective is difficult in our contemporary world. I had thought of objectivity as a matter of logic and reason, but others have questioned the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. Elizabeth Grosz, by drawing on the writing of Merleau-Ponty, suggests that the body

is defined by its relations with objects and in turn defines the objects as such — it is ‘sense-bestowing’ and ‘form giving’ providing a structure, organization, and ground within which the body-subject is positioned. The body is my being-to-the-world and as such is the instrument by which all information and knowledge is received and meaning is generated (Grosz 1994, p. 87).

Can I, in fact, ever be objective? If our ideas can never be neutral because the body is ‘sense-bestowing’ even the process of deconstructing and reconstructing paradigms will not achieve objectivity. Perhaps all we can do is recognise the gathering of intertextual inscriptions that inform a writerly identity, although as Grosz argues, these too are amenable to change. Perhaps all we can do is develop an awareness of self.
Objectivity has also been difficult because my lifeworld comprises both direct and indirect experiences: written texts, film, television and radio are all mediated experiences in that they are constructed by others. Like Celia, I am locked within the culturally mediated inscriptions of my generation which are reflected in the influence of Celia’s legacy on Zoë’s life.

One of my reasons for distinguishing between the narratives by excluding and including ‘I’ was my sense that when ‘I’ is used I speak as a coherent identity, as if all things in my lifeworld have been considered and resolved. Celia’s thoughts and her writing up of her imagined conversations with Paul are more like objectified reports; there is rarely any embodied sense of her being, just as there is no sense of my embodied self in the exegesis. Further, just as Celia has engaged in imagined conversations, so the exegesis has demanded that I engage in ‘imagined’ dialogues with the ideas of others — I say ‘imagined’ because they all stem from the written lifeworlds of others. It is these dialogues which have instigated a reconstruction of my writerly identity. From these comments it can be seen that the distinction I drew between the novel and exegesis that of one being subjective and the other objective, is flawed. In this respect, the novel did not anticipate what came to be in the writing of both texts. On the other hand, the ‘free direct style’ (Porter Abbott 2005) and interior monologues of Zoë’s narrative do reflect my ‘in flow’ writing when the imagined feels united with the act of stream of consciousness writing.

Objectivity is difficult when engaged in such writing. There is the surprise of capturing in words the previously ‘unknown’, a surprise which impinges on my larger lifeworld. Stepping in and out of ‘in flow’ writing is disorienting, as is stepping out of a swelling body of fictive text into daily life. The experience of inhabiting the world of the text, for me a characteristic of fictive writing, leads to a sense of living a double life, a sense readers might have as they move between Zoë and Celia’s lifeworlds.

Margaret Atwood writes of this ‘world of doubles’ (Atwood 2002, p. 31): the writer in their everyday life and their writerly being. She suggests it stems from the changes the writer undergoes: ‘Too much time has elapsed between composition and publication, and the person who wrote the book is now a different person’ (2002, p. 37). While I
agree that the passing of time is relevant, I also believe the act of writing elicits change, particularly if new knowledge is needed in the production of a text. This is as true of the novel as of the exegesis, a commonality I had, once again, not anticipated. Zoë does undergo change, but this stemmed from plot and character development rather than my anticipating a change in my writerly identity, and although the function of the exegesis is to bring about change, I did not build this into Celia’s narrative.

The emergence of some experiential commonalities when writing both texts has been a surprise. One of these occurred in the later stages of writing of the exegesis. Fictive writing draws on interiorised experiences, many of these researched. Likewise, by coming to understand my experiences within the frameworks of others during a lengthy gestation and interiorisation period, and by writing many drafts which led to a greater mastery over the relevant ideas, ‘in flow’ academic writing was enabled.

**Voice**

Language is deeply relevant to this project: its phonetic, semantic and representational functions have been used to fictionalise the anticipated differences between writing the novel and exegesis. Single words, short phrases, clauses and sentences comprise the text of the novel whereas the exegesis comprises only sentences and more subordinated clauses. The subject is frequently elided in the novel, but in the exegesis it is clearly expanded upon in a predicate dominated by an explanatory tone. The tone of the novel varies with the voice of the narrator and is affected by the context of the narrator, but the narrative voice in the exegesis needs to be consistent and formal. This tone is maintained not only by the choice of language but the narrowing of the representational function of the language by a limited and defined topic. The semantic takes precedence over the phonetic in the exegesis. However, in the novel, words were chosen as much for their sound as meaning.

Discovering the importance of the sound of the text in my writing and editing processes has made me aware of the priorities of other writers. In *On Writing*, Stephen King details how the cuts he makes in his second drafts are ‘intended to speed the story’ (2000, p. 282). In allowing the story to flow freely, he creates a rapid, entertaining and
informative read. My concerns, when editing, are about trapping the reader within the sound of the text, not advancing the plot. The focus is on the words flowing like music — jazz preferentially — and is realised by listening to a sub-vocalised voice as I write (and read). I had not conceived of the sound of language within Lewis Turco’s terms — liquid, voiced, plosive, sibilant, guttural, open, closed, unvoiced, continuant, nor thought of the diphthong as a ‘gliding sound between two contiguous vowels’ (1999, p. 1). However, on reflection, these sounds do exist within my writing and are sensed in both the writing and editing processes as assonance and rhythm are intuitively and intentionally prioritised.

The Fragility Papers is a polyphonic novel. My sub-vocalised voice, which feels like an interior essence, underpinned much of its writing. I am conscious of it because by setting the novel in Australia there is an expectation of an Australian accent. However, my sub-vocalised voice does not sound Australian. Instead, it rhythmically turns on my grandmother and aunt’s English/Welsh accent. This echoes the dislocation expressed by John Banville who writes in English but speaks of the ‘ghost of another language’ — Hiberno-English, Gaelic English — contributing to his distinct style (2007). This act of appropriating another’s voice suggests that language is heteroglot: that is, it has the ability ‘to contain within it many voices, one’s own and other voices’ (Allen 2006, p. 29). These voices represent:

the co-existence of socio-ideological contractions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form (Bakhtin in Allen 2006, p. 29).

In this way, myriad intersections give rise to new languages (Bakhtin in Allen 2006). Innovation in the novel has been achieved by playing with language; in the exegesis innovation is located in the ideas which, in this project, have arisen through theorising the experiential.
**Language**

The complex array of representational functions of language allows the writer to play extensively with language. Playing with language is one of the joys of fictional writing and this section will explore the role of such play in the novel and exegesis.

Owen Barfield in his *History in English Words* describes how ‘high tension’, a phrase used to describe human relations, ‘is a metaphor taken from the condition of the space between two electrically charged bodies’ (1967, p. 16). New ideas and inventions introduce new words into a language and facilitate the attribution of new meanings ‘to many old words’ (1967, p. 17). They create possibilities for new images, associations and locate the reader in time and context. Zadie Smith, for example, in *On Beauty* writes: ‘Her knuckles were grey and dusty. You could pluck bass notes on those veins’ (2005, p. 81). Inversely, in *The Fragility Papers*, the letter to Lachlan’s father locates the reader in an earlier epoch by evoking the world of a traditional thatcher: ‘yealm’, a traditional word for a bundle of straw, is used to describe the grandfather’s friend, Tommy, who is ‘as long and round’ as his yealm (p. 159).

My interest in finding ways to create new images and disrupt traditional usage was stimulated by the German writer, Durs Grübein. In a paper on effective poetics, he describes how a psycholinguist identified that simple model sentences such as ‘the cat catches the mouse’ caused little neural tension but when the sentence was changed to a poetic ‘the cat catches the moon’, the neural activity was higher (Grübein 1996). This gigantic leap over lexical categories took the reader into a new realm of experience. Grübein’s paper validated my interest in seeking new words and phrases as well as taking words out of their usual lexical categories. Such work, Francine Prose writes, is able ‘to give a familiar word the sort of new slant that totally reinvents the language’ and she quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald’s use of ‘deferential’ in *Tender Is the Night*: ‘Deferential palms cool its flushed façade, and before it stretches a short dazzling beach’ (Prose 2007, p. 25). Similarly, Jonathon Franzen in *The Corrections* evokes an era and the cultural with his use of ‘Gauloise’ in ‘his grad-school class-mates, who slept off their Gauloise hangovers until noon’ (2007, p. 37). In *On Chisel Beach*, Ian McEwan writes: ‘Out in the corridor, in silver dishes over candle-heated plate warmers, waited slices of long-ago roasted beef in a thickened gravy…’ (2007, pp. 4-5). ‘Long-
ago’ evokes the weariness of tired food by drawing on the ancient story telling device of ‘long ago’. Hyphenated and adjectival, he creates a new image out of a traditional adverbial phrase which is embedded with genre associations. Such associations enlarge the imagined world. The juxtaposition of previously unrelated elements is also evident in Annie Dillard’s juxtaposition of a description of an aerial flight with her writing process in *The Writing Life* (1990).

An associated technique is identified by Alice Flaherty in *The Midnight Disease* in ‘what is called the tension in language between the dictionary and the scream’ (2004, p. 220). This tension between the semantic and emotional meaning generated by language, she believes, is resolved in metaphor which ‘unites the cognitive and emotional meaning of a proposition’ (2004, p. 230). Metaphor, by drawing an analogy through the linking of two ‘previously unassociated mental elements’, creates ‘a subjective feeling of understanding’ (Colin Martindale in Flaherty 2004, p. 229). Metaphors allow the abstract to be expressed in more physical terms and, she argues, allow the reader to experience the semantic and emotional connotations of a narrative.

Through the metaphor of threading ribbons of daylight, Zadie Smith evokes the wonder and possibility of celestial light. When Franzen’s character Chip is torn between attending to the departure of his girlfriend from his flat and the presence of his parents, he writes ‘Chip … closed the door … but in the few seconds his back had been turned the elevator had swallowed Julia’ (2007, p. 30). Metaphorically, ‘swallowed’ carries all the feelings associated with her undigested departure. Likewise, Bobby Ann Mason in her novel *In country* writes: ‘The screen door slammed behind them, and like an echo, thunder scattered across the sky’ (1990, p. 26). Thunder cannot be scattered like grain across a field, yet we sense both the physical movement of the door and the thunder through a single word ‘scattered’; and through assonance the reader enters the physical experience beyond the house.

How does innovation occur? Does it emerge in stream of consciousness writing or though intention? In my experience it comes from both. Literary fiction demands innovative language use and my first draft writing (in both genres) is laden with banalities. Consequently, my editing process demands not only listening and correcting
but searching for words, particularly verbs which may resonate with the reader because they are being used in new contexts. The following examples are drawn from the novel: ‘They want me to junk her life’ (p. 4); ‘Did she airbrush them out of her life …?’ (p. 18); ‘… our anger choreographing a dance of avoidance …’ (p. 39); ‘His apartment brims with clutter and neglect’ (p. 217).

The presence of innovative language also raises the question of its source: the texts of others, the writer’s unique experience and their interpretation of them. In On Writing Stephen King writes: ‘I lived an odd, herky-jerky childhood’ in ‘a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees’ (2002, p. 17). Could anyone else have used ‘herky-jerky’ in this way? King evokes both his physical and emotional being by using a phrase which acknowledges both the social and individual source of language. Its evocative quality reflects the interplay of the emotional, semantic and phonetic. However, I return again to the question, is this work conscious or unconscious?

Hans-Georg Gadamer, when reviewing his work on Plato, comments on how the Philebus sought to explore the relationship between hedone and episteme, ‘between the urge of life and life guided by consciousness’ (1991, pp. 17-18). The Fragility Papers explores this tension: Zoë’s story represents being in the moment when thought emerges; Celia’s narrative reflects the reconstruction of the extant. Being cognisant of playing with the extant to create the new and using stream of consciousness writing as a technique for allowing new language use to emerge — and the ongoing movement between the two — has confirmed the importance of both conscious activity and unconscious in my creative writing process.

As I sought to recount my experience of writing as truthfully as possible in the exegesis, I became aware that the nuances and associations that ‘brims’, ‘airbrush’ and choreographing’, for example, bring to the novel were not wanted in the exegesis. Precision and the logical and progressive development of ideas have dominated particularly the writing of this last draft of the exegesis. This has led me to raise two questions. How did my writerly identity differ when writing the two texts? What role did conscious and unconscious activity play?
Consciousness in the novel and exegesis

David Lodge in his novel, *Thinks*, contrasts two differing experiences of consciousness — literary intelligence and artificial intelligence. Through two characters he questions ‘the specific nature of our subjective experience of the world’ (2003, p. 8). How do we describe the aroma of freshly baked bread? Such phenomenological experiences are called qualia. Lodge, suggests that drawing on metaphor and simile is one way (2003). I found it difficult to write about the sensed in Zoë’s narrative. In spite of taking cello lessons, describing the experience of playing the cello demanded intense reflection and was difficult. Equally, it is difficult to describe the experience of writing.

While Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow accommodates one aspect of the experience, there are many aspects to writing apart from the physical act of putting pen to paper, or fingertips to keyboard. There are the experiential processes of thinking, planning, imagining, reflecting and problem solving. These words describe what we do, but not the phenomenological experience. Claxton writes:

… imagining an object creates a pattern of cortical activation that is very like directly perceiving it. Mental rehearsal of an action — a golf swing, let’s say — produces attenuated electrical activity in the relevant muscles, but a level and pattern of activation in the brain that is very similar to that which accompanies the full-blown action (Claxton 2005, p. 262).

The phenomenological experience of these other aspects of fictive writing often entails an imagined rehearsal of what unfolds in a novel. This may explain why fictive writing can be exhausting. Claxton’s description also confirms my sense of dwelling within the psyche of the character. Our lived and imagined experiences are equally powerful in generating our sensations and feelings: who hasn’t woken up in a fearful state after a dream. The creative use of language enables the bringing of the experiential to life for the reader which, as Lodge (2003) argues, is not only central to narrative discourse, but the key work of the novelist. And, as a novelist describing the contrasting experiences of writing ‘in flow’ and planning, thinking, imagining, reflecting and problem solving, I
would write: writing ‘in flow’ is like skimming across water on the prow of a yacht, the rest belongs with the busy work of the crew on deck.

However, when writing the exegesis, I have not drawn on the felt and sensed as I do in fictive although my feelings and senses have been fully engaged as I have sought to avoid the worn tropes of an entrenched academic discourse. Although writing the exegesis has aroused feeling states — anxiety and frustration — these are superfluous to the ideas being discussed in the exegesis. However, I have had a sense of a growing authoritative voice which Elaine Martin and Ron Adams (2007) discuss. This has affected the tone of my writing and underpins my questioning and deleting of the words ‘probably’ and ‘seems’. While these words suggest an appropriate level of humility for the PhD candidate, they also express uncertainty which is inappropriate for an experienced researcher.

Barbara Kamber and Pat Thompson reframe thesis writing as ‘working in the field of knowledge production’ because it ‘emphasizes the constructive capacity of … intellectual work’ and ‘highlights the physical, mental and emotional labour of text and identity work’ (2006, p. 45). Certainly, evolving knowledge has led to several restructures of the exegesis and the unpredictable nature of emerging insights contrasts with what is finally a highly and consciously constructed text in which the ‘physical, emotional, mental and identity work’ Kamber and Thompson refer to remains hidden from the reader. Just as Celia’s feelings are lost within the negotiation of her present within her past, so too has my creative writing identity been subsumed within this highly constructed academic discourse.

The two texts have made different demands on my writerly identity. Initially I thought these differences were reflected in two of the four different forms of knowing outlined by Peter Reason: presentational knowing and propositional knowing (1998). Presentational knowing ‘emerges from experiential knowing and provides its first expression through forms of imagery such as poetry and story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance’ (Reason 1998, p. 4). Propositional knowing, the ‘knowing through ideas and theories’ is expressed in abstract language (1998, p. 4). However, while the two latter forms of knowing do coincide with the two genres, and much of the exegesis is expressed in the abstract language of the ideas and theories of others, the nature of the
research has meant that the experiential has also been discussed in this way rather than in expressive language.

The dialogic nature of the preface, two narratives in the novel and the exegesis fulfils Reason’s promise of a new epistemology, although not within the four firm boundaries of his model: experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing and practical knowing. Laurel Richardson’s image of the many faceted crystal ball (1994) more closely represents my writerly identity within the context of practice-led research.

A further facet that needs to be focused upon within this discussion of conscious and unconscious activity is ‘the articulation of female subjectivity in language’ (Lawtoo 2006, p. 240). Luce Irigaray in The Way of Love writes:

> It is not only the current formalization [sic] of language that threatens the language said to be natural, it is also how it is thought to always already exist and impose its norms on whoever speaks. It thus informs and programs the speaker without them having any possibility of questioning it from an outside. It encloses that subject from which they cannot or do not want to leave in order to go encounter the mystery of the other. Each imperceptibly becomes the prisoner of what they imagine to be the instrument of their most radical mastery. The formalization of which they believe to be the inventor and the actor is already a way of reacting towards how a language said to be natural has formalized them (2002, pp. 34-45).

Can the female writer, or any writer, step beyond the prison walls of their linguistic habitus? Celia, although aware of its restricting force, is unable to do so. Zoë, too, is entrapped in a romantic masterplot whose myths and inscriptions, both linguistic and embodied, are normalised in our culture. However, Luce Irigaray writes: ‘That there is some language in which man is always already situated should, through reflecting upon it, allow the subject to invent, at least partially, a speaking of their own’ (Irigaray 2002, p. 35). The embodied engagement of Zoë and Patrick with their music, their instruments
and finally with each other seeks to represent an evolving way of being — in this case through love — through a distinct but shared language known to themselves and of themselves (Irigaray 2002). Such a shared, but unspoken, language is written into the final rehearsal scene in the novel:

> A group sensing of the music hovers in the space between us, wraps itself around us, denying the physical boundaries of our skin, our fatigue and pain. The experience is simply one of joy (p. 216).

The shared language of Zoë and Patrick is evident in the last chapter of the novel. Although they remain distinct — Zoë comments that Patrick’s ‘presence in my bed is an intrusion’, they are also in the process of creating a shared and evolving way of being. She notes, ‘… he says he wants children and there was truth in the moment of his speaking’. Her sense of experiencing truth occurs within this shared moment, a moment which will become a part of their evolving history, a history constructed of such shared moments. Within this history, there remains the possibility that in bringing into language these shared moments, there will be a speaking of their own.

The struggle to express a state of conscious being, of finding the ‘new speaking’ to share an existential state, may be the central work of the fiction writer but it proved difficult to realise. Conscious attention was required as I examined what I wrote and asked whether it was ‘old speaking’.

Finally, I would like to return to my interest in the rhythm and sound of language which harks back to a childhood pleasure of being read to. To what extent is its emergence in my writing and my conscious awareness of it just another from of entrapment? Is it enough for me to say that words signify more than their referential meaning, they must sing? E.M. Forster suggests that poetic qualities cannot ‘be achieved by writers who plan their books beforehand, it has to depend on a local impulse when the right interval is reached…’ (1978, p. 149). His words reinforce my innate prioritising of the sound of language. However, my learnt understanding is that a poetic text is achieved not only through the phonemes of words and the rhythm of sentences, but through the layout of
the text on the page, paragraph and sentence length, font and even capitals as exemplified in Peter Carey’s *Theft* (2006). My conscious inclusion of such poetic elements suggests that conscious action, too, may enable a speaking of one’s own.

Lodge (2003) suggests that the novel as a genre of writing demands conscious awareness of the nature of consciousness and the many ways in which a writer may use language, but the unconscious remains a potentially powerful force in the fictive writing process. On the other hand, the strongest demand when writing the exegesis has been on conscious and conscientious reflection as I have sought to express the truth of my experiences. By writing in both genres, my writerly identity must enfold within it an amalgam of conscious activity and a respect for the unconscious.

**Inscriptions and intertextuality**

*The Fragility Papers* includes echoes of childhood texts with their nursery rhymes and rhythms because they came into my mind, unexpectedly, as I was writing the novel. Their inclusion was a conscious decision, reflecting the conscious attention to the text I have adopted. Such eruptions reflect the conscious and unconscious life-long absorption of other texts and the inscriptive nature of intertextuality. They have led me to ask, what are the intertextual inscriptions that have informed the writing of the novel and exegesis, and how have they been negotiated within these two texts and within the novel?

Firstly, the interweaving of Celia’s defined words into Zoë’s narrative aimed to reflect the inscriptive nature of language. The interweaving of these words was influenced by my experience of listening to the interplay of leitmotivs in Richard Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*. Likewise, the intertextual inscriptions underpinning the writing of the exegesis were drawn from language — my reading, the experiential — the teaching of academic writing, and the development of a research argument in which the viewpoint of the researcher is supported by the ideas of others.

The surfacing of childhood inscriptions during the writing of *The Fragility* Papers has reinforced the role of the unconscious in my writing. However, my questioning of them remaining part of the novel led me to recognise that stream of consciousness writing was ‘a’ writing process, not ‘the’ only writing process. The emerging of material in
which I recognised intertextual influences encouraged me to stop treating all I wrote as sacred and elevated rewriting within my writing process. The emergence of such material was rare during the writing of the exegesis. Instead, I actively sought the written knowledge of others, the intertextual, in order to validate the exegesis. However, in both cases, the acceptance or rejection of such material was determined by its relevance to the narrative I was writing.

An awareness of the role of intertextuality in developing the writer’s voice is noted by Dorothea Brande (1981) who argues that the techniques and writing of others are ‘yours to use only when you have made them your own by full acquaintance and acceptance’ (1981, p. 106). Novice writers identify their likes and dislikes in the writing of other writers, noting strengths and weaknesses, authenticity, characterisation, description, arresting scenes, mannerisms, favourite words, the passing of time, vocabulary, shifts in focalisation and consistency of voice. For Brande, this may even include copying the number of syllables in each word in another writer’s sentence (1982, p. 107). In this way rhythm can be learnt as may other techniques. The inclusion of emotional responses to texts in her list implies an intertextual apprenticeship during which both the writer’s skills and sensibilities are inscribed.

In Celia’s narrative, the fragments were initially intended to be a collection of writings from which meaning would be constructed by the reader. However, I decided not to leave this work to the reader, but undertake the construction of meaning by theorising the experiential myself. In this way Celia’s narrative fails to represent my experience of writing the exegesis. Instead, Zoë’s construction of Celia’s story reflects the sense of intentionality that has characterised its construction. Intentionality, it could be argued, questions the force of inscription and intertextuality as does my deeply felt sense of wanting to pursue personal issues in the novel and to step beyond my identified cultural inscriptions.

The writing of Grosz could also be considered inscriptive. Her proposal that women are open to new inscriptions, that
... the body is an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of reinscribing the forms of sexed identity and psychical subjectivity at work today ... 

that

... rewriting the female body as a positivity rather than as a lack entails two related concerns: reorganizing and reframing the terms by which the body has been socially represented... and challenging the discourses which claim to analyse and explain the body and subject scientifically (1994, pp. 60-61)

in order that women’s interests might be better served, was influential. The idea of reframing the representation of women, and my awareness of cultural and familial inscriptions, led to my wanting to place the reader within the skin of a female character by writing in the first person without ‘I’. I wanted to represent women indirectly through their embodied experiences of the world, rather than through direct descriptions of their physique and clothing which would fix them in recognisable gendered and cultural constructions.

The determining attribute of intertextuality was also questioned by the ongoing movement between the many contributing facets of my self when writing, and my sense of being able to step unfettered in any direction. This conflict between the inscribed and the potential for the new is realised in the novel through Zoë’s playing. The cello is an extension of her body, every note is uniquely hers and speaks of her experience with music just as my texts speak of my experience with language. Expressing oneself through music is not easy: practice is necessary, interpretations and emphases demand careful attention and subtlety, and there is the changing physical state that occurs as the work is undertaken. Likewise, words struggle to surface, they flow suddenly without interruption or I wait in long pauses for their arrival. The sentence, half formed, becomes extended or erased. Rhythms strengthen sentences and give voice to a character. Within the intensive patterning of practice, a unique sound may be heard.
Reflective journal keeping led me to recognise the breadth of influences on, and facets of, my writing process. There is a tension between the cultural encodings within the intertextual inscriptions which shape my work, or do I say from which I shape my work, and the cultural demand to produce a unique literary text. I have found that seeking to understand and gain insights into my personal and cultural inscriptions, and paying more conscious attention to the choices being made when writing the novel have been two ways of dealing with this tension. Is this simply paying conscious attention to the unconscious?

A similar demand for uniqueness exists in the production of an exegesis. Research itself is based in a belief in the possibility of the new, and this exegesis has argued for the new by theorising the experiential. In both texts I have attempted to step beyond the lifeworld I knew when I started. One particular aspect of my lifeworld which I wanted to represent in a new way was the female voice.

**Seeking a new voice**

Is a distinct female voice possible? For feminist theorists such as Grosz (1994) and Irigaray (2007) our language is so imbued with interiorised patriarchal renderings of experience that women have no language to express who they are. If, as Kristeva suggests, texts are situated ‘within history and society, which are then seen as texts and read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them’ (Kristeva 1986, p. 36), how does this insertion take place? The rhizomic model of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who write of literature as ‘an assemblage’ (1999, p. 4), refigures subjectivity ‘in terms of planes, intensities, flows, becomings, linkages, rather than being, objects, qualities, pairs and correlations (Grosz 1994, pp. 161-2). Their rhizomic model implies a freedom to move in any direction in the production of a text which is mirrored in Ulmer’s concept of ‘mystory’ (2005). The writer may stop, gather and dwell in the intensity of a moment, draw on researched knowledge or the experiential as they advance their narrative. The rhizome accommodates many aspects of the creative writing process and echoes the Kristeva’s ‘carnivalesque’ view of the novel which seeks
to defy the ‘laws of language imposed by grammar and semantics’ (Kristeva 1986, p. 36).

However, it also implies the dissolution of the subject into an infinite number of particles, which Elizabeth Grosz argues denies the significance of the body and once again subsumes women into ‘a generalized “humanity” which in no way represents their interests’ (Grosz 1994, p. 179). Further, Grosz argues, their model continues to project or represent a male view of humanity and is therefore ‘no more attentive to the specificity and particularly of woman than psychoanalytic frameworks’ (1994, p. 182). For Grosz, it is the unique physiology of women, based on their flow of bodily fluids, which has been instrumental in shaping the female psyche and contributing to their historical alienation within traditional patriarchal structures. However, this unique combination of social and corporeal inscription is also amenable to change because of the body’s capacity to incorporate ‘into the body’s own spaces modalities of objects, that, while external, and internalized’ add to, supplement and are supplemented by the ‘organic body’ (1994, p. 188). It is from this position that Grosz suggests women should develop their own distinct representations as ‘intellectual, social, moral, and sexed agents’ (1994, p. 188). By recognising their material difference ‘new terms need to be sought by which to think this alterity within and outside the subject’ (1994, p. 208). Grosz’s view validated my interest in the role of embodied experiences in the creative process and led me to question the focus on language in discussions of intertextuality.

Luce Irigaray, like Grosz, argues that as the exploitation of women ‘is based upon sexual difference; its solution will come only through sexual difference’ (2007, p. 4). Women’s responsibilities and opportunities, being linked to a world undergoing transformation, need to be situated within ‘cultural production alongside with men’ (2007, p. 50) but their voices should be distinct. While I agree, where should such an embedding occur in a novel?

I hoped to do this by writing from the experiential and by focusing on my use of language. In addition, Zoë’s character was influenced by Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner’s report on a auto-ethnographer’s feelings about which they wrote:
I tried to show him how the goals of Sylvia’s work relate to what Coles (Robert Coles) was saying about how to live our lives meaningfully. I felt I had reached him where he lived at the site of his subjectivity and deep feeling (2000, p. 760).

The idea of reaching another person ‘at the site of their subjectivity and deep feeling’ made me reflect on my need to reach the site of my own subjectivity and deep feeling if I was to write with a unique female voice. In the novel, Lachlan does not acknowledge Zoë at the site of her subjectivity. She is little more than an adjunct to his desires. Patrick, on the other hand, as a fellow musician does. Celia, whose subjectivity is denied, rejects her family, but fails to recognise that she remains trapped in a subjectivity of their making.

Another way in which I tried to establish a uniquely female voice was also by avoiding the traditional tropes of appearance and focusing on the phenomenological. However, as discussed by Merleau-Ponty (1986), it is very difficult to identify what it is we are experiencing. We often resort to describing the qualities of that which we experience as I did in the last line of the novel, ‘And his elbow is bony.’ The reader is left to imagine the sensations Zoë experiences. In addition, having absorbed such qualities, we use those qualities to identify other things. We absorb and abstract the context in which we experience things which in turn becomes a way of viewing the next experience or object. So, although I have tried to write with a unique voice, I feel that I have written out of another sort of entrapment.

Luce Irigaray did provide me with another way of writing the relationships in the novel. ‘Communicating’ she writes, ‘which wants to speak to the other, unfolds starting from this [sic] impossible to say’ (2002, p. 23). In The Way of Love, she focuses on the spoken communication between two people in the becoming of a relationship: ‘It is little by little that words can draw near to the transcendental, if they do not close up upon themselves’ (Irigaray 2002, p. 22). ‘New language’ is needed to express the becoming of a relationship. The writing of Zoë and Patrick’s relationship was influenced by this idea. Their being musicians allowed me to mediate their growing relationship through a medium other than language. Although expressed through
language, I hoped the reader would see that the unfolding of their relationship through music would lead to their own way of speaking. This, in turn, was written in language which I hope expressed my individual voice as a writer, a voice which is also in the process of becoming.

Irigaray suggests that it is not possible to communicate if the spoken language does not correspond to the immediate situation: ‘When a same — code, language, meaning — dominates and regulates it’ (2002, p. 26), it breaks the exchange. The tropes of Lachlan’s reviews, and Zoë’s mimicking of them, seeks to reveal the ineffectualness of the well worn. ‘I love you’ is the shared phrase we reference in romantic masterplots (Porter Abbott 2002, p. 192), but as Zoë asks, what does Lachlan mean? I now question my use of a romantic masterplot to lure the reader beyond the definitions in Celia’s narrative. While unresolved sexual tension commands attention, was I doing women a disservice by framing Zoë’s life within it? Was my attempt to write a relationship in, and of, its becoming no more than a replay of a tired masterplot?

If a dissident voice is to break away or establish its own hegemony it must ‘constitute itself outside the cultural hegemony’ (Lawtoo 2006, p. 236). However, is the novel sufficiently dissident? And to what extent can language be disconnected from its shared meaning in fictive writing which, in itself, is an act of sharing? The capacity to break away, or move beyond a gendered coding is hinted at in Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida’s *Veils.* Derrida writes:

> For the child could not believe what he was seeing, he could not see what he thought he was seeing, he was already telling himself a story, this story, like a philosophy of nature for a shoebox … namely that the silkworm buried itself, came back to itself in its odyssey, in a sort of absolute knowledge, as it had to wrap itself in its own shroud, the white shroud of its own skin in order to remain with itself, the being it had been with a view to re-engendering itself in the spinning of its filiation, sons or daughters — beyond any sexual difference or rather any duality of the sexes, and even beyond any coupling (1998, p. 90).
Derrida returns me to the self, to the intense habitus of my childhood. Is Carmel Bird right? Is this where I should be writing from? In writing Zoë and Patrick’s relationship I sought to suggest that in their touching of skin, and in their participation in the quartet, there was a sharing of experience that transcended gender. This intent seemed valid. Now I have to ask whether touching, like language, is socially inscribed.

A return to writing

Some writers believe that it is during the writing of each novel that the novelist learns how to write that novel (Carey, McEwan & Ulster 2008). Equally, I would argue, this is true of the writing of the exegesis. My writing has evolved as the ephemeral ideas which marked the beginning of the novel and exegesis have taken form. Fictional characters and voice were established as I learnt to use first-person focalisation without I. In the fragmented first draft of the exegesis, I wrote from the uncertain position of the novice researcher, depending on many quotations to speak for me. In the second draft I was able to write in a more summary way with a greater sense of authority, a characteristic of PhD writing noted by Martin and Adams (2007). My third draft was characterised by ‘in flow’ writing and further insights and extensive questioning of the exactness of what has been written. As I have interiorised the ideas of others through critical reflection then writing, new insights have reshaped my view of the role of conscious activity and the unconscious in my writing. Understanding more fully the nature of my writing process has also led me to understand that my frustrations are one of the difficulties writers experience at different points in the creation of a text. These discoveries are not embedded in the novel. Nor have I embedded my realisation that the exegesis, while demanding an engagement with preconceived ideas, is also a site without boundaries in the pursuit of new knowledge and that its writing provides opportunities to reflect on traditional epistemologies and present knowledge in new ways.

The recursive process in the development of my ideas, the extensive editing required to hone the two texts, my sense of forward movement as they have been forged within this recursive process, the breadth of influencing sources and the unexpected arrival of solutions and insights suggest a constructionist ontology in which ‘realities exist in the
form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent on their form and content on the persons who holds them’ (Gray & Malins 2004, p. 20).

The exegesis became a story about new knowledge emerging from a research experience. As with the novel, I drew on the experiential — although very different experiences. Fictive writing draws on the breadth of the human psyche including the deeply etched inscriptions in the crowded house of the writer’s past. In the exegesis, clear statements reflecting the socially inscribed meanings of language have been paramount, not the expressive, resonant, evocative and ambiguous associations of language. My view of the novel has also changed. More extensive researching, in all forms, has been reinforced as a strategy for realising new possibilities in my fictive writing.

Smith maintains that ‘writers are in possession of “selfhood”, and that the development of self has some part to play in literary success or failure’ (2007, p. 6). Drawing a connection between publication and the development of self is something for me to consider, but the development of self has been a goal in this research, but will it translate into unique expressive qualities in my next novel which will offer the reader the pleasure of taking a walk through my mind?12

Smith raises another issue that seems pertinent to understanding the differences between writing the novel and the exegesis. The literature we love, she argues, elicits hard emotional and intellectual work on the part of the writer and reader because the art in both is a ‘matter of understanding-that-which-is-outside-of-ourselves using only what we have inside our selves’ (2007, p. 10). As a novelist/researcher I have used my resident inscriptions and knowledge to interpret my growing lifeworld, and through my enlarged lifeworld both the new and old has become open to review. Smith’s comments reflect Kamber and Thompson’s (2006) view of the hard work entailed in thesis writing. However, it has also led me to ask whether or not I should rewrite the novel. I am reluctant to do this because, as Atwood suggests, I have changed. However, I will make

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12 This was said to me by my supervisor Professor Josie Arnold. It was a statement that changed my way of thinking about the relationship between writers and readers.
some minor changes. One reader suggested that at times the omission of ‘I’ seemed arbitrary. I will try to address this.

In revisiting my reading on intertextuality, I found another useful way of thinking about the two texts. Graham Allen notes the distinction Gérard Gennette draws between narrative and discourse (Allen 2000, p. 99). The distinction focuses on the presence of the writer in the text: in the novel the writer is present in the creation of the story but not a character in it. In the exegesis model, the author is present as the voice of new knowledge. Finding and writing this voice has been difficult. If both our bodies and language are socially and culturally inscribed, then to write about them, or from them, with a new voice may be impossible. In the light of this, my initial view that writing the exegesis was just a matter of gaining an objective viewpoint must be reviewed. Writing objectively demands more than planned and linear writing. The research of Romy Clark and Roz Ivanič (1997) on academic writing discards such writing as a natural writing process. Instead, the academic writing process asks the writer to sort through a maelstrom of physical, affective, social and cognitive elements (Clark & Ivanič 1997, pp. 96–97).

Interestingly, the role of the unconscious is not on Clark and Ivanič’s list of contributing factors to the academic writing process. Discussions about the nature of the unconscious, or as Rob Pope suggests ‘unconscious processes’ which are consciously acknowledged and therefore might best be expressed by ‘unconscious’ (2006, p. 70), continue. Such discussions are part of a general movement in which the Enlightenment mind is being reviewed, a review Claxton argues ‘is in urgent need of moderation’ (2005, p. 357). Although Enlightenment values such as conscious reasoning, critical reflection and logical, discursive discussion characterise the text of the exegesis and the related processes have underpinned its writing, unconscious processes have also given me insights. They have, I would argue, a role to play in practice-led research based in creative practice. However, questions also exist about the role of the unconscious in the creative process. While Csikszentmihalyi might argue the creative person must develop an unconscious, guiding mechanism when dealing with complex problems, how is this to be developed?
The unexpected surprise of this project has been the recognition of the many similarities in writing both texts. The exegesis was seriously edited four times: once to reduce the abundance of material to the word limit, the second, third and fourth times to hone the discussion and narrative qualities and attend to minutia. During these edits, I realised that just as I edited chapters of the novel to ensure their internal coherence, so I focused on sections of the exegesis. The coherence of the discussion, the flow of ideas, the relevance of ideas, finding suitable verbs and checking sentences and paragraphs for section relevance were all creative writing techniques. The sound and rhythm of the texts were also revisited. The emergence of these similarities confirms as Goddard suggests, that ‘in both the practice and exegesis, symmetries of correspondence echo’ (Goddard 2007, p. 119).

Just as the novel came to be seen as a creative artefact rather than an act of self-expression, so too has the exegesis undergone a metamorphosis. I now see it as a flexible, malleable form, as a creative work in its own right. Based in an amalgam of practice and theory, the genre is open to being developed as a new discourse. Knowledge from self discovery, experience (Barrett 2007) and reflective thinking, all of which have helped identify processes and epistemologies, characterise the text of the exegesis. As a researcher and story teller, I have come to understand that the exegesis records the work undertaken by the practitioner researcher as they uncover and interpret from an ‘insider’s perspective and experience’ new knowledge within the ‘context of professional contemporary practices in the world’ (Stewart 2007, p. 126). Its very malleability enables the accommodation of the particularities and the processes of the researcher’s personal, yet theorised, journey.

The exegesis has illuminated creative practice as an alternative mode of knowledge and understanding (Barrett 2007, p. 161). As a discursive discourse it, too, has provided a foundation for new knowledge (Arnold 2006). It has brought together ‘practice and research as purposeful practice’ and encouraged ‘the creation of intentional meaning through a process of … documentation, interpretation, analysis and storying’, although, not in my case, the rigorous planning Stewart attributes to the process (Stewart 2007, p. 128). It reflects the ‘conceptual architecture’ that sits between the merging of the personal, the domain of other writers and the academic field (Haseman 2007, p. 156).
I discovered, as I was writing the exegesis, that in becoming more cognisant of my process and methods of dealing with my frustrations and accompanying feelings when writing, that a stronger sense of being able to realise new projects now exists. I hope the past strain of realising a new novel will decrease now that my processes are more fully understood.

Finally, the desire to write with a distinct female voice did not arise when I thought of writing the exegesis, except as an issue to be discussed. After reading Luce Irigaray’s *The Way of Love* (2002) I now question this. In this work, she stylistically gives voice to the problem of writing about knowledge that is in the process of becoming. In this last draft, I have recognised that my search for language to express the becoming of new ideas has also characterised the writing of both texts.
Section 4: Weaving the Threads Together

Conclusion

Is there a model which comprehensively describes my writerly identity? The tree remains a powerful metaphor in the academic world where knowledge is sourced from the reasoned roots of past research. While the exegesis has grounded my fictional flight by theorising the experiential within the ideas of others, I have yet to find a model to represent my writerly identity. Deleuze and Guattari reject the tree as a model of subjectivity, preferring the rhizome which certainly accommodates the choice of multiple trajectories, my play with language and narrative time, and the breadth of resources and experiences I have drawn upon. However, the rhizome fails to accommodate the multilayered depths inherent in the cultivating and pruning aspects of editing, the ongoing need for new writing skills to realise unique writing and the movement between conscious intentionality and that which emerges from the unconscious.

The model would have to accommodate the arrival of unexpected insights, which emerged during the writing of the exegesis and novel, and the concept of flow. Although Csikszentmihalyi suggests it can characterise the creator’s state of being at many stages of the creative process, I did not experience this. When writing the exegesis, it only occurred when sufficient knowledge had been interiorised for the narrative to be honed. Although I value it as part of my creative process, this project has led me to think that it may serve different functions at different points in my writing process rather than being the dominant method.

The role of intentionality has also arisen in seeking to understand my writerly being. David Lodge questions the inclusion of intentionality within a creative writing model because ‘until the writer has completed it he doesn’t know what it is that he is communicating, and perhaps doesn’t know even then. You discover what it is you have
to say in the process of saying it’ (Lodge 1996, p. 195). Umberto Eco would disagree, but writers differ in their view of who, or what, controls the narrative and whether it should be controlled. Marcelle Freiman’s concept of ‘dangerous dreaming’, foreshadows and confirms my experience of my writing being ego-centred. Her praise of Walter Benjamin’s model in which there is a ‘need to move between the world of the individual unconscious and conscious social activity’ (2007, p. 3) reflects the position I now hold. Actively seeking the right words to describe the truth of my research experience is not the same as allowing evocative words to emerge when seeking to describe the experience of playing in an imagined quartet.

Conscious activity has been particularly relevant to the research process and the writing of the exegesis. The conscious critical reflection which has characterised the reworking of my drafts has served the creation of new knowledge. Each draft not only provided the scaffolding for the next but led me to understand that drafting is part of coming to know as one writes, a process that is equally relevant to my fictive writing. Conscious activity was also important as I stepped outside the traditional model of an introduction, review of literature and method to accommodate my iterative, first-person action research process and sought — with an increasing depth of understanding — an alternative structure to this paper.

Are we sitting at the edge of a new era as the ongoing search to explain human experience continues? Mansfield in his discussion of subjectivity divides recent thinking into two camps: the fixed, as exemplified by Freud, Laçan, the psychoanalytic method and the metaphor of a tree which is limited by the tips of its branches and its embedded roots; and the loose as theorised by Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari for whom the subject, being at the whim of power, politics and the deconstructed text which lays bare our informing paradigms, has no centre or fixed place. The rhizome not only reflects the subject’s unbounded movement over a multiplicity of surfaces and planes, but leaves meaning at rest in the particularities of time and place.

Within these paradigms, could I ever have a writerly identity that ‘stands in itself’ (Lawtoo 2006, p. 245) or, as Irigaray suggests, a writing only of women’s being? Efforts to deconstruct or suspend my highly inscribed writerly identity have been
difficult because, like language, it is subject not only to past inscriptions but to ongoing community changes which bring new words, new forms of knowing and new ways of imagining through language. However, I believe there is a need for women to be aware of themselves as active agents as change occurs, and active agents of change. These values will continue to inform my writerly being and be addressed in my writing.

Being open to and subject to change, acknowledges the possibilities for change within and through the creative process. My writerly identity flows between corporeal, social and historical inscriptions, direct experience, critical reflection, conscious activity, revelations from the unconscious, multiple and changing forms of the novel and social and cultural change. Patrick’s ‘elbow is bony’ because it reflects the ‘moment to moment’ experience of Zoë’s being. However, without a shared language and knowledge of ‘elbow’ and ‘bony’ the words are without significance.

This project has given me the opportunity to explore my writerly identity and I do have new insights into my creative process. It has been a circular approach in which multiple voices have been negotiated in the construction of a newly imagined whole. While my childhood experience of having a felt sense of an imagined dress arises when I think about my next novel, I believe the intertextual nature of this research experience and the recognition that writing involves change and movement will be helpful in my future writing and informative in pedagogical discussions about the writing process in practice-led research.
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