

Major Creative Work:

Anatomy of the Upper Body

Exegesis:

**‘Desire and its Disastrous Results’: Re-examining
Representations of Feminine Masochism in Women’s
Writing**

**Maya Linden BCA Hons. (Creative Writing, University of
Melbourne), MA (Creative Writing, University of Melbourne)**

**Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
Doctor of Philosophy.**

**Discipline of English
School of Humanities
The University of Adelaide**

August 2010

Major Creative Work:

Anatomy of the Upper Body

Loving and killing absolutely cannot be disentangled [...] it is simply a question of designating the scene or scenes of abandonment that punctuate our paths.

Hélène Cixous

*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*¹

I once had a love affair and I think that's where it started, the story I tell. It wasn't a... a love story, but it was a – how shall I say? – I thought I wasn't going to get out alive.

Marguerite Duras

*In Interview*²

1 53.

2 Selous 207.

Part I – Last Night in a Dark Street

Chapter 1

The minute I saw your face I knew. I saw the end of my story.

Hélène Cixous

Angst (11)

The first man I loved was not my father. Although I think psychoanalysts believe that it should be. At age four, I was already a prodigy of adultery.

We were on holiday in Israel at Ein Gedi, visiting my mother's family. We had rented a house in a small village set in mountains on the coast of the Dead Sea. What parents would take their small child to a war-torn country? But then, where better to learn the basic truths of love and death?

I caught breathless glimpses of him in the evenings, walking in the street, as the light grew dim. A stranger. He intrigued me. With his arrogant profile and skin, the colour of milky coffee. This man seemed to me like a beautiful apparition. Out of my reach. A ghost already. He must have been no more than nineteen.

Then there is the memory of seeing him one day – noticing with a shock that his head had been shaved. And all the young men left the village in mottled army buses which ground painfully down cobbled streets built eras ago, meant only for bare feet.

He was killed, within one week of arriving at the base, not yet even a soldier. In my mind, the moment of his death played, over and over, pieced together from what I overheard. A tow-truck had reversed at the base. The driver had not seen him. I imagined it, a clumsy slapstick sketch with too much red. He was shattered against a brick wall, the two hooks on the back of the truck puncturing his lungs. A casual accident.

‘It was not instant,’ his mother whispered to mine. They sat in our courtyard one long evening and I listened from behind a trellis of grapevines. ‘He drowned in the blood that filled his nose and mouth.’ She began to moan. As I held my breath in the darkness, it seemed to me a thrilling sound. The bridge from pathos to eros was built in that moment, and so it was that I crossed. Love is, after all, just another case of friendly fire.

My meeting Alex happened accidentally. There are many things that could be blamed – Penne’s illegible handwriting; the dark night; the slightly warm rain; my penchant for chance encounters – but where there is an accident, there is sometimes an element of choice, as in this case. I let it happen.

I have a postcard I have kept; it was sent blank to me by my best friend, Penne, a few months before I met him. On it, an image stolen from a 1950’s advertisement. A young woman, smiling mischievously, stands in a railway station, looking somewhat lost, yet oddly thrilled. In the distant background is a smoking locomotive. The candid 90’s caption reads ‘she threw herself eagerly into the paths of unsuitable men’. I knew why she had left the card blank.

Penne had left a note under my door the night I met Alex, too. Scrawled on the back of a travel brochure advertising ‘Abseil the Grand Canyon!’ were the words ‘Veronique’s house-painting party tonight, join me’, followed by an address, partially blurred.

It was early autumn, when Melbourne is sometimes still warm. A semi-tropical drizzle glistened on the roads. I caught a cab to the address in Hawthorn. I didn’t know Veronique. She was a Parisian student on exchange who Penne had befriended, but I felt somehow as if I’d been to the house before. It had a flaking beige picket fence from which unkempt rose bushes burst. Their fragrance swallowed me. The street, narrow, dark, silent, seemed to close over me. I knocked twice. I waited a long time. A man’s voice called out finally. ‘Hey, who’s there?’ He sounded as if he were underwater.

‘It’s Nina,’ I called back, my mouth pressed to the damp wood.

There was the sound of footsteps, then the clunk of a latch. He stood before me in the open doorway, illuminated by the floodlit hall. He was taller than I had imagined while I waited, but everything else seemed to suit his voice. He was just a few years

older than me, perhaps twenty-seven or eight. He wore blue jeans. His grey t-shirt, clinging to his arms slightly, was a little tucked up as if he'd just pulled it on. He dragged one hand through his hair and stared at me quizzically. His mouth was set in a sullen expression which gave a certain stoicism to his face. His muddy green eyes squinted slightly as if he had a humorous secret and was trying not to smile.

'Nina?' he repeated. 'I'm sorry, but who are you here for?' He seemed genuinely confused, but also, I liked to think, a little enthralled.

'Veronique...?' I asked. He stared at me and shook his head. I took a step back from the door. '...is Penne here yet?'

'I'm the only one home and I've never heard of these people. I'm sorry, but you've got the wrong place.'

'No, it's here!' I protested, growing less certain. I pulled out the Grand Canyon card. The photograph with its tiny ant-sized figures slid from my hand, falling beneath a rose bush. When I picked it up, the ink had bled and the address was illegible. He stared at me with condescension. I was definitely lost then.

'As I said already, they're not here. I'm busy. Sorry.' He closed the door.

I stood there, unsure of what to do. My yellow taxi had long since pulled away, reversing awkwardly from the one-way street. It was strangely warm. The rain had begun to fall more heavily, swelling the puddles around me. The silence was engorging.

I was still standing there when he opened the door to a thin slice of light. Once again, I saw the mockery in his eyes. I still recall so clearly the steep glassy curve of his eyes in the dim porch light, flicking like blades from my cheeks to my lips to my breast. Grey-blue, sea-green, the everchanging colour I've been unable to map.

'What was your name again?'

'Nina.'

Why did I already crave so much from him in those few minutes? The air had grown heavy; my breath was fervent, unfamiliar.

'Well, I'm Alex.'

His hesitation let my imagination bloom dangerously. In my mind he moved toward me, touching the fingers of one hand to the nape of my neck.

'Nina.' He stood firmly on his side of the door, arms at his sides. 'It's been nice to meet you. Maybe we'll run into each other again some day.' He gave me an idle smile as he closed the door to my searching face. I waited, but he did not open it again. I turned and let myself out by the gate.

As I walked away, I wrote down 'Alex' and his house number on the soggy Grand Canyon card and slipped it into my bag.

Chapter 2

Before the imminence of death, language rushes forth ...

Michele Foucault

Killing Gazes, Killing in the Gaze (66)

That summer at Ein Gedi is the last memory I have of my mother and father together. Rather, that is the easier truth – there was also that other morning, shortly after our return to Melbourne, which for many years I chose to forget, rubbing at it whenever it surfaced like a stubborn stain. It was easier to imagine that my father had never returned with us from the airport. Easier than the memory of waking in Melbourne to a strange shrieking sound, coming from my beautiful mother who smelled of incense, with her Middle Eastern skin and tiny bells on her ankles. I ran from my room to see my father disappear through the door.

Then, there was just the smell of burnt toast, and my mother crying.

I never saw my father again.

Until I was almost twenty-five, I never even questioned why.

My mother cried for a long time. For months, she would pause in train carriages, in the aisles of supermarkets, even at Luna Park on my sixth birthday.

When the crying stopped, *it* started. I didn't have a word for it.

My mother could not afford a babysitter with my father gone. From six years old I was put to bed and left alone. I would wake with a hammering heart and pull up my sheet 'helmet' in the late darkness when my mother returned home. I would hear the slow thud of the front door and then her laugh. I hated the way she feigned a breathless girlishness, her giggles accompanied by the gruff chuckles of men. There were different men, I deduced in the darkness. At least three – faceless, with magnified footsteps. I played at detective, recognizing each by the waft of his cologne as he passed my door. Heavy Brut; delicate pine-tinged florals; nauseating spice. I imagined them to be like

men in the 1950's movies my mother sometimes let me stay up to watch with her when she wanted company during the months of crying. The men had names like Lester and Chuck and Bradley, and wore bowler hats.

Then the slapping, moaning, heaving, shaking sounds would shudder through the thin walls. Sometimes I thought my mother, crying again, was being comforted. Sometimes it sounded like she was scared, but happy, too, like when we rode the Big Dipper on my birthday and she screamed as we plunged down, dizzy under its force. Sometimes it sounded like she was being hurt.

In the sudden silence that followed the crescendo of noises, I strained to imagine the scene. Once the front door slammed and I heard the man's footsteps retreat, I would finally sleep.

In the morning, up on my toes on the cold linoleum, I would reach for the wooden handle on the door to my mother's room and twist it slowly. I was never sure what I would find. Once I found her like a princess, asleep in a foam of pearls. Her favorite necklace broken: a red ring around her throat where it had been pulled too tight. She looked serene and ruined, an ancient sculpture carelessly shattered. There was something pink spilt on the carpet. I was terrified, fascinated. I didn't smell the Brut again after that night. At six years old then, I already had begun to plan what to do if my mother died.

I needed it 18 years later, but it failed to serve as any guide.

Now I am waiting in the darkness for Alex, breathless in anticipation of his knock at my door. One last time, I have become that child again. My hesitation now is the same as it was then, pausing, one hand covering my eyes, as I slowly creaked open my mother's door.

In truth, I can no longer remember a time when I have not been waiting for him. Everything in this room is hot with sleepless pursuit. My skin emits tremors with the regularity of fever, sheets twisted between my legs in the brooding damp of insomnia. They are the fine percale sheets Sam bought for our bed whose spray of pale green flowers I've quietly resented for months. Such an insipid choice for a man.

Alex's two hands were about my throat the first time I knew for certain that I loved him. Big tanned hands, surprisingly soft and smooth, as if he wore a mugger's gloves. He liked his women to cry out, he said. But I was silent. His hands held my breath.

He had told me earlier that he was researching a paper on the anatomy of the upper body. 'For a presentation', he'd said, 'to trauma specialists at the hospital.' They were interested in the tenuous network of muscles that arc from the spine to the shoulder and nest beside the fragile collarbone. He'd looked briefly into the heart, too, with its squadron of inelegant valves, 'so prehistoric, so vital' he'd concluded. A detailed knowledge of that region was not essential, however, he only needed to know which muscle could lead to a fatality if bruised.

I raised myself up from the mattress and turned toward him. I asked him to make me his diagram, to mark the bare parts of me that could be torn away.

'Nina, come on', he said tersely, gripping my forearms in one hand as he sank me back down to the bed. 'It's you, not me, who sees every moment as something to paint.' I felt him tighten his grip, felt a little pulse, like the heartbeat of a bird, trapped in his wrist. One hand slipped from my throat, across my breast, swam home to the jutting island of my hip. A flutter of fear in me was totally eclipsed.

Before tonight, perhaps, he has never been afraid to leave fingerprints.

Since Sam has been away, since I left the white-hot letter yesterday, I lie perfectly still, my hair and make-up fixed with specially purchased sprays. I move like an automaton, already practicing vacancy from my body, half excited, half afraid, refraining from food and drink so as not to disturb anything about my face. I am a wax mannequin, ready to melt at his door knock.

I think about Sam, his simple obsession with sky-puncturing pylons—their firm hold on earth, their fixed gravity, harnessed energy—and how he will be absorbed now at his convention, grinning like an over-excited child, as he discusses the likelihood of making light from lightning. At seven in the evening, he will sip a cup of tea, swallowing with that little popping sound, like a caught bubble in his throat, that so irritates me. He'd be thinking of calling me. I reach for the telephone, and then fall back against our bed, recalling how I have unplugged it already. With all his understanding of electricity,

Sam has never found the switch in me. Like a primitive people, we have rubbed the dry twigs of our skins together for months, praying for something to ignite. Who could blame me? Without fire, I have gone hungry.

When it comes, the knock at the door has none of the solemnity I expected. It could almost be the magnolias in the front yard, their pink flesh of petals sliding across the glass. Then the tapping begins to repeat more insistently, vibrating the brick doorway. I have always said this house has poor foundations, not just from the stumps set too shallow which I have smelled, wet and decaying in the summer, but from the rhizomatic spread of lies that have flourished between Sam and I.

When I met Alex, I was in the process of falling out of love with Steven. Although falling sounds too gentle. I was pushed. Steven had found me 'too inhibited.' His 'three-little-words' to me after we first had sex were 'what-a-relief.' He walked away from me five days into a holiday in Thailand – at 3am on Koh Samui's dirt track streets.

I seem to have attracted abandonments since I was a child. Even those I do not love, leave me. Steven was just another in a series. I had met him through a fellow artist, a friend of Penne's, at an open 'interpretational movement' workshop in Melbourne. I should have known that it would be the kind of event magnetic to the lonely. He offered to give me a back massage. I gave him my phone number. Three months later, I found myself on the steamy avenues of Bangkok amidst crowds of smiling scammers and packs of rabid dogs.

At night in the whirring hotel rooms of Thailand's 'five star' accommodation, I listened for his footsteps crossing the cheap linoleum. I felt his body heaving on top of me. The mattress was thin and the wooden bed-boards bruised my hips. In the morning, he said 'If I was an artist I'd paint you'.

I loved him with the desperation of a mail-order bride. I was also scared for my life; realising one night that I knew very little about him as he watched me peel the tough red skin from a rambutan and his eyes fixed on my flick knife. When he wasn't looking, I hid the knife in the suitcase with my lingerie. But it was not Steven who should have worried me.

This ending was disappointingly ordinary. No drug smuggling, rape, extortion or murder. We began to argue one night, and, as we moved around the town from pub to bar to club, the argument escalated. Outside the *Green Mango* he admitted that he regretted asking me to go there with him. He said he would enjoy the trip more alone, and he left me, in the town that was gradually shutting down to its neon centre, until my only safety was the glowing lights of a *Seven Eleven*. The way back to the motel was an unlit scrubby beach track, which I contemplated taking alone, but remembered how a few metres from where I sat there was no network for my mobile phone.

So I did what any dumped girl does.

Chocolate.

Despite its recognisable green and orange signage, everything inside the *Seven Eleven* was unfamiliar. After a while, I spotted some *M&M's* and sat down on the stained stone steps outside and sculled them. I sauntered into the *Burger King* next door and, resting my forehead against one of the luminous yellow tables, cried until the cleaner stacked up chairs around me and the sun finally rose in Australia so I could call the airlines and change my flights. When I arrived back in Melbourne, I was looking to be primed, wiped clean—looking for someone who could erase from me the rusted touch of others.

The knocking is louder now; it erupts from the wooden panelling like a round of shots. I get up from the bed and slowly walk toward the noise. I feel as if I am lazily swimming, limbs heavy. To my surprise, I hesitate. To hear this knock at my door is the reason I left the postcard at Alex's gate yesterday.

I adjust my smile in the hallway mirror. I reach for my key chain with the *Hamsa* charm, swinging, the blue enamel 'evil eye' that, as usual, will do nothing to protect me.

Chapter 3

Pure chance was actually no chance at all: the intrusion of the unforeseen turned into necessity.

Mladen Dolar

At First Sight (131)

When Lady Caroline Lamb decided to burn all the letters that Lord Byron had sent to her, she found herself unable to destroy the originals – instead she made special copies of each with which to satisfy the flame. Even in her utmost rage, she could not untie her longing from the few precious words he gave.

I heard this story from Penne who was researching histories of literary love affairs. She told it to me like an intellectual joke. Pain is not a punch line, I wanted to say – but I remained silent, I did not want to admit that I understood Lady Caroline completely. In my story, Alex is always present from this point on. Any attempts I have made toward forgetting him have been only counterfeit sacrifices; the half-hearted dilution of memory.

Perhaps the memory of meeting him was still fresh in my mind when I was struck by something unforeseen the following week. I was on a train when my mobile phone rang and a remote voice with no more intonation than the voice announcing the stations, said, ‘We regret to inform you—’

‘—it all happened so quickly’

‘We’re very sorry to tell you—’

‘Sincerest condolences.’

‘Unfortunately, she—’

‘We did everything we could, but—’

‘—the hugest loss.’

‘She did not respond.’

My breath staggered under the weight of how many words it took to say, ‘Your mother is dead.’ There were none left for me to reply with. I switched off my phone. At

first, I did not cry. All that fled from my lips was a winded gasp and a low rattle, as if something had been torn inside. The shuddering carriage rocked me into my mother's arms.

She was carrying me from the garden of the house we had leased at Ein Gedi. It was twilight. After the young man had died. Restless and unhappy, I twisted in her grasp like a snake. We were preparing to leave for Melbourne. I didn't want to leave the sweet-corn plants she had planted in our provisional garden. When she was not looking, I tore at their tender leaves. My mother rushed out to find me covered in torn pieces of ragged green, corn sheaves ground beneath my feet.

'Why are you doing this?' she asked, surprised by the violence that had sprouted inside me.

'When we leave', I said, trying to explain, 'there will be no one here to look after them. Mama, I am killing them now, so later they won't have to die on their own.'

One always imagines that there will be some kind of momentous sign when the one who gave you life leaves it – a prophetic dream, perhaps the silhouette of a single crow soaring across the sky. There was no foreboding – just a breath released which her confused lungs forgot to take in again. A routine operation which three days later collapsed her heart to a clenched fist. On the autopsy report, there were just two words: 'undetected complications.' For all that cutting and peeling and draining of blood, her body gave an insufficient reply. Busy with design assignments, I had planned to visit her at home after she was released from surgery – as though my busyness had been an excuse even I had come to believe.

Not until I had left the train and arrived home at my room in St Kilda, did the dam of shock give way to despair, as if all the years of my mother's crying had depleted me of tears until then.

There was nothing remarkable about the day that she died. It was what followed that was remarkable.

I was living by myself, in an apartment cluttered with easels. I had been painting a lot of portraits, for whenever I have tried to paint my own face it turned out too much

like my mother's, with a certain unsteadiness about the mouth. That afternoon in early autumn, I sank down on the cold floor and cried, under the impassive gaze of all those eyes.

Eventually I rose from the floor, from where the pattern of wood grain had imprinted on my wet cheek, and slipped from my house like an escapee. I walked towards the water.

On the lampposts at the intersection of Barkly Street, I imagined pasting a 'missing' poster with my father's picture, or spraying a solemn graffiti message above the grinning mouth of Luna Park, recalling the line of a poem: 'the sky has been torn off my life' – yet what I felt was more relief than sadness, the lifting of a weight.

I walked all the way to Brighton. I wanted to walk to the end of the pier, but there was a torn danger sign and bright orange cordons strangling the rocks like fluorescent seaweed: 'Jetty damaged from severe storm flooding. Keep out until further notice.' I stopped just before the concrete boardwalk fell away to steep bluestone rubble. The city skyline was hazy, silver and blue; it shimmered brighter than the metallic sea. Brighter than the sky. I wished I had paint and paper to capture it, or even a camera. The magnetic wash of silver reminded me of the curt indefinite tinge I'd glimpsed the week before in Alex's eyes. Beside me, moored yachts struggled against their knotted ropes. In the water, an engorged jellyfish pulsed with the tide, skirting the sharp edges of the rocks.

I walked back along the steep dusty running track. In the shallow water, a small tiger-striped fish flitted. I searched for more, but there were none. Caught in the current between two rocks, another jellyfish swayed. Its blue gills drifted, turning a pretty lavender, sketched with luminous veins, and I saw that it was dead.

There was nowhere to go. At the two bridges that connect the slow-running Elwood Canal to the sea, I realized that I'd felt solitude before, even loneliness, but never the overwhelming vertigo of being so totally *alone*.

I felt into my pockets for a tissue, but they were empty.

I peered into my wallet, also empty.

I dug down into the deepest corner of my handbag and felt the scrap of weathered postcard with Alex's name and address on it.

It was dark by the time I reached his house. I had not stopped to think what I would say to him. What had seemed quite a reasonable action – walking there that night – seemed a mistake. When the door opened, I could not speak.

He hesitated. ‘My lost girl from last Thursday?’

‘I’m sorry to just turn up like this. I found your address, and I remembered how you said maybe we would meet again. Someone died and I didn’t know where to go... somehow tonight, your house felt more right than mine.’

‘Well, to be honest I don’t remember what I said. You look cold. Come inside. Can I get you anything? A hot drink maybe?’ He slid a quick glance from my stricken face to my legs, bare below the wet hem of my dress.

There was a scar on his brow that I had not noticed the first night. I recall his hand, reaching, the door swinging open, revealing the hall like the horizon of a foreign atoll. Finally. His hand, firm, dark-veined. Strange, the things that are imprinted on our memories. I followed him inside.

It was an old house, but partially renovated. A glass cathedral ceiling arched above me dizzily. The décor in his lounge struck me as unusual. A new pool table at one end, while at the other, a partially assembled human skeleton was hanging from a stand. On a glass coffee table sat the headless bust of a woman. Made of hard silicon, she had mobile flaps of muscle, so that every part of her could be hinged away from her heart. I felt nauseous, thinking of scalpels slicing at my mother’s breast, soft folds of flesh falling, one by one, like the petals of a flower.

‘Oh’, he laughed, noticing my agitation. ‘Physiotherapist,’ he said, pointing at his chest. ‘So, what do you do?’

I was four years old again, pulling away petals. Tearing at leaves in the garden until I was certain all the abandoned corn sheaves had been destroyed.

‘I’m a painter,’ I managed eventually, hot coffee swelling my throat. ‘I paint to remember... I guess I paint the things that I don’t want to lose.’ I spoke slowly. Each word felt as if it were an inefficient translation of something greater that I wished to say. I looked up from my cup. He was observing me vacantly, more so each arc of my body, not listening. I could see through an archway to the television in the next room. On it, a

couple kissed and crooned. I felt dizzy, saturated with the gravity of the day and the strong black coffee. I longed to be held. A simple knot of arms around me. Easy to tie, that knot, but much more difficult to loosen.

I turned back toward Alex. He had moved closer beside me, only the span of a hand between us on the grey suede couch.

‘This really is wet’, he said, touching the back of his hand to the hem of my skirt. I held my breath as he rotated his wrist, pushing his fingers into the damp cloth that rode further up my thigh in crumpled waves. ‘I wish I could offer you something to change into, but I don’t usually keep a stash of spare dresses’, he continued, smiling, as he his hand moved a little further up my leg to catch my hem and smooth it down again.

He stood up then, and moved forward as if to reach for me, but instead lifted the cordless telephone from where it sat on a table behind me.

‘I’m going to call you a cab.’

I nodded and swallowed the last grainy sip of coffee, as I managed a faint ‘Okay.’ He was already dialing, already walking away.

Before he returned to the lounge room again, before the yellow doors of the cold taxi swallowed me, I wrote my first and last name and phone number on a dry tissue he had given me and left it on the pool table, at the heart of the triangle, where the white ball should have been.

Chapter 4

It is already too late [...] I have already lost what one could call the self-being.

Mladen Dolar

At First Sight (138)

I went through the necessary processes of my mother's cremation in a blur of signatures. She had adopted the convenient form of being initialed away. I managed, in little more than one week, to erase her presence in a way that I had never been able to achieve while she lived.

I had slipped out of her influence, as if from an ill-fitting dress, yet some threads remained attached to me. For, as if in reverse relation, all the small things in my life became amplified. Every moment, every motion, became an imperative. Raindrops against my window in the late autumn were a painful cacophony. The zippers on my clothes growled and bit. Cut flowers made me uneasy. And always, Alex circled in my thoughts with a hawk's unswerving intent.

Perhaps it was simply pity or sympathy, or fear of being charged with an unfair dismissal, which prevented me from losing my contract with the advertising design company. I certainly put in enough hours on my projects, finding the vast landscape of billboards a temporary relief from the new claustrophobia of everything else, but innocuously the images became a coded projection of my misery, hovering over Melbourne's city streets.

In the ad I designed for a new brand of coffee, sharp vector figures, male and female, swayed in a room made for love. Couches took the shape of lips, and walls were the color of spring lawns. While painting, I thought back to the evening when Alex had invited me in; the way he had gazed at me as I sat silently on his couch, my mouth full of coffee. It wasn't until long after I had finished the design and the first billboard went up on Punt Road that someone noticed a misplaced apostrophe in the slogan sat disturbingly, like a scar, on the male figure's brow.

It was the first of several mistakes.

With my mother gone, thoughts of my father, or rather, a shrieking awareness of his absence, crowded into my thoughts. I became obsessed with the idea that he should be told of her death. To trace my father, to see him, and to tell him, seemed the only way to slow the vortex in my mind.

But where to begin? I had not seen him in twenty years. The note I had received from him when I was sixteen had been hidden in my lingerie drawer for eight of them. I had never showed it to my mother, not because it would distress her, but because it seemed the closest thing I had ever received to a love letter.

I exhumed it from beneath a camisole, searching it with the eyes of an archeologist or a spy, but there was not much that those few words could hide.

Nina,

You must be almost sixteen.

I'm sorry I had to leave.

Peter.

The words seemed more final as I read them again than the day it had arrived for me. Bereft, I turned over the paper. On the back was a hotel logo: Park Lane, London. I examined the envelope. The stamp had been postmarked in Tokyo.

I picked up the phone and called the hotel, relieved by the reassuring voice of the 24-hour concierge who sounded like a porter in a BBC teleseries. Polite, impartial. I explained that I was seeking the record of a visitor who had stayed at the hotel almost ten years earlier. It was urgent. I was hoping they could find the receipt of his bank account. Or his destination when he checked out of the hotel. Or where he had come from. The concierge continued repeating, 'Yes, yes hmmm. Yes, yes, I see', mechanically, at regular intervals. He asked me to leave my contact information for the hotel manager who perhaps could assist me, although he was on leave until the following week. I placed my father's letter back amongst the lace.

Later, I was woken by the serrated sound of the phone ringing. It was a Sunday night. Slightly after 3am, and I was clouded in that heavy chrysalis of sleep, after dreams

have seeped in, muscles drugged with fatigue. The light from the ringing phone in the dark room pierced my eyes. I focused on the number. The flashing sign read ‘unavailable’. I hesitated before answering, wondering who it could be – knowing instinctively that a call at that time would either be a lonely man, or bad news. Or a combination of the two.

‘Hello?’

For a moment I thought I had missed the call and it had passed through to voice mail. All I could hear was a resounding silence.

‘Hello?’

I thought I heard someone breathe. A rustle of cotton on stubble. Then the line went dead, and I was left with a weak persistent beeping. I thought of the hotel manager, the concierge, but calculated that in London it was still the weekend. It took me a long time to fall back to sleep, and even then, I rested just on the surface, rising eagerly at six o’clock to leave my apartment.

After I’d set down the phone, everything in the room seemed to turn against me. The neckline of my t-shirt was too tight. Shadows churned. I sat up in bed to open the window, to let in some air. On the street below, light from the lamps spilt like milk. A figure sat in a car, or maybe it was just something hanging; a pressed suit, the windows were too tinted to see clearly. Somewhere far away, water dripped. Tyres screeched. I felt feverish. It seemed as if a century would pass until sunlight. I didn’t want to be alone. In my drowsy terror, I thought about calling Alex, then realized I only had his address, not his telephone number. I lay down again, still as an insect playing dead. Then remembered that I had left him mine.

That faint sigh on the telephone haunted me the next day. I attended a meeting in the morning, feeling pursued and exhausted, shivering in the weak sunlight. I was meant to contribute a creative spin on the new advertising campaign for a mobile phone, but when everyone at the table turned to me, everything that I had planned to say was erased.

‘So, what about you, Nina – any thoughts?’ asked the CEO, Charles Longmire. ‘Come on, where’s that creative brain of yours? On holiday today?’

I tried to focus on the slide show presentation projected on the wall before me. The campaign was designed to target commuters on trains. In the photo, the hands of those commuters with new phones glowed. In the room where we sat, inefficient air-conditioning whirred. I stared at my fingers - heat waves rippled their edges.

'Look, I think it's good. What you're thinking is perfect, I think it's great!' I lied enthusiastically, unsure of what it was that I had just agreed to.

My phone rang again that afternoon. This time the screen bore a number, but it was not one I recognized. My breath came quickly, as if I was in deep water, taking shallow gulps of air between waves.

'Hello?'

In the momentary silence, I waited for the heave of breath, but there was none. Just a young man's voice saying my name as if it were a question.

'Yes, it's Nina, who's this?' I asked, as if I did not know it was Alex.

'I found your number. You left it on the pool table.'

A sensation shot through me that was closer to a sound, the shrill rush in one's body of ascending toward the sky on a swing. 'That part wasn't an accident,' I said.

I could taste the gasp of that air, the sharpness.

'Well, it blew across the table when I went to play a game of pool last night. I thought I'd try and give you a call today. I don't mean to pry, I just wanted to—'

His last few words were lost in a hard rustling.

'What was that? I couldn't hear you.'

'Sorry, my hand scraped on my shirt collar. I said I just called to make sure everything was all right. You didn't seem too happy the other night.'

'I should have told you. My mother died. But I'm better now', I said, without hesitating. 'I just need to find my father now and let him know.'

'I'm sorry Nina. I had no idea. I wish I could talk more, but I have a client arriving.'

'I'm thinking about leaving Melbourne. I need to go away for a while,' I said, hoping it would prompt him to want to see me. My breath quickened as I waited.

'Okay, nice talking to you again', was all he said. 'Take care'. He spoke absently, as if he were distracted, years older than me.

I felt my brow shrink, and my smile tighten. A heaviness ached behind my eyes.

I held the phone away from my face for a moment as I hastily copied down his number. When I brought the phone back up to my lips to say goodbye, I heard the beep of an empty line.

Chapter 5

Enslavement is always the final result of desire, but at first it is very distant.

René Girard

Deceit, Desire and the Novel (180)

Forty thousand feet above the shrinking vista of the earth, the world inside my mind grew monstrous. In the airplane's artificial night, my throat was choked with unsaid words. I stared through the double-glass porthole, a prisoner at visiting hour, my silence containing a babble of armed thoughts. Below, in the indifferent ocean, a war-torn island burned.

The overseas trip I had devised desperately, thrown out like a quick lasso, in the momentary phone call from Alex, had soon become opportunity, and then necessity. The Park Lane hotel never returned my call. When I dialed again, and finally spoke to the manager, I was told that their bookkeeping systems had been digitally translated in recent years, leaving the movements of all previous guests impossible to trace. The mobile phone billboard campaign I had been working on so unconstructively for weeks was assigned to another designer, and in place I received an email 'suggesting', without alternative, that I utilise some of my accrued leave.

Winter days in Melbourne were so dim, it was difficult to resist the consolation of sleep. I threw out all of the half-painted portraits; their expressions seemed to have turned to pity. I cleared my apartment of empty canvasses and drawing paper; in their vast blankness, they sickened me. I kept my parents' wedding photo, my passport and the thirteen-word note from my father on Park Lane notepaper. One afternoon, I took the note from where I had re-placed it, safe under the strata of lace and ruffles and diamante buckles. The more I stared at the note, the less it seemed to reveal. In frustration, I tore at it. Peeling away at the envelope, I ripped off the neat row of Japanese stamps. Something

was marked on the paper - in my father's handwriting was a line of numerals with odd spaces. An international number punctuated with pause tones.

The call was answered with a roar of traffic. Bus horns, wheels, a musical pop of traffic lights assaulted my hearing. An abrupt male voice yelled 'HELLO' into my shrinking ear.

'Who is this?' I asked.

'It's Ralph. Who's this?' he shouted back through the noise. I wondered where this Ralph could be. His rough Australian accent surprised me.

'This is Nina; I'm calling from Melbourne. I'm trying to track down my father, his name is Peter, I've got a feeling you might've have known him.'

'Peter...Melbourne...Peter. Oh, Peter Southey?' he repeated brusquely. Then there was a cough, as if he were clearing his throat. It was difficult to tell with the traffic and his low tone.

'Well, about time,' he said, 'I was wondering when someone would show up and settle things - so, you know about this whole deal then? How are you going to help me?'

'I was hoping you'd be able to help me, actually. I need to get in touch with him. It's quite urgent.' Then I heard the echo of his words. 'Settle things?' I asked.

'Listen, Nina, is it? We can't go into detail on the phone now, but let's not mess around. I know where Peter is, love, where he *definitely* is, so if you *assist* me, then maybe I can *assist* you.' He pronounced 'assist' and 'definitely', sarcastically, ominously, as if he presumed the concepts might be too complex for me.

'But, I'm in Melbourne, what can I do?' I asked, 'Where are you?'

'Our business is all in Asia these days. Not likely I'll be back in Australia again soon.'

'Can't you just tell me what you know? I'll give you my email address.' I said, hope sliding back into me.

'I stopped writing letters a few years back. Telegrams, postcards, emails - one way or another, they're always bad news or bad luck, if you know what I mean.'

Though I shared his odd aversion to the written word, it was not until weeks later in Shibuya, as I watched Ralph's teeth chewing, his dark features swimming in a saké haze, that the incomplete exchanges of our initial conversation began to reassemble.

'If you want to know where your dad is, looks like we'll have to meet up. And let's make it sooner rather than later,' he continued, without waiting for a response. 'When you get here, call me.' Something in the background exploded. Car backfire? Firecracker? Gunshot? He hung up.

I booked a flight to Tokyo three days later.

In a crowded space I have always been able to recognize a man I have loved by the back of his head. Something about the singular nape of his neck, the way a hair might curl above his ear, the bow of a sullen jaw-line caught in a sideways glance. And so it was that, leaving in search of one ghost, I glimpsed another.

In the airport, I was shaken by a sudden sensation that all of the elements I reliably identified with my life had left me behind, folded like apparitions into one dark blue suitcase and clattered off into a tunnel along the check-in conveyor belt. It was a strange lightness I felt; perhaps fear turned to euphoria. Without belongings, I wandered as a missing person, past clusters of chatting travelers. I lingered on the moving boardwalk that shunted steadily toward the silver exit gates. Through the international lounge windows, which revealed my reflection, exposing a surprising solidity about me, I could see down into the domestic arrivals hall. Baggage carousels spun and weary people milled and mingled. A couple descending on an escalator, their backs to me, caught my attention. A shock of recognition rippled through my body, weakening me as I recognized the slant of that shoulder, the cropped curl of Alex's hair. Beside him was a woman, arcing gently toward him, her head inclined against his chest. His hand rested on the small of her back.

As each step of the escalator drew them farther away, I tried to convince myself that I was mistaken. I had not seen the man's face. Yet, even without that certainty, by the time I settled into my seat on the aircraft, I was sick with a churning jealousy.

Too troubled to sleep in the artificial night, I stood at the back of the aircraft, while others slept, their compressed bodies forming a hilly horizon in the darkness. I leaned

over the foldaway emergency escape slide and peered through the porthole window into deep space.

Something moved behind me. I turned to see a woman standing there. Unlike me, she had an accomplished look about her, a look I hoped I'd have as a confident woman of thirty.

'Can't sleep?' she asked softly.

I shook my head. 'No, normally I can but not on this flight. I don't know why.'

'Thinking about something?'

I nodded. She smiled and said 'a guy.' No question in her voice this time.

Rachel had met Matthew on the QF9 to London.

'Listen to me, is it crazy? All these years later, and I still remember the flight number!' She laughed. Desire has a way of freeze-framing detail, I thought. She still recalled how at dawn the sky over Russia had been streaked like a rainbow washed with black. She was 21, travelling alone, and she'd sensed something that felt like destiny. There was something fatal in the way she told her story; their meeting, an unavoidable natural disaster.

He had sat behind her in the departure lounge; he was grey from a week of encountering death, a refugee from Intensive-Care-country, zippered suit bag slung across one arm. She recalled the smallest things – the way he'd walked to the bar and stood, beer in hand, watching her intently. She described the worn cord of his jacket, the pale cleanness of his t-shirt, a hint of white above the waistline of his jeans.

'I remember so clearly the back of his cropped blond head', she said. 'And his profile.' She'd sat six rows behind, studying him during the hard gravity of the take-off and the long-haul flight. Later, in the night, they had collided, intentionally, queuing in the toilet line by an armed exit door. Matthew was on his way home to London from Melbourne where he'd spent a long week sleeping on couches, speaking through the night to a friend whose father had died suddenly.

'Once our conversation turned to mortality,' she said resignedly 'there was really nothing that could have saved me.' The corners of her mouth sank down into a purposeful frown.

Later, they had met again under the heavy moon of a Singapore stopover. Their adjoining flight was delayed for several hours. In the darkness just before midnight, under a tide of tropical heat, the evening had seemed to elongate. She'd walked alone through the fluorescent airport where stern military police strutted with cartridge belts, their rifles slung across their dark green uniforms, to a glass staircase that led to a rooftop cactus garden where the sharp-leaved plants stood in red-rubble dirt beside drinking fountains. She saw him sitting on one of the wooden benches, watching her. In my imagination, Matthew merged with Alex as she spoke. He'd taken off his jacket. The sweat welled along her hairline and spine; the hot air was stifling. She'd walked over and stood before him.

'When I look back,' she said, 'everything that night had such a finality'. And later, as she stood beside him again, trying not to cry, it had felt like years of sadness filled the back of her tight throat and blurred her eyes. 'There I was, standing in the aisle of the airplane, trying to say a casual goodbye!' She laughed again, more melancholy this time. Soon, below them, London's matchbox cars and toy houses had swelled to life-size faster than she'd wanted. The heavy thud of the plane's wheels on solid ground had made her shudder, and the tears she'd tried to hold in welled behind her clenched lids.

'But, I'm sorry, I've moved forward,' she said. 'He'd first found me, here, where I met you, in the dark airplane. It really felt, to me at least, like we were the only two people in the world that night.'

They had lent over to look through the porthole, their cheeks so close that their breath blended, fogging up the glass. He had mentioned his wife once during their first conversation, almost by accident, it seemed. By the time they met again in the cactus garden, it was something they had both chosen to forget.

'Was he wearing a wedding band? I can't remember, although how could I not have noticed? Funny, the one thing I can't picture *are* his hands. Maybe he'd taken it off. It is wise during air-travel, you know. The toes and fingers swell.'

I leant back against the escape slide. I thought about Alex's hand holding the door as he had allowed me to step inside. *I* can always recall a man's hand. The knuckles. Swift arrowed fingers. The skin it reveals. The caution it steals from me.

The pane shook in the turbulence of a small tropical storm. Something inside me felt loose. The kitchenette death-rattled behind us. My imagination swam back to her and Matthew. Morning had come too quickly for them. On the plane, breakfast had been served and they took their separate seats, twisting to exchange awkward glances, knowing that something tremulous had passed between them in the night. At the Heathrow baggage carousel, she avoided his gaze, knowing that they would never meet again.

‘And all the time I was thinking that outside the green exit gates was a wife waiting for him in the early morning, with food in their cupboards and a double bed – probably covered with an awful floral bedspread,’ she added. The truth had sunk in as she exited the airport to a diffuse rain. London’s lonely horizon.

Two days later, she’d stood on the deck of a ferry, her lips tasting of salt, her skin and hair thick with it. Her mind was heavy with his memory. Wanting so much to speak with him, she wrote Matthew a postcard.

For years, I have been apprehensive of the open confession of postcards, passing through the hands of strangers, without the possibility of retrieval. This is why I cannot write one. Even writing a letter paralyzes me after the obvious start of ‘Dear.’ I wondered what would have happened had Rachel posted her note. Perhaps, I began to contemplate, it was not yet even too late for the sending.

‘Why did you throw the postcard into the sea?’ I asked Rachel, when she’d finished her story, ‘Why didn’t you send it?’

She paused a moment.

‘Because I think I knew...I already knew the ending.’

Chapter 6

A real and irrevocable abyss [...] the feeling that her existence is disappearing from her.

Elisabeth Bronfen

Over Her Dead Body (107)

Outside of the airport, which wore the same fluorescent shroud as any other, the burst balloon of Tokyo took me by surprise. I was alarmed by the heavy traffic that groaned along the streets, the abrupt slap of a fermented smell that had hit me immediately. I couldn't quite pick it from my litany of naïve expectations. Fermenting fish flesh? Pickled plums? Human sweat? Perhaps it was simply the scent of my own gathering fear. The steep height of everything towered over my sleepless body.

On the walk from Shibuya Station to my hotel, I stalled in souvenir stores, remembering that I had promised to send a postcard back to Penne in Melbourne. I rifled through high-rise piles of photographic cards depicting predictable storms of cherry blossom, the red exclamation of a modern geisha's mouth, the Hie Shrine.

In reality, I was trying to find the card with the smallest space for writing, almost hoping that I would come across one with the wish-you-were-here greeting already printed. I was terrified of my lack of words for her. Since my mother died, the frivolous part of me had split away. When I caught up with Penne one afternoon shortly before I left, meeting for our traditional coffee on Acland Street, the distance between us had become unfeasible. I needed a telescope to make sense of anything she said.

I paid 300 Yen for a card charting the Native Birds of Tokyo and tucked it into my suitcase. I came across it months later in Melbourne when I moved in with Sam and finally unpacked. It was still blank.

I was surprised to find that there was none of the oppressive humidity of Thailand in Japan. I'm not sure why I had expected, even wanted, the same disfiguring heat as I had experienced with Steven in Koh Samui. Perhaps because I have learned, from an

early age, to transform the aftermath of abandonments into something strangely comforting; a pleasure both in the initial pain, and in the healing from them.

Tokyo was clear and cold: powder blue skies; the kind of cold that makes you thirsty. It pierced my skin like a needle, sensing something vulnerable beneath. At least, inside my standard single room at the Sakura Hotel, I was comforted by the same mini-bar and after-dinner mint selection as anywhere else. The bedspread, too: a standard nylon jacquard, slightly rough counterpane, as heavy as a tapestry. But I was too drowsy from listening to Rachel to let that bother me. I slid between the thin starched sheets, and spiraled down into a cavernous sleep.

It was dark when I woke. I had forgotten to eat and I was unsteady: my blood thin, desperate. I left the hotel and bought a tangy Nori roll from a curbside sushi bar, let Shibuya's late-night vibrancy drown me. Tipping my head back, warm breath ribboning from my mouth, I could only glimpse a crack of sky, grey, washed-out by dazzling lights. Edged by the angular corners of high-rise buildings, the vestigial sky was an ill-formed jigsaw piece that would never be placed.

A floodlit billboard caught my eye. It was an advanced form of advertising, exceeding the thrill of digi-dot and shimmering sequined words I was accustomed to, displaying instead video images and still frames which shifted every few seconds. The longer I stared, the less sense emerged from the repeated images overlaid by Kanji, made more bizarre by my ignorance of the language. In the first scene, a woman, staring out a window, read a letter forlornly. In the second, a man entered and the image dither-dissolved in a cloud of engorged pink hearts and rainbow handprints. In the third image man and woman embraced giddily in a wedding march. I watched it several times through. Who could say which order of images was true? Where did the story begin, where did it end? The third image might in fact have been the first. The second, then, a hopeless memory, coloured by grief. I watched it a fourth time, and walked on.

It was too late to make it back to the hotel by foot. I turned to search for the nearest subway entrance and saw a cruising cab instead. I slipped into the backseat, jet lag overwhelming me as we pulled away from the curb. There was an odd scent in the car,

something masculine - tanned leather, tar, cigars. Fatherly, soothing. When I looked up to give the middle-aged Japanese driver directions I noticed there was a man in the passenger seat. A sliver of reflection in the rearview mirror seemed to reveal Western features. A smudge or shadow below his lip, and across his throat. Another tourist probably. The cab was dim, the windows indigo-tinted. I leant forward to the driver and asked in a whisper if it was customary to take multiple passengers. He responded only with a quizzical shake of his head, followed by a blank stare, but I was too gratified to be out of the cold and the dark to ask him again. We were silent as we drove on to the Sakura. Strange, I thought later, that the driver knew my hotel when, distracted by the unexpected presence of a third person, I had failed to give him a destination. It wasn't until I'd paid and tipped him at the hotel that I looked back at the car and realized it had not been a taxi.

Sleep was an invasion that night. My body was as defenseless as a house whose alarm has been cut. In the welcome brightness of morning I called Ralph. His Australian accent was now reassuring, though previously its unexpected roughness had shocked me. How the oddest bonds form between expatriates in a foreign country! We arranged to meet that evening at the Ryuoo Diner in Asakusa. I wanted directions to my father's whereabouts and a rapid escape; I had already mapped out the quickest way.

I traveled by subway, too unnerved from the previous night to hail another taxi. I was several hours late for the notorious crush of Tokyo rush hour; my emptying train carriage shook and exhaled. I felt my body loosening again, solidity falling away as it had when I'd waited in Melbourne to board the plane, glimpsing the specter of Alex, the hourglass of a woman in his arms. At least here the streets and buildings held only strangers' faces.

Yet Ralph seemed somehow familiar. As I ascended the restaurant's seven-tiered steps, he raised one hand to his forehead in mock salute. If I had met him somewhere as a child, it was surely too long ago to remember his eyes, the way his figure etched a solid shadow on the landscape. I nodded and smiled bravely. Introductions were unnecessary. I caught a compartment of the rotating door and he followed me in, a little too close in

that space meant for one. He grew mountainous beside me. My breath formed a frosted circle on the glass panel and spiraled away as we were ushered to a table.

Ralph prodded a slippery round of quail egg from one side of his plate to the next, then speared it mercilessly, with his sharp red chopsticks. I had never seen anyone eat like Ralph. Each dish was a duel; a fight to the death. He grunted and swallowed, the bump of egg moving beneath his stubbled throat, engorging, for a moment, a cobra tattooed below his left ear. He was a little younger than my father would have been and I wondered how they had come to know each other. When I asked him what line of work he was in, he mumbled something about being self-employed and import-export. He had deep-set eyes that were likable. Big dark eyes, and high cheekbones tinged with a plummy blush that bloomed toward his mouth when he downed yet another glass of hot saké. A triangle of hairs beneath his lower lip bristled as he chewed. It reminded me of the crook angle on an ace of spades. The willow-etched saké glass seemed incongruous in his thick hands. He reached across the table and clinked it against mine. My glass was still full, ripples split the surface and some of it spilled.

‘Local Japanese custom darl,’ he said. ‘Once I touch my glass to yours it means you have to shoot it. So, come on now, don’t be rude.’

I tipped my glass and let the saké course through me. I felt my limbs softening.

‘So you know what happened to the money?’

Ralph’s curious question brought me back into the room. ‘The money...what money?’ I asked.

‘Later’, he said bluntly. Something chimed: his glass against mine. ‘Have another drink.’

I did. And I did.

I forgot my plan for a quick escape, all imperatives faded. I listened to him in a reverie as he told me of my father’s myriad of secret lives. The claims made; the bribes denied. Oral contracts and broken pacts. I was beginning to feel unsteady. My head swayed.

‘Where is he now?’ I asked Ralph. ‘You said you definitely knew. How can I find him?’

‘What do you mean, “Where is he?” ’ He looked at me incredulously, as if my ignorance offended him. ‘Your Dad’s long gone and you’re here to tell me how I’m going to get what he owed me. Sure, I know where he is. He’s in the Kurihama cemetery, for nine years now.’

I stared at him aghast, my eyes burning. ‘Did-you-kill-him? Did-you-kill-my-father?’ I asked. I sounded like a rattled talking doll whose batteries were fading. It is not a question one ever anticipates asking a stranger over dinner.

‘He knew we were after him, but claimed he couldn’t pay up. He topped himself.’ Ralph clicked his thumb and forefinger together. Snap. ‘I got a postcard saying “by the time you read this, I’ll be dead”, instead of a cheque.’ He paused for a minute, as if he were going to apologise, acknowledge the cruelty of his nonchalance. Then he chewed another mouthful of stringy boiled chicken and went on. ‘You didn’t get any kind of payout? No lump sums for you and Mum? Come on, Nina, you’ve put on a good show of not knowing anything, but I’m not going to let you get out of this so easy.’

Again he mistook my silence for insolence. I did not know what to say in that huge red room in which my father, too, had been snatched away. Sharp octagonal tables. Candlelit lanterns. I saw it all from above as if outside of my body – my untouched food, six emptied bottles of saké, my cup spreading a dark blot where I had dropped it on the imperial rug.

‘I got a note from him. I was fifteen. He said he was sorry. That’s all.’ I stood up and took my jacket and bag from the back of the chair. I motioned to leave, but my movements were unbearably slow. It was as if I were in one of those maddening dreams where urgent circumstances demand a crucial action, but one’s body obstinately refuses to move.

‘No, you don’t,’ he said. His voice was hard. I could tell he had not believed me. There was a rustle of cash as he stuffed a wad of notes under the edge of his emptied plate and walked out after me.

As I ran from the restaurant, my legs melting, I could feel through the paved steps, a terrible trembling as the last train sped home below.

‘God, the bitch’s drunk!’ I heard Ralph say behind me. He spoke in the third person, and to no one. There were just the two of us in the dark square beside Asakusa station. I could tell by his voice then that there was no hope. I disgusted him.

‘Come on.’ He put one arm across my breast, from shoulder to shoulder, I smelled the leather of his jacket, pushed up against my nose and around my neck. ‘I’m going to have to drive you home.’

I pushed his arm away and ran to the edge of the road, looking around for street signs. The signs were written in Kanji, just dazzling shapes to me, terrifying in their sudden meaninglessness. Two Geishas from a tourist show walked from the underground station exit on the opposite side of the road, strutting home late on the teetering blocks of their platform shoes. I wanted to call out in the remote hope that they might help me but I knew that, like the driver the night before, they would not understand. Together they disappeared down the dark street, a pair of wild exotic birds whose hostile habitat I had mistakenly wandered into.

Ralph had been watching me, smiling, as if my desperation amused him. He slung his arm about my shoulders again. His male smell lulled me. There was a tinge of something, perhaps a cologne, I knew from home. My last drink was still swelling in my blood, making fear lose its effect. He led me through the dark streets to a shiny black car, and I entered, as willingly as a blind girl might walk to the edge of a precipice.

He turned on to the freeway toward the Sakura hotel. He knew where to go. The lights from the other vehicles stretched like ribbons of blown glass as they sped past. He’d known all along that I would leave with him. He knew everything about me.

We were almost back at the hotel. I buried my head in the soft leather armrest of the passenger seat and tasted that same bite of stale cigar smoke I’d smelled in the car the night before. Looking at Ralph, I caught the reflection of his eyes in the rearview. The shadow on his throat of the cobra tattoo. No Japanese chauffeur to bear witness this time, just the grip of Ralph’s hands on my shoulders as I tumbled from the open car door. I hit the road to his last words: ‘I’ll wring it out of you tomorrow.’

Part II – Postcards from The Dead Sea

Chapter 1

The act of un-framing oneself, of stepping out of one's portrait, is a subversive and dangerous move for women.

Helena Michie

The Flesh Made Word (107)

I woke in a fog of pain as the cold Shibuya light sliced into my room through a thin shroud of hotel curtain. The chain of scrapes along my spine from where I'd landed on the footpath the previous night did not simply yield the irritating presence of gravel burn but seemed to spell out something closer to words. They felt like dark ink smudges, a typewriter's persistent tapping on my skin. The knowledge of my father's desperate suicide had settled in my heart. In my head was the dull throb of a spirit-induced hangover and the threat of Ralph's departing words. I rolled over in the narrow bed, crushing the hard foam pillow on either side of my face as I pulled the cheap sheet over my eyes. I curled into a fetal position, willing an invisibility that would not come. The bruises on my spine had bled into serrated shapes, the edges of a skeleton key Ralph had cut from me, which would lead him back in, I knew, too close, inside.

In that narrow bed I longed for Alex, his memory warming my body, building a comforting halo around me as the icy lake of sheets froze over my broken sleep. Not his memory exactly, but images painted in my mind by desire. Those hands of his: treacherous, precise as arrows, closing his door behind me. His gaze: a shadow creeping across the valleys of my body. Why could it not have been his arms after midnight, tight on trembling shoulders, slipping to my breasts beside the deserted platform? Why Ralph's and not Alex's fine fingers sliding across my collarbone, catching momentarily in my hair? His cool shirt-cuff grazing my lips, and then that hot exquisite sinking, so

close to fear, as his sure hands on my hips would have pulled me back in, finally against him.

The buzz of a bedside telephone snapped me back into consciousness. The number showed the extension of the hotel Reception. I let it ring as I rose and dressed quickly, pushing all my belongings, still so barely unpacked, back into my suitcase. A few moments later, a memo bearing the Sakura logo was pushed under the door informing me that two unnamed men had stopped by to see me. They had not left phone numbers. I didn't need them.

By noon, I had clambered unceremoniously onto the hotel shuttle bus and returned to the reassuring fluorescence of Narita International Airport, myriad splinters of pain dissipating through my body in a mixed wave of relief and over-the-counter analgesics. Though I had no itinerary, I was thrilled by the simple pleasure of being able to vanish into Departure's teeming anonymity. I stopped by a payphone to make the traditional call home, realizing, with the humming receiver to my ear, that I had no one to call. I was not expected back at work for a further three weeks, and even Penne had not known how long I was meant to be staying in Tokyo. I looked through my diary, too embarrassed not to call somebody. Recklessly, I flicked through the address pages and noticed the scrawled number I had penciled down the afternoon that Alex had called me. I realize now how misguided it was that I always sought him out in the moments I craved comfort most. As I dialed, I turned to smile at the other travelers in appreciation of their patience – not certain what I would say to him if he answered. I rehearsed a few lines in my mind while I breathed through the draining beep of the distant line: 'So, I went away.' Too abrupt. 'I just thought I'd call and say g'day'. Too informal. 'Well, after going all the way to Tokyo I found out my father's dead anyway.' No.

I realized that it was some guarantee from him that I craved, rather than his pity. In the end, 'Who was that woman at the airport with you?' was all I really ached to say. An older sounding receptionist answered with 'Good afternoon, Dr. Marik's paging service,' and without pausing to listen to me, 'What is your message?'

'Sorry. Wrong number,' I mumbled and hung up, walking away from the waiting line of impatient tourists. Later, back in Melbourne before moving into Sam's house, I

would take the smoldering tip of a rose incense stick to the page, burning out Alex's address, phone number and name in a fragrant chain of ashen perforations. It was only a symbolic attempt toward deletion, of course. Alex's name, street and number were already preserved inside me, indelibly.

Walking away from the payphone in Tokyo that day, with the dawning realization that there was nothing to return to at home, and the insidious prospect of Ralph alerting his Australian associates, I scanned the flight board for any destination that would take me farthest away from Australasia.

Brussels, Dublin, Hamburg, London, Geneva, Florence, Ottawa, Frankfurt. I recited the names, trying to decide, as if it were a child's elimination rhyme. Finally, my shaking gaze settled on New York.

I slept through the direct flight and alighted at midnight, taut and silent as a mannequin, at JFK International and climbed onto a bus headed for the hotels of downtown Manhattan.

When I awoke, I was dripping with the heat of a sudden summer. That first morning in New York, all I did was walk, allowing the hot air to envelope me. A grimy oppressive smog loomed over Central Park where groups of elderly Chinese practiced Tai Chi. I watched them, mesmerised by their slow motion after the speed of Tokyo. I sat beside a wavering fountain where delicate insects danced between droplets. I wondered how so many dragonflies had managed to survive the sullen heat.

Outside the gargoyled gates of the park, I sauntered down 7th Avenue to West Broadway and on into smouldering Harlem. The cat calls and piercing whistles from the Hispanic men on building sites were exhilaratingly real; the thick sharp scent of Jamaican food from steel bain maries was strangely comforting. There were abandoned milk-crate-seats on the coal-hot sidewalk outside an African hair-braid salon, and dusty shopfronts from which woven goods spilled on to the street. At least in that chaos I felt secure: I knew that I was nameless again.

The sticky footpath, melting in a cruel afternoon sun made me dizzy. I had never seen so many patches of baked chewing gum, the shrapnel of mouths, pock-marked tarmac. I walked toward a group of West Indian youths tossing a basketball outside a

high-rise housing estate. They didn't split to let me pass. Their eyes crowded in. I walked through them, one of them called out

'Hey, yo' smokin' miss!'

I turned back and met his gaze. With my auspicious escape from Tokyo complete, I was hot-wired on adrenalin, strangely unafraid.

The city washed up a continuum of foreboding signs to me, or perhaps not for me. But my body invited them in, took them to be. Unrelated observations became messages. On the outskirts of Central Park, I saw a young girl crouched behind a tree, stabbing at the back of her wrist: the hard veins of a junkie. A crippled man at the bad end of Broadway, one arm bandaged, was throwing tied-up plastic bags of what looked like old rags through the shattered windows of a dilapidated building. Two ambulances stalled outside my motel room by Grand Central Station, blue uniformed paramedics scattered across the block. Unrelated images, with unknown meanings. Yet each spoke to me of something, still in the distance. On the horizon. Creeping into frame. Each passerby, a painting.

I took a subway to Chinatown. At a restaurant on Canal Street, I snapped open the complimentary fortune cookies like wishbones, sliding the thin slips of paper into my wallet. Back at the hotel, I glued them on a piece of card to keep with me, in random order like a poorly translated script:

Fortune cookie says there is excitement to be found everywhere you go.

You will be rewarded for your patience and understanding.

You will soon bring joy to someone.

There is a way to everything you want.

Hidden, glued tight to the page, a sub note on the back of that slip read:

Learn Chinese: duo-shao qian. How Much?

How much is all right for me to want?

There was a photograph of Jean Rhys on the wall in the Manhattan café where I met Sal. The appropriateness of that image only became apparent later. The café was an artistic place – raw, organic, edgy – set below ground level with bluestone steps leading

down to a doorway like so many terraces on Bleecker Street. From my communal table at the low-set window, my horizon was a dirt-littered sidewalk.

Sal was another sign.

I had stepped in for a shot of coffee, and was swallowed by a love story.

If I'd dared to look close enough, I'd have seen the shadow of my future in her eyes.

She was wearing a leopard print headscarf, a funereal black silk dress, and a smile that quivered pleadingly. She was of an indefinable age, drifting somewhere between thirty and forty. Her skin was still smooth, but at the sides of her face, sad wrinkles were slithering in. She was waiting in the café for her lover, JC, whose initials were the acronym for an unexotic English name, 'John Christopher.' She was waiting hopelessly for someone who would never, who *could* never, return to her. I guessed later that she had made that claim to me because she hadn't wanted to seem so alone, or because it was her way of opening the door to her obsession. She spilled her story listlessly, as if I were her only hope.

JC was her religion. JC was gay, although six years earlier, he had claimed not to be, at which point they had shared a fleeting love affair from whose single coupling Sal had fallen pregnant. She had miscarried at nine weeks under the cool UV of stained toilets in a club, driving herself from the meatpacking district's gushing crowds to the purgatory of Metro Emergency. She'd returned home to her family in the morning, blaming a bad hangover for her pallor. She never told JC about the baby. She had never told anybody until she told me. She claimed that she found my foreignness emancipatory. Something in Sal unnerved me, I wanted to leave the café. I did not know which fragments of her story I could believe.

Three days after she miscarried, JC announced his homosexuality. He called Sal, crying with relief at the positive reaction of his family to the news, and she had cried for her definite loss of him. She had never quite recovered from that phone call, and from what she had seen in Times Square, six years later. She said she'd begun to notice that bad things really do come in multiples of three.

Did she sense my anxiety? At one point, she paused in the telling of her story to profess reassuringly that she was in fact being treated by a doctor, pulling out a crumpled

prescription from her pony-skin handbag as evidence. I feigned concern as my eyes skimmed over it. She'd been diagnosed with 'Hysteroid Dysphoria'. I had never heard of it before. Was it airborne? Locked inside her veins? Contagious? I passed the script back to her quickly, but she placed it on the coffee table, in the space between us.

Sal and JC had not seen each other again after that tearful phone conversation. Until that summer, he had refused to be found. She'd been idling in Times Square and stopped to watch some workmen on a scaffold assemble the separate sheets of a billboard overhead. As each portion of the picture was pieced together, a giant jigsaw on a high-rise frame, the image gradually revealed itself. It was a charity billboard asking for donations to find a cure for AIDS: a haunting photograph showed the hollow body of a dying man, his jaundiced skin spattered with aubergine ink-blots. He looked as if his flesh had already fallen from him. Something of the martyr in him held her gaze. His bones were gradually pushing up toward the light, insistently sculpting out their presence. The ice cream she was eating was melting from the cone in her hand as the final strips were pasted, completing the face with his eyes. It was JC's face.

I did not return to the café, though I glimpsed Sal again a few days later. I recognised her jagged figure as she walked along West Side Highway, smiling tightly, dressed as finely as before, but pausing oddly now and then to touch or gesture at something. I slipped into a gift shop and hid just inside the doorway behind a rotating rack of novelty postcards. As she came nearer, I could see that she was stopping to pick out morsels of food from the half-finished dishes abandoned on cafe tables set out along the street. I felt unbearably lonely, suddenly nauseated by the city. She licked a long manicured finger clean of something creamy and continued on. Someone came into the shop where I was concealing myself and the swinging glass door caught Sal's face in reflection as she passed. Her lips were thinner than I remembered, parched. Gums receding from amplified teeth. Her eyes were glazed, sinking into rings of shadowy skin, the dark purple of overripe figs. The door swung closed again.

Chapter 2

In the birth of desire, the third person is always present.

René Girard

Deceit, Desire and the Novel (21)

When I glimpsed Sal that day, from my hiding place, I knew that it was time to return to Australia. For a few peaceful days in each new location, I had been lulled by anonymity, even if something vague and fateful, was lying in wait for me at the edge of each city.

I caught a bus to Washington DC that night. The departure time – midnight – seemed less romantic to everyone but myself. Once I had alighted and found that my ticket led to a cramped corner seat adjacent to the lavatory, the ordeal was less romantic to me, too. Although it was the most economical route to an airport with direct Australian flights, the cramped bus smelled of deep fried food and unwashed clothes. I craned my neck in the darkness, trying not to breath, while I watched a soundless Jackie Chan movie on an archaic TV.

By dawn, my muscles were torpid; my mind emptied by the flat road. It wasn't until I had finished watching *Mr. Nice Guy* for the second time, and saw the opening credits begin again, that the bus pulled over at a gas station to refuel and we were freed for refreshments. White birds on the fluorescent store sign stood out against the still-dark sky. Inside, glazed donuts topped with whipped cream sat on a dusty tray. I thought of Sal's quivering hands, her long thin nails scraping sauce from abandoned plates, and felt a sensation that was not quite hunger in my stomach. It was more like the feeling I have had tonight while waiting for Alex. Closer to fear.

Inside the store were trucker caps with the appliquéd logos of *Smith and Wesson*, *Dunhill*, *South's Best Old Time Whisky*. I tried one on, alarmed at the sight of myself in the thin shard of mirror on the sunglasses rack. I barely recognized myself. It was as if my features had been left on my pillow at the Sakura Hotel. Behind me were racks of

curling postcards, stripped of colour by years of sunlight. *Roadside USA...Greetings from...As it Was...Welcome to...Wish you were here...In the Heart of...* When the cashier was busy, I slipped a card from the pile into the pocket of my jeans. All journeys require a souvenir, though sometimes we don't realize what we have chosen to carry home until later. Taking the card that day turned out to be unnecessary. It was someone else's story that stayed with me.

The others made their way back to the bus, but I remained, watching them through the dusty glass, sensing their sour breath, and their damp clothes crushed from heat and sleep. I thought of the subway in Tokyo, then of the different kind of claustrophobia that had kept me off Melbourne trains since my mother's death. The uneasy feeling in my stomach turned to nausea, and I rushed for the store lavatory. Inside, it was cool and bright and smelled of chlorine. I sat doubled over on the closed lid of the toilet until the clenching and unclenching in my guts had softened to the rhythm of an anemone. When I finally made my way out of the grocery, the bus was gone.

I had taken my suitcase with me to the store but had only five hours before my flight to Melbourne left from D.C.'s Dulles Airport. I sat on the low concrete step that cordoned off the row of gas tanks, not knowing what to do. The sky was a mottled shade of indigo. Almost tropical. I was reminded of the night in Thailand after Steven left me. The cold comfort of snack food and fluorescent lights. The lonely waiting for sunrise. A swirl of headlamps blinded me as a truck pulled into the gas station.

The airbrushed sign on the side of the truck read *PLT Porto Game Hoists*, and then, in smaller text below, *Your Gutting and Skinning Solution*. A thin woman leaped down from the driver's side and flicked open the gas funnel. She was wearing pastel yellow shorts with a pink floral design that made them look more like pyjamas, and a man's white Singlet that gaped under her arms, revealing her breasts. On her head was a hat like those I had seen inside, except that hers was emblazoned with the words *Deer Assassin*. The passenger seat was empty. As she bent down to lift the hose, I noticed that she was beautiful. She was older than me, but less than thirty, I guessed. There were cracks at the edges of her mouth. She set down the nozzle and walked over to me. There was something about her, even in the way that she walked, which made me feel a kind of

sadness, as if a fragile item had been carelessly stored. Close up, I saw that the dark lines at the corners of her lips were dried blood. She smiled quizzically at me. ‘Hey, girl, you all right?’

So for the second time in as many weeks, I found myself in the passenger seat of a stranger’s vehicle. Though Kerrie, as she was called, had not needed to employ the force that Ralph had. She simply advised me that hitching a ride was my only option if I wanted to make my flight. We were already on the road to D.C. before I looked into the hollow between the drivers’ seat and mine and saw nestled there, leather gloves, a coil of rope and a roll of silver duct tape. She heard the hiss of air as I caught my breath.

‘Don’t worry’, she said, shaking her head with a smile. ‘It’s not my truck. When I found them in the glove box, I was surprised too. Actually, not too surprised.’ She laughed, too loudly for the tight space, and turned on the radio. I was shaking, and pleased that the music would make it less necessary to speak. I wondered if she’d wanted me to ask whose items they were but I was still sick from the claustrophobia of the coach. I did not want another story. Stevie Nicks’ *Dreams* was playing and Kerrie was singing along, a little off-key. ‘What you ha-ad, and what you lost...oh, what you lost.’ My eyes were half-closed but I was afraid of sleep. It felt as if my lids were on fire when opened them to find a pencil and sketchpad in my bag. I wanted to capture fragments of the passing landscape in an attempt to stay alert, but I was quickly losing any sense of the road, of borders, of the edges of things. The trees seemed to be shifting; following us. In the rear-view mirror, the headlamps of passing cars turned into hunting lights, eyes.

I woke with a start to hot sunshine, distressed that I had slept. There was a saccharine alcoholic scent to the air like ether and rotting fruit. Not more than an hour could have passed, but it was daylight and we seemed to be driving through wooded paths rather than the tar ribbons of the interstate. A road-sign, blurred with speed, read *Deep Water Highway*. A road that I have travelled on, unofficially now, for some time.

‘It’s a back route,’ Kerrie said, seeing me search my surroundings. ‘It’ll get us there faster. Trust me’.

I didn’t.

She took a swig from a long-necked bottle of watermelon-flavoured Bacardi. I'd seen it for sale in the truck stop; strawberry, peach and cherry, too. We drove on in silence. As the road slimmed to a tight bend, warm air rushed at my face and lifted my skirt. I coughed in the dusty heat, thirsty from sleep. Kerrie placed the bottle in my hand and I drank. The heat of the new morning and the burn of the rum seemed to weaken the wariness with which I had first regarded her. Eventually we began to speak.

She was leaving Virginia with no real destination. I'd evaded the finer details of my itinerary, so I froze when she asked 'What happened with your man? Why did you decide to come here? Where did you say you were from? Before the States?' She took the bottle back from me and sank another draught as I swallowed my last mouthful of the warm alcohol.

'Tokyo', I said. I had briefly listed the cities I had visited, but did not recall mentioning Ralph, or my reason for visiting Japan. 'Who do you mean by *my man*?' I added, hoping that I hadn't murmured Alex's name in my sleep.

'There's always a man somewhere at the start of the things isn't there? When we end up on our own, middle of nowhere.' Like Rachel during my flight to Tokyo, Kerrie was presuming correctly, disturbingly reading the past and future buried in me. I held the lip of the bottle to my mouth and stared out the window. 'In most cases anyway, we're running away. In my case I almost left it too late.'

The night she met Davey she'd gone to a Virginia Beach bar alone. One with pool tables and a sunken dance floor. It was wintertime, she told me, when the whole Tidewater district shuts down like a ghost town, aside from the Marine base. 'I was dancing to 80's music with some drunk sailors. I can't remember what it was now. Cindy Lauper, probably.' She laughed again, softer this time. She'd felt someone come up behind her and then a man's hand moving the hair from where it was caught on the lashes of one eye. Then she'd felt his mouth on her shoulder. When she turned to see him, he'd raised his chin and slid one hand down her arm. 'Like this', she said, bringing her hand from the gear stick and tracing with her nails, the bare underside of my upper arm. Her skin was still burning from the trail of stubble his lips had left behind, and so she'd looked into his eyes and said, simply, 'Alright'.' Even as she spoke it then, I heard it, as it

would've sounded that night: taken, resigned. Her hand remained on mine. Soft, girl hands, both of ours. Uncomfortably alike.

They'd walked from the bar to the caravan park by the beach where he lived. She'd stayed the night, and then a few more. Two days before Kerrie and I met, Davey's friend Pete had arrived home from Madison where he drove trucks. She disliked him immediately. His body was bound with a lean muscle that made her afraid. His gaze, too, was unsettling. Eyes squinted from too many nights staring into the wreath-littered roads between Wisconsin and Arizona. 'He said he had 'white line fever', but that wasn't it. I could tell he was on trucker pills. When he walked past me to the trailer, I heard him ask Davey, "Who's the bitch?"' Kerrie spat out the word with the sugary dregs of the drink. Some drops fell on my hand and I wanted to move it away.

A leaden silence had settled in the cabin that night. At one point, she had noticed Pete nod toward her thigh through the split in her skirt, and elbow one of his arms into Davey's side. 'It was like they were starting to speak a different language', she said. One that had flourished between them and other men since they were boys. I'd seen it too, in Steven, in Ralph, and I knew how it excluded women. 'Pete walked over to the mattress where I was and sat next to me on its edge. Davey was lying on the floor. His eyes were open, but he wasn't fully conscious. They'd shared six crushed pills of speed by then, and probably eight bottles of beer each. It was only the higher ratio of alcohol to drugs in their veins that saved me.' Perhaps it was there in Alex too, I thought for a moment, before turning to the window.

Through the glass, young trees streaked past; a fast shudder of trunks, taut as blades of grass: green and sharp. I wished that Alex could've been beside me in the driver's seat instead of Kerrie. Just he and me, so he could've pulled over, somewhere off the map. I'd have tossed aside my shoes, and walked with him, barefoot on unused paths, and his arm would have fallen from my shoulder to my breast. I could almost smell the crushed scent of privet, feel the cool trail of cufflinks through my blouse, and then our bodies tangled in unruly grass. At a curve in the road, Kerrie swerved, shaking me from my dream. Both her hands went to the wheel, and I was able to move mine away. I have been learning something about boundaries, lessons that began that day: that we are most insistent about

them when we sense their precariousness. That whatever else it is, love is always in some way about loss, loss of boundaries. Boundaries sometimes violated.

Kerrie warned me never to ignore the smallest sign. She said she'd noticed a tendon in Pete's thigh twitch below the pale hairs of his leg when he sat beside her on the bed. Then his sharp breath was on her neck as he pushed four knuckles of his fist into her mouth, forcing her lips apart. His nails scraped her tongue and she gagged on the taste of rust; saliva mixed with blood. His other hand, covering her eyes, came down across her neck and tore at her dress before he shoved it between her legs. 'Not once did Davey come to help me. I even thought I saw him nod his head a few times, like he was urging on, until Pete pulled his fingers from my throat and slammed me back against the bed head.' She remembered seeing a raccoon caught in a trap at the side of the road once, its body twisted, still kicking with its back feet at the steel that clamped its front paw. That is how she fought. Kicking was useless against him, until, his drug-induced frenzy began to fade. 'I rolled him onto the floor beside Davey. I pulled the bedspread over my head and forced myself to sleep,' she said plainly, not noticing how my hand had leapt up to cover my mouth.

In the dark of early morning, their voices woke her. She rolled over to the cold side of the bed where all those nights Davey had held her, while she'd whispered *iloveyouiloveyouiloveyou* beneath her breath. 'They thought I was asleep,' she said, 'but I heard them. Davey suggested weighing me down and dropping me off the pier, then Pete laughed and said, "More fun from, a moving car," as he made a screeching sound like wheels racing, and a body being dragged.' She mimicked the sound of squealing tires. 'Then he said "we'll push her out at 75, just like that."' They'd laughed, and she'd known that they weren't joking.

She paused and looked searchingly in the rear-view mirror as if someone was following us. 'It was hearing Davey's laughter that shocked me more than anything else.' The road behind us rippled away in hot empty waves. 'The one person I wanted to love me, happy to be done with me.' When Davey and Pete fell back into sleep, she crept from the bed and slipped outside, not knowing what to do or where to go. I knew then how she had recognised the distress in my eyes when she found me. 'I lit a Salem as I walked

between the trailers, just trying to think clearly. A rustling close by made me jump, but it was just a squirrel digging for scraps.’ Then the trees were lit with a spray of white light. A hot trail of flame from her dropped cigarette snaked through the dry grass as it hit the gas-soaked earth where a faulty fuel tank had been leaking for months. ‘I started to run. The explosion shot the roof of the van into the sky,’ Kerrie said, lighting up beside me, the small flame a reminder of that night. We passed a sign bearing directions to the White House. She’d been right about the short cut. It had only been three hours. ‘Then I saw that Pete had left his keys in the ignition of the truck.’

“Why did you go to sleep? Why didn’t you just leave?” I asked, regaining my breath. I was afraid again. That she had not fled once Pete had slipped into unconsciousness seemed the most disturbing admission in her whole story.

‘It doesn’t make sense to you now, but maybe some day. The answer’s more simple than you’d believe: I had no car, and nowhere to go. I was scared. It was the middle of the night. It was all of those things, but really I didn’t leave because I still loved the person I had thought Davey was. That he didn’t care in any way was something I didn’t want to accept.’ She turned to me. I was beginning to understand, not wanting to believe. ‘I don’t mind if you forget everything I’m telling you’, she said, ‘but don’t ever make the same mistake as me.’

I thought of Kerrie lying there, wanting to believe that somewhere sober, far away from what had been, his hands still cupped a flame of tenderness for her. I shook my head as if still unconvinced, but I was faking. I did understand, though perhaps not as fully as I do now, how the recognition that a hope is misguided does not in most cases make it fade, at least not instantly – and love, even if one-sided, has made some of the worst atrocities seem okay.

I know that it was in some way Kerrie’s unheeded warnings that have led me to where I am today, poised at the opening of this door, recalling the transit of my own story.

Chapter 3

At first simply pleased and happy, as always, to be a vaguely defined woman in the arms of a man.

Marguerite Duras

The Ravishing of Lol Stein (113)

Three months later in Melbourne, I recalled Sal's stunned recognition of JC. I was packing the contents of my one-bedroom apartment into cardboard boxes, wrapping each delicate stem of a set of champagne flutes with the crushed sheets of the previous week's newspapers. I noticed a mug shot in a column of 'News In Brief', a minor item on the re-arrest of a long-term escapee. The face in the photo froze me. A glass slipped from my hand and scattered in broken shards across the tiled floor. It was a face I knew, but could not place: eyes from a memory, a dream, perhaps lips I had once kissed. It was only after reading the caption that I realized it was the photograph of a young Ralph. He'd killed a man in the 80's – I'd sensed somehow when we had met that his eyes had seen death. Beside the photo, a news item revealed the results of an experiment in which scientists had found that laboratory animals reached the steepest peak of excitement when 'the advance equaled the abiance.' In other words, when the promise of pleasurable reward and the threat of electrocution were most finely balanced. I looked again at Ralph's photo for a long moment – the terror I had felt in Tokyo was transfused with a strange sense of longing.

I have begun to notice something about myself: I have a troubled relationship with morality. It is an observation I've made only recently, these revelations always coming a bit too late. It's not that I cannot separate right from wrong, but forgiveness and desire too easily colour my perceptions of people. Men, in particular. Since I was a child, watching late-night black-and-white movies with my weeping mother, I have known I

could fall for a merciless outlaw if his face possessed that superior combination of reticence and cruelty.

The year my father left, but before I knew that he was gone forever, it had been relentlessly hot. 1983, the year that began with natural disaster. It was the summer of the Ash Wednesday bushfires when flames licked the edges of the city. The air was difficult to breathe: floating fragments of burnt bone and gum leaf. Smoke drifted through Melbourne's streets. I remember my mother walking beside me. We were walking home from the supermarket. I held onto the edges of her skirt. Why she was not holding my hand, I don't know. Perhaps her arms were full of groceries. In Hessian bags. I think - I remember the rough smell of the cloth. A stranger walked toward us. I was tiny; her knees my horizon, I could hardly see his face. He passed a little too close to my mother. She slowed. He did, too. They almost met, but continued on as quick looks back were exchanged. Something passed between them, I know. It had a volume that was inaudible, but dangerous. Like electricity – silent, invisible, sometimes fatal. I sensed it. When we reached our front gate, he was there. I'd seen the car drive alongside us, a few minutes after he'd walked past. I'd heard the ignition start, the door slam. My mother hadn't seemed to notice any of this until he called out to her. Words I didn't recognize. My mother asked me to go inside. I watched from the doorway as she walked over to him, cautiously, leaning through his half-cracked window. As they spoke, he held out his hand to her. A vast hand, it seemed to me. Something passed between them. I recall a flash of green. My mother took out her keys and turned toward where I waited on the bluestone steps. He circled the curb in a slow U-turn and left. Inside, in the cool darkness, my mother was breathless. We unpacked dusty plums, crushed quarters of watermelon. The juice of something had got into her hair. The distant scent of flames made me scared.

I thought of that summer of fires one winter afternoon, stalled between lanes in the metallic crush of Punt Road. The road was smoky with exhaust fumes. Weak sunlight was amplified into uncomfortable waves of warmth by the windscreen, and the insistent ticking of the indicator was agitating me. On the street, I saw the platform which had

displayed my error-riddled coffee billboard, the vector image with that misplaced apostrophe above the eye of the male figure. It had remained a blank white space for a long time after the billboard was taken down, and a place I had deliberately avoided looking. Every time I'd glanced at it, I had seen Alex's sullen gaze. Since I had been overseas, it had been replaced, with an advertisement for Epworth Chiropractic Services: hands in teal green gloves spread across airbrushed skin. In the hot car, I felt my shallow breath quicken. I rested my arm against the window, shielding the billboard from my eyes. The impression of my fingers on the steamed-up glass had left a hand-shaped porthole through which it was still visible. The traffic lights changed, but the memory of Alex's face was back in my mind.

When I arrived home that day, I called him. I was tantalized with the knowledge of his full name: Alex Marik. The abrupt brevity, the commanding arrogance of it. Did I test out my first name with his last, joining them like a besotted schoolgirl? Yes. If I'd been alert enough to subtract just one letter, I'd have seen that his last became an impression, one either deliberately or accidentally left, rendering a surface irrevocably different from the rest. A mark. No greater truth about him could be said.

A woman answered his phone; a secretary, I hoped. I announced that I was a patient calling to discuss some confidential examination results, and could only speak directly with Alex. She transferred the call immediately. I was surprised that he remembered me; seemed to be expecting me. I told him that I was calling to apologise for the previous time we had spoken; when I had slipped into the conversation my mother's death. I told him that I had wanted to call sooner, but had been traveling for six weeks, and had left Melbourne quickly, trying to find a plausible reason for calling, when really there was none. He didn't seem to understand my need for an excuse. He said he'd briefly been out of Melbourne, too, for a symposium on muscular paralysis. The momentary glimpse of him at the airport came back to me, constricting my throat.

'I was wondering if I'd hear from you', he said, 'I had a dream about you.'

I wondered if it was a line he had said to women thousands of times. Something in his voice was too unfeeling, and too smooth. I gasped anyway. 'Really?' my voice was thinner and quieter than I wanted it to be. 'Where was I? What was I doing?'

‘You know, I think it was that first night when you accidentally showed up at my house, except it was also like the second time because you were wearing that dress and it was soaking wet. I had to ask you inside to get dry.’

There was nothing different in what he described than what had occurred in real life. I felt my heart sink, wanting to resist the suspicion that his ‘dream’ was just a seductive lie.

‘And then...? *Did* I come inside?’ I wanted to tease the truth from him.

‘You sound short of breath, Nina. You need to inhale more deeply,’ he said, ‘take your free hand, the one that’s not on the receiver, undo the clasp of your bra’. He paused. I unhooked the clasp. ‘Now put the pressure of three fingertips at the joining of your ribs, right there between your breasts, then with your whole hand push down, draw a line along your stomach, circle your navel, flat palm on your diaphragm, moving from hip bone to hip bone, side-to-side.’

I did all this. The air in my lungs grew even less present. Then his words turned businesslike, almost disdainful, as he told me sternly that someone was waiting outside the door to see him and hung up. I stood for a moment or two, relearning breath. A dead receiver in one hand, the other slipping away from three blossoming pink pressure marks between my breasts.

All night, I was unsteady with desire. Sam has never understood that there is nothing particularly appealing or unique about him: the week we met I was paused at a precipice. The advance equaled the abstinence. I would have followed any man who glanced at me.

When I first met Sam, his left arm was in a cast. Is there something of the predator in me, too? Injuries in men have always held a certain allure, more so when accompanied by a heroic tale. But Sam had simply fallen off his bike. A pushbike, stacked on an urban road. No one had stopped to help.

The cool white plaster of the cast caught my attention and enticed me, at least temporarily. More solid than flesh, but unnervingly blank, too. I had yet to learn that in my story, injuries have most often been this: occasions of casual damage that have propelled me incidentally from isolation to temporary sanctuary.

Sam is the kind of man described by all who meet him as ‘nice.’ I met him on the platform at Hawksburn station. We were both waiting for a train that never came. A sudden electrical dysfunction had caused services to be suspended on that line. Sam, it turned out, was an electrician and took pride in dazzling me with a myriad of plausible explanations, but the following morning’s papers confirmed the whispers I had strained not to overhear. There had been a death. I was haunted by the story, and the brief news item sketched a gruesome procession of images in my head. The woman’s face had been sliced from her skull by the cold steel wheels; a mask left on the train tracks.

It was no accident. A note on a greeting card had been slipped into a bunch of flowers delivered to her former lover that afternoon. Perhaps these were the only details ever released. Perhaps not even these. Had they fought over an email or message left for him by another woman? Did I imagine, too, that he’d arrived home late, remorsefully, not knowing why his own train had been delayed, eager to see her and repair their relationship? On his porch, the roses in the bouquet had wilted. He picked them up, crushing them to his chest as he unlocked the door. Roses were not mentioned in the news report, but I am sure there were roses.

The details don’t matter anyway. It was how they entered me.

I absorbed that story. I felt it in my body. Unwillingly, like stigmata. It was the intoxicating combination of everything, of my conversation with Alex, of my sudden encounters with death. For days, my face ached. But I was overtaken, at that time, with an impulse to rush in the opposite direction: headlong into to that soothing clasp of some stranger’s arms. I had read somewhere that funerals are ranked worldwide in the top five meeting places for couples and I was beginning to understand why.

Chapter 4

All love becomes vulnerability, the doorway to cruelty, the stairway to contempt.

Kate Millett

Sita (22)

When my flight from DC landed back in Melbourne, I descended into a new awareness: I had no one left. With my mother gone, and then my father gone, I was fearful of falling into something of Sal's isolated fate.

I succumbed to the belief that to be loved, even by someone who I did not love completely, would preserve my uneasy sanity, ensure I remained somehow alive. This has not necessarily proven to be true: it was after I moved in with Sam that four insistent voices took up tenancy in my mind.

It would be untrue to say that I have not loved Sam occasionally. He is attractive, in a gentle unintriguing way. His kiss is dependable; his gaze earnest and amenable. But he likes to think he has saved me from my former relationships. He hugged me reassuringly close when I told him about my abandonment by Steven in Thailand. Too close, when I told him about Alex, when he did not know how artfully I was lying to make that present more distant – when he was inside me and I, tipping my head back toward the ceiling and clenching my eyes, was bringing Alex's face to my mind.

Is Sam too obliviously taken with me to sense my contempt? How defiantly I began to realize that I had not *wanted* to be rescued.

Back at work, people treated me carefully, as if I were a delicate heirloom that might shatter into fine dust with one sudden move. They no longer asked for my contribution in meetings, instead they observed me curiously. When I caught them staring, they smiled disingenuously. Their caution was correct, but I was a buried landmine. Alex had planted a restless want in me that Sam only partially satisfied. I tried

to focus on the billboard projects that I was assigned to design, but the stricken faces of other women intruded persistently. Rachel, Sal, Kerrie and that woman who had leapt in front of my train. Why was it that these women's four stories, fleetingly encountered, whispered so incessantly from the peripheries of my blank page? I heard echoes of their voices, but as I could not put them down in words, I began to draw. Their haunting stories were better told in paint, for each in their own way, it seemed to me, had found the words for expressing their love long after it could be returned or saved. The paintings became four immense panels. The things that should have been said. The postcards that should have been sent. The necessity of a fifth, my own, was only a murmur in the distance then.

I moved in with Sam after we had been dating for one month, filling his modest weatherboard cottage in Windsor with half-finished canvasses. The women in these images became more my companions than he, for they and I had a shared understanding which was gradually becoming apparent. For the weeks I was painting, I barely spoke to him, but he remained almost infuriatingly unfazed by my distraction. He seemed grateful just to have me. Did this in some way devalue Sam for me? Lead me deviously astray? I have always needed to sense a certain precariousness about my desirability.

As I was unpacking my suitcase, still untouched since Japan, the blank 'Native Birds of Tokyo' postcard I had intended for Penne floated out and fell to the ground. I was reminded of that summer in Israel when the first young man I loved had died and my grandfather threw stones into the sky. I didn't understand why. Then a single drop of blood fell to the cobbled path followed by the flurried thud of a stunned bird. His aim had been perfect. He had the kind of gaze some men possess. Drawing all prey into his orbit.

Watching the postcard where it lay, I wondered if it was due to my father's final three-line note to me, that I've never been a letter writer. That day in Tokyo was the first time I had been unable even to stammer out a few lines to fill the blank square on the back of a card. Usually I have found the picture on a postcard to be a liberator of words. I am able to express myself more easily in a small space beside an image than on a

completely bare page. Postcards, those transitory pieces, are more like billboards than the folded intimacy of letters. I picked up the card and sat a long while with a poised pencil, making faint track marks on its whiteness as I strained to imagine what might have been said. I stared at the image, at the birds' dappled feathers, their claws, their long, fine legs.

Since my return, I'd left my apartment and changed my number. Though I told myself this was due to the fear that Ralph's cohorts may be seeking me, I knew that it was from my friends and former flames that I was fleeing. In the end I did not report my return to Penne. I folded the thin postcard into a paper plane and let it sail from the balcony of our bedroom where it fell through the magnolia's bare branches and settled in the long grass beside the front door. I enjoyed the knowledge that my existence back in Melbourne was completely anonymous; that I was able to vanish if I chose.

I forgot about the postcard until Sam arrived home that afternoon, soggy airplane in his hand.

'So, I can see you've been hard at work today,' he said, holding it up to me, teasingly. He smiled. He has never been unkind to me, even when he should have been.

'I tried,' I said, and was silent.

Melbourne was creeping into Spring, a light rain had steamed away the first warm evening. The hot mulching scent recalled the night of Alex's and my accidental meeting. Sam could see that I was about to cry, he did not know why.

The postcard fell from his hand as he took me in his arms. As always after our first kiss, he faded away as someone else took his place. Did he see it too? Something came into the room. A dark shape from a dream. Or memory. Perhaps a figure, Alex, Ralph; one of those who have haunted me. A man's hands opened the buttons of my bodice, and clenched, tight as clam-shells, over my breasts. I held them there until I burned. It is sometimes then that I think of my mother's autopsy. Of the hinged anatomical bust in Alex's lounge room, too; its torn open chest. *Undetected complications*, they had said of her death, the brief conclusion that might be applied to a posthumous assessment of what has killed the love between Sam and I. Complications in me, undetected by him. My dress slid across my hips and settled on the floor, concealing the postcard. I felt his

quickenning breath, his lips momentarily nesting at my collarbone, tracing the live bare incline of my neck. Something sounded outside the room; a bird-call or a siren. And the memory fled. His hands and lips were Sam's again. I felt nauseous, dizzy. Not in the giddy way I had at Alex's house, anticipatory, but a sickening reproach. I pulled on my dress and stumbled into the bathroom, pulling the door shut. I lay down on the cool tiles. From the other side of the door I could hear Sam calling me, probably still wearing his broad, slightly confused grin.

'Nina, what's wrong, lovely?'

I reached up with one hand and turned the lock. I knew for certain he would forgive me.

Chapter 5

A sharp observation, a sober assessment: you are in a trade-off situation. Desire and love are either/or.

Zygmunt Bauman

Liquid Love (11)

From the bathroom window that night I could see the edge of Sam's work van parked tight against the curb, lit by a streetlight. Our front gate obscured half of the airbrushed insignia, so instead of the letters reading *Sam Evans Electricity*, only 'Sam' and then the 'E' were visible. It was another moment of recognition. Sam/e: in adding these together I recognised the monotony of what I had surrendered to. Every day with him was the same. All elements of chance were tunneling away.

Until I heard the whining sigh of Sam's van as he drove away, as he did at exactly 6:40am every day, I stayed frozen on the cool tiles, resting my head on my rolled up dress. When the whirl of the van faded entirely, and the house became silent, I left the bathroom. I was pleased at having to attend a morning of meetings. It was a welcome temporary escape.

I caught a train to the office. I had not taken a train in Melbourne since I learned of my mother's death in that shuddering carriage. Although I had attempted to take a train the day I met Sam, that woman's leap onto the tracks had interrupted my intention. If a pattern could be observed, linking trains to unfortunate events, it did not become apparent to me until the end of this day. But I noticed other things: at a station as we passed, a derelict man, tipped the thick dregs of an abandoned McDonalds milkshake, clotted by the heat of the rubbish bin, into his crusted mouth. The missing finger of the inspector who checked my ticket. Dappled bruises on the face of a baby, resting beside a crumpled can of rum and Coke in its vacant mother's arms. These things should have passed from my mind after a few moments, but they stayed there: anchorless dread.

I arrived at work unusually early to the curious nodded greetings of my colleagues that had lately replaced their former attempts at over-zealous cheer. Only one person spoke to me. As I walked toward the cool light of the boardroom, Susan, my Accounts Supervisor caught me by the elbow and took me firmly aside.

‘Big night last night, Nina?’ she asked.

Puzzled, I stared back at her and shook my head.

‘Well, I don’t care if you’re telling the truth or not, but we can’t have you going into a meeting like that.’ She spread a long disconcerting look from my head to feet.

I followed Susan’s gaze along my legs and saw, below my crumpled hem, the pale gashes of bared skin where overnight my stockings had torn. My shoes, I noticed with a shock, were the scuffed fabric sandals I only wore at home – I had forgotten to change them, too. I lifted my hand like someone blinded, scanning fingers across my face to my hair, flattened from resting my head on the tiles all night. My fingernails came away caked with the mud of sleep-smudged make-up.

I was placed in an office at the end of the corridor to work on my projects independently for the rest of the day – a frosted glass bubble in which I sat, uncertain as to whether it was I, or the rest of the staff, who felt safer when I was out of their sight. At 5pm, the Chief Executive Officer, Charles Longmire, entered, silent as a warden, and led me to his mezzanine office. Longmire had always repulsed me, but never so much as that day. There is something unnerving about a man over fifty who insists on wearing a waistcoat and bow tie. His assistant left the moment he entered, turning her body sideways as she did, scuttling out crablike so as not to show him her back. On the table, she’d arranged a dish of the praline chocolates in gold wrappers from Germany and the mini bottles of Evian water he preferred. Glass bottles only. I wondered if he enjoyed the knowledge that there was something in the room he could break.

His paunch, barely contained in his three-piece suit, trembled slightly at the edge of his desk as he began to speak with the abrupt brevity of his South African accent. As he leant forward, the veins in his face strained, the broken blood vessels in his nose pulsed close to mine.

‘I suppose you know why you’re here, Nina. We’re worried about you –’, he started. ‘We know it is a tough few months you’ve been going through and, if you need

to talk to anyone...’ His sentence trailed off as he eyed the disheveled bodice of my dress where three buttons were hanging loose. He plunged one pudgy hand into the dish of tiny chocolates and offered one to me. I refused it. He tore the wrapper and engulfed it with blue-tinged lips.

‘You’re a strikingly pretty girl, Nina,’ he said, chewing thickly. ‘Very valuable for the company, too, you understand. You can help secure a lot of accounts for us, but you need to keep it all together. Not like today.’

‘I know, I’m sorry –’ I started, but he did not want to listen to an explanation from me. He raised his hand in a practiced gesture, as if to silence or to strike me.

‘Not that seeing a bit of skin would normally make me complain’, he continued. ‘This morning if it wasn’t in the work place, you know what I would’ve liked to say; ‘is that a ladder in your stocking or a stairway to...’ his faint chuckle transformed into a wheezy guffaw.

As I raised myself from the chair to leave the room, he moved around to my side of his desk, bending as if to pass me my handbag and folders – and clasped my leg. As I turned, my ankle twisted and I fell to the ground before him, the top of my head striking the locked door. Time slowed to stilted freeze frames. For a split second; darkness. And then I was awake again.

‘All right now, off you go –’ he said as he dragged me to my feet. My legs felt like stilts, I was an actor propped on top of them. His thick fingers lingered uncomfortably on my hips, digging into them. Through my dress, I felt the damp span of his hands. ‘Home to wash up and get changed now, Nina, or I won’t have you in this building again.’

I never returned after that day. The escape had proved to be no escape at all. Sam’s house and his unwavering support seemed the less baleful of my two options. At home every day, watching the frostbitten earth crack into green under the hand of spring, the postcard paintings became my get-away.

Chapter 6

The painting enacts a crucial moment of hesitation.

Elisabeth Bronfen

Over Her Dead Body (4)

I remember crushed pine needles, brittle from the heat. The sharp scent of their decay in late summer. Hands, not my own, are cupped over my eyes. I remember the sound of legs peeling from wooden benches. The thud of a pallbearer's shoes beneath the weight of a casket. Then a cry. A split and slide as a mother beats her forehead against stone columns in a parched yard. It's someone else's mother, not mine, but it is my father's hand that covers my eyes. It is the burial of the young man who died at Ein Gedi. He who left his mother behind, alive. I push and push at my father's hands, wanting to see his body one last time. As my father swings me from his hip to the ground, I catch a glimpse of the dead face. He has turned to white porcelain, cracked by the jagged scar of a fresh wound above his brow. A thin rivulet of blood trickles from his nose to his mouth. First this memory comes to me. Then another.

It is my own mother who leads me through Melbourne's streets, evening reaching for our heels. This repeats and repeats. Always we pause at a tall wooden fence; an ivy covered gate crowned with the amber glow of smashed stubby spikes, too high for me to see over. I am eight, unafraid, my mind full of *The Secret Garden*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Rapunzel*: undying love, eternal life, miraculous escapes. I can see my mother's fingerprint on the shimmering doorbell. No response at the intercom. We would wait awhile, her hand clutching mine in the darkening street. Then her hand would let go of mine and dip into the folds of pockets, bags, coats. Her hand, luminous with the flash of silver rings, would flick something through a dark space gouged into the gate. The memory of the thing itself falls away. An envelope, a bank note? Sometimes it is a paper crane. I am not certain if she took me to this place or if I am stranded on a false loop of memory. *Habent Sua Fata Fabulae* is the Latin phrase I once read somewhere. Tales,

stories, have their own fate, because always they are disseminated, misremembered, wrongly translated.

These two memories came to me, unasked, in a bookstore. I was in the children's section, flicking through an illustrated edition of Perrault's *Bluebeard* when everything went dark. I had been hoping to find some inspiration to complete a portfolio of illustrations. In the absence of a workplace, I was attempting to find new graphic markets in which I could freelance.

The blackness might have been my mind's response to seeing Alex's name. It was not the first time that day. I had been waiting at traffic lights on the corner of Lonsdale Street in a sticky sputter of spring rain when a bus passing too close to the curb sprayed my legs with a dark splash of gutter grime. Wiping them dry with the hem of my dress, I looked up to see the bus departing. It was the coach of a company called Marik's Tours. As the bus's piercing taillights disappeared into the rainy street, I gasped, feeling as if the bus had actually hit some part of me. My wet dress clung to my body; silty streaks of damp striated my thighs. I was reminded again of that night when Alex had asked me inside. I stepped into a bookshop for warmth, creeping between the close shelves. Rows of books towered around me. I caressed their spines with my fingertips; the rough cloth of hard covers, the smooth soft sheen of paper. The store was crowded; throngs of people waiting out the rainy lunch hour. The ladders, precariously propped, the height of the shelves, the rows of book spines, and all the words, began to unnerve me. Which is why I found myself in the children's section. A colourful solace of sleeping princesses and comic book deaths. The illustrations in a new edition of *Bluebeard* captured my attention. The way a wife had been drawn, poised at her master's forbidden door. In her hand, a tiny key with its sinister legacy. A mark of blood indelibly left on it. I flicked to the front of the book where the illustrator was credited and saw that his name was Alex. His last name, something Russian, started with a 'P'. 'Alex' was all I managed to read before the darkness came, then the memories.

I caught a cab past Alex's house that evening. Everything seemed to have been conspiring to draw me toward him all that day. The wet slap of that speeding Marik bus,

and then Alex being the name of the *Bluebeard* illustrator, seemed somehow to be signs to me. I knew that Sam was working late – a fuse had blown at Melbourne Zoo, affecting the butterfly aviary. The glasshouse is maintained at a humid 28 degrees year-round so already, I knew, the soft wings of tropical species would be crumpling to the ground. Protected from the deadly swoop of their natural predators as they were, the unusually long lives of those carefully preserved butterflies could be coming to an abrupt close.

The cab was cool and dark. I sank against one corner of the back seat while the air-conditioning whirred. As usual, I hadn't thought about what I would do when I arrived at Alex's house. I asked the driver to stop, pretending that I was confused and needed to re-check my destination address. I gazed at Alex's gate in the twilight. Why was it always in a faint drizzle that I longed for him? Perhaps it was the intractable imprint of that first night; his seawater eyes. The windshield wipers heaved and sighed a little sadly. On the radio, *Careless Whisper* whined. The taxi driver hummed along softly, oblivious. It appeared that no one was at home. The fence paint had flaked a little more to expose a pale blanched wood. At the Guggenheim in New York, I'd seen footage of a human skeleton stripped of flesh and scrubbed clean for an anatomy lesson. The pickets reminded me of that. A ribcage. Between them rose buds could be glimpsed, gradually revealing the intrepid pink of their covert interiors. I feigned a slow sifting through my handbag for an address book. My fumbling didn't bother the driver, as long as the steady meter ticked. As the lights were out at Alex's house that night, I barely noticed when the dark blue curtain moved until the glass was illuminated with the glow of bare skin. Was it him? A man stood there, chest bared, clad in jeans. He was bending forward with one arm outstretched toward someone or something I could not see, perhaps the edge of a bed. A sweep of hair obscured the features of his tilted head. I held my breath. In the half-light, the skin of his torso was drawn with grey-blue shadows. I noticed a muscle in his arm flex. Biceps, Triceps: indigo etched. Too solid for the body's ghostly tone. There was something in his hand; a curtain sash, or a rope. Something behind him moved. Did I imagine a woman's naked legs, scissoring the tremulous space of that darkened room? As impervious and assured as a pair of strutting cranes. *Tancho* they called them in Tokyo. I'd learned something from that postcard, at least. My eyes stung with the strain

of my fixed gaze, saltwater welling. Then an arm reached out from the darkness and the curtain fell.

I do not know if the whole scene was just a premonition; future memory. *Habent Sua Fata Fabulae*. George Michael had long ceased singing on the radio; the broadcast had given way to football scores. The cab driver turned inquisitively.

‘I can’t find it!’ I said. ‘I must have forgotten to pack my address book. Please turn around. I want to go home. Just take me home.’

Part III – The Laws of Affinity

Chapter 1

The trouble begins with the permeable skin of the bodily envelope and the life we imagine therein.

Sanford Ames

Dead Letters, Impossible Witnesses (238)

I decided to attempt a complete erasure of Alex from my life. After I returned from his house that night, I tried to transform the map of his whereabouts into that of a foreign city; unknown and hazy. Not the way it had been for me until then: a satellite diagram viewed aerially, the target points a blazing red. I even burnt the page of my diary where I'd scribbled down his number, knowing that a simple strike of the line would still leave me searching for ghostly digits. After the flame died down, I knew that I had made a mistake. A vague breeze from the cracked window sent remnants of the page fluttering across the tabletop to the tiled kitchen floor. Ash grey on grey. I was desolate. In the failing light of evening, the dull emptiness of my life with Sam left me as cool and dry as bone.

Sam had been able to repair the fuse and restore temperate equilibrium at the zoo that day, but he was too late for the butterflies to be saved. Most of the American Painted Lady, Mourning Cloak and poisonous Postman butterflies had succumbed to the shock of sudden cold. Entire species had to be replaced.

Why have I stayed with Sam? It is a fair enough question to ask, though no one has asked me. There *is* no one to ask me. I have no friends or family, no colleagues to ask why I've left the house so rarely. Though it is what I chose, willingly: to narrow my life. Who has not heard about scientific investigations into the way that living things can develop a terminal loss of hope? I recall from high school Psychology lessons that *Learned Helplessness* is the term assigned to that numb state of despondency in

laboratory animals; a state that was also mine. These past eight months I have not been able to see a way out, so I ceased to try.

Sam is reliable.

He keeps me fed.

He leaves for work and returns, usually on time.

He holds me when I need to be held.

He keeps me between four walls.

And I keep my eyes closed, with Alex in my mind.

It would not be true to say that I have stayed with Sam simply due to lack of income, but, no longer working, I have felt myself inheriting what had haunted my childhood: my mother's dread of debt. It was easier to stay where I was, with one man, than become like my mother: night after night, repaying with her body under the hands of so many. When we are together, Sam has never questioned the distance in my eyes. This is why I've stayed. It has been easy.

I did have some opportunities for income. I received sporadic offers of freelance design work from the director of an advertising agency. Her name was Magdalena; she'd been one of my teachers at university while I studied for my design degree. I had always been slightly amused by her attempts to play the 'Art Agent', dressed in pale linen and chunky resin jewelry, topped with a screen-printed silk scarf. But despite those outward pretensions and her over-analysis of my projects, I knew she liked my work. I did accept one project from her, but found myself in the end unable to complete it. It was a series of billboard designs commissioned by a US-based company who specialised in charity outreach projects. They were seeking assistance with trial billboards across Melbourne and Sydney; emotive images calling for HIV awareness and donations in the St Kilda and Kings Cross districts. I read through the email brief carefully. Their design specifications were quite open. I was excited by the opportunity to work again in large print, on those vast spaces I loved to populate with words and shapes. I could spread double entendres over the city, or experiment with more private inclusions (the particular tilt of a smile, the placement of a hand) that everyone would see, but only I would understand.

I sketched out a few rough plans and emailed them back to her.

I was not prepared for what I received in return. Magdalena thanked me for my work, suggesting that although she found my approach to the designs remarkable, it was not what the company had had in mind. She wanted me to give it a second try and forwarded me some samples of the current US campaign. I had supposed their concept had been to use realist photography to convey the message that AIDS can strike anyone, but as I began to open the attached images, I was overtaken by a pounding nausea. As each photograph flickered and spread on the computer screen, the withered face of a dying man dissolved first into a younger bedridden woman, then a wizened baby, its skin taut over a protruding ribcage. I was transfixed by the contorted lips of the now dead; the nearly dead. That solemn, wordless parade of faces – surfacing then fading again, swimming below the shell of plasma lake. I paused on the face of the young woman. Her expression had grown indefinable, but her features preserved forever at that moment between beauty and decay. Oxygen tubes distorted the fine architecture of her nose; the thick silver needle of a drip pierced the back of her pale wrist. A faint purple tinge coolly illuminated the skin below her eyes and across her lips. My dizziness swelled into a thudding ache at the base of my skull, as if some insistent memory were tapping at the bone, and my mind would not let it in. A shroud of sickness had replaced my fascination. I deleted the email and emptied the trash folder, but even as I turned away from the computer screen, I could see the neon glow of the image's retinal echo. It has not left me.

I did not send Magdalena a reply to that message, so I was surprised to receive a further email from her later that week. It was an invitation to visit the boutique gallery in Elwood that she owned. The email said that although my ideas had not proved appropriate for the billboard project, she had seen great potential in my work. Rather than have me discouraged by the rejection of my designs, she was offering me the exhibition space rent-free. She had an opening in the booking calendar coming up in three weeks and wanted to know if I would be able to 'step up to the challenge.' That last part of the note was so like the Magda I remembered – any seemingly generous offer always served her own needs.

If I hadn't already been painting the series of women's faces, I would have said no. But instead I found myself, later that afternoon, standing in her gallery, signing a booking confirmation form. I am always too eager to agree to others' plans for me. It was also the blank whiteness of that room that hastened me to sign. She was 'between artists' as she put it; another was due to set-up that night. There is something unnerving about the immense emptiness of a vacant gallery. Especially those with a white floor that swallows all corners.

'So,' she said, with a tight smile, 'I'm thrilled that you've accepted my offer so enthusiastically, but what kind of pieces do you plan to prepare for this? You don't have long, you realise. Already less than three weeks.' The smile gathered into a wrinkled O as she pursed her lips and shifted them from side to side, repetitively.

'Three weeks will be fine,' I said, signing my name. 'There's a project I've been working on for some time ... a series of postcard-style images...faces mainly, women's faces, crossed with text. Portraits of some people I met while I was traveling.'

'And how do you anticipate your work will interact with the gallery space?' she continued, barely responding to what I had said. 'Keeping in mind that I am *lending* you the room. We will require a minimum of at least thirty images to ensure an adequate commission from sales. We can't charge much for a new artist, someone just starting out like you.' She slid an angular orange ring on and off one of her fingers nervously, raising one eyebrow at me.

'I'll reduce the size of the paintings. I'll prepare them as a series of miniatures.' I heard myself say. Again, too easily agreeing, unsettled by the asymmetry of her face. 'Just leave it with me. I'll be pleased to make modifications for this generous opportunity.' I was afraid I had not been thankful enough. How unused to the economy of simple daily interaction I had become! She thought I was eager for the exhibition opportunity but really I couldn't wait to leave. Not just to escape the white room, but also her probing questions.

'Just one more thing!' She called hurriedly as I walked to the door, 'What will it be called?'

'Postcards from the Dead Sea.' I said without pausing. Decisive insight sometimes comes clearly in a moment of anxiety.

‘Why the Dead Sea?’ I heard her ask shrilly. But I was already out on the street.

At home, I took my easels and paints along with a camping mattress and a sleeping bag and settled in the basement. I left a note on the fridge for Sam, saying I’d be mainly downstairs for several days to work on a project for Magdalena. He was becoming used to my disappearance. He knew I was somewhere in the house, that I was at least superficially safe. He was not fazed – or perhaps he was afraid that I might leave him if he questioned anything in my behavior he found strange.

Down in the basement, under the bare light bulbs, by the hidden flame of the humming hot water system, I tried to paint. I tried to shrink the four faces into ten miniatures, each bearing ten emotions: fear to anger, yearning to grief. I was trying to capture the small critical fragment of lost chance in each of their stories. The words to their lovers that they might have said. I wanted to trap in their faces the emotion that each, on her own fallible ground, had failed to communicate. Was it for this reason that they had come to me, uneasy messengers?

Rachel wrote a letter to Matthew and instead of sending it, threw it from the deck of a ferry.

Sal had never told JC about their lost baby that she had washed into the sea, through the stench of New York’s underground sewers.

Kerrie had told her story in a way that she seemed to think might save me from a similar fate.

That unknown woman had thrown herself beneath the thudding wheels of a train. A goodbye card to her lover arrived later that day.

For all of them, the words that might have helped them never came, or arrived too late. In my own story, too, this has seemed, at least until yesterday, to be the case. I received a letter from my father only after he had died. I never understood my mother while she was alive. And once, I believed that I had snuffed out any possibility of returning to Alex with that small fire.

It was only then that my last words to Magdalena at the gallery – postcards from the Dead Sea – began to assemble some element of meaning. The sea itself: an ambivalent lover that holds me, but might also submerge me. I had run to the ocean

when I heard of my mother's death, and I had almost found my own death in that dangerous tide below the bridges at Elwood canal. When my ankles were clutched in the water's cool grasp, I had turned away to find myself on Alex's doorstep instead. I wonder now if I hadn't simply run from one hazard to the next: vise-grip of death, vise-grip of desire. The postcard paintings were remnants of feeling, rescued from the lifeless place that these past few months have left inside of me. Though I suspected that most visitors to the exhibition would understand the title superficially as a reference to my heritage, to that summer spent at Ein Gedi, it was not the real Dead Sea that was consuming me. That hard salt water, where surprised bodies defy gravity, floating up like corpses, those heavy waves.

Down in the basement then, why couldn't I paint?

Something in me was frozen by the letter-sized space of the miniature frames. Each time I lifted my hand to make a start, the thick cold clots of wet paint would slap and splatter my skin instead. The blue tinged gouache left cloudy stains on me, blooming with the beauty of bruises. I daubed the gouache across my legs then peeled off the dried splashes, bleeding in the places where it had married too tightly to my body. The forty small canvases remained blank day after day, taut on their frames. I could not bear to touch them. The four stricken faces clamored in my head, but I could not release them. I tried to paint them, but they refused to be pinned to the frame.

Down in the basement, a terrible thirst.

There was no water left in the three-litre bottle I had taken down with me. My body was a coiled up leaf. All luminosity left me. I was on my knees, waiting to be ground to pieces beneath someone's feet. And all the while that unbearable thirst. It must've been a Sunday, Sam was not leaving for work; a persistent thud of footsteps cautiously mapped the ceiling above me leaving no route around him to the kitchen or bathroom taps. Down there, I became one with the forgotten things. In my half-excavated luggage I found a bottle of duty-free saké I'd purchased in Tokyo. Beneath it, that serious little knife I had hidden from Steven in Thailand. A cloudy slash of cranes flew at the edges of the bottle's dark label. I slit the red wax seal. Was it some strange comfort I had felt with Ralph at the Ryuoo Diner that had made me buy the saké? Until then I had not remembered buying it,

but in the parched darkness it was a welcome tearing in my throat. It filled me with heat until I grew unsteady. I sank amongst the miniature canvases. The bottle fell from my hands and shattered into curvaceous shards. The broken pieces glinted, wet eyes in the darkness, surrounding me. Longmire eyes, Ralph eyes, Magdalena eyes. Alex eyes. All the eyes that contained an occasion to destroy me.

Down in the basement, a moist slip and trickle.

Liquid in the drainpipes. And so I knew that outside in the rushing, moaning world, that warm insistent spring rain had come. And in my own rushing veins, where saké had transfused judicious blood, I felt a swell of yearning for Alex. The idea of him was always heaving up in me, turning all reason slippery. I lifted a bottle from in amongst my paints, brought it to my arid lips and swigged, gagging on a coniferous rush of turpentine. I lay back on the ground and Alex came to me. At first I saw his face with the sly deep-sea stones of his eyes, and then I saw myself in his house. It was night, as it always had been, and he stood in the doorway. He led me inside and locked the door behind us, doubling back in the hall and advancing toward me where I stepped breathlessly across his carpet, noticing how it bled at the edges into something I recognised from the childhood country of my memories; a field of dormant landmines. In the semi darkness of the hallway I could see a shadow watching us. I felt my mouth open to ask who it was but the question popped and drifted away before I could taste it. As I opened my mouth to speak, he snapped his hand over my lips and I felt the cool slap of the wall on my head as he pushed me back against it. Too soft to fight, I was. A fish-hook, an open eye. From somewhere, I could hear a marching beat. And then again more clearly, a hard rhythmic noise. The thud of my head against his door where I had leant my one hand to steady myself, the other grasping for his arms. But his hand in mine became a paper-cut, and that sound: my own brow breaking. When this scene disappeared, ricocheting back into the darkness from where it came, and I was alone again, back in the basement, I found that it was my forehead hitting the floor, and not a man's hand but the blade in my fist, and not me but the miniature canvasses lying there, split apart in shredded pieces. In that ragged half-day half-night there was no longer any difference between my body or an eye or a knife.

Down in the basement, a shuddering delirium.

Blood darkened the half-moons of my fingernails as I slid them through my hair. I reached for my mobile phone to call someone to help me, but the battery flashed once and died. Who was there to call anyway? Only Sam: too fair, too freckled and simply grinning, to be the hero of my childhood TV dreams. Too gentle to hold me in his arms with that necessarily uneven ratio of force to tenderness. I could hear his footsteps in the house, on the stairs. I could not tell if it was morning or night. Perhaps he was waking again, or going to bed. Perhaps flicking off the overheads, leaving the night-light on as always, lying flat on his back beneath the soup-green bedspread.

Down in the basement, a flock of words winged into my head.

They arrived with the concussion and overstayed their welcome, remembered from something I had overheard in the past, something in a lecture perhaps. Something I had read:

Voir l'amour qui se passé – *to see the love between*. The words then repeating, becoming louder: *to see the love between the man one loves and oneself brutally played out*. Une femme se voit – *a woman sees herself ... exiled from herself*. Défaite de ses repères, de son intimité – *without bearings, without intimacy*.

I took something into my mouth and swallowed. I don't know what – drain water, saké, cellar wine — all blended into one sour taste on my singed tongue, grown thick and rough from the burn of the turpentine. I took the last of the miniature canvases and broke it between my hand and heel as images of Alex came rushing back. This time his hands were tearing at the page of a newspaper. He held the torn paper close to his eyes, and I realised that it was the ad for my exhibition. I knew he had seen my name. And then I saw him standing in Magdalena's gallery, his immense shadow splashed on the white walls, as he noticed how, from a distance, the four colossal paintings of those four women's faces, became mine.

Down in the basement, I painted.

Finally the vision came as four vast panels burst from me in waves. Not a peaceful ocean. No: Tsunami. Unpredicted, dangerously different to Magdalena's wishes. I left the canvas in huge sheets as I had bought it. There was no time left to hesitate. The paintings became an urgent offering for Alex then, my own moment that could not be lost, that could not come too late.

Once the images came to me, I was able to leave the cellar, even to eat occasionally and to sleep fitfully. I exchanged vacant pleasantries with Sam before returning to the dappled canvases blooming in the basement. Conjuring Alex's image as I painted, I heard those strange words again, echoing. *Voir le regard qui fait votre être fixer sur un autre corps...elle se voit.* I could not remember completely, only: *to see the look that defines your entire being attach itself to another-body...she sees herself...exiled from herself, without bearings, without intimacy.* Painting the four fathomless postcards, I told those four women's stories and my own want for Alex, in the only way I could. Without the words that would not come to me. Street-sized portraits; *de son intimité.*

The day before the exhibition opening, I was afraid. I only had to drive across three suburbs to reach the Elwood gallery, but I could hardly turn the steering wheel. A growing apprehension of Magda's stern skepticism was weakening my limbs, and I arrived at the gallery a little late.

'Where are they? Where are the paintings?' she asked urgently. I saw a tendon in her neck quiver. I could see she had grown more tense than usual, waiting for me. I knew then that she had always doubted me.

'Nina, my goodness, you don't look well!' she went on, not waiting for my reply. I saw her glance at the pale pink patches of raw skin on my legs, hesitate at my darkened nails and come to rest on my bruised brow. 'Is there something wrong?' She peered closely at my eyes as if they held the answer.

'The paintings are in the hire van', I replied. 'I've had to leave it double-parked because none of the spaces were large enough. I'll need some help to bring in the canvases, but it won't take long. There are only four of them.' I didn't reply to the rest of her questions. I knew she did not care about me. She was only concerned that I should arrive in appropriate appearance for the opening of the exhibition.

Her eyes widened as the tendon in her neck fought at the taut skin of her throat. 'But there's meant to be forty, you said you'd do miniatures!'

I could not even begin to explain why that tiny array of postcard-sized canvases had terrified me. ‘The finished piece is something I think you’ll like. The four bigger panels fit together into one large image. From a distance, the four faces form one face.’

‘No!’ she shouted. ‘No! Whether I like it or not, Nina, is not the point! A billboard is not what I asked for!’

‘But,’ I tried to cut in, ‘in the end I realised that all four stories became the same story. Only one postcard, only one painting was necessary.’

‘NO!’ she exclaimed again. ‘I explained about the commission cut. How imperative a display of smaller middle-priced pieces is for me financially.’ Her words were gathering an unwavering momentum of fury. ‘Your insolence, Nina, is disgraceful.’ She addressed as if she were my superior, my teacher again. ‘Do you realise I had even gone to the effort of calling in some extra staff to help you with the hanging tonight? Well, forget it. I won’t be able to cover the cost of that now. Since you seem to prefer autonomous decisions, you can set this exhibition up yourself, Nina. All on your own, Nina.’

With that last hiss of my name, she threw me the keys to the gallery and walked away. The keys clattered to the floor.

I heard the thud of a slammed car door. The angry shriek of ignition. I looked around the empty room. White on white, from wall to ceiling to wall.

Chapter 2

Every time he looked at an attractive woman, he thought of her skeleton.

Beth Bassein

Citing a claim made by Gustav Flaubert (75)

The cold womb of the exhibition room rocked around me. Light from the high windows blinded me; my eyes had grown so accustomed to the darkness of Sam's basement.

I dragged each painting from the van by its noose of ropes. When I had all of the canvases inside, I no longer felt so alone. Those four women's faces gazed at me cautiously, scarily, and yet they were reassuring. I was able to breathe again. I felt the tension of Magda's pervasive panic leave me as I ascended each rung of a ladder to secure the hooks that would bear each frame. In the hammering I found tranquility. Each beating of a nail into the wall's blankness was a thrilling exercise in permeability. It was not until I had completed the attachment of the hooks and tried to lift the first frame that the trouble began.

As I started to climb the ladder, lugging a canvas behind me, I realised that I would need to push the canvas up the ladder by supporting it with my hands until it made contact with the hooks. In my weakness, this was much more difficult than I had thought, especially without the assistance of the gallery staff. I wished then that I had been able to produce those forty small lightweight miniatures. I let the frame slide to the ground and crept back down the ladder after it. I angled it toward the ladder from below. I put both hands under it and lifted.

There was a slip and a crack. My eyes were open but I could only see the back of the wooden frame from where I lay, pinned beneath it. My head was twisted to one side. My neck seared with a burn that trickled down my spine in hot arrows when I tried to straighten.

I scissored my body sideways, moving my arms and legs, as if I were swimming an odd breaststroke, and rolled myself across the floor. The early evening light bled warm patterns across me; an ornate web of coral. From the painfully rotated corner of one eye, I could see that my handbag was within reach. I dragged my mobile phone from it and dialed Emergency.

I woke to the sound of a siren and the return of that searing ache. Surely only a few minutes had passed, but all around me the room had grown cool and dark. From the street, the ambulance's red and blue lights rotated across the walls dizzily. Then arms were lifting me and a stretcher was slid beneath me, and I was in the street and on Brighton Road and in the sterile ice-white cave of the car with someone holding my hand and the throb of the rolling wheels in my body.

I was carried like an infant into the cold light of the hospital, trolleyed on rumbling wheels, to a room with pale green curtains. The nurses had been too afraid to lift and change me into a hospital gown, so the first surgeon who assessed me tore my shirt to reveal the tender point at which my neck had been pinned to the ground.

He made only the slightest movements across me. His touch was eerily faint. He did not have any questions for me; he just made notes, writing the words 'Blunt Trauma.' Then he turned to the triage nurse. With the simple fascial release of the spasm in my left *levator scapulae* I would be recovered enough to return home later that night. As my relief grew, and my consciousness faded with the swell of morphine in me, I was wheeled to the rehabilitative ward. On the stretcher, in my torn shirt, eyes fixed on one white wall, I waited.

A masked figure with gloved hands came to me, carefully rocking me onto one side, twisting my matted hair into a surgical cap as he positioned me for the single muscular snap. An assortment of instruments rested on a metal trolley beside the bed; scalpel handle, drill bit and specula, and I readied myself for a wave of morphine-muffled pain. A small mirror rested on the trolley, too, and I could see the man's reflection as he moved above me. I knew those eyes. But before I could consider why, I felt a cool rush of air as the remains of my shirt were torn from me and a warm swell of release as my head was roughly swung back into place and something twanged inside me. A taut cord

vibrated painfully. My body hushed beneath his touch. Moving against me, he ground his elbows in a circular motion down either side of my spine. I looked at the bedside trolley. The scalpel flashed in the fluorescent lights and I caught the reflection of his face in the mirror again. He'd pushed down his surgical mask and it hung below his chin. It did not make sense, in fact, that he had been wearing it. There was only something to be released - no open wound in me. He'd pushed back his cap, too. I watched as all the elements of Alex assembled in a slow analgesic daze: the scar above his brow, the blue-green eyes, his heavy hand on mine. And then his voice, saying my name.

'Nina, how does that feel? Can you shake your head for me? I just need to see a "yes" or a "no". Yes or no?'

I nodded slowly, the morphine dulling my body's response.

'I'm here on a rotation, interning as a specialist,' he continued, 'and when I saw the name 'Nina Southey' on the patient sheet tonight, I was wondering if it would be you. There couldn't be two of you.'

The morphine was not the only reason I didn't feel surprised. The past few months had been an incessant accumulation of signs, all leading to this night. What did they call this kind of encounter in science? I looked at the tray of blades, straining to recollect. Then it came to me – *Ockham's Razor*. I'd always liked the danger in the name given to the rule used to explain 'the temporally coincident occurrence of acausal events.'

Alex took a thin folded blanket from beneath the stretcher bed and placed it over me, concealing my exposed chest.

'I've been wanting to call you, for a long time' he said quietly.

'Well, why didn't you, why didn't you look me up?' I rose to my feet, holding the blanket around me, realising that even if he had, he wouldn't have found me.

He was closer to me than he had ever been. I could see dark stubble pushing through the tanned skin of his cheek. The slow heave of breath in his chest. He turned away from me to scan a clipboard on the wall. 'I'll let the Triage know that you're okay now and good to go.' He took a small salmon pink box from a drawer in the silver trolley. It rattled slightly as he handed it to me, as if there were something alive in it,

trying to get out. 'Here, take these with you. Take them, just one at a time, if you feel any pain tonight or tomorrow. They're strong. No need to tell the nurses, though.'

I took the box and slipped it in the pocket of my jeans.

He reached in beneath his white surgical jacket and took out a business card. 'There's a patient I have to see with a critical EMG reading in his contralateral lumbar region. Call me tomorrow' he said, handing me the card, 'Just so I can make sure you're all right.'

I felt his eyes pierce mine. I knew that there was no part of him that had ever longed to comfort me, but I nodded and smiled as I took the card. His gloved fingers brushed mine. Both of us knew that the last of his words had been a lie.

Chapter 3

That very desire that culminates in the sacrifice [...] of everything that is the object of love, in one's human tenderness.

Jacques Lacan

The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (275)

The next night, that should have brought the opening of my exhibition, brought to life something else from the deadness that was inside me. I was hoping that Sam would not return from work until I had left for Alex's house that night, but he did. And so the lying began. I said I had happened to reconnect with an old friend, Penne, who he had not met. She had invited me to her house for dinner, and maybe we would even go out for a drink or a dance.

'Don't wait up for me,' I called to Sam, from where I stood in the bathroom, burning curls into my hair. I thought it sounded more like a caution than an assurance, something wavered in my voice.

'Don't worry, Nina. Have fun with your friend,' he called back with a rustle of pages. 'I know how busy you've been. Its been a long while since you've had the time to do something normal like this.'

I knew he was reading all three of the daily papers as he always did in the evening. I breathed out, relieved that he had not noticed the quaver in my voice. I released a hot lock of hair from the curling iron and watched as it snaked down the side of my face.

I dressed quickly, swallowing three of the painkillers Alex had given me at The Alfred the previous night, and slipped from the house before Sam could see what I wore. Outside, the spring night still cradled some of the day's tentative warmth. My breath grew slower, more shallow. The pills were too strong for what had turned out to be a not-so-serious injury. My lungs fought at the cinch of my belt to breathe the evening in. I smelt the magnolia's heavy, dusty scent; felt the breeze on my legs beneath the blue crepe of my dress. Heat rose from the train tracks at Windsor Station.

The follow up examination was to take place at Alex's house. We had both felt the need to maintain the pretext of an examination during our brief telephone conversation earlier that day, but I no longer knew why once I arrived. I had stared at that façade in the darkness, imagined myself pressed beneath the dim glass of his windows, against his curtains, a heavy indigo satin, restrained with darker sashes. I knocked once and waited.

He opened the door and led me inside. His hand dropped from the latch to the small of my back.

All was still the same as I recalled. Pool table, cathedral ceiling, the flickering drone of a TV with the volume down. But something had changed – not the couches, they were the same, although something protruded from beneath one of them. A patent leather spike. I was alarmed at first, then recognized the rest of the shadowy shape as the overturned shell of a discarded high-heel shoe. A jazz CD played in the next room, a gay beat, overlaid with a piano melody heavy with trepidation. A doleful woman's voice sang strange lyrics: '*Sweet reunion, Jamaica and Spain, We're like how we were again...*' I looked from the floor to him; wondering if he noticed what I'd seen. ('...*I'm in the tub you on the seat, Lick your lips as I soap my feet*'³) but his eyes were fixed on my chest. If he had, he showed no inkling.

'I don't know...' I started. His eyes returned to my face. 'I don't know why I came here...or how this...or what's happened to me this year...' I knew he was not the person to be saying these things to, but the words spilt from me helplessly in that darkened room.

'I never knew you before this year', he said in an indifferent tone, turning away and walking toward the kitchenette. 'But you seem alright for — to me, I mean.' He laughed, a low laugh, noticing his mistake. I followed him. He moved toward the sideboard, taking up a bottle of vodka and pouring a drink for himself, and me. 'And don't worry about your neck', he added, taking a sip as he handed me a glass, 'the pain will clear. There's no lasting injury, Nina.'

³ Winehouse, Amy. 'You Know I'm No Good', *Back to Black*. London: Island Records, 2006.

‘No, it’s not that, it’s not...’ then, even my ability to form a sentence of speech had left me, it seemed. I abandoned it. As he handed me a drink, I briefly remembered the three painkillers I had dropped as I tipped the glass, downing it in one gulp.

‘It’s not even me, but the way that things have changed in me . . .’ I began to speak again, in the absence of sensation, accumulating lucidity. ‘Since my mother died, and now that I know, my father’s dead, too, and since I met you, nothing seems to move through me. Everything stays in here, piling up inside.’ I pointed to my head. ‘I should write it out, but I can’t. I can’t write. I never have. I can hardly even paint anymore!’ I could feel my breath becoming more desperate. Alex had walked over from the sink, closer, he stood before me.

‘You’re overtired’, he said. ‘Come into the bedroom. You can lie down for a while. Last night was a rough night for you.’

‘But it’s too late’, I heard myself say. ‘It’s always already too late. There’s never enough time for anything to be said.’

He took my hand and led me to a bedroom. I could tell by his firm grip, that there was something he was thinking. Was he going to call another ambulance for me? Was he beginning to think that I was crazy?

No.

Well, maybe.

But first he lay me down on the bed and sat beside me, leaning against the wall with his legs slung across the mattress, the shadows of his feet spreading across the floor. In the darkness, his face took on a mobile shape, neither hard nor soft, but something like lava that could move between the two. I felt my breathing heave with the rhythmic prelude to tears. He moved toward me.

‘Don’t try to comfort me’, I began to plead. ‘Please, just let me be.’

He sat back, momentarily confused, then began to tell me what his research topic had been that day. A story about bodies; their vital upper anatomy, all the ways in which muscles can be clenched, fatally.

‘Show me.’ I whispered, interrupting his description of the fragile spinal column.

‘What?’

‘Mark the parts of me that might be torn away.’

‘Nina, come on’, he said, tersely, gripping my forearms in one hand as he sank me back down to the bed. ‘It’s you, not me, who sees every moment as something to paint.’

I lay there for a long breath, my arms in his fist. I was wide-awake, my consciousness tuned at the highest pitch, but around me everything had slowed. After a silent while, he relaxed his grip and we both rose.

Back in the in the kitchen, he poured me another drink. I noticed then how he left the good vodka unopened. Brimming full behind its frosted glass. I was not worth it, I realized shamefully. He knew he had me. I downed the cheap drink in one draught. In the warm bedroom, I had grown thirsty as the medications pulsed in my blood, dehydrating me. Ice cubes clinked in the empty glass.

‘Have you ever wanted to be hurt, just so you could heal again?’ I asked him warily. Willfully. ‘Like last night – I would go through the pain again and again, just to have you force my spine back into place.’

I could see in his impassive eyes that I had lost him, somewhere between his one drink and the three pills blending with the two of mine. His failure to answer unnerved me, though. I craved some response from him. He walked to the sink, placing our glasses in it. I sank to the tiled floor and looked up at him, raising my arms in a half-pretended surrender.

‘I want you...to do what you want...do what *ever* you want to me’, I said.

But I did not expect him to grip my hair in his hands and tilt my still aching neck with a sudden low sweep and graze his teeth against the soft skin of my shoulder where my sleeve had slipped as he lifted me to my feet and bent my surprised body back towards the long wall of the dim hall. I did not expect that scene, precise as my concussed imagining had been. Was it some memory in my body speaking to him? Did my thoughts instruct him, enacting that First Law of Affinity with its dark roots in Quantum Physics? *Thoughts have an energy that attracts like energy*. Something from the Hebrew Book of Proverbs, the *Míshlê Shlomoh* of my childhood, came back to me – Verse 7, Chapter 23. ‘As we thinketh in our hearts, so we are’ – as Alex marched me through the hall with my two hands in his, clasped behind me, as I was swung to face the

deadlocked door and I swayed toward it on my blistered feet, as my dress was twisted from me and he pressed himself in... so I was.

I concentrated on the soundtrack of that urgent jazz in the other room, horns trumpeting, helplessly obtuse, so loud I realised no one would hear those small important noises:

the slap of his hand on my back
the door in my face
the soft pop of my own teeth splitting my own lip
painful as a foot on glass
as my eyes came too close to the cool white paint
and my brow hit.

He liked his women to cry out, he said, but his hand was flat across my open mouth. There was no sound that could escape, just the buds of tears bursting forth, hard as pearls above my eyes, rolling down behind their hollows, rough as a landslide, to the corners of my clenched lids while my lips met the door and he held me – on my feet, so I would not fall to the floor like a Hans Bellmer doll, in my high heels and all.

And afterwards, when he was done, I ran to the bathroom and knelt on the cool marble tiles, mouth pressed into the damp rug, shaking with the tears that I had been gagging back for so long. Not the slow minutes that had just passed, not the past eight months either, but all of my twenty-four arid years. He came in to the bathroom after me, I knew he was there in the darkness, but I could not raise my face to him. And when my tears would not stop, he lifted me to my feet and steered me to the shower and bathed me. Bathed me, like a baby. His warm cushiony palms, so different to the tough fingers that had restrained me, moved soap bubbles across my navel, washing me clean from that other scene until it became distant to me.

It wasn't until then, beneath the fall of water, that he began to kiss me for the first time. I had been waiting for months for his lips to meet mine, to slip to my neck, and down the skin of one arm to my breast.

Gradually my tears were bathed away too and I said to him, 'this is the most intimate thing I have known, you know, the most.' And strangely, it was the truth, just

being like a child with him in the dim watery room. Perhaps he would have preferred me to lie. He did not reply, but moved away from me, shrugging his shoulders as he shook the water from his hair – but I thought he knew then what I meant. In that moment, I made the grim error of thinking that something in him cared. The same error that has led me to this end.

Forgetting any promise I had made of a home-time to Sam, allowing that shower to wash away any other identity than the one that Alex had that night earthed in me, I let him peel me from my towel and walk me back into the bedroom. There, inside the room that I had strained so many times to peer into, with his body finally beside me, wanting him never again to evade me, I slept deeply.

In the morning, in the moment of returning to consciousness, the tender ‘where-am-I?’ of waking was tinged with a dull pain. Alex’s handprints were a raised plum red on the soft flesh above my elbows. Not the faint green of weak pressure. No. Between my skin and my bone it was real blood that had flowed. I would have burned at the stake centuries ago, I thought, for devil marks like those.

Alex lay next to me. I almost gasped with disbelief, thrilled to see his back before me, indelibly tanned skin, crossed by my paler arms. I felt the coarse hair across the warm span of his chest, where my two hands were clasped above his heart. Deep in sleep beside me, he murmured curiously about the lighting of candles. I tried to hold him close, to hold on tight, to stay afloat, as the heat grew outside the window. I thought the glass might melt, back into dunes. I thought that I woke again, inside a cathedral, inside the echo of every vow and broken vow, beneath his sheets. On the pillow, my head: lead-light, remembering, the sinking burn of my skin between his teeth.

I dug my arms around him.

He recoiled.

(dreaming)

I wanted even more to pull him close.

He mumbled something about bouquets, and flames.

(still dreaming)

At least I hoped.

I rolled from under the covers, and surveyed my body. I noticed with a start a dark red trail beneath me on the white sheet. Small drops of blood. I followed the tracks to my hip and saw a shallow graze there, as if I had been scraped by something metallic and serrated. I looked across Alex to the clock on the bedside table. It was just before 6am. Already the sun was bright through the heavy curtains. It was going to be a hot day. His left hand hung from the edge of the bed, beside the table. It was then that I saw, in a flash of sunlight, the barbed edge of a silver mesh wedding band. I had not noticed it the night before. He must've taken it off before showering, and at the hospital, he had worn gloves. What careless habit had made him slip it back on after I had dozed off, then place his hand beneath my body where it had burrowed into me?

In the hot room, winded by the solemn shine of that momentous thing, I breathlessly gathered up my scattered clothes from the floor and hall where they lay stranded – dress, belt, bra, resting on the carpet like a chain of islands. I left before he woke.

Outside his rose strewn gate, I found myself in the first sweltering day of late spring. My skin too tender, too membranous, too stubble-stained and lip-grazed, for the hard hot air.

I detoured via the Queen Victoria Markets on my way home, hoping time would diminish my victorious smile. The straying eyes of passers-by seemed to widen as if they knew how Alex had leant over me in the darkness and held my arms down where the marks were darkening fiercely into a map's blue estuary. If Sam noticed, hopefully I could pass them off as bruises from my accident.

I lost myself amidst the stalls, purchasing an odd assortment of groceries. Tomatoes on 'quick-sale', tuberous leeks, shiny aubergines, overpriced cherries that I knew had been picked too early to be sweet. At home in the afternoon, I put on a long-sleeved gown and cooked a subterfuge dinner for Sam. I prayed that nothing had slipped in from my hands. That he would not be suspicious of my sudden display of peculiar affection, that he would not taste in it the foreign hint of Alex's kiss.

Chapter 4

‘The need for morality’ (that expression is already an oxymoron; whatever answers a need is something other than morality).

Zygmunt Bauman

Liquid Love (92)

‘Nina, if you keep on surprising me like this, I’m going to fall even more in love with you than I already am,’ said Sam, swallowing his last spoonful of soup.

Again, a statement that should have been a warm assurance reached my ears as a caution. An orange dribble of soup was caught just below his lip. I couldn’t bear it. When you no longer love someone, it is the smallest things. His words hovered in the air between us, flapping at me with their terrifying sincerity. I battered them away with a loud clatter of dishes littered with half-eaten remnants, as I stacked them one on top of the other in an unsteady tower and carried them to the kitchen. I was afraid that if I spoke, Sam would sense my relief and my reproach – relief that he had not guessed why I had plied him with wine and set out a candlelit dinner – reproach for betraying his foolish trust in me.

The Second Law of Affinity: ‘whenever two substances are united that have a disposition to combine and then a third is added that has a greater affinity with one of them, these two will unite, and drive out the other.’ Any remaining feelings I might have had for Sam had been exiled by the strength of Alex’s mark on me.

Seven days later, the bruises had faded and I did not hear from him.

And so, unguardedly, I went to him, dragged to his house on the slipstream of my own need. He did not seem surprised to see me. He seemed exasperated, although something in his manner suggested that he had been expecting me. Perhaps even planning how to ‘deal’ with me; anticipating that he would not be able to lose me so easily.

‘Nina, hi,’ he said solemnly. Just being in his presence was enough for me. His voice held me, even if his hands stayed resolutely at his sides. He seemed apprehensive, but he was polite – either that or he did not want to say what he needed to say, out on the street. He asked me inside, glancing at me curiously, with an almost concerned expression, as we entered the lounge. I searched his face for the fixed gaze that had devoured me the last time, but it was gone.

‘What are you doing here? Everything all right?’ he asked, a hint of irritation in his voice. When I stared back at him, confusion weakening my face, he offered me a drink in his wieldy tradition and I accepted.

He handed me the rippling glass with a strange smile. Was it pity or desire? The hard ridges of the glass felt familiar against my palm. My breath quickened with the memory of our night. Bringing the glass to my lips, I saw, on its edge, a vermilion smudge of lipstick. I never wear red lipstick. I took a sip, and it was cold water. Ice cubes clinked in it mockingly like the chiming laughter of a woman.

Alex was as cold as the water that trickled down my throat. He was expressionless; locked away. I slowly swept my hair back from my face, let a strap slip from my shoulder, willing him to carry me back to that place.

I dropped the stained glass to the floor and walked toward the bedroom, but he did not follow in after me as I intended. I heard the ice cubes though, tracing their own wet trail at my heels, rolling on relentlessly – or perhaps it was the sound of something coming loose inside of me. And while the coldness crowded in, Alex remained in the lounge, turning the volume up on the TV. I could hear canned laughter. Some tired comedy. And him chuckling along with it coolly, as if I truly no longer existed.

I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes, willing that when I opened them he would be at my side. But he did not come to me. The television cackled on. I thought of Kerrie’s story, of her waking alone in the double bed to Davey’s voice planning her death – but I failed to heed, also, her warning to me.

As I stood up from the bed and walked to the door, something pulled me back into the bedroom. It was a strand of my hair caught on the high knob of a closet. How many times has hair led a woman into misery? Medusa, her beautiful locks turned into snakes for tempting her own rape. Rapunzel, Delilah, and poor Scylla, who, in love, betrayed

her father to his enemy. And I became just another one of them, not noticing what those stories might have taught me. Just as with Rachel, Sal, Kerrie and that woman on the train tracks – but I did not observe their cautions. A residual ache in my spine twinged, as I leant to untangle the trapped curl. Freeing my hair, I opened the closet. Hanging there, on cool silver hooks, as those tender skinned ducks with their sunken necks had dangled at the Ryuoo Diner in Tokyo, was a row of women’s clothes. I gasped, and a violent peel of laughter from the TV echoed.

I emerged from the bedroom, pale and incredulous.

‘Do you do these things to her?’ I asked, walking across the room to him.

‘You’re still here? I thought you’d gone,’ he said, turning down the volume. I thought I saw his eyes linger on the bared skin of my shoulder where the strap of my camisole had slipped, but he was straining to see the television behind me.

‘I saw it,’ I said. ‘Your wedding ring. And now I saw her dresses and shoes. All her things.’

‘I have a wife and I love her,’ he said plainly. As if he assumed I had always known. ‘I didn’t ask you to come here tonight. I never wanted you...here again. I didn’t want to ask you inside, but since you’d made your way over here, you know, I thought I’d give you some time...’ His voice trailed off, his eyes closing in a slow blink. I took a few steps backwards, toward the cold fluorescence of the kitchen.

‘Where is she?’ I asked. My voice was growing plaintive. I wanted to be angry with him, but it would not come; that simple inversion of love into hate.

‘She’s away. She’ll be back in eight days, and I can’t wait to see her. I really can’t wait to see her.’ Did he need to add those last words?

‘But you don’t love her. You couldn’t love her,’ I pleaded, uselessly. ‘You would never have pursued me if you were happy and in love. You don’t love her.’ I said again, thinking that with repetition I might believe my own words, and force some recognition of their truth in him. He moved closer to me.

‘I *never* pursued you. Don’t ever say that, to anyone. Don’t ever say that. You were an accident. It was always an accident, really. Something that happened. That happened, and shouldn’t have. Yes, I do. I *love* her.’ His face was close to mine.

Love again. The word was an arrow. ‘And if she ever finds out...God, if she ever finds out.’ He took my arm and led me down the hall to the front door. ‘You have to stop coming here.’

He was trying to be reasonable, almost kind; I did not want him to be reasonable with me. I wanted to receive the violence I knew to be in him. I stood at the door; unmoving, refusing. I searched it for handprints, the mark of my lips, but no trace of our bodies remained. The door was as blank as Alex’s face.

I reached toward him, but he pushed my hands away. I felt my breath quicken, but there was no intent in his force, just the amount of pressure necessary to dismiss my gesture.

‘Leave. Now.’ he said, with a bored tone. As someone training an animal might, an animal that was slow to learn its commands.

I went out the door, walking backwards to the gate. I held the letterbox to steady myself as I fell on to the street. It was overflowing, a dewy pamphlet stuck to my hand in the heat.

Chapter 5

The postcard arrives and installs disjunction [...] the urgent anxiety of distance, temporality and location.

Sharon Willis

Writing in Transit (98)

Alex had co-authored a journal article that summarized various studies of the heart. I'd read it online after searching websites for his name one night. The conclusion of the article suggested that the heart, like the rest of the muscular and nervous system, possesses the capacity for memory. He had found that changes induced in cardiac activation patterns persisted long after the agent that induced those changes was removed. After the effects of stimulation had disappeared, the heart's response to the stimulus applied for a second time was greater than the first. So it would take seven years for the memory of Alex to disappear from my flesh completely, I thought as I walked down his street; the seven years that it takes for the body's cellular structure to replace itself.

Coming into the brighter lights of Glenferrie Road, I unfolded what I thought had been junk mail from my hand. It was in fact not advertising at all, but a confirmation of attendance at an event, addressed to Dr. Marik and guest. I remembered he had told me he would be speaking at it. He had been researching for the presentation the night he gave me his indifferent summaries of upper body injury and I had lain on his bed, trying not to cry. I knew that he'd be giving a lecture, but the accidentally-acquired card gave me the specific date, the address, and the time.

For those two weeks, there was anticipation, but not a moment of hesitation in me. I was always going to go. Of course I went. I could not resist an occasion to see him again.

I arrived late at the corporate tower on Collins Street. The sliding glass doors at the theatre entrance were guarded, and I could see the panel of speakers waiting in line to begin their accomplished procession to the podium. I pressed my hand to the cold glass that stood between Alex and I. He had his back to me, talking to someone beside him – a woman. Her features, I noticed with shock, were a more spectacular arrangement of my own, the difference between the moth and the butterfly. In my mind it was the same woman I had seen with him at the airport. It was his wife. Then again, I wondered if she were simply a fellow researcher, or a colleague, or perhaps worse than that, a lover. I tapped softly against the glass, hoping that he would turn and tell the security guards to let me in. But he did not hear the tap of my hand. The two black-clad security guards, Number 60 and Number 59 (I read their tags as they swung to face me) cracked open the door to let me speak.

‘I’m a friend of Alex. Alex Marik. I’m a little late I know, but he asked me to come to hear him speak tonight,’ I said, weaving my breathless story desperately.

‘We can probably still get you seated before Dr. Marik’s presentation, but we do need to see your invitation,’ said Number 60, holding out his hand impatiently.

‘Alex has my invitation. He was keeping it for me.’ I knew that if I could just get Alex’s attention, he would look at me with the craving I knew he was feeling. I knew he was desperate to see me.

‘We’ll have to verify that with Dr. Marik – if you don’t mind waiting.’ 60 closed the door in my face and left his post, walking over to Alex, who was still deep in conversation with the slim bronzed woman. How detached her skin seemed, as if nothing rested between it and the long muscles of her limbs. I scanned her body ruthlessly, looking for a flaw, something disfiguring about her. There was nothing.

Alex turned to stare as the security guard pointed at me, relaying my words. The woman turned, too. My body trembled to feel Alex’s eyes upon me. He stared at me with the erased face of a stranger and shook his head in a slow ‘no’, as he shifted his gaze from me, to 59, to 60. Through the glass I read his lips. I saw him form the word ‘crazy.’ I pressed my hands to my cheeks, blocking the glare of the lights, straining to catch the old dark tenderness in his eyes, but he turned away from the glass, taking the woman’s

elbow in his hand as she, too, turned away, nodding toward me and rolling her eyes, smiling up at him with a hushed conspiratorial laugh.

The guards each took one of my arms and ushered me through the rotating glass door that led back to Collins Street. They walked me to the corner of King Street, and left me. I wandered toward a lane at the side entrance to the building and sat down next to a plane tree on the step of the gutter, amongst the dumpsters. It was daylight-saving time; eight fifteen in the evening but not yet dark. An awkward mix of moonlight and streetlamp leaked through the leaves of the trees. In the flicker of light, I saw that the word 'Please' had been gouged into the trunk of one of the trees, just above a rough heart impaled with cupid's arrow. The remnant of some other night, a message left by an amorous stranger. An amorous stranger, with a knife.

From inside the lecture hall I could hear the sound of applause. I felt the shadow of someone fall over me as they walked into the lane from the side door. A tired cleaner out for a smoke probably, I thought. I didn't look up, praying that whoever it was would just walk on past. But the figure stopped in front of me and began to speak. It was Alex. Words came to me between each of my sobs. He was saying something about his 'reputation at stake' and 'Nina this isn't a joke or a game.' At least he remembered my name.

'You almost embarrassed me, Nina. In front of my friends and my colleagues – and look at you, you embarrassed yourself.'

I looked down at my rubber flip-flops, my bare legs resting in the gutter. As Alex continued to reprimand me, my hope grew. I could see that he was moving toward anger. I let him.

'Do I have to say it again? Nina, get out of my life. Please. My wife, she's everything to me, my job, too. No one can ever find out about what happened with you.' I was waiting for him to raise his hand at me. I looked up at him from where I sat, cradling the grim memory of his fingers on that other woman's arm, while the grip of the security guard's had found mine. His hands stayed in his suit-pant pockets.

‘And if you *ever* do anything like this again, if my wife ever finds out, you’re dead Nina. I’d do it myself...or have it done. I know people.’

What a strange species of speech; the threats of men, I thought as I listened to him. Over the past eight months I’ve become accustomed to words like those. The sly coercions of Ralph, of Longmire. But Alex’s threat was the only one that transformed itself into a comforting promise.

He went back to the theatre. As the door opened and shut, I heard the harsh rattle of applause again. As if the whole room were cheering his humiliation of me.

I walked back to Melbourne Central Station through a city decked out, three-months early, for a summer Christmas. I joined the candy-munching crowd that waited in a thick queue beside the Myer building on Bourke Street Mall, where the ornate Christmas window display had been unveiled earlier that day. The robotic twirling of the gaudy automatons in the windows made me feel sick. Something on the neck of a man standing in front of me at the window slowly came into focus. The inky blur of a cobra. I took a step back, then remembered the mottled mug shot and the news item on Ralph’s rearrest, and I relaxed again. I had never noticed before how unfortunately common that tattoo design was.

Walking from Windsor station to Sam’s street though, I thought I felt a car follow me – speeding up, then slowing down as I tried to control the pace of my feet in opposition to its fluctuations. The black car with tinted glass revved up and decelerated again, once, twice, three times beside me, and then turned down a lane, leaving me alone at Sam’s gate.

Chapter 6

What was I, in the end, writing for you? The only thing one can write that is a bit serious – a love letter.

Jacques Lacan

On Feminine Sexuality (84)

That night, if I could have left Australia for some other continent I would have gone. It is a great torment to know that the object of your love, that person whose body has come to define your entire being, is somewhere in the same city – refusing you. At home, sitting in the lounge room, I turned my swollen eyes away from Sam as he read me news items of interest (of interest to him I thought) from the previous day (for me, already too late). One article was about natural sources of electricity. I did not need further knowledge of that – I knew it already in my body. I began to think of other things. I remembered a board game I played with my mother as a child called *Scotland Yard*. Like a sinister version of monopoly, each player adopted the character of a detective and was given a figurine to represent them. Unknown to all, one player was in fact the ruthless criminal whose location the others hopelessly sought. With the roll of a die, each player could cunningly shift their ominous identity to various locations across the board painted with a streetscape of London. An odd choice of game for a child – what had been unworthy about yoyos and colouring books? That is how I pictured my last conversation with Alex: watched from high above. Our tiny chess-piece figures, stalled on Collins and King Street, were frozen apart, while his next round shifted him to some secret location, forever. Away from me.

‘Hay-fever?’ asked Sam, when my sniffing became too loud for him to ignore. He was still reading something out to me about the transformation of electrical energy.

‘Yes, I suppose it is. Spring, Sam.’ I wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my tee-shirt.

‘Well, this article was one I actually wanted you to read – it’s going to be an important topic when I go to the conference. You know – the Victorian electrician’s convention next week?’ He sounded excited, but also, I noticed, as if he, too, were finally beginning to lose patience with me. I felt ashamed suddenly, and sorry for him. I felt a tide of regret, for all the terrible things that he has never even suspected. He’d mentioned the convention several times already, but words from Sam seemed to evaporate easily.

‘Yeah, I told you yesterday,’ he said. ‘It’s next week. Just for three days. Hey,’ he said, turning back to the paper. ‘Listen to this. “A survey on infidelity has found that the majority of women would prefer their partner to sleep with another woman while thinking of them, while men, on the contrary, said they would prefer their partner to sleep with them while thinking of another man.”’

I coughed a hard, dry cough as I exhaled. An article of interest to me, at least, but again, already too late. I had held my breath while he read. Even then, I stayed silent, eyes fixed on the blue wall behind him. He reached for a tissue and handed it to me. Was he trying to tell me that he knew? Has he sensed something? It seemed ludicrous to believe that he was not able to see even a shadow of that other body that totally occupies me. The news item stayed with me, unnerving me all weekend whenever I passed the paper, open on the armchair where he’d left it. A passive threat? The answer is irrelevant now, I will never know.

Sam left the following Tuesday for his conference. ‘I’ll see you bright-and-early Friday morning,’ he called through the half-cracked window of his van as it pulled away. There are many things that can take place in the span of three days, I thought as he finished reversing out of the driveway. I remembered a billboard I had seen in the States: *3 Days, 3 Ways, Are You Ready?* It was an advertisement of a public motivation campaign urging the community to prepare for emergencies and natural disasters. I thought of *The Forgotten Book of Eden*. Wasn’t it for three days and three nights that Adam and Eve were forced to repent beneath the barren rock? *Their flesh dried up, their eyes and their hearts troubled from weeping and sorrow*. In three days, a lot can change. A lot can begin, or end, I thought.

He honked twice and then he receded, down the road until his van was the comic size of a piece of Lego. I released my lip from my teeth and tasted the comforting metallic bite of blood, just as I had in Alex's hard grip.

Tuesday was one of the first days I'd spent alone since returning from overseas. I had feared the ambiguous caution in those other women's stories so greatly that I had moved in with Sam as quickly as I could after meeting him.

Just after seven, I heard the shrill whine of the telephone next to the bed. My hand hesitated over the receiver as Sam's number flashed cheerfully on the screen. With a faint sigh of remorse, I reached down to the floor and unplugged the phone from the wall.

I may have armed the room in silence, but it took me a long time to fall asleep.

The wooden skeleton of the house has been in a slow battle with the damp earth beneath it for weeks. I listened to its sad swampy sounds during those days I spent painting in the cellar. In the heat that night, I smelled the decaying stumps, the sorry rotting scent of their defeat. The air was so thick with it, it was difficult to breathe.

3:30am, I woke alone. I had crushed one arm under me in sleep. My hand was so numb it filled up the whole room, reaching for the warm skin of anyone. I knew I had been woken by a noise. Was it the screech of brakes? The slam of a car door? Below my window, were those the footsteps of heavy boot-clad feet? I listened, but there was nothing. Then I heard the noise again; an urgent, soft sound. The house trembled. I looked from the bedside clock to the window; I saw a grey moth, aching for the distant cold glare of the moon, shuddering its wings at the unyielding glass. In my half-dream state, Alex's threat returned to me on the wings of the moth and did not dissipate with the breaking day. In its dim insect night, the moth understood the necessity of accepting defeat, better than I did. It beat itself against the bedroom window, three more times, before falling to the floor, inching a slow trail through the layer of dust beside the skirting boards, leaving me in silence again, its own thwarted longing overtaking me.

I tore the cardboard cover from a sketchpad in the bedside drawer and began to paint with a small compact watercolour set I'd left beside the bed the night before. I had been attempting at last to unpack all the derelict things from my various overseas trips.

Trip. I use that word rather than, say, ‘holiday’ or ‘adventure’, for a trip is what it has always been for me: a fall or stumble, a blunder, error or mistake. The paint set contained only stark primary colours, with solid boundaries between each of them. It was something that one would give to a child as a birthday gift. I’d bought it uselessly on my way home at Singapore airport after Steven had left me in Thailand, but I had never used it. I spat into the pellet of blue, dried to a cracked pill, and ground my stiffened brush deep into it, crumbling in shards of red, yellow and green until it blended into black.

I painted on the card, keeping the other side blank. Why had I once found that envelope-sized space so impossible? I filled the card relentlessly. I painted a curtained room, my own naked body crouched on the ground, as tender as an anemone, while Alex stood above me, wedding ring crowning his hand. The painting filled the entire space rapidly. The heat of my breath dried the image as I painted, binding it to the page. I turned the card over to the glossy white of its blank side. And I began to write. At first just a single character, the ‘A’ that begins the alphabet and his name, and then words that soon trailed into full sentences, and then an entire letter. By the time I finished, it was 4:30. The moth was dead, but my first letter and my only lie to Alex was alive, written in blue-black ink:

A. I told your wife today. Does the promise you made to me still stand true? Here is my address. I will simplify the job for you. The windows are double-glazed. I will be alone until Friday. A garden surrounds the house. You can do what ever you want to me. Whatever you do to me, I will not stop wanting you. The end. N.

Again I used those words that had yielded some response from him. *You can do whatever you want to me.* I don’t know what made me write *The end* before signing my initial, *N.* Perhaps it was a moment of confusion - I had read so many stories that ended in that way, and I am unfamiliar with the form of letters. All I knew was that I could not cleanly wipe away the ink, or paint the card again. And so it stayed.

I stayed awake the remainder of the night, restless in the growing warmth, lightheaded with sleeplessness and the musk of the magnolias in the garden, the creeping Jasmine’s saccharine scent.

I rose and dressed at first light, walking through the softly sleeping suburbs to Alex's house, furtive as an assassin, with the postcard concealed in my bag. As I walked, I thought about something I had learned in high school. *Cher Ami*, the homing pigeon in World War I who received the *Croix de Guerre* award for bravery, had delivered twelve crucial messages, written on light paper, as translucent as skin, before bleeding to death from shrapnel injuries. Now the only places pigeons are released is at weddings and funerals. White pigeons that everyone mistakes for doves.

The house was dark and silent; there was no car in the driveway. Perhaps Alex was on night shift at the hospital; perhaps he had left to start a day shift early. The letterbox was still cluttered with advertisements. That was not where my card belonged. I reached into my bag and took out the postcard, rolling it into a half-cylinder so I could wedge it more securely between the fence post and the latch.

It did not matter who read it first. Him, or her – the result would in the end be the same. And so I have sat at home these past two days, wondering how long it will take for him to come to me again.

Tonight, Thursday, with only twelve hours until Sam's return, I finally hear a knock at my door. I wait, paused in the hall, remembering.

Anatomy of the Upper Body: An Afterword

In this love you are like a knife, with which I explore myself.

Franz Kafka

Letter to Milena Jasenská (14 September 1920)¹

Women, men, memory, masochism, madness, love, death, language, power and obsession. My work reflects on all of these themes. While no particular psychological or criminal case study formed the basis of my plot, it is informed by a selection of the relevant literature surrounding the study of these topics and sets out to explore them from philosophical, political, scientific, cultural and personal perspectives. However, I have not attempted to adopt any particular stance on the many complex, and at times problematic, issues surrounding these themes, nor did I write this novel to provide answers. Rather, I chose fiction as a medium through which to examine elements of the human condition that interest me.

Firstly, I have used the character of Nina to explore various aspects of love. In particular, the popular conception of women's experience of love as tending to romantic obsession – the “erotic diabolism” (Sullivan, *Labyrinth of Desire* 122) commonly described in terms of being close to insanity:

Falling in love automatically tends toward madness. Left to itself, it goes to utter extremes [...] once a woman's attention is fixed upon a man, it is very easy for him to dominate her thoughts completely. A simple game of blowing hot and cold, of solicitousness and disdain, of presence and absence is all that is required (Ortega y Gasset 53).

It is this particular aspect of romantic obsession that I present in the relationship between Alex and Nina – and also, to a lesser extent, in that between Nina and Sam, as I will later explain in more depth. Another aspect of falling in love that I touch on (highlighted by the quote at the start of Chapter 2, Part II: “in the birth of desire the third person is always present” (Girard 21)) is the way in which each new liaison inevitable contains shadows of previous romantic patterns or remnants of previous or unrequited attractions. Be it, in a

¹ Accessed May 8, 2010. < <http://www.abbyssal.de/zitate/liebe.htm> >

psychological sense the parent of the opposite sex in the infantile Oedipal scenario, someone from the past, or someone who has passed away, a relationship is rarely between two people only. Similarly, we are often fixated, in the case of infidelity, on the lover's spouse and other potential sexual rivals. In popular culture and in our personal lives, we are fascinated by triangular configurations of desire. The associated emotions of jealousy and despair, melancholy, longing and questioning of self-worth are all central to my conception of Nina's character.

The supporting characters of Rachel, Sal and Kerrie, also, to varying degrees, present symptoms of romantic obsession – the latter two, and Nina, to an extent that has clouded their perceptions of relationships and thus proved dangerous and damaging to them. What Nina could observe as warnings in their stories go unacknowledged because of her inability to objectively perceive that she is in an analogous state of obsession.

Of course it is not only in philosophical or 'self-help' style writing that we come across such accounts of psychic domination by love and the experiences of pleasure and suffering that inevitably arise in such situations. Scientific texts increasingly report on women's 'lovesickness' in terms of medical pathology. As reported in *The Guardian*:

Doctors are warning that the throes of passion should be seen as a potentially fatal medical disorder [...] 'lovesickness' is a genuine disease that needs more awareness and diagnosis [...] Professor Alex Gardner, a clinical psychologist in Glasgow and a member of the British Psychological Society, said doctors needed to be more aware of lovesickness as a possible diagnosis in their patients. "People can die from a broken heart," he said (Lynch 2005).

Although Manhattan-psychiatrist Donald Klein's application for Hysteroid Dysphoria (a technical name for the 'lovesick' state) was rejected for inclusion in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual, Klein believes that lovesickness is distinct from other forms of mental disorder: "These people, mostly women, are not true depressives or manic-depressives. They are so vulnerable that they are driven to repeat their love cycles over and over" (Lynch 2005). What I have attempted to show in my characters' behaviour is the development of repetitive, and often self-destructive, behaviour as a result of their obsessive pursuit of sometimes inappropriate love objects – more a symptom of an obsession with the very idea of love itself.

Part of my project in presenting an ambivalent and deeply troubled heroine was also to explore the theme of feminine masochism – not so much in terms of explicit sado-masochistic imagery (leather, torture, whips, chains, flagellation and extreme physical pain) but more so in the subtle everyday interplays of power between men and women, in their speech, and emotional and psychological, as well as physical, behavior. I am interested in the notion that being injured, emotionally as well as physically, might bring a painful sensation that is highly addictive. The experience of abandonment, devastating in the first instance, may become a state that is desired. In *Critical Desire*, Linda Ruth Williams explores this interrelatedness of pleasure and trauma in female desire, suggesting “the problem of masochism, within which the subject takes pleasure in pain culminating in the final loss of self [...] underlines the sense that there is pleasure to be had in trauma” (16). The subject relies on the drama and tragedy as an essential part of their personal narrative – to the extent that relationships free of this torment may eventually provide no satisfaction. Again, Nina, Kerrie and Sal, to differing extents, exhibit this tendency. However, while Kerrie’s assault was an unforeseeable horror, Nina is more willful. She is aware of the dangers of her behavior and it is this aspect that is exciting to her which is why she ignores the other women’s warnings, despite recognising the affinity of their stories to hers. Her reactions are not appropriate; her sense of self-protection is skewed (as we see in relation to Simon, Ralph, Longmire and Alex). To an escalating degree, Nina begins to unavoidably find herself in, or perhaps even seek out, situations where she is powerless. Again, whereas Kerrie’s assault is one that I intended to be seen as an act of rape, the encounter that occurs between Nina and Alex should not necessarily be interpreted in that way. In her state of numb, self-destructive despondency, she wants to experience something extreme.

Similar to my reading of Duras’ heroines – who “accept the fact that love cannot be contained that it ‘circulates’ and ‘starts over again’ as a repetition of the primal experience of oneness and separation” (Pappin 85) – Nina’s existence, following the separation and loss of her parents and previous lovers, becomes one where “death will always come as the ultimate experience” (Pappin 85). By the conclusion of the novel Nina is in such anguish that she wants to die and is mesmerized by the fantasy of suffering violence from Alex. In this way, Nina’s potential death takes the form of

Rilke's *der eigne Tod*, "the actively seized upon, personally authenticated death which grows with a certain moral logic out of one's life" (Eagleton 208). Alex's worst crimes are that he takes advantage of her instability, as well as his subsequent dismissive treatment of her and his betrayal of his partner. Nina's actions and desires are darker. She "plays at" what Sullivan describes as "the diabolical in erotic games" (*Labyrinth of Desire* 122).

The story is neither an endorsement nor a recommendation, nor is it a condemnation. It is an exploration of the particular internal state of a woman seeking her own annihilation. Nina and my other female characters are responses to Atwood's statement that: "women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression?" (9). My attempt has been to write women who are unconstrained by popular reference, women who unframe the good female character stereotype.²

In Alex's character, I also wanted to present a story about men taking advantage of women's mental instability and emotional vulnerability – men getting away with what they can to serve their own ends – as much a popular conception of male behavior as is women's tendency to 'lovesickness.' As an article in US men's magazine *Details* (placed beside a style spread on the 'Top 10 Best Dressed Murderers') proclaims: "*The Ultimate Male Addiction: The Crazy Girl: She Has Emotional Baggage, A Xanax Habit, And Daddy Issues. But... You're Powerless Against A Hot Crazy Girl.*" The article, extolling the sexual benefits of pursuing unstable women, goes on to say:

It [this kind of encounter] has the ability to transform *you*. Because someone has just thrown the marbles on the floor and you don't know when they're going to do it again. It's not a relationship based on trust [...] this is about lawlessness. Chaos. Escapism and unpredictability – a balls-out, soul-affirming what's-nextness that is so rare and so powerful that you completely forget to give a shit about consequences.³

² See Chapter 1, Part II: "The act of un-framing oneself [...] a subversive and dangerous move for women" (Michie 107).

³ Accessed March 23, 2010 < <http://www.details.com/sex-relationships/dating-and-cheating/200803/why-cant-you-resist-this-woman>>

These are the kinds of possible consequences that we see Alex has failed to adequately consider. Alex is also in many ways a character embellished by Nina's desires. Readers only receive impressions of him from her perspective, which we come to realize may not be entirely, if at all, reliable. Nina, may, after all, have invented aspects of Alex in order to satisfy her obsession. As Rosemary Sullivan writes of her own love affair in *Memory Making*: "Obsessive love is a training ground [...] In the end, it didn't matter whether I got [him] or not [...] because *I never really knew the man independent of the idea of him I had invented*" (86, italics mine).

Also interesting to me was the idea of the masochist who is at the same time a sadist. Nina is at once masochistic in relation to Alex, yet sadistic in her destructive thoughts toward his wife and in the dismissive and dishonest games she plays with Sam. These mirror the same patterns of presence and absence, affection and disdain that Alex exhibits in relation to her. Sam is also a masochist, holding the same position toward Nina that she occupies in relation to Alex. It is a situation between three people that usually only end badly. As Sullivan continues, "all those roaring needs walking around unclaimed and projected onto others are, I am sure, the crude basis for the world's murderousness" (94).

I have attempted to present some scenes that show how, as Kate Millett's quote heading Chapter 4, Part II suggests, all love opens us to the possibility of vulnerability, and contempt. Nina, however, in her jealousy of Alex's wife, does not consider the wrong that she is doing to Sam. Hers is a story about the distorted morality of obsession, and testimony to Zygmunt Bauman's statement that "whatever answers a need is something other than morality" (see Chapter 4, Part III).

As Anne Carson writes in *The Beauty of the Husband*, "how people get power over one another" (75) might be as in her case, bruises, but it might also be many other things. Not just, or not ever, episodes of real physical domination. In *Cheating on the Sisterhood*, Lauren Rosewarne writes that infidelity provides a woman "with the opportunity to showcase her sadistic *and* masochistic behavioral tendencies, getting to inflict pain and also consenting to receive it" (164). Rosewarne moves on to explore how "the single woman's attempts to expose the affair can be read as sadistic" (172) which is also a

duality I present through Nina's final act of openly leaving the postcard, one that might be considered an act of, in the words of Michael Vincent Miller: "intimate terrorism" (22). It is an act of sadism against Alex's wife, and Alex, but it is also a masochistic act by Nina in its potentiality of causing him to express violent anger toward her, too.

Another territory my novel explores is language and its many forms, tensions and ambivalences. As Terry Eagleton writes, "language is just as slippery as our emotional life, governed as it is by the imagination rather than by clear and distinct ideas. We move in a world of smudged meanings and ambiguous objects" (97). In Rachel's and Nina's stories, and elsewhere, the power of words, of names, and the relationship between creativity and madness, and between art and emotion, as well as our relationship to language as readers, writers and emotional beings were themes I was interested in examining. I was also interested in the way that language can be an affective temporal event – it has the possibility to make something happen as we see in Nina's oddly hopeful postcard to Alex. As JL Austin wrote, speech can be performative – an episode of speech or writing might make something *happen* in the world (1430-1442). In the case of advertising, the industry in which Nina works, the effect is obvious – but words can also affect change in interpersonal relations.

Nina's paintings and her postcard, like Derrida's, are "an open letter in which the secret appears, but indecipherably" (Derrida's back cover note, *The Postcard*). I use Nina's ability to express emotion through vast images, but inability to do so through intimate written words (which culminates in her final exhibition of 'postcards', and then her overcoming of this in the card she sends to Alex), not only to highlight the unconscious effects that the trauma of her father's disappearance has caused (his last communication was a letter to her) but also to examine the way creative expression in art and writing might lead us to decipher ourselves and to understand our fate or destiny, however grim that may be. To return to Derrida's *Postcard*: "it is the picture that turns you around like a letter, in advance it deciphers you, it preoccupies space, it procures your words and gestures [...] You find yourself, you, yourself, on its path" (back cover note, *The Postcard*). The notion that stories have their own fate (see Chapter 6, Part II: "Tales, stories, have their own fate, because always they are disseminated,

misremembered, wrongly translated”) and take control of the author was one I found I experienced in the writing of this novel. Often I felt that the characters wanted to do, and did, things that I never intended to depict or include.

How what we read and write and what we identify with, as well as the psychology of our parents and our earliest memories, may become part of us is another interest reflected in my novel’s themes. Our concentrated thoughts or desires might be both prophetic and illuminating of our experiences: “Like the soothsayer, a ‘fortune-telling book’ watches over and speculates on that-which-must-happen, on what it indeed might mean *to happen*” (Derrida, back cover note, *The Postcard*).

What is also reflected in Nina, and perhaps Kerrie’s, experiences is the way that we sometimes see only what we want to see, ignoring possible threats, and possible warnings – as well as the notion that in each experience there are contained many different perspectives, many different stories. Nina’s quest is not only to uncover the mystery of her father’s disappearance and resolve her masochistic obsession with Alex, but also to interpret and strive to escape, the recurrence of real and imagined recollections that haunt her life and her art. The insoluble memories contained in Nina’s body contribute to her escalating madness – and they narrate her actual or fantasised doom.

Memory plays an important role in much creative literature and for the writers I examine in my critical exegesis and it seems that many times romantic memories are the most vividly recalled. Hélène Cixous’ most recent work, for example, takes place in “the letterbox of memory”, detailing the recollection of a love affair, through a woman’s attempt to prove the shared passion over an interval of forty years, returning to scenes, remembered and misremembered, embellished with errors and imaginings. In *Love Itself: In The Letterbox*, we meet a narrator tormented by recurring memories of voice and touch, memories that are unprovable, unacknowledged in their significance by the absent other:

The trace of touchings, the mysterious memory of muscles [...] the mouth must have its mouthful, the hand must have its hand [...] I spent the day wanting to stop loving you, at the worst of the pain I loved you against myself, I wanted to place my head on your shoulder, enter into your chest and double-lock myself in (124).

Many times too in the fiction of Marguerite Duras (such as *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*), and the poetry of Anne Carson (such as *The Glass Essay* and *Anthropology of Water*), memories reappear persistently, redescribed in the authors' obsessive writing and rewriting of a lost love. In the same way, remembering and misremembering have influenced my own creative writing process. Certainly this is a fictional work, but one in which I would like to think my own memories make cameo appearances, displaced into the fate of my characters, where they enrich, merge with and transform the narrative. This process is present too in the writing of critical theory, for I think it is true that, as stated by Paul Valéry: "there is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully preserved, of some autobiography" (Miller, *Getting Personal* 1).

My novel is also an exploration of the powers of different *kinds* of language and the differences between that used in advertising, in letters, on postcards, in love and in anger, which reflects the tensions between external and internal worlds. It simultaneously explores the non-verbal language of images, symbols, the repeated narratives of memory, the language of bodies and the marks they leave on one another. In my exploration of narratives of memory and the language of bodies, I began to consider psychological responses to traumatic events which can include workplace accident/violence, hospitalisation, childhood neglect or abuse, assault, being held hostage, and the loss of a loved one. In Nina's life there have been episodes of some of these, escalating in occurrence during the narrative, both in present events and in recollected memories, so I was interested in how the experience of these events presents its own language and submerged narrative (epitomised in Freud's psychoanalytic concept that the body gives expression to trauma or forgotten memories through hysterical symptoms). It is said that:

A traumatic event involves the direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's or another's physical integrity; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate [...] The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (Kihlstrom 30-31).

Nina's responses increasingly do involve fear, helplessness and a sense of horror. Intense psychological distress and physiological reactivity, flashbacks, difficulty concentrating,

sleep problems, over-reactions, feeling detached from others, markedly decreased interest in pleasurable activities, and a sense of a foreshortened future are common reactions to traumatic stress (Kihlstrom 30-31), and these are also responses and emotions Nina expresses throughout the narrative. Although I do not wish to make the interpretation of her character dependent on psychological elucidation, I am interested in the resounding effect of even minor traumatic events, and how, if incompletely dealt with, traumatized behaviours may become displaced and expressed to a magnified extent in other parts of a person's life. In this way, a deeper understanding of my narrative may benefit from illuminations provided by the scientific writing surrounding these areas of psychological enquiry, just as I have demonstrated the manner in which the projects of psychoanalysis can enlighten our understanding of Duras' fiction.

Another area of psychology relevant to my work is that of exhumed memory and false memory syndromes: "when the memory is so deeply engrained that it orients the individual's entire personality and lifestyle, in turn disrupting all sorts of other adaptive behaviours [...] it takes on a life of its own, encapsulated, and resistant to correction" (Kihlstrom 30-31). Nina, as the sole narrator, dominated by memories and present fantasies, is one that becomes increasingly unreliable. Truth is placed in question over many, if not all, of the events depicted, particularly the ending where it is left up to the reader to decide who is knocking at the door. Is it Alex as she hopes? Perhaps it is simply Sam, worried for her and returning early, a neighbour, or some other person of no consequence. Perhaps she even imagines the knocks in her distressed and hallucinatory state. Or, perhaps it is Alex's wife. Perhaps it *is* Alex, but he has not come to do her any harm, he just knows she is alone that night. Perhaps it is one of 'his people.' Perhaps Sam has hired private investigators. Or, perhaps Ralph's cohorts have finally caught up with her. In my opinion it doesn't matter. It is the psychological state that might make someone desire to be killed, and all the experiences that have brought her to this point, which I wanted to explore.

Lastly, the novel deals with the idea of the body in its physical expressions (blood, bruising, torn skin, muscles, permeability, indiscreetness and visceral needs) as well as

the way in which emotion and memory may be stored in the muscles and brain at a cellular level. In researching the ‘mysterious memory of muscles’ that Cixous writes of, I came across a study into Cardiac Memory (referred to in Chapter 5, Part III) in which surgeons found that the heart muscle has a capacity for memory:

Changes induced in cardiac activation patterns persisted long after the agent that had induced those changes itself was removed. After the effects of stimulation have disappeared, response to the stimulus applied for the second time is much greater than the earlier response. Starting from these results, we conduct a preliminary investigation into the possibility of a ‘cardiac memory’ (Chakravarthy & Ghosh 1).

I found this fascinating and I wanted to explore this idea not only in relation to matters of the heart (the experience of falling in love, and of heartbreak) but also in relation to the other ways our bodies store and remember experience. For example, how the manipulation of some muscles, in massage, or yoga postures, can bring memories forward and return previously repressed emotion.⁴

Although my novel in part deals with obsession and recollection, at heart, it too, is a love story. It is, moreover, one that acknowledges those other motives that lie beneath romantic idealism – the predatory, dangerous, selfish, ambivalent, cruel and sinister side of human impulses – that are as important to represent and explore as those of more pure obsession and devotion. *Amor meus, pondus meum: illo feror, quocumque feror: My love is my weight: because of it I move.*⁵

⁴ For any questions on the plausibility of Nina’s injury and treatment in Part III: “Spinal manipulation is a very effective therapeutic tool for the treatment of upper thoracic pain of cervical origin. Physiotherapists use three basic manoeuvres acting on the lower cervical spine: rotation, lateral flexion and the “chin-pivot”, a manoeuvre combining rotation, extension and lateral flexion. Because the hypothesized mechanism of the pain (a “spasm” of the muscle splenius cervicis), manipulations with a stretch of the upper thoracic spine in flexion are also used. Usually, one to three sessions are sufficient” (Maigne 2010).

⁵ St Augustine, referring to the spontaneous absorption in an object which is characteristic of love (Norton & Kille 16)

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Carson, Anne. *The Beauty of The Husband: A Fictional Essay In 29 Tangos*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2001.

Duras, Marguerite. *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*. New York: Grove Press, 1966.

---. *Four Novels: The Square/Moderato Cantabile/Ten Thirty on a Summer Night/The Afternoon of Mr Andesmas*. New York: Grove Press, 1990.

Moore, Susanna. *In the Cut*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

In the Cut. Dir. Jane Campion. Pathe Productions, 2003.

Secondary Literature

Adler, Laure. *Marguerite Duras: A Life*. Trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Aitken, Johan Lyall. *Masques of Morality: Females in Fiction*. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1988.

Aisenberg, Nadya. *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*. New York: Continuum, 1994.

Ames, Sanford Scribner, ed. *Remains To Be Seen: Essays on Marguerite Duras*. New York: Peter Lang, 1995.

- Attridge, Derek. *J.M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature" (2005). March 15, 2010
<<http://www.owtoad.com/villainesses.html>>
- Austin, J.L. "Performative Utterances" (1956). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Vincent Leitch, ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogical Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barker, Francis. *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays On Subjection*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Barr, Marleen and Richard Feldstein, eds. *Discontented Discourses: Feminism/Textual Intervention/Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Barreca, Regina, ed. *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1990.
- Barry, Kathleen. *Female Sexual Slavery*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.
- Bassin, Beth Ann. *Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature*. London: Greenwood Press, 1984.

- Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957.
- . *Death And Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*. New York: Walker, 1962.
- . *Literature and Evil*, Trans. Alastair Hamilton. London: Marion Boyars, 1973.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. London: Polity Press, 2003.
- Benoit, Catherine. "Sex and Violence as Phantasm: Eros and Thanatos in *Campion's In the Cut*" (2006). January 20, 2010 <http://offscreen.com/phile/essays/in_the_cut/>
- Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism: Optimism and Its Objects". *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Brown University, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2006): 20-36.
- . "Starved", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No.3 (2007): 433-444.
- Bersani, Leo and Adam Phillips, eds. *Intimacies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Bersani, Leo and Ulysse Dutoit, eds. *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture*. New York: Schocken Books, 1979.
- Bersani, Leo. *Baudelaire and Freud*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- . *The Freudian Body*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Bickerton, Emily. "Film Review: In The Cut" (2003). January 11, 2010
<<http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-03/cut.htm>>

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

Bogdan, Deanne. *Re-educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992.

Boumelha, Penny. *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*. London: The Harvester Press, 1982.

Bowlby, Rachel. *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Bree, Germaine. Introduction to *Four Novels: The Square/Moderato Cantabile/10:30 On A Summer Night/The Afternoon Of Mr Andesmas*. New York: Grove Press, 1990.

Bristol, R. Curtis. "Love and the American Psyche". *Cosmos Journal* (2001). January 22, 2010 <<http://www.cosmos-club.org/journals>>

Brocks, Emma. "Anne Carson: Magical Thinking". London: *The Guardian*, Saturday December 20, 2006.

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.

---. "Killing Gazes, Killing in the Gaze: On Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*". *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Zizek, eds. London: Duke University Press, 1996, 59-90.

Brooks, David. *The Necessary Jungle: Literature and Excess*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1996.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading For The Plot: Design And Intention In Narrative*. Oxford: Clarendons Press, 1984.

Brophy, Kevin, *Patterns of Creativity*. Melbourne: Rodopi Press, 2009.

Brownstein, Rachel. *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels*. New York: Viking Press, 1982.

Buhle, Mari Jo. *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Burack, Cynthia. *The Problem of the Passions: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Social Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.

Cameron, D. and E. Fraser, eds. *The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder*. London: Polity Press, 1987.

Carson, Anne. *Eros The Bittersweet: An Essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

---. "The Glass Essay", *Wild Workshop*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.

---. *Glass, Irony and God*. New York: New Directions Books, 1992.

---. *Plainwater*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

---. *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Chakravarthy, Srinivasa V. and Joydeep Ghosh. "On Hebbian-like Adaptation in Heart Muscle: A Proposal for 'Cardiac Memory'". Austin: The University of Texas (1997). March 16, 2010

<<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.53.2565&rep=rep1&type=pdf>>

Cixous, Hélène, *Angst*. New York: John Calder Ltd, 1977.

---. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

---. *Love itself In the Letterbox*. London: Polity Press, 2008.

Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000.

Cohen, Susan. *Women and Discourse in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras: Love, Legends, Language*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.

Colburn, Nadia Herman. "Book Review: *The Beauty of the Husband*" (2002). January 20, 2010 <<http://jacketmagazine.com/19/colb-r-cars.html>>

Dale, Alan. "Meg Ryan in Jane Campion's *In The Cut*: Disarticulate". *Blogcritics Archive* (2003). January 11, 2010

<<http://www.blogcritics.org/archives/2003/11/05/204851.php>>

De Certeau, Michele. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1986.

De Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

---. "Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory". *Conflicts in Feminism*. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. New York: Routledge, 1990, 255-271.

De Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement". *MLN* Vol. 94 No. 5 (1979): 919-930.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. New York: Zone Books, 1989.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Postcard: from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Details Magazine (Editorial), "The Ultimate Male Addiction: The Crazy Girl" (2010). March 23, 2010 < <http://www.details.com/sex-relationships/dating-and-cheating/200803/why-cant-you-resist-this-woman>>.

Dolar, Mladen. "At First Sight". *Gaze and voice as Love Objects*. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, eds. London: Duke University Press, 1996, 129-154.

Duras, Marguerite. *Destroy, She Said*. Transl. Barbara Bray. New York: Grove Press, 1970.

---. *India Song*. New York: Grove Press, 1976.

---. *The Lover*. London: Harper Collins, 1985.

---. "Vera Baxter". *Drama Contemporary France: Plays By Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Vinaver, Gildas Bourdet, Enzo Cormann, Jean-Claude Grumberg*. Philippa Wehle, ed. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986.

---. *La Douleur*. Transl. Barbara Bray. London: Flamingo, 1987.

---. *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.

---. *Summer Rain*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992.

Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet Violence: The Idea of The Tragic*. London: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

---. *Trouble With Strangers: A Study of Ethics*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Eisinger, Erica M. "Crime and Detection in the Novels of Marguerite Duras". *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 15, No. 4 (1974): 503-520

Faulkner, Grant. "James Salter: A Sport and a Passtime" (2008). January 11, 2010
<<http://litmatters.blogspot.com/2008/04/james-salter-sport-and-pastime.html>>

Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Ferstman, J and J.C. Smith. *The Castration of Oedipus: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Will to Power*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

Finke, Michael and Carl Niekerk. *One Hundred Years of Masochism: Literary Texts, Social and Cultural Contexts*. Atlanta: Rodopi Press, 2000.

Freeman, Barbara Claire. *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Transl. Joan Riviere. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1935.

---. *Civilization and its Discontents*. London: The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1949.

---. *On Sexuality: Three Essays On The Theory Of Sexuality And Other Works*. London: Penguin, 1991.

Fuchs, Miriam and Ellen Friedman. *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1991.

Fuller, Graham and Lizzie Francke. "Sex and Self-Danger". *Sight and Sound* Vol. 13 No. 11 (2003):16-19

Gallop, Jane. *Feminism And Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982.

George, Stephen, ed. *Ethics, Literature, Theory: an Introductory Reader*. London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2005.

Gillett, Sue. "Engaging Medusa: Competing Myths and Fairytales in *In the Cut*". *Senses of Cinema: An Online Film Journal Devoted to the Serious and Eclectic Discussion of Cinema*. No. 31 April-June 2004:(no pagination)

Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, And The Novel: Self And Other In Literary Structure*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965.

Grigg, Russell. "The Ethics of Desire". *Analysis*, No.3 (1991): 29-35

Glassman, Deborah. *Marguerite Duras: Fascinating Vision and Narrative Cure*. London: Associated University Presses, 1991.

Gordon, Andrew M and Peter Rudnytsky. *Psychoanalyses/Feminisms*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence To Rape: The Treatment Of Women In The Movies*. Toronto: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1973.

Henry, Astrid. *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict in Third Wave Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Hirsch, Marianne and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. *Conflicts in Feminism*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

Hill, Leslie. "Reviews", *French Studies*, XLIV (1990): 89-90

---. *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Hinton, Laura. *The Perverse Gaze Of Sympathy: Sadomasochistic Sentiments From Clarissa To Rescue 911*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Hopgood, Fincina. "Inspiring passion and hatred: Jane Campion's In the Cut", *Metro Magazine* Vol 139 No5 (2004): 28

Humm, Maggie. *Feminism and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology (1890)*. New York: Thoemmes Press, 1999.

Jensen, Katherine A. *Woman to Woman: Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

- Josephs, Lawrence. "The Observing Ego as Voyeur". *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* No. 84 (2003): 879-890.
- Johnson, Merri Lisa. *Jane Sexes is Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*. London: Seal Press, 2002.
- Kaplan, Carla. *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Kaplan, Louise. *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Emma Bovary*. New York: Double Day, 1991.
- Kellman, Steven G. *Loving Reading: The Erotics of the Text*. New York: Archon Books, 1985.
- Kihlstrom, John F. "Suffering from Reminiscences: Exhumed Memory, Implicit Memory, and the Return of the Repressed". *Recovered Memories and False Memories*. M.A. Conway, ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1997, 100-118.
- . "Exhumed Memory". *Truth in Memory*. S.J. Lynn and K.M. McConkey, eds. New York: Guilford Press, 1998, 3-32.
- Konow, D. "Rough Cut: Jane Campion and Susanna Moore on In the Cut". *Creative Screenwriting* Vol. 10 No. 5 (2003):69-73
- Kundera, Milan. "The Day Panurge No Longer Makes People Laugh". *Testaments Betrayed*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993, 1-33.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The seminar of Jacques Lacan BOOK VII The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1960)*. Jacques-Alain Miller, ed. Transl. Dennis Porter. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.

---. *The seminar of Jacques Lacan BOOK XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed. Transl. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton, 1977.

---. *BOOK XX Encore: On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge (1973)*. Jacques-Alain Miller, ed. Transl. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.

Leader, Darian. *Why do Women Write more Letters than they Post?* London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Leader, Darian and Judy Groves. *Introducing Lacan*. Minneapolis: Totem Books, 1996.

Lechte, John, ed. *Writing and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Arnold, 1996.

Leeds Revolutionary Feminists. *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*. London: Only Women Press, 1981.

Lentriccia, Frank and Andrew Du Bois. *Close Reading: The Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Lever, Susan. *Real Relations: Australian Fiction, Realism, Feminism and Form*. Australia: Halstead Press, 2000.

Lydon, Mary. *Skirting The Issue: Essays In Literary Theory*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

Lynch, Zak. "Is Lovesickness a Psychiatric Disorder?" (2005). June 15, 2009
<http://www.corante.com/brainwaves/archives/2005/02/07/is_lovesickness_a_psychiatric_disorder.php>

Maigne, Jean-Yves. "Cervicothoracic and Dorsal Thoracic Pain: A review of the Main Anatomic Syndromes". March 16, 2010
<http://www.sofmmoo.com/english_section/3_dorsal_thoracic_pain/ais_levator_notalgie.htm>

Marcus, Maria. *A Taste for Pain: On Masochism and Female Sexuality*. London: Souvenir Press, 1978.

Massé, Michelle. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Mazlish, Bruce. "The Flâneur: From Spectator to Representation". *The Flâneur*. Keith Tester, ed. New York: Routledge, 1994, 43-61.

McGinn, Colin. *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*. Gloucestershire: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Meyers, Diana Tietjens. *Subjection and Subjectivity: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Moral Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Michie, Helena. *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures And Women's Bodies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Miller, Jacques Alain. "Loves Labyrinths". *La Lettre Mensuelle*. N° 109 (1992), 32-47.

Miller, Michael Vincent. *Intimate Terrorism: The Crisis of Love in an Age of Disillusion*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995.

Miller, Nancy K. "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic And Her Fictions".
Conflicts in Feminism. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. New York:
Routledge, 1990, 112-121.

---. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New
York: Routledge, 1991.

Millett, Kate. *Sita*, London: Virago, 1977.

Mitchell, Juliet. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women*.
London: Basic Books, 1974.

Moore, Susanna, *The Whiteness of Bones*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

---. *Sleeping Beauties*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

---. *One Last Look*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

---. *The Big Girls*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

---. Personal Interview, University of Adelaide, Australia July 15 2009

Morrow, Hope. "Understanding Traumatic Events and PTSD: What constitutes a
TRAUMATIC EVENT?" (2008). February 16, 2009
<<http://home.earthlink.net/~hopefull/about.htm>>

Norton, David and Mary Kille. *Philosophies of Love*. Lanham: Rowman and
Littlefield Publishers, 1971.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy
and Philosophy*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme*. Trans. Tony Talbot. London: Gollancz, 1959.

Park, Douglas. "In the Cut: Movie Review". *Film Quarterly* Vol. 58 No. 4 (2005): 38-9

Pearson, Ethel S. *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters: The Power of Romantic Passion*. New York: Penguin 1988.

Petrucci, Jean, ed. *Longing: Psychoanalytic Musings On Desire*. London: Karnac Press, 2006.

Pile, Steve. *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1996.

Porter, Dennis. *Rousseau's Legacy: Emergence and Eclipse of the Writer in France*. London: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Radner, Hilary. *Shopping Around: Feminine Culture and the Pursuit of Pleasure*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Radway, Janice, A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Reppen, Joseph, and Maurice Charney. *The psychoanalytic Study of Literature*. Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 1985.

Reyes, Alina. *The Politics of Love*. London: Marion Boyars, 1998.

Rosewarne, Lauren. *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism*. New York: Praeger, 2009.

Ross, Val. "Classic Carson" (2001). January 11, 2010
<<http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/01spring/carson.asp>>

Rutherford, Jennifer. *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan, and the White Australian Fantasy*. Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2000.

De Sade, Marquis. *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and other Writings*. Transl. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

Sagan, Eli. *Freud, Women and Morality: The Psychology of God and Evil*. New York: Basic Books, 1998.

Salecl, Renata, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate*. New York: Verso, 2000.

Salter, James. *A Sport and a Pastime*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1967.

Scott, A.O. "A Mystery of Language, A Mystery of Murder". *The New York Times*, New York, Oct 22, 2003.

Selous, Trista. *The Other Woman: Feminism And Femininity In The Work Of Marguerite Duras*. London: Yale University Press, 1998.

Shainess, Natalie. *Sweet Suffering: Woman as Victim*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1984.

Shepherd, Harvey. "Book Review: The Beauty of the Husband". January 11, 2010
<<http://wdsreviewofbooks.webdelsol.com/WDSRBCarson.htm>>

Simmel, Georg. *On Women, Sexuality and Love*. Transl. Guy Oakes. New Haven: Yale Uni Press, 1984.

Smith, Zadie. "Read Better" (2007). March 15, 2010
<<http://zadiesmithnews.wordpress.com/2007/01/20/read-better/>>

Sontag, Susan. "Pay Attention to the World". London: *The Guardian*, Saturday March 17, 2007:20-23.

Stallybrass, Peter and Allan White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Stoller, Robert. *Perversion: the Erotic Form of Hatred*. London: The Harvester Press, 1976.

Stewart, Robert ed. *Philosophical Perspectives on Love and Sex*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Suleiman, Susan Rubin, ed. *The Female Body In Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Sullivan, Nicky. *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics, And Pleasure*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 2001.

Sullivan, Rosemary. *Labyrinth of Desire: Women, Passion and Romantic Obsession*. New York: Counterpoint, 2001.

---. *Memory-Making: Selected Essays*. Canada: Black Moss Press, 2001.

Tanner, Tony. *Adultery in the Novel: Contracts and Transgressions*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Thometz, Kurt. "Susanna Moore: The Book as Aphrodisiac". January 11, 2010
<<http://colophon.com/privatelibrary/interviews/moore.html>>

Thornham, Sue. "Starting To Feel Like A Chick": Re-visioning Romance in *In the Cut*". *Feminist Media Studies* Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2007): 33 – 46

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977.

---. *Genres in Discourse*. Trans Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Watkins, Liz. "The (Dis)Articulation of Colour: Cinematography, Femininity, and Desire in Jane Campion's *In The Cut*". *Questions of Colour in Cinema: From Paintbrush to Pixel*. Wendy Everett, ed. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007, 202-213.

Williams, James S. *Revising Duras: Film, Race, Sex*. Liverpool: Liverpool University press, 2000.

Williams, Linda Ruth. *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1995.

---. *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

Willis, Sharon. "Writing in Transit". *Remains To Be Seen: Essays On Marguerite Duras*. Ames Sanford Scribner, ed. New York: Peter Lang, 1995, 112-123.

Wilson, E. *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*. Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 1991.

Winston, Jane. "Forever Feminine: Marguerite Duras and Her French Critics". *New Literary History*, Vol. 24 No.2, (1993): 467-482

---. *Postcolonial Duras: Cultural Memory in Post-War France*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2001.

Wright, Elizabeth. *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous: The Poetics of the Unconscious*. London: Polity Press, 1999.

Zizek, Slavoj, and Renata Salecl. *Gaze And Voice As Love Objects*. London: Duke University Press, 1996.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*. London: Verso, 1994.