Standing in the Plaza: Problematic Place in the Short Story

Sally Sian Lily Fermer

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Philosophy in Creative Writing
Discipline of English and Creative Writing
School of Humanities
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Volume One: Standing in the Plaza, Wanting

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Abstract

There are places in the contemporary world where the predominating feature is a kind of worrying absence. We negotiate a relationship with these problematic places in order to live with them or in them or in close proximity to them or in order to use them. They are ubiquitous in the contemporary world: carparks; demolition sites; shopping centres; pieces of fenced-off land called reserves; freeways; service stations; animal refuges; train stations; main roads; empty buildings; abattoirs; residential subdivisions; sites dedicated to solely to tourism; prisons; boarded up rooming houses; detention centres. How does one talk about these problematic places in fiction? How does a writer describe and understand the in-between place, the temporary place, the ugly place, the bland place in terms of its effect on the people who inhabit it?

The exegetical component of this thesis takes a work of anthropology as its starting point and asks can an anthropological thesis on place assist in writing fiction about place? In looking for a way to describe and understand the nature of the problematic places described above and their effect on the individual, Marc Augé’s Non-Places: an Introduction to Supermodernity provides a useful linguistic and a philosophical approach. He attributes the term ‘non-place’ to places defined by particular characteristics of excess, temporality, representation and effects on identity. This exegesis will examine the interface of place and the individual in two short stories using Augé’s thesis of non-place. The short story “Safety Procedures” by Nadine Gordimer exemplifies the characteristics of Augé’s supermodernity and non-place. The second story examined in this exegesis is Raymond Carver’s “Kindling”. Responding to a number of authors who have critiqued Augé’s thesis, this exegesis will ask whether the definition of non-place can include places other than sites of supermodernity. “Kindling” is studied with this question in mind.

The creative component of this thesis is a collection of eleven short stories titled Standing in the Plaza, Wanting. Each story is set in a different problematic place and, drawing on features of Augé's thesis to better understand the nature of problematic places, each story investigates the
influence of that setting on the characters who inhabit the it, rather than the setting itself.
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Standing in the Plaza, Wanting
We'd been up the mountain and stayed the night. In the morning we came down the mountain on our bikes and that's when I lost my coat. At the base of the mountain there was a field of dried corn. It was a bronze flat field and it spread to the base of the mountain we had just come from. I waited under a large tree for Ida to return. She had gone back to look for my coat. It was warm. I waited in the shade. I counted the cars. I timed how often a car came along.

The place felt like all of the other places in France we had been to. I was tired from riding. We had to ride to the next town and I had lost my coat on the way down the mountain. The night before, when we reached the top of the mountain, we found it hard to find a hotel room. There was only one hotel and it was expensive and we had to take it because we were told there were only two rooms left in town. The smaller hotel was closed. We had seen the smaller hotel, had held onto the handlebars of our bikes and leaned into the door to look inside. It was nice. It was simple. It was closed, which seemed strange for a hotel. Ida sat on the hotel steps. She said, ‘All this truffle and fois gras. Did you see that wooden clown with a slit in the back of its head? I refuse to walk past it again. I feel like it knows something.’

‘Henry Miller loved it here,’ I said. I was reading about Henry Miller on a notice board.

We paid for our room and went to dinner. We didn’t book. Ida had to go back to the hotel for something and that created confusion and the waitress became terse with us. She was tall with grey eyes and long cheeks. She was striking but not beautiful. She was not civil to us. We were seated next to a table of Kiwis. They were loud and they made fun with the waitress and she treated them well but she treated us badly. ‘I suppose that’s the way it is in these places,’ I said to Ida. ‘I suppose people are all the same when you see people all the time.’

The hotel room was very nice but we were tired after our long ride. It was more grandiose than any room we’d stayed in. It had a bath and a large bed. We had a bath and we made love on the bed because it was an expensive hotel. We were tired and although neither of us spoke about the waitress we
were both affected by the way she behaved towards us. I hit my head on the wall and Ida laughed. I didn’t laugh. It didn’t seem funny to me. Maybe another time I would have laughed. Ida pulled me to her again but it was like she had left the hotel to find cigarettes and I was wrestling with a stranger.

The ride to the mountain had been tiring but it had been lovely. We rode through a wood of poplars or silver birch planted in rows — I have a photo somewhere — their trunks luminescent against the cliffs. As we got closer to the mountain we rode through farms and the trees changed to red barns and the verdant grass to fields of dried corn.

Waiting for Ida after she had turned back to look for my coat, everything started to look the same. She must have been gone an hour. When she returned — she had found my coat — she told me that she'd left her bike at the bottom of the mountain and that is why she took so long. We’d come down fast. It had taken less than ten minutes. The force of the wind coming down the mountain had blown the coat off the back of my bike. I hadn’t strapped it down well. Ida left her bike and walked to the top of the mountain looking for my coat. She stopped people along the way to ask them if they had seen a coat. She did this for me because I was so unhappy when I discovered that I had lost it. She was confident she would find it. She wanted to return heroically with my coat.

But as soon as Ida had set off to look for my coat I wanted her to come back. As soon as she left I didn't care about my coat only about her return. A convoy of delivery trucks drove along the road and cyclists appeared in the distance at the base of the mountain. Some were in pairs and I could see when they were far away that they were not Ida because they were riding in pairs. But there were others who were riding alone and I watched their approach with apprehension until they got close enough for me to see that it was not Ida and to see that made me downhearted.

It occurred to me, watching the flow of cyclists off the mountain, that Ida had done something she shouldn’t have in riding back up there. I didn't think about the vista from the lookout at the top of the mountain or about the hotel with the oversized door. I thought about the waitress. I thought about Ida’s return. I didn't know she was walking. I didn't understand why she was taking so long. I might’ve enjoyed some time in the shade, found pleasure in
the black cliffs and the trees growing out of the corn, but I looked up that long road that led away from the mountain and watched it like one watches for a tram. The cyclists were small dots very far away.

She rode easily away from the mountain with my coat under her arm. She laid her bike on the grass and presented me with my coat. ‘I saw a button in the sun,’ she said. ‘I had to climb. Look.’ She showed me a scratch on her leg. It was bleeding. It was a small scratch but it was bleeding. I let the coat fall to the ground.

‘I don’t care about the coat,’ I said.

She pulled my coat out of the grass and draped it across my shoulders. ‘I went up a mountain for this.’

‘I wanted you back.’

Ida spat on her fingers and washed the blood off her leg. She unclipped her drink bottle and sat in the grass. ‘You should have gone looking for the coat yourself. I would have been happy to sit in the grass.’

‘You were gone a long time.’

‘I walked. It was easier.’

‘The coat doesn’t matter. I watched for you.’

‘After I left?’

‘Don’t say you left.’

‘Ah,’ she said, ‘the waitress. Yes. We stole away. She crushed my hand in hers. We stumbled down the hill and made love under the cypress.’

‘Don’t.’

‘You should give this coat to someone else,’ she said. ‘You should keep watching the people coming off the mountain and pick the person who most needs a coat.’

‘It’s too warm for a coat. No one will want to wear a coat.’

‘It was cold coming down the mountain just now. In the shade it’s cold. I wore your coat up there.’

‘I think you want to be with someone else. That is why you took so long. To get away from me. I’ve been annoying you. I can see that.’

‘You’re annoying me now. I had to get off the road in a hurry. A car came and there were cyclists at the same time. They were all going too fast. I had to jump off the road to get out of the way.’
‘Perhaps it would’ve been better if you had left my coat up there,’ I said. ‘On the mountain. Proof that I had actually been there. That waitress looked through me like I wasn’t there. My coat would have been proof.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Ida said. ‘You’ll be in the background of someone’s photographs. Instead of Souillac we could ride to La Roque-Gageac. It’s closer. It’s not far at all. We could stay a few nights, recharge our batteries.’

‘I suppose it’s like that when you see so many people all the time,’ I said. The heat soaked through my coat like rain. Ida walked away from me. I couldn’t move. The corn blew sideways. Three cyclists flew past like three buzzing bees. Ida came back. ‘I’m tired,’ I said.

‘We don’t have to get to Souillac,’ she said.

‘We’ll go to La Roque,’ I said.

I draped the coat across my handlebars. It fell onto the road as we were crossing the highway and a truck drove over it. I stopped on the other side of the road and leaned my bike against a stone wall. I wanted to pick my coat up off the road but the traffic drove over it from both directions. I turned to look for Ida. She had stopped. She was twisted around on her bicycle seat to look for me. She saw me and saw my coat in the middle of the road. She turned away. She climbed back onto her seat and rode towards La Roque-Gageac.
Surfers Paradise

Before the dog there were the waves and the sun. At the first wash of light on the beach Patrick woke, watched lines shift in the sea. Even with all that sniffing, along the edge of the water and around Angus’s body, the dog didn’t get sand up its nose. Angus stirred. There had been no reason to wake him — his long chin burrowed, his curly hair knotted like beach weed. Last night they swam in the sea — the sea black, the night black, a faint line in the sky. Angus curled away from the sun. There was no shade. He writhed in the sand, swore, lifted his face to find Patrick. The bruise was showing more this morning. It was round with a sort of tail towards Angus’s temple. There was no bruising in the corner of his eye but a stripe across the bridge of his nose.

‘Does that hurt?’

Angus disappeared. Patrick had no idea where he had gone. He found him sitting behind a toilet block, his pants around his knees. The old scar in his cheek deepened. The back of his head pressed the besser brick wall.

‘What are you doing?’

‘That’s a stupid question what does it look like I’m doing,’ he said without stopping, ‘come here,’ and then seemed to forget Patrick was there.

‘I mean why did you leave? Why did you go off?’ Patrick leaned against the wall. ‘Why did you just disappear?’ He slid down next to Angus, close so he could feel the up and down bounce of Angus’s hand. The sea had changed colour. It was almost yellow as the sky was orange and yellow, a real golden yellow, jagged and splintered and then orange sheets thrown in different directions and all of that light, those colours, conspired to change the colour of the sea. It wasn’t blue or green. The sea was almost true yellow.

Angus finished. Patrick took a handkerchief out of his pocket and grabbed Angus’s wrist. He wiped his friend’s hand and the inside of his thigh. He undid his own fly and placed Angus’s hand on his hard cock. Angus took his hand away. ‘Why not?’ Patrick asked. But he hated the sound of his voice then. It was whiny. It was pleading when he had meant it to sound angry. He did up his fly. Angus bent his neck backwards. He pressed the crown of his head onto the bricks behind him. Patrick saw he had clenched fists buried,
pushing into the sand, his heels digging into the sand. He was hurting himself, gritting his teeth and pressing his head hard against the rough wall.

Patrick didn’t know what to do with Angus these days. Once they had secreted themselves away together, behind any wall, any door, taken risks. Now he pissed off to wank behind a toilet block. His eyes were the same penetrating blue. They were like marbles, bright colour inside clear white. Patrick touched the Adam’s apple pointing at the sky then laid his hand on Angus’s throat. Angus didn’t move so Patrick pressed and pressed a little harder. Angus’s hand made for Patrick’s cock now. It undid his fly and held him hard. As Patrick gripped so did Angus but something flapped in the space between them, flew in their faces, waking them out of it. Was it his arms or Angus's who stopped them, whose knuckles first punched the besser brick wall? Because the other one’s hand did too and there was blood.

Sand rubbed in Patrick’s crotch. There were people on the beach now. He went in with his shorts on. He couldn’t stand it, the grazing sticky reminder with each step so he went in the water and squatted deep in the water and washed himself. Angus laughed as he came out of the water. He had been standing in the foam smiling mockingly and when Patrick climbed out of the sea he laughed.

‘Do we have any money?’

‘Nothing will be open this early.’

Angus put his arm across Patrick’s shoulder. He looked around like he used to and kissed Patrick on the cheek. Patrick thought he should pull away from the arm but he didn’t want to. He put his arm over Angus’s shoulder. ‘I’m hungry.’

In the sea last night they kissed. They had kissed many times. For four years they had kissed. But for one moment last night, the sea like midnight glass with light splintered through it and the piece of moon emerged from a cloud, lips sliding, it felt like the last moment and Patrick, after the kiss had ended, held Angus’s shoulders and wanted to push him under, wanted to lower him into the darkness and hold him until, like his cock desperate for sufferance against the besser brick wall, he stopped and sank. Patrick’s two hands rested on Angus’s shoulders. His thumb ran the line in Angus’s cheek, the line he dreamt of in bed when Angus wasn’t there. He felt Angus's lips on
his lips, felt Angus leaving. The world held only the two of them, treading water so black and so deep that any shark, any jellyfish, could have appeared between them without being seen, opened its jaw of glinting teeth and taken either one of them in full view of the other, wrapped its tentacles around the throat of one, the other unable to free him without suffering the same electrical annihilation. Treading water Angus sank, dropped away in the dark, appeared metres away blowing his nose into the sea.

‘We have no money.’

‘We must have something.’

Patrick was wet again and it felt good. ‘You should go in again. You should go wash yourself off.’ Angus laughed again, a brief scoffing laugh. He was somewhere else, looking around, thinking and somewhere else. ‘You should go in. I’ll come in with you. Let’s go for a swim again.’

There were people everywhere now. The sun was back to its usual brash self, rising, now forty-five degrees. Angus dropped his trousers on the beach and Patrick — taking risks like they used to — grabbed Angus’s hand and they ran hard as they could into the water, yelling so that the whole world would turn and watch.

Angus didn’t swim away. The old scar kinked. His black tooth showed. Drips off his hair on his tight brown face made small magnifying lenses over his bruise. He swam shark underwater, slam-dunked Patrick and fell on top of him, laughing properly this time. Patrick felt the laugh against his chest. A man nearby watched them disapprovingly. Angus turned to see what Patrick was looking at. He poked his tongue out at the man and Patrick climbed on Angus’s back and wrestled him beneath the wave.

‘Your jacket.’ Patrick signaled with his eyes. Angus had used his jacket as a pillow. He lifted it out of the sand and shook it. There was a fleck of blood on the lapel. He had shown up at Patrick’s house dressed for his mother’s wedding and winking a blood shot eye.

They found a table with a little shade and opened the butcher’s paper and the one chocolate milk. A few minutes earlier Angus had vomited into the bushes beside the parked cars. Patrick wasn’t so badly hungover. Angus had drunk most of the vodka. He said he had swallowed too much salt water. The vomit was mostly water. Patrick wiped Angus’s mouth with the same
handkerchief he had used earlier. He could smell Angus on it and wanted to press it to his face but put it back in his pocket.

The chips tasted good and as soon as their mouths tasted the salt and the soft potato their stomachs growled in unison. They laughed. Patrick looked around them. Most people had left the beach after their morning swim. A few were arriving with children and beach towels and eskies. He looked up at the apartments on the other side of the road. A woman draped a towel over a veranda. Patrick waved.

‘What’s that?’ Angus had dug something out of his pocket.
‘I found it in the glove box.’ Of his car. Angus had bought a car.
‘What is it?’
‘An electricity bill.’ He pressed it open on the table leaving grease from his fingers across the print. ‘It must’ve belonged to the people who used to own my car. Let’s go there. There’s an address. Let’s go check it out.’

Seagulls cawed above their chips. ‘Angus, I’m afraid.’ There. He said it. Not meaning what he knew Angus would interpret him to mean, but he’d taken his moment and said ‘I’m afraid’. You’re going to leave me. He hadn’t said that. Out loud words never go away.

‘Don’t be stupid. It’s in Beenleigh. What else is there to do?’
‘OK.’

The phone-box was dirty. Smeared glass. Sand on the concrete slab. Something on the phone like glue, smeared and dried. Patrick tried to scrape the stuff off by driving it against the metal shelf that housed the phone book but only a little came away. He put his fingers where the glue stuff wasn’t and with his other hand dialed the number.

‘You and Angus enjoying yourselves, Pat?’ His father had a habit of yelling into the phone.
‘How’s Sally?’
‘She’s fine, Pat. You enjoying yourself?’
‘Yes. Is she OK?’ Patrick could hear his sister gurgling in the background. She must have heard his name. He couldn’t tell if she was excited or upset. She sounded upset. ‘Is she missing me? Should I come home, Dad?’
‘She’s fine. The cat hasn’t come in that’s all. You know how she gets about that cat.’

Even five-year-old Patrick could tell his sister had something wrong with her when she came home wrapped in a bundle bound tight to prevent her arms from paddling. When Patrick leaned over his mother’s elbow to look into the small face her mouth gave it away. And as she grew her eyes didn’t know where to go. Their mother cried often then left. From his bedroom window Patrick watched her put a suitcase into the boot of a man’s car. The man was missing half a finger.

‘Have you called him?’

‘Yes, Pat. Look she’s fine. Please, mate, go and enjoy yourself.’

One day Patrick walked into the kitchen and the cat sat at the back door looking into their home as if it had lived there all its life and had returned for dinner. It didn’t have a name because Sally couldn’t speak and it was her cat. Sally got agitated when the cat wasn’t around.

‘I’ll be home soon, Dad. I’ll come home soon. Maybe check next door. He might’ve got locked in the shed again next door.’

‘OK, I’ll check. But don’t you worry. You and Angus go have a swim or something. She’ll be fine without you for one day.’

Angus waited in the car. ‘How is she?’

‘The cat hasn’t come home.’ Across the road the immense sea crashed. It was blue now and blinding and reached away forever.

‘It will come back,’ Angus said. ‘The cat. You worry too much. It always comes back.’

It does, Patrick thought. So he said it out loud. ‘It always comes back.’
I have to tell you before I tell you this story that I never saw them again. After the accident. My train arrived seconds after Terry fell down the escalator and I watched them through the window for as long as I could but my train left the station. I was hoping someone would help them. I don’t know if anyone helped them in the end.

Their names were Terry and Jilly. I called them Romeo and Juliet. I’d tell my wife about them when I got home. I’d say, ‘Romeo and Juliet were at the station again today,’ and she’d say, ‘What were they doing this time?’ She liked to hear stories about them. She’d seen them a couple of times when we’d caught the train home together. I got to know them pretty well because I’d been catching the same train for almost two years by then and they were there often. I called them Romeo and Juliet because the first time I saw them they strode in front of the commuters like a leading lady and leading man on stage: straight walking, shoulder to shoulder, eyes ahead. They behaved as if the station belonged to them and the rest of us, motionless and silent, were their sentries. I sat across the tracks and heard every word. They said they loved each other. They climbed the escalator and stood inside the little Perspex balcony. They watched traffic on the overpass and, below them, the trains pulling into and leaving the station. Romeo leaned back, pulled Juliet to him. They kissed.

Juliet — Jilly — was short and too thin. She had high cheekbones, large eyes, a beautiful face. My guess is she could take a punch if she had to. Terry was wiry in straight-leg jeans. He had a long full sullen bottom lip, heavy eyebrows and deep grooves on either side of his nose that made him look like a man much older. On occasion we’d catch each other’s eye at the top of the escalators — me and Terry or me and Jilly or both of them would see me and I’d smile. Terry’s look said, ‘I recognize you, but don’t speak to me.’ To him I was like the trains and the escalators and the vending machines. Jilly was different. She acknowledged me on occasion. Like the Melbourne Cup afternoon when a woman in a hat stepped behind a vending machine and vomited into her handbag. Jilly sat on the opposite platform. She laughed loudly and I laughed and she saw me laughing and waved.
I got used to seeing Terry out of it. When he was out of it he did this thing on the escalators. That’s how the accident happened. But before he did the escalator thing he’d half pass out on the concrete for a while with his head on his arm. Or he’d try to put his head on Jilly’s lap and Jilly would push him off like she was dusting crumbs. Jilly sat up very straight when she was high. She scratched the dog behind the ears. They had a German shepherd. It was a well-behaved dog. They fed it from bins and flicked its turds onto the tracks. It was Jilly’s dog. It always sat with Jilly. On one occasion I saw them begging with the dog out the front of the station. The dog lay languidly beside them. It was a good life for a dog I suppose: stray but not stray, a sort of bohemian dog’s life. I often saw the three of them asleep together on the platform. On one side of Jilly the dog lay with its head on its front paws and on her other side was Terry with his head on his arms like the dog. Eventually Jilly would take pity on Terry squirming on the concrete. It took him a while to register the tap on the shoulder, to move in and lay his head on her lap.

The first time I saw Terry’s escalator thing I had a book with me and I’d been half watching them on the opposite platform and half reading. I went back to my book and when I looked again Terry was sitting up as if he had been called to attention in his dreams. He scratched up and down the inside of his arm and stood and nudged Jilly awake with the toe of his shoe. Jilly reached for his belt and pulled him down to her. They always kissed with their mouths rigid and angular and pressing hard, as if they had invented kissing, as if they were obliged to kiss for the benefit of the commuters. People tried not to look but I watched. Jilly’s knees parted then all I could see was Terry’s backside. He stumbled and saved himself on Jilly’s knee then stood and yelled ‘Love ya Babe.’ Jilly laughed. She turned her body to the escalator, bent her feet beneath her buttocks.

Terry leapt up the escalator. He looked for Jilly. He waved. They blew kisses until Terry was out of sight. I watched Jilly watching the top of the escalator. Terry was waiting for the Geelong train. Attention passengers. He was attuned, able to read trepidation. There was a young bloke in fluorescent work wear, tall and thin and slightly stooped at the shoulders. He had large hands. He was green as a rookie footballer: Terry’s pick.
Terry once made the mistake of targeting the old woman with a shopping buggy and a fat Pomeranian. The old woman wasn’t homeless and she wasn’t crazy, just old with a buggy. Jilly always watched her from a distance. They never spoke. I knew what Jilly was thinking: no more raising her skirt to ease the sun onto her legs, no longer brash, no longer raucous. The tatty old thing with raw drooping eyelids was her future, mute and as unseen as if she wore camouflage. When Jilly saw Terry target the old woman she pushed her way up the escalator. Jilly yelled. I couldn’t hear what was said. The pair frightened the old woman. They were rough. She glided down the escalator and sat with her dog in its buggy facing her. She watched for her train. Terry followed Jilly onto the platform. He was angry. He swore. Jilly yelled again and again. ‘Piss off. Piss off, Terry. I’ve got to clear my head.’

Terry let the young bloke onto the escalator and trotted down the first few stairs; he could have been anyone in a hurry to make a train. Jilly laughed. She yelled, ‘Love ya Babe!’ and Terry heard her. He raised his hands above his head: the dance had begun. I thought, this guy has been a clown the whole of his life. He’s born to it. Jilly squealed when Terry raised his hands. Terry reached his rookie and stepped down onto the stair in front of him. He pushed a woman in the back to make room. The woman looked behind her and saw Terry and took another step down to get out of his way. Terry turned to face the boy. The boy looked over Terry’s shoulder. His train had arrived. Jilly yelled, ‘Love ya Babe.’

Jilly liked to watch Terry. Most days. Indulgently lie back squealing, attracting her own looks of revulsion. But Terry was non-stop. He was a prattler and he was predictable and sometimes Jilly’s look picked him up at the point of its blade and flicked him high and long into the distance. Like the dog’s turds. ‘Piss off, Terry. Leave me alone.’ Terry didn’t get alone. Alone he was moody and no good at his craft, his timing was shoddy. He needed company and he needed a crowd.

The rookie jumped and Jilly squealed and clapped: Terry had made one of his noises — a scream or a boo. The rookie searched Terry’s face for the source of the sound. He stepped backwards up a stair and Terry stepped up to meet him. He moved to one side and Terry moved with him. A man behind
the rookie said something to Terry and Terry laughed. Terry loved to be egged on. It brought out the master in him.

You just couldn’t help watching Terry. There were times when everybody looked up from their page or screen to watch him. ‘Funny man, hey? Funny man.’ One time, on the way home from the footy, my wife and I found Terry in excellent form. He was telling stories. ‘My Dad had this fucking tree in his backyard …’

‘There’s kids, Terry,’ Jilly interrupted.

‘Sorry. Sorry. I was saying. My dad. He had this tree with five fruit on it. Five different fruit on the one fucking tree.’

‘Terry.’

‘Sorry. Grafted onto one tree. Apples, pears, nectarines, apricots, peaches. Believe me? Don’t believe me? I’ll prove it to yas.’ A man pulled his small son close. The boy’s eyes were hooked onto Terry’s dad’s tree. Terry picked five pieces of fruit and hugged the fruit to his chest. He offered an apple to the boy. The boy was still holding the apple when he got on the train.

But mostly people recoiled from Terry. He liked to harass. He liked to weave through the crowd and tap people on the head and say, ‘Hat. Hat. Hair. Bald. Hair. Hair. Hat.’ Herb sold The Big Issue. Herb used to say, ‘Grow up you stupid bastard. It doesn’t hurt to be nice,’ and Terry would tell Herb he was a ‘useless miserable old cunt.’ Sometimes I wanted to yell, ‘Look around you Terry. No-one is laughing. You disgust them. You frighten them.’ But it would’ve egged him on like the man behind the rookie with the big awkward hands egged him on.

Terry laughed at the man. The man put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. Jilly yelled, ‘Love ya Babe’ and Terry raised his hands high and screamed into the rookie’s face. No one passed them. Terry wagged his head from side to side and screamed again and screamed at the man as he pushed past the boy. Terry let him pass. He did a jig and the Geelong train left the station. The boy saw his train leave. He walked backwards up the escalator and the people behind him moved out of his way: that man is volatile, that man is the type to avoid, better the boy than me. They moved out of the rookie’s way then passed him. Perhaps they are mates mucking about. They knew in the instant they turned their heads and looked at the boy’s face they were not mates. The
boy looked over Terry’s shoulder but not at the train because the train had
gone. There was nowhere else to look. Better him than me, they thought,
stepping down two stairs at a time to the bottom of the escalator, pretending to
be in a hurry although there were no trains at the platform.

Terry changed. He stopped dancing. He looked past the rookie to the
top of the escalator and pointed. ‘Fuck off you fat wog cunt.’ The boy shifted.
Terry didn’t notice. The boy stepped down. He passed Terry. He trotted down
the escalator. He looked straight ahead as if he was still looking over Terry’s shoulder. The security guard came down the escalator
after Terry. He was about as fit as I am and he was slow. Jilly called the dog.
Romeo and Juliet and their dog. Chased by the security guard through a hole
in the cyclone fence at the end of the platform.

When I told my wife the story about Terry on the escalators she said,
‘Don’t say cunt.’

I said, ‘I’m just telling you what Romeo said. Word for word.’

‘It’s demeaning to women.’

‘I know it is, love. I would never use it.’

‘You just used it.’

‘I was just telling you word for word but from now on if you prefer I’ll
say “the c word”,’ I said.

‘OK’ she said.

‘Why is that better?’ I said. ‘You know what the ‘c’ stands for so why
is it better?’

‘Can’t you just respect my wishes?’ she said.

The woman who punched Terry stepped over him at the bottom of the
escalator. She was young, moon-faced. She was shaken. Before the punch
Terry had timed things perfectly. He descended the escalator and passed her
and came back up to her. But she did not timidly move aside or clumsily and
apologetically step backwards onto the toe of the person behind her. She acted
out of self-defense. Her fist came up as if it belonged to someone else and she
punched Terry in the chest. It was a strong winding punch. Terry stumbled
backwards and commuters moved out of his way out of concern for their own
safety. They turned like dolls on a pin. They dropped down a stair or two and
onto the safety of the platform where it was all behind them, whatever it was,
and their train in front. Or if not their train they must check when their train would arrive. Behind them a rough looking woman made a lot of noise. There was a dog. A train pulled in. The noise of the train drowned her out.

I watched the woman who punched Terry. Her train arrived soon after she stepped onto the platform. I saw her through the window enter the carriage. She was dazed but she pulled herself together. She looked up the aisle for a seat. She squeezed passed a man with a laptop and sat beside the window. As the train departed she was sniffing under her arm.

Terry’s head hit the platform. It hit the concrete hard enough to bounce and hit it a second time. He was unconscious. Jilly screamed his name into his face and screamed for help. I would have helped but my train arrived. I hoped somebody helped them.

There’s a wind tonight. It’s cold. I should have brought my coat today. This morning was warm but it has turned. My wife has started to complain about her job. She says she doesn’t know what she is doing with her life. She doesn’t like where we live and complains about the rent and says she wants to move to the country. I thought about bringing my coat this morning but we started talking about moving to the country and I left it behind. I don’t mind the idea of moving to the country. I might get a bit healthy if we moved to the country — I don’t feel great about my weight all the time. ‘I could chop wood,’ I said to her. ‘If we move to the country I’ll chop wood.’

‘You’d better do some walking or something before you go chopping wood,’ she said. ‘You’ll have a heart attack if you just go chopping wood.’

‘Are you going to chop the wood then?’

She said, ‘No way. I’m not chopping wood.’

‘Well you have to chop wood if you move to the country or what’s the point?’ I said. She threw the teatowel at me. We get on OK but she’s not that happy.

It’s about six months since I saw Romeo and Juliet. My wife has stopped asking me about them. It’s probably a good thing they’re not here now winter is approaching. They didn’t like winter. They derided each other and gave everyone a hard time. ‘What are you looking at?’ That sort of thing. Darkness earlier, the night longer. It gets to commuters who see little of the day and it got to Jilly and Terry. For Terry it was like the stage lights were too
dim, the crowd less awake, more withdrawn, blanketed. They did not look when Terry wanted them to look and Terry tried too hard. He rushed and he stumbled and lost his effervescence. But winter seemed to torment Jilly. When it was warm and the days long I guess she could enjoy the triangles of sunlight on the platform or the rain powering in sheets onto the tracks, the echo of it under the overhang or watching the pigeons and sparrows pick at crumbs. In winter she paced and she yelled at people. It was as if her life leech ed out of her with the early diminishing light. Terry would take her by the shoulders and walk her in long circles around the platform. He held her like he was keeping her in one piece. Last winter I remember her yelling, ‘The trains are eating into my head, Terry. They’re eating into my fucking head, Babe.’ Like it was all over. Like there was no more pretending to be done.
As a pair they were small in the large room, far beneath the high ceiling. He said they were the survivors of Wilfred’s death as if Wilfred’s death had been a shipwreck and they, castaways. Off very different ships, she had said. She said the battering experience of the death of one’s father was more wreckage than the change in tide that had swept him, Brian O’Byrne M.P., momentarily lost, to her. She filled boxes with books and the boxes grew tall and propagated in various corners of the room. He visited in the evening. She was reluctant at first. She heard herself say ‘I wouldn’t sleep with you if you were the last man on earth,’ knowing, as the words formed secretively in her head, that they were false. Already she knew that. She understood his practised attractiveness, was aware of the effect it was beginning to have on her. She saw the irony of the attraction and the greater irony in her intention to pursue it.

Brian O’Byrne had read about Wilfred Stone’s death in The Age, had indulged memories of the time when they knew each other for as long as it took to finish a strong latte. He allowed himself these minutes in place of what he should have been doing which was catching up on emails and phone calls and following the latest Twitter feed. He had not expected to revisit those years more than this one time but Stone’s daughter had written to him and her letter, and the book she had posted with it, had a pull he was unprepared for.

The Hon Brian O’Byrne MP
Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations

Dear Mr O’Byrne

My name is Clarissa Stone. I am the only child of the late Mr Wilfred James Stone. I believe you and he were once friends.

I was introduced to you many years ago but I purposefully did not put myself into context for you and you will not recall our meeting. You were Minister for the Arts at the time and I a young filmmaker. You are someone I never imagined I would meet, although I have known of you all my life. We
shook hands when we were introduced and it was like shaking hands with Boy George. I never imagined I would shake your hand but when I did I found it was the most ordinary thing. Your hand was just a hand and the child in me, who had watched my father relive your betrayal every time your name appeared in the paper, looked up in disbelief. It was like I’d taken the hand of Boy George and said, ‘I had posters of you all over my bedroom wall,’ and it was just a simple thing to say.

Something other than his age — he was eighty-two — had seeded in my father and me a sense that his death was imminent although there was nothing quantifiable to hang our suspicions on. His previous strokes had been minor and he had recovered from them quickly. I visited him daily. If he caught me scrutinizing his weight, the clarity of his eyes, the steadiness of his hands he didn’t let on, though I would have offended him. Last winter he began giving me pieces of his pottery. (His pottery is valuable. Anyone who appreciates Australian pottery will be familiar with his mark. I imagine he gave you some of his early work.) When he heard my car coming up the driveway he swayed across the garden in his studio coat looking like a brown bear. The following summer he greeted me wearing threadbare shirts and I was shocked to see how un-bearlike he had become. Without speaking he opened the back door of my car and put the piece or pieces onto the back seat. Or if he handed me the pottery I would raise it to the sun to admire his trademark translucence. That strikes me as almost patronizing now when I write it, but it was something I had done since I was little. I suppose I may have been remarking on our shared pasts more than his talents. To the end his work was as poised and as confident as it had always been.

You may remember that my father and my mother, Grace, met at a meeting of the Communist Party of Australia. I believe that was some time before you joined the Party. They said of their first meeting — often enough for me to recall their precise words — ‘We had been waiting for each other.’ As you know they were active members of the Party for many years until my mother’s teaching demanded more of her time. And then I was born. Freed of Party obligations my father’s work prospered but both remained members until the late eighties. They clung on for some time after your attack on the CPA was published as an opinion piece in *The Age*. 
Grace cared for Wilfred in the most traditional sense and I feel her presence in the house after all these years as if she has returned to take him. (My parents would have hated such religiosity, although Wilfred forgave me my spiritual inclinations as they developed in my late teens. He and Grace were committed rationalists as well as communists.) But it is as if Grace and I are on handover, as nurses do at the change of their shift: Wilfred is once more in her care.

I feel Grace looking over my shoulder as I pack things away. Not in judgment but with curiosity. But I have not found the photographs of her yet. A few weeks after she died I came home from school to find all photos of her put away and I haven’t seen them since. Except the one beside Wilfred’s bed. I suppose he allowed himself the indulgence of being with her at night when the house was quiet. Perhaps he cried himself to sleep, I don’t know. I’m sure they will be somewhere in the house. I am sure he would not have disposed of them as he did the photograph of the two of you. He burned that photograph in our fireplace. As I remember it Wilfred was in his late-thirties and you in your early twenties. My father has his arm around your shoulders. You were Comrades smiling. Actually you could have been father and son in that photo.

Grace died twenty years ago this week. Such coincidences are uncanny are they not? A number of years after her passing I helped Wilfred tidy up some of her belongings. Her desk was the repository of all things family, everything worthy of her exacting curatorial hand. In there we found the newspaper clipping and I felt a trill of guilt as I had read it many years earlier on a day when it had rained and I was trapped in the house. Wilfred was in his studio and Grace was absent. (I later learned she had been having medical tests.) At the time puberty was erupting at every corner and there was a sense of risk and the faint perfume of independence in reading the infamous Brian O’Byrne opinion piece that had deeply hurt Wilfred, whom I loved. Wilfred earned my love, Mr O’Byrne. He was a great man. When Grace died he was naturally wretched with grief but he handled the confusions of his daughter with such thoughtfulness I was eventually able to let her go. He was so present for me I cannot say I longed for Grace’s influence beyond missing her as a person. I did not feel an especial need for a mother because my father was unembarrassed by life, withheld nothing and I could talk to him with the
ease of taking a jar of jam from the pantry. He walked me to school. We caught the tram across the river. After school I came home by myself and visited him in his studio. I pressed my fingers into lumps of cold clay. He made me a Milo and my finger traced his mark, WJS, on the bottom of the mug. I watched him throw clay and I watched his hands shape it. He was a gentle, talented man. Were your ambitions within the ALP so important, Mr O’Byrne? Even in the last years of his life your name remained capable of reddening my father’s face; your betrayal was a pain never vanquished. So when Wilfred and I found that piece of newspaper neatly folded where I had returned it years before I was afraid he would destroy it rather than taint the moment with his rage. But he looked at it and unfolded it and said, ‘It snowed that day, apparently. I didn’t see it snow.’

Do you remember the snow, Mr O’Byrne? Do you remember that the day you betrayed my father, the day you acted to distance yourself from the Communist Party, it snowed in Melbourne for the first time in thirty-two years? Each time that piece of newspaper found its way into my hand I imagined Wilfred on that afternoon, what it felt like to read what you wrote. I remember the sky was muddy grey. Wilfred would have switched on the light. I imagine him bent beneath the lamp, reading in disbelief, flakes of snow catching on the leaves of the camellia as they had caught on my small, gloved hand. Wilfred, too taken aback by what he was reading to look out the window then emerging from his studio into the midwinter air at the moment the snow turned to water, a dampness under his feet as if from winter drizzle, a tram squealing in the distance. That evening Grace said, ‘Did you see the snow?’ and Wilfred said, ‘What snow?’ That evening I became a bewildered child for the first time. I sat cross-legged on the floor.

I told Wilfred that I remembered the snow. We were let out of the classroom, I told him. We caught snow in our hands and dusted it from our hair. The gardens across the road whitened with a drifting veil, the bitumen of the playground dotted. We tried to gather enough into a ball to throw at each other but it was too meager and melted as soon as it landed. But we ran around and behind us the teachers stood at windows. Wilfred handed me the piece of newspaper. He said, ‘He flattered me. I thought I was his mentor. He was like family to us.’ He gave it to me to read and when I’d finished he told
me you had been to their house — this house — for dinner, less than a week before. He told me you often came for dinner. He told me you arrived at the CPA as a young man and he could see you were ambitious but he considered you a great friend. I said, ‘Surely you’d been betrayed before.’ He said he had, they all had. He said, ‘I thought I was thick skinned. We all had to be thick skinned.’ Then I said, I remember, ‘I’m sure you were, Wilfred. I’m sure you were strong.’ But I don’t know why I said that. I had seen otherwise. It is you who showed me the fissures in my father’s fortitude, Mr O’Byrne. He said, ‘He put the boot in. We were already down. We were on our knees in fact, but he put the boot in.’

I gave the piece of newspaper back to Wilfred and watched him burn it at last. But here I find there is another copy. I have come across another copy today and I must tell you, Mr O’Byrne, that your words are fierce: “impotent”, “lame”. I suppose ambition and politics go hand in hand and you perceived your moment: the CPA was more than fraying at its edges. But you chose to attack my father personally. You alluded to him in a most obvious and unforgiveable way. He was the “potter living a very comfortable, one might even say bourgeois existence, in the Eastern suburbs.” You called him hypocritical. Your desire to cleanse yourself of the Party saw you single out the one man with whom you had had a most intimate friendship out of fear that that friendship might be your undoing.

I write to you with a book opened beside me on the table, its hard cover bound in rust-orange and with the title Working Imperialism. I suspect in the scheme of things it is insignificant and long out of print. Do you remember giving it to Wilfred? You had written Happy Birthday to him and had signed the inside cover. Beside your signature is the other copy of your opinion piece. (Did you regret writing it, Mr O’Byrne? I have often wondered.) The Sellotape is brown; it must have been stuck there a long time ago.

Sir, it has taken me a long time to decide what to do with this book and the newspaper clipping taped to its inside cover. Your appearance in this house, once again, has stilled my momentum and stirred memory I no longer wish to have stirred. I am sending this memento to you on behalf of my father, Mr Wilfred James Stone.
Truly,
Clarissa Stone.
P.S. Victory to the nurses, Mr O’Byrne.

Dear Clarissa,

The book you sent to me smelled of your father’s library and the evocation wiped out the in-between of my life as if it had been fraudulent. I don’t wish to make too much of this; it was fleeting, a second. But the enormity of that memory hit me like a wave and washed my present reality away. My life endured, of course. It rose in a kind of a rage to assert itself and I would never have expected less of it: the collective force of my wife, my daughter, my career, my public persona. I have created a successful life, a good life for myself and I have no wish to abandon it. But when I opened that book I was another man and then it seemed one of these men was false and I couldn’t work out which.

Clarissa, I loved your father but he flattered himself into thinking I was looking for a father. It was he who was looking for a son. Perhaps he wasn’t aware of his paternal instincts before I came along but I knew it was there. It is possible it is one of the reasons I did what I did, or the reason I was able to do what I did. I was a little repelled by his need for me to be a son. I was not his son to have. I had a perfectly reasonable father already, an ordinary middle class man who worked in the public service all his life and played oboe to himself on Sunday afternoons. A contented man. A simple and adequate father. Not a romantic figure like Wilfred, not a jewel of a father. (They don’t come often, you know, jewels in the father department. I am certainly not a jewel of a father.) But it was easy to love Wilfred, as a man and as a friend.

I was very sorry when I heard Grace had died. She was an incredible woman. She had a great head for maths, did you know that? I suppose you know that already. And she was an amateur economist. She tried unsuccessfully to keep it under her hat, her understanding of the way the world worked in economic terms. I could never understand that, why she kept such a lid on having her say. She read economics ferociously. She couldn’t get enough of it and I always wondered why she didn’t study it at university,
she and Wilfred being so progressive. She would have been a force. She was acutely intelligent and forward-thinking. Your father had a tendency to be wishy-washy, a little too creative to the point of losing a grip on reality altogether. Grace was not like that at all. On the occasions when she pulled Wilfred up in his ramblings he would ask her why she didn’t do it more often. He said he appreciated her tempering influence. She said good things come from creative people and it was not up to her to bring him back to earth. That’s why they were so amazing together. They worshipped each other’s strengths.

Grace always remained a little aloof from me and I think she saw me more clearly than your father did. I suspect she was not surprised when I wrote that piece. I was a bit in love with her. Not in the way I loved your father. I mean had a quite a crush on her. I have never told anyone this and I suppose I shouldn’t be telling you, of all people. Your mother was easy to fall in love with. She was younger than your father and I was ripe for falling in love. And it was safe. There was never any possibility that her love for Wilfred would falter. Although I did fantasize, after I had sabotaged any hope of seeing the two of them again, that she may have kept her distance out of a sexual attraction she felt towards me. But never an inclination to love.

I had never known a person so calmly self-assured as Wilfred. It’s a class thing; do you understand that about yourself? There are consequences in being cared for, educated, protected, of never having to want for anything, just as there are in being neglected or abused. Wilfred was free to pursue his passion and to turn it to excellence. That is something my father never had. He had a mortgage. That was his passion, chipping away at his family’s debt. Wilfred made me feel secure. I suppose when we met I may have appeared to be in need of a father. I was only aware of my ambitions to make something of myself, to make it in politics. I didn’t set out to injure him. I boarded the tram to my first CPA meeting, a middle-class university student afflicted with sympathy for the working class. At the time I had integrity. But I grew to understand my own ambitions. I was never going to get anywhere in the CPA. I wanted what your father had, only not what he had done with it. I wanted money for my future family and myself. But I lost my honour when I had that
piece published. I lost my honour when I sat down to write it. I have had to live with that.

It began in anger. Did he tell you that we argued? Wilfred badgered me to give up a third of my income. He lectured me that poverty was relative. You must see how hypocritical that seemed to me. In his place perhaps I would have done the same. One cannot know how one would behave given different circumstances. But your father looked at the black hole of poverty through a microscope while most of us stand, wobbly and frightened, at the lip of its crater. He had never wanted for anything and he called me snobbish and mercenary. I was arrogant. I decided he understood nothing, but he understood everything. Yet to be fair to my younger hot-headed self, I still hold I was right in thinking he had experienced nothing. But neither of us had and that was his point. I had never experienced real suffering. Your father understood that about himself and he was never apologetic about it. His vision was worldly. But I don’t need to tell you all of this.

Clarissa, yes I regret writing what I wrote, but I am not sure that I wish to ask for your forgiveness,

Yours
Brian

Dear Mr O’Byrne,

If the evocation of Wilfred’s library has the power to trouble you, would you take pity on the person who confronts the real thing daily after breakfast? Through quick arithmetic I have calculated there to be over two thousand books. I am not into the book as an object as Wilfred was. I could never hold onto two thousand books, although Wilfred didn’t hold onto them as much as allowed them stay: a book in his care was a fortunate book. Do I suppose he read all of these? Yes. Did he love them all? I have no idea. I cannot take the same amount of time to decide the fate of each of them as I have taken over the small volume you now have in your possession. But a small number of books are unquestionably special to me. I can barely hold them for the weight of significance they have. Books one loves are one thing, but books loved by people one has loved are altogether more difficult. So far I have five I shall keep but I am only about one tenth of the way through his collection. Four of
these books I remember my mother or my father reading. I have subsequently read two of them but I know them less through my own reading than Grace’s or Wilfred’s reading of them. I cannot explain it any more than that. The fifth is a book used as a doorstop to Grace’s study. I am assuming she thought little of it as a book but I remember its smell and I remember being on my knees pushing it along the floorboards.

There is so much in this house I have decided to have a clearing sale where I hope to sell most of the library. The leftover books will go to an op shop. (I dread the fate of them amongst romance fiction and microwave-oven cookbooks.) I have thought how I might advertise at local bookshops. I suppose there are better ways of doing all of this but I don’t know what they are and I have too much to think about to look into it.

I have set up a room for myself here. Upstairs. Not my childhood bedroom. I think it may have been a guest room and perhaps you might have used it at one time. It is east-facing and overlooks Mrs Wilson’s back garden. It is a small room with a small window. It was filled with cardboard boxes, the kind my father used to package up his pottery for posting. Behind the boxes I found the violin that I never learned to play. After I emptied the room I pulled up the carpet and began painting the walls. I have only managed the first coat.

Today the wind is blowing. There is no sun. There is a good store of firewood that will go with the sale of the house. I have considered staying here. I have thought about selling my flat in Perth to return permanently to the house where I grew up. If I am honest I have nothing keeping me in WA (I have not lived there for almost a year). But if I choose to stay I would want this to be my home and I would go ahead with the clearing sale. I will keep the things bequeathed to me and my father’s porcelain. I have put a large amount of that into storage already. Right now I don’t mind being alone in the old house but it is possible I will buckle under the task of sorting through my family’s possessions. I would not say no to a little help. I am hoping Trades Hall will take the Communist Party posters flyers and minutes. But there are other things. Wilfred’s studio coat, purchased in London in his early twenties. Do you remember it? At the start of every summer he draped it over his arm and walked it to the dry cleaners. And he kept the ashes of our cat. He was
very fond of her. During the day she slept in patches of sun in his studio or beside the pot-bellied wood heater or under the shelves lined with unfired pieces of porcelain if the weather was hot. At night she slept on my bed, her fur often powdered with clay and glaze. She was run over. It was the only time I saw Wilfred cry. I suppose I should scatter her ashes under the camellia before the blooms have fallen.

In this wild weather I think I hear Wilfred’s studio groan. This is ridiculous of course. I can hear barely anything above the fire and the wind. And his studio, you will remember, is at the bottom of the garden. I think it is the isolation I hear; the weather makes the studio’s plight worse. Some may think it is my plight too: an only child, a failed relationship and no children, but I don’t consider myself lonely. But Wilfred’s studio seems desolate, like a dog after the birth of a baby. It has no use anymore. After Wilfred’s body was maneuvered through the screen of pink flowers he was so fond of I locked the door that, in my memory, has never been locked. (I’m afraid poor Mrs Wilson found me taking to the camellia with garden shears.) With the fire lit, here in the living room, I feel the sort of cocooning I did as a child. Wilfred’s studio, lit and heated for most of the day and night during his lifetime, is now dark and cold as a cadaver itself.

When my father died he swept three bowls, a small vase and a large blue platter to the floor as he fell. I found him. He lay neatly on his side on the floor of his studio, ankles together, arms by his side. Pieces of bowl and vase surrounded him, but the platter had come to rest in front of his face, a jigsaw of its former self. He had made it as a peace offering to Grace. It engineered, I recall, a reconciliation and Grace insisted he keep it in his studio as her representative. I looked at that platter for perhaps a full minute before I bent down to his body: had his consciousness prevailed long enough to see the piece destroyed? Perhaps it is right that it had ceased to exist. The final stroke was his third and I hope he experienced it with an optimism bred of familiarity. Not afraid of death but irritated, as if the end had come as another inconvenience, the thing he most despised: an interruption of his work.

Yours,

Clarissa Stone
‘You wrote to me,’ he said after she let him in. He constructed a face of innocence as he said this: a simple man. Part of his political repertoire, she imagined, expressions filed like documents on his desktop, opened as needs must. ‘You told me you were living in the old house. I took it to be an invitation. I watched you for half an hour before I had the courage to knock.’ He watched her leave the living room and return with wood for the fire. She was tall like her father. Not unattractive but none of her mother’s delicacy. When she came to the window to draw the curtains he walked to the front door. He waited, absentmindedly running his fingers along the iron curves of the house’s name, _Aberdeen._

‘Let’s call a spade a spade,’ she said. ‘I’d call that spying.’

She offered him a drink and he declined. ‘Are you angry with me for saying I was in love with Grace?’ he wanted to know.

‘Theirs was the glass ceiling of relationships for me. The possibility of there being an imperfection grants me a little fresh air.’

One of the denuded bookcases towered behind him, a dark monument to Wilfred and Grace. If it fell it was quite capable of crushing him. She was no less the barbarian than Brian now, occupying the house in a military sense. But the old house was colluding with her, was even orchestrating the two of them. Like Wilfred and Grace it was completely lacking in sentimentality and was ready for something of substance to take root where there was only an expanding vacancy. It was built of brick and it was vast and as she emptied it a draft moved through it. She checked the windows. It wasn’t a draft. The warmth was leaving. As Wilfred’s body returned to the earth so his possessions reverted to the status of objects. At best they had become references to or reflections of her father. When Wilfred was alive he and the house and his things were one: simply, the house was Wilfred’s home. Now this wind ruffled her. The house expressed an urgency to manifest something new.

She woke. He had been up already, had asked her to remind him where the bathroom was. Now he had his back to her and she didn’t know if he was awake or asleep.
She was not his first infidelity. The nature of his confidence told her that. He was easy and smooth.

If his nature had been different what had happened last night would have been incestuous, such was Wilfred’s love for him. She fancied she heard Dr Freud shuffling in his slippers in the hall. She tapped the foot of the bed: sit down, Dr Freud. Sunlight snuck over the windowsill and fell across the bed. It shone through the candle beside her head and the beeswax glowed as if the wick had been lit again inside it.

*Remember that old Commie potter?*

*Yeah, Stone.*

*That potty bloody Communist? Well I’m screwing his daughter.*

She had not committed incest but was it something worse? In Wilfred’s house.

The wallpaper was visible beneath her single coat of paint, the raw floorboards dusty where she had removed the carpet. Was it a boudoir then? She thought she had been clearing a small space for herself but he had called the letter an invitation and perhaps this redecorating had been in preparation.

She turned over and looked at the sun-spots on his shoulders and the wrinkles. Dr Freud had gone. It was Wilfred now. ‘Has he aged, Wilfred?’ Wrath was not Wilfred’s style: his perfection was in knowing his imperfections. ‘Forgiveness already? Of me but not of Brian. Of course, you saw his face on television but in the flesh is he different to how you remember him? I never imagined him as the young man you knew. I watched you age and in my mind he aged too. I permitted him his mortality but you had him preserved. Look here: evidence of time, evidence of sun. He has aged. He is weathered. He has not spent his life tucked into a corner of your mind.’ She wanted Brian again. She curled into his back and slid a hand between his thighs.

They slept again. She woke and got out of bed and stood naked in front of the window looking at Mrs Wilson’s garden and feeling the sun on her skin. She put on a pair of underpants and a t-shirt and opened the can of paint she had left beside the wardrobe. She poured a liberal quantity into the tray. She lifted the roller to the wall. A faint clatter sounded downstairs. Not loud enough to be alarming. A vague sound. The kind of ambiguous sound
made by old houses. A sound that might have been Wilfred making a pot of tea.
That’s a good boy, Jilly said to the dog. That’s it. Like that. She could hear the train. It made her heart beat in her throat to hear it. She pushed her nose into the brush of his neck. A river rushed in her ears. Like that. Good boy. Good boy. Life seemed small now. Life passed quickly. Then and now and all that in between seemed like nothing now. Could hear the train. Then. Terry’s entrance. Stupid man. Last thing they needed was a puppy. All legs in his arms. Good boy. Like that. And now. The train.

The old Greek woman cried out.

The thing she had thought about most was timing. She chose the far end of the platform where the train had already begun to slow down but not too much and she could push hard and he would topple. She didn’t want him to fall all the way. The train had to make contact. She didn’t want him to fall on the track.

_Sixameni! Sixameni!

They’d trained him to sit and wait outside Preston Markets, Saturday mornings. They didn’t tie him up or nothing, he just stayed. Two hours sometimes. Sometimes someone fed him pizza and he looked guilty. When Madeline was born Terry turned up and wanted the dog all of a sudden. Out of the blue. Like hell, she told him. Like hell you can.

_Sixameni! Sixameni!

Jilly was at the front of the train. Her legs felt like she had been running. She needed to look. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to look but she needed to know he wasn’t lying there suffering. That was her worst fear: a man would jump down; there would be a coat; they would be gentle, careful. My car is in the car park, someone would say. He would be taken from her. They would insist. She would have to follow to find out if the vet fixed him or put him to sleep. She couldn't afford to fix him. She couldn’t even afford to have him put to sleep. Money. Money always. Debts filled her brain like coal. She looked. It was hard to look. It had worked.

Someone bumped into her. It was the driver of the train who had also come to look down at the tracks. The driver’s fingers danced uselessly, hopelessly over a packet of cigarettes in her breast pocket. Finally she had one
and puffed, looking north along the tracks. She turned. She looked at Jilly’s face but looked through her, said nothing. The Station Master put his arm around the driver and held her weight by the elbow. He led her to a bench to sit down.

Madeline. That was her child, Madeline, crying.

Anestheti!

There was noise everywhere now. The old Greek woman had Madeline. Jilly had asked her. They were waiting for the same train. She had lived in Preston all her life since she had arrived from Greece. She had seven grandchildren but most of them lived in Queensland now. How she missed them. Would you mind? Of course, yes of course. They were waiting for the same train after all. Madeline cried and pushed at the old woman’s flat breasts. Jilly approached. Now that she had seen that her dog was dead she heard the noise. The train was quiet, the brakes of the train had stopped screaming, but there were people on the platform. Passengers came out of the train, watching the driver, some keeping a foot inside the door. They came in small bundles to see what had happened and turned away with their hands over their mouths. Jilly approached the old woman who held onto Madeline who was crying and a face came close. He had perfect teeth. Close like he was going to kiss her with perfect teeth, smelling of soap. You psycho, he was yelling at her, how could you do that? How could you do that? Fucking scrubber.

It was over now. She needed to hold Madeline. No, the old Greek woman shook her head. No. No you are not having her back. Before she was yelling but now she shook her head and twisted her body so that Madeline disappeared behind it. Yeah, don’t give her back, someone else was saying. God knows what she’ll do to that little girl.

Jilly walked towards Madeline and Madeline saw her over the old woman’s shoulder and stopped crying. Madeline liked the Greek lady. She giggled for her while they were waiting for the train. The old woman knew how to talk to children, how to make them feel safe and how to make them laugh. Jilly had been grateful. It was something she hadn’t really thought about when planning what to do today. She hadn’t really thought about Madeline left alone in her pusher a few metres from the edge of the platform.
She might not have been able to do it if the woman hadn’t been there and she felt safe leaving Madeline with her. Madeline had stopped crying. Her little fist gripped the sleeve of the old woman’s black dress. The old woman smelled a little stale. Madeline was tucked into her armpit. She smiled now that she could see her mother. The woman who said god knows what she’ll do to that little girl said I’ve called the police to the old Greek woman. I’ve called the police. They’ll be here in a minute. The old woman said something in Greek to no one. She crooned in Madeline’s ear as if Madeline was her own grandchild.

Jilly stood still. She hadn’t said anything. The dog was dead. That’s what she had come to do, she reminded herself. She had come to end the life of her dog because when he tried to stand up most times he couldn’t. It had taken an hour to walk him here. She had done what she had come to do and now it was time to go home. She stepped forwards with her arms out to get her little girl back but the old woman shook her head. Jilly said, We want to go home now. She didn’t take her eyes off her daughter. She wanted to take Madeline home and change her clothes to get the smell of the old woman’s stale armpit off her beautiful soft baby skin. She would give her a bath. She would wash her hair. The woman gripped too tightly. The old woman was forgetting she had a little girl in her arms.

The man who swore at her and the other woman walked quickly towards the two police officers who were now on the platform. Jilly said to the Constable who stood close to her, we want to go home now. That woman won’t give me back my baby. Tell her to give me my baby. The police officer took Madeline out of the arms of the old Greek woman and handed her to Jilly. He told Jilly she must wait to be interviewed. The old woman didn’t like it. She said more things to herself in Greek then said to the police officer, she shouldn’t be trusted with that little girl after what she did. The police shooed people back onto the train.

She and Terry were always in trouble with the cops. Cops made Jilly nervous. She and Terry were mostly in the wrong and Terry hated cops and that rubbed off on her. Mostly she felt like she had just done something wrong just because there were cops but today she didn’t hate them. They had made the old woman give back her daughter.
Madeline groped Jilly’s breast. She was getting a bit old for this but Jilly pulled up her t-shirt and bra and allowed the little mouth to attach to her nipple. The Station Master was sitting with the driver of the train and the police officer had seated Jilly next to them. Jesus, the Station Master said, *two in three months? You should go home. We’ll get a replacement.* The driver ground her cigarette butt under her shoe. I’m OK. It was a dog. *I thought it was another one but it was a dog. I’ll be OK in a minute.*

Jilly had imagined her plan many times to be sure it would work. She had pictured the blank face of the train coming towards her as though it was a real face of ribbed steel, preoccupied and focused. She had thought about the train, the front of it, and her dog and had pictured it happening and wondered if she would have the courage to do what she had decided needed to be done. She looked up from Madeline and looked at the driver. She hadn’t thought about a driver. The driver’s hands were shaking but not as much. The driver looked back at Jilly with the same empty expression as before. Madeline grew heavy. She was falling asleep. *I’m …* said Jilly, facing the driver. She wanted to say she was sorry, but she stopped because the word came out sounding like she was going to introduce herself.
Angus rode until he reached the scrub and stopped and threw his bike and had a smoke. His punched eye smarted. He had three cigarettes one straight after the other and pressed the butts into the leaf litter. One of the cigarettes didn't go out. He let it smoulder, watching the leaves around it catch and glow at their ends and he wondered what it would be like to be burned alive, caught in a bushfire and burned alive and then what it would feel like to light a fire and run away and watch it burn. The embers peeled along the edges of the first couple of leaves and spread into adjacent leaves and he let them burn.

He imagined getting Uncle by the throat and punching him hard in the face and knocking him out then dragging him here and lighting a fire. Tie him to a tree and light the fire then throw water on him to wake him up so Uncle sees just in time the flames growing around him and there would be nothing he could do. Angus would never have the guts. Anyway, he couldn't be bothered. Uncle was a waster.

He ground the little fire out under his shoe and pressed a fourth butt under his shoe and got back on his bike. He rode up the hill along the dirt track. It was narrow and it bent around the roots of trees. He reached the top of the hill by standing on the pedals of his bike and riding hard and he forgot about Uncle and his mum and Danny while he was riding like this and about his eye that had probably changed from red to blue. His mum she was pathetic. He felt sorry for her she was that pathetic. And fat Danny — she would be married to him by now — fat Danny was pathetic too.

At the top of the hill Angus dropped his bike because he wanted to push through the scrub and it was easier without it. He took off his jacket and left it on the handlebars. There was a sort of a track at this point that went further uphill. The ground was pressed hard but the track was only as wide as his foot and the bushes on either side of it were prickly. But you could see the whole of the suburb from up here.

His mother stood at his bedroom door this morning, wearing her wedding dress. The bones of her small body showed. He wished he could have said you look beautiful. She flicked her hair. She said ‘Uncle wants you downstairs.’ He kissed her on the cheek.
Downstairs balloons gathered on the floor. Uncle was making sandwiches. He asked Uncle, ‘Why are the garage doors shut?’

‘She doesn't want to see. Wants it to be a surprise.’

Angus’s feet sent the balloons drifting. Packets of balloons on the table waited for him. He and Uncle had spoken only once about Danny and Uncle had said, ‘I don’t know what my sister sees in him’. The garage smelled of Danny's aftershave. Angus was prepared to accept Danny into his life if it meant Uncle would be out of it. Angus sat on the table and began blowing up the balloons. He watched Uncle beyond a green balloon, then blue, then a yellow balloon (that one had a hole in it), then orange and there it was: the glass of beer. He’d had it hidden beside the washing machine. And an empty bottle. Uncle opened another. Angus smiled at Uncle and raised a hand. They were in this one together weren’t they, Uncle? Angus blew balloons and watched his uncle stooped and busy and drunk.

Uncle would hit him today. Angus knew that. The first time was a couple of years ago but since he had started Uncle didn’t see any reason to stop. Ungrateful selfish little no hoper. Uncle never swore. It was beneath him to swear. He upheld the dignity of the family, kept them on track, led them like donkeys along a dusty road. But Danny turned up. Auntie Pattie’s funeral. That was the first time. His mother met Danny and the insipid man made Uncle shaky and Uncle got drunk. Auntie Pattie was Ted's wife. Ted was his mother’s and Uncle’s brother. Auntie Pattie found a lump like a hardened prune and the word breast was at first spoken uneasily then declared clear as glass in the kitchen, on the phone, watching TV. Breast. Auntie Pattie grew thin and coughed and died in hospital. Angus liked Auntie Pattie. She had a sense of humour. She raised her eyebrows behind Uncle’s back. Ted and Pattie had two sons. At the wake Angus took them for a smoke and Uncle came looking and punched him in the mouth. His head hit the tree behind him. That was the first time.

A woman was sitting on his rock when he reached the end the track. She was watching. Sometimes there was a hawk that flew up this high. Angus wondered if that was why she was up here. The woman hadn’t heard Angus. He could turn around and go back down the track and she would never know
he had been there. Angus said hello and she didn't respond. She must be deaf.
He walked forward but not too close.

You could see the whole of the suburb from up here but there was
nothing to see. Houses and streets and telegraph poles. But above the houses
and streets the sky was big and contemptuous and Angus liked that. The sky
did its own thing. It could be hot and flat and blue or fat with cloud or milky-
lemon ribbons might sweep all over the place and it didn’t matter a shit what
was happening underneath. Angus was right. The woman was deaf. But she
could speak the way deaf people speak and her name was Jenny. Angus took
out his cigarettes and offered one to her. She smiled and said thank you and
took one and he gave her his lighter before lighting his own.

‘Who turned off the light?’ It wasn’t Angus. Angus was blowing
balloons — continued blowing balloons when the light went out. The light
switches were at the top and the bottom of the stairs. Someone upstairs had
turned the light off. It was difficult to see. Light came through the small
window above the laundry sink. The balloons bobbed in the dark like
creatures at the bottom of the sea. Uncle made his way around a pillar and
knocked his leg against a table. He called up the stairs again, ‘Who turned off
the light?’ and his sister cheerfully apologised. Uncle switched the switch at
the bottom of the stairs. At the same time his sister switched the light from the
top of the stairs. ‘I’ll do it!’ The empty beer glass slipped from Uncle’s
fingers, exploded against the stair rail and rained glass onto the sandwiches.
Angus tied his balloon.

Uncle pulled himself together. Angus dropped a balloon onto the floor
and took another from the packet. Uncle dragged the table of sandwiches
towards the garage door. He opened the door for extra light. He bent over the
food. He recovered the largest pieces of glass andfingered the ham and
cheese and tomato and egg. It was done.

There were no balloons left to blow up. ‘What will you do after the
wedding Uncle?’ Uncle closed the garage door and dragged the table across
the concrete floor. ‘After Danny moves in?’ Angus climbed off the table and
opened a packet of streamers. He carried a bright paper tail across the garage.
Uncle ducked. Angus was a surf lifesaver looking sternly out to sea. Balloons
swam away from his long bare toes. Uncle was watching him. The streamers
crossed above the sandwiches. Angus would cop a punch today. Might as well bring it on. Fly a kite. Boy with a paper plane. He smiled. In this together, hey Uncle? A streamer came loose from the wall. Angus walked towards it with his arms raised. The sticky tape peeled off the brick and the first streamer took the other streamers with it and he watched them go and understood, as Uncle came towards him, that Danny was like a balloon.

Jenny pointed. It was the hawk. She whistled. The hawk flew towards them and circled above them. She reached down to her bag beside the rock. She had raw meat. She threw a piece of meat in the air in the direction of the hawk. The hawk circled and watched the meat in the air and watched where it landed and dropped out of the sky. It took the meat in its talons and flew away. Jenny turned her face to Angus to speak. ‘It will come back.’ Then she said, ‘What happened to your eye?’ She pointed at her own eye as she said this. ‘My uncle,’ Angus said. The hawk came back and she whistled again and threw it another piece of meat. The hawk was quicker this time. It caught the meat in its talons mid-air.

Jenny tipped the container upside-down and smiled and said ‘all gone’ like she was talking to a child. She put the lid on the container and put the container in her bag. She pointed at her own eye again. She was leaving. She said, ‘What a bastard. I hope you hit him back.’ Angus shook his head.

He leaned against his rock. The sky was very blue. The shopping centre had turned brilliant white. Points of light dotted the carpark. Angus looked away. His eye hurt. The shade he had been standing in when the woman fed the hawk now shrunk at the edge of the scrub.

The hawk flew high in the distance. Angus whistled. He whistled twice. Its almost perfect shadow glided in front of his legs like a boat on water. The bird tipped and the shadow narrowed and curled behind him. Angus bent down and felt beside the rock. He found a stone. The stone was large and smooth and oval. It reminded him of the beetle he found dead under his bedroom window. Bang-bang on the glass at night. Bang-bang. Bang-bang. In the morning the red and the green of its shut wings mixed in the sun like oil on water. The hawk had ceased circling. It hovered. He threw the stone at the hawk. The stone flew upward with great speed as if it had a life of its own. The hawk eyed the object in the air. It missed. Angus was glad it
missed. The hawk had seen it coming. The hawk had seen it coming and got out of the way.
Highway

Mostly she remembered the smell of his shampoo and the way his thick hair curved above his ears like he was made of Lego. That, and how she took advantage of him. He bought her coffee and a packet of cigarettes. Doesn’t sound like much but that was all. Nothing else — not in a million years, although he thought so. He thought he was on to a good thing. That’s what she took advantage of.

She’d filled the car before sitting down for coffee and added up how much money she didn’t have. Not enough for cigarettes; that was pretty standard. The time she’d had to hock her violin her mate Joanna said she was cutting her nose off to spite her face. But she refused to pull beers. She was paid for a gig and got her violin back.

He sat at her table, put his helmet on the table, held out his hand and said, ‘Matt.’

‘Ida,’ she said. ‘You ride a bike.’

‘You know about motorcycles?’

‘Not really.’ She shook his hand. ‘I don’t.’

Matt turned. Behind him a woman yelled at a man fussing at the front of the queue. People were waiting to pay for petrol. Matt turned back to her. His face was round. ‘Where you headed?’

‘South Australia,’ she said.

She could do the rest of the drive in one leg but just in case she’d thrown the blue blanket in the boot with her violin and overnight bag. She told Matt she would make it by morning. To Joanna’s. She lived on the coast. She told him how she looked forward to sitting on the deck with Joanna’s kids, Flynn and Ruby, listening to the drone and hiss of the surf. She went a few times a year if she could make it. She was Aunty when she was there. She didn’t tell Matt how far back she and Joanna went or how Joanna’s partner, Connie, would be away.

‘Holidays?’ Matt turned again to look at the yelling woman and turned back and said, ‘I’ve got a place in Adelaide. Place in Melbourne, too. Place in Sydney but I don’t get there much.’ His cheeks were the colour of bricks in
sun. She smelled the shampoo. ‘If you need a place to crash in Adelaide,’ he said. ‘What do you do?’

‘I play the violin.’

‘You’re kidding me aren’t you?’

‘Why would I kid you, Matt?’

She met Joanna at the Con. They were young. After they graduated they toured for a year or so. They were a couple back then. It was another lifetime. Now she took Ruby and Flynn to the beach to give Joanna a break and they’d go crazy looking for shells in rock pools until they were hungry. Then she’d walk them up to Main Street to buy fish and chips. Joanna was the better musician but she didn’t play a note anymore.

‘Would you like another coffee?’ Matt asked her.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘a train.’ They turned their faces to the glass and watched the line of white squares coil in the dark. ‘How about you. What do you do, Matt?’

‘Entrepreneur. Import export. Another coffee?’

He put the two coffees on the table. ‘Everyone thinks China’s the next big thing.’ He wiped the corners of his mouth with a serviette and rubbed his eyes. ‘My contacts in Sydney tell me things are pretty bad. Doors are closing. It’s the same in Melbourne. I see it with my own eyes it’s the same in Melbourne. You on holiday?’

‘Visiting. Do you smoke?’

‘I don’t smoke,’ he said.

He queued again, his hands in his pockets. He made a point of looking into her eyes when he handed her the packet.

She pulled the foil from the box. ‘Will you come outside while I have one?’

They stood away from the fuel bowser and watched headlights off the freeway move across the grass. Matt said, ‘So you play the violin. You must be very talented.’ His eyes followed the headlights and stayed looking at the grass. She wondered if he was taking her there, beside the plastic bottles and disposable nappies, laying her in the shadows, his fingers working furiously, his mouth taking aim. She stopped. Beyond Matt’s shoulders was the to-and-fro of the highway.
In the bathroom she washed her hands and face. Matt stared at her wet fringe. Green light struck across his face. He said, ‘Wait here,’ and returned with his name and number written on paper towel. She thanked him. She pushed it into her pocket and thanked him for the cigarettes and the coffee.

‘If you need a place to crash in Adelaide,’ he said.

It was three hours since she’d left Melbourne holding her violin and overnight bag and with the blue blanket pressed under one arm. By the time she set off it was almost dark. Her car was parked up the street. She stood at the lights, her fingers hurting, puffing clouds into the cold. The air smelled of exhaust and open fires. She watched the grey evening surrender to the switching on of lights.

Melbourne tugged from behind until, after a certain way, it wasn’t there any more and the road and the dark bundled her up and then it was just she and the highway. Rain hit the car like hail and she couldn’t see. It subsided and the road peeled in her headlights and the moon stayed with her doing a hundred and ten.

Matt was stopped on the shoulder about twenty minutes after they parted ways. He peered into the fuel tank of his bike. She pulled over and cleared the front seat and watched him in the mirror collect his things and trot, loose and floppy, to her car. His face appeared at the passenger window. Water trickled like sweat but it was the rain and his hair sat black and shiny on top of his head. She leaned across to the passenger door and pushed it open and he dropped his bag and helmet onto the back seat. The shampoo smell was more potent.

‘Well this is a turn up for the books,’ he said.

‘You broke down.’

‘Ran out of petrol.’ He clicked his seatbelt. ‘Forgot to fill up after all that.’

‘After all what?’

‘The cigarette.’

‘You didn't have a cigarette.’
She indicated and pulled out. He looked out his window then said, ‘I would’ve loved to learn the piano.’ He was quiet again. Then, ‘Granite country out here. I ran a few sheep not far from here.’


‘South-west of here. I had a small farm holding. Thanks for stopping. Did I thank you?’

‘It’s freezing.’

‘You’re one in a million,’ he said.

The moon softened behind cloud. She would drive to the exit, she told him. She would take him to the servo. ‘You’ll have to buy a jerry can,’ she said, ‘I don’t have one.’

‘I’ll buy one.’

‘I’ll wait for you. I’ll take you back to your bike.’

Matt spoke for a long time about how generous she was. She overtook a car and he commented on the car’s speed. He studied the driver as they passed and commented on the driver. The moon stayed with them like a kite on a string.

‘So you're going to Adelaide?’ he said, ‘You can crash at my place if you like. No strings. Bought it as an investment. Living there for a year. Nice place. Prime location. Sydney and Melbourne? — freefall coming, that’s for sure. Believe me, I’m getting out. Do you have a share portfolio or anything?’

‘No. I don’t have anything.’

‘The West or Queensland of course. Tell you that for free. There’s the exit. Married or anything? I'm separated. Could be worse. We could've had kids. Taking me to the cleaners of course. Boyfriend?’

‘No.’

‘She’d put on a bit of weight. Not like you. You look fit. Are you fit?’

‘I swim a little.’

‘Swim? She was a good cook, though.’

‘Does she have a name?’

‘My wife? Brenda. We had big parties — there’s the service station. Brenda would cook up a feast. Everyone loved our parties because my wife could really cook. One time she did seven courses. I don't know where she got it from, the talent I mean. Another time she made tiramisu. Everyone had
gone home except for her folks and we had a row — things got pretty bad
towards the end. We had a fight in front of her folks and she took a big scoop
of tiramisu and threw it at me. They didn't say a word. They just got their
coats.’

‘They were probably thinking what a waste of tiramisu.’

He laughed. ‘See we're getting to know each other already.’

She pulled into the service station and drove up to the grass. ‘You can
put the jerry can in the boot,’ she said. She took the violin, bag and blanket
out of the boot and put them on the back seat. She lit a cigarette. Matt pushed
the door of the servo. He bent low over the jerry can. He slammed the boot of
the car too hard and pulled his wallet out of his pocket in a businesslike way.
He said ‘That's bad for you, you know,’ pointing to her cigarette. ‘Is that your
violin? She wasn't having an affair or anything.’

‘That's OK,’ she said, ‘You don't have to tell me.’

‘It’s OK. It’s what everyone thinks. I don't mind telling you. She never
wanted kids. She told me after we got married. I’ve always wanted kids. I said
she should've told me. What do you think?’

‘You didn’t ask?’

‘Do you want kids? I always wanted a big family.’

She drove slowly, afraid she would miss the bike. There it was in the
dark, small and patient. Yamaha V-Star. She felt sorry for it like she felt sorry
for her cousin’s dog.

‘By the way,’ he said, his face at the passenger window again, ‘I
meant to tell you, your hair looks nice. Shiny.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Dinner,’ he said. ‘I insist.’

‘I have your number.’

‘Ring me when you get to Adelaide. Let me thank you properly. For
your kindness.’ He’d rehearsed it all. ‘I know a great place. The restaurateur is
a very good friend of mine.’

‘OK,’ she said.

It rained lightly. There were no cars for a long time, occasional trucks
in the opposite direction. It was late. She didn’t play music. She liked to hear
the engine strain and the tyres on the road and the light rattle her car gave with
a certain shift of the wind. She opened the window for a short blast of cold to wake herself.

It was another lifetime ago except not quite a year ago — Connie was away — she was cleaning up in the kitchen and Joanna came up behind her, entered her in a breath. Joanna said simply she’d had an impulse and she went with it. They took the blue blanket off the couch. It was warm outside. She didn’t visit for months afterwards. She told Joanna she felt guilty but mostly she couldn’t stop thinking about her. They had a long talk on the phone. Nothing had happened since. Only that once and there was no logical reason to bring it up again. But on the drive west through Victoria into South Australia she relived the wisteria, the cicadas as excited as they were and Joanna smelling of fenugreek and singing that mad song. Sometimes — abducted by the highway, the road splitting in her headlights, the world falling away on either side of her — it was enough. It sustained her — a long note, a reliable unremitting motif — for the whole drive west. Victoria. South Australia. The highway was the straight a to b. And that was the trouble. Once she started along it there were no tricky bends, roundabouts, blind corners to negotiate, no intersections to get lost by. On the map it was a simple line that sutured them end-to-end. The how of this thing that still had her, made it easy to keep it alive. All she had to do was keep her eyes open.

The single light of Matt’s bike reached through the rain and grew in her rear vision mirror. He rode up alongside her car and waved and she tried to ignore him. He tooted until she turned her head. There was nothing she could do to deter him, no feigning sleep or staring out of a window or holding a book up to her face. His hand wiggled in the air until she nodded. He rode with her car then rode ahead and zigzagged on the freeway, playing like Flynn and Ruby play aeroplanes on the driveway of their home. He was showing off, snaking in the wet. She slowed down hoping he would take off, slowed right down. He slowed too and pulled in behind her. His headlight flashed in her eyes. She accelerated, but at a hundred and twenty her car whined like it was going to snap and Matt’s bike cruised in close behind.

She braked because she wanted her freeway back: the night, the moon, her headlights. She braked and the light behind her wavered in her mirror and flashed across the interior of her car. She skidded for what felt like minutes,
the white line deranged in front of her until she reined the car in. She righted herself, drove straight and onto the shoulder and stopped. Matt’s headlight flicked wildly in the distance ahead of her.

The cigarettes were under the violin. It had fallen onto the floor. She leaned on her car and her legs gave way and she sat with her back against a wheel. It was not raining now. The air was sweet with eucalypt and grass. She ashed the cigarette and pulled the violin case onto her lap to check that the instrument was undamaged. Her hands stilled around the neck and bow and she played a few bars of Janacek. The music entered the darkness, sharply as ice on skin.

Matt rode in the gully along the edge of the bush. His headlight nodded comically at her. So he is alive, she thought. She put the violin in her car and pulled the blanket around her shoulders. It took some time for the bouncing light to reach her. He took off his helmet and trotted. She hoped he intended to tear strips off her so she might be rid of him but he took her shoulders and leaned close to her face. ‘Are you alright?’ he asked. She looked into his pink eyes, less visible in the dark. She saw large black pupils and a ropey thickening behind his eyelashes. And she saw he was pretending. He knew there was nothing between them but his own fantasy. She laughed. It was not an unpleasant laugh, not a laugh that might have offended him. And it sounded to Matt like relief, as though the sight of him gave her reassurance.
Standing in the Plaza, Wanting

The shop assistant doesn’t have much of a face. In the way he looks at us, I mean. He has his arm out. My mother has given him money and he is waiting for more.

‘Oh no!’ I say.

I start with ‘Oh no!’ because it’s the best way to get their attention, my mother and the shop assistant. The shop assistant stretches his arm out further in front of him with the money my mother has given him in his hand. He is waiting for the rest of it. He is tall.

‘What?’ my mother says. She is still looking into her purse. She faces down for a long time like her neck is broken.

‘Oh no.’

‘What?’ She looks up.

‘Where’s Henry? We’ve lost Henry.’

My mother looks into her purse again. ‘What have you done with him this time?’

‘We’ve left him behind somewhere. We’ve lost Henry.’

‘She’s done this before,’ she says to the shop assistant. She looks up to say this to the shop assistant then looks back into her purse.

‘I’m serious, Mamma. Swear to God I didn’t hide him this time.’

‘Swear to God I’ll beat you if I find out otherwise,’ she says. She looks up at the shop assistant again and smiles like she’s embarrassed for the first time in her life. ‘She tells my boy to hide then she tells me he’s lost. She’s done it before.’

‘Swear to God,’ I say.

My mother calls, ‘Henry!’ while still looking into her purse. ‘Henry!’ She takes out a two-dollar coin. It’s the last money in her purse. She’s been playing with it for half a minute. She puts the two-dollar coin on top of the rest of the money. ‘Swear to God,’ she says to me, looking at the money in the shop assistant’s hand.

I try the shop assistant. I say ‘Henry’s missing. We’ve lost my little brother, Henry.’

‘How old is Henry?’
‘Don’t listen to her,’ my mother says.
‘Three,’ I say.
‘When did you last see him?’ The shop assistant is looking at my mother.
‘I said don’t listen to her,’ she says.
He puts the money on the counter and turns his back to us. He picks up a telephone and waits. ‘We have a missing child,’ he says.
‘We don’t,’ my mother says. ‘She knows where he is.’ She looks at me. ‘She’s done this before.’
‘All the same, Madam’ he says. He has a face now. He’s looking at us now. ‘It’s better if I report it.’
My mother doesn’t like to be called Madam. It makes her feel old. She looks down at her purse again and her fingers start to move inside it in a strange way. They have stopped searching for money. There is no money. They poke the inside corners. I watch her hands, the purse in one and the fingers of the other moving inside the purse like they’re having a fit. My mother feels me staring. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I don’t have enough money.’
‘I swear to God, Mamma.’
The shop assistant picks up the money he has left on the counter and gives it back to my mother. She turns to leave. A woman is walking towards us. ‘I’ll start looking for him.’ I say.
My mother says, ‘Stay where you are.’ She says to the woman, ‘This is nonsense I’m afraid. My daughter tells my son to hide and then she pretends we’ve lost him. Really. He’ll be around somewhere.’
‘Now then,’ the woman says, ‘relax.’ The woman has bread between her top front teeth. ‘When did you last see him?’
‘Ask her. Ask her when she last saw Henry.’
‘Swear to God I don’t know where he is, Mamma.’
‘When was the last time you saw him, Madam?’
Once I said to a different sales assistant in a different shop, ‘My brother has a habit of going missing’ and the old woman looked at me for so long I thought maybe I needed to repeat myself. She said, ‘Why don’t you keep a better eye on him?’ But she was not speaking to me. She looked into
my eyes for a long time but when she spoke she turned to my mother and my mother said nothing.

My mother leaves Henry with me when she goes to try on clothes. She never actually buys anything because she never has any money but she goes in and out of shops and up and down the escalator in Myer. She spends a long time trying things on.

My mother and the old woman looked at each other for so long I wondered when she was going to do something about finding Henry.

‘Well I’m not wearing a watch. I don’t know what time it was,’ my mother says to the woman with bread in her teeth. The shop assistant sighs. He says, ‘Would it be too much to ask you to guess, Mrs …’

‘Roughly,’ the woman says. ‘A rough idea how long since you last saw him.’

‘No. Really. I don’t know.’

‘But your little boy, Madam.’

‘She’s hidden him. He’ll turn up.’

‘You’re anxious.’

‘I couldn’t tell you.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘When I last saw him. I don’t know,’ my mother says. ‘I’m going to Myer. I’ll come back in half an hour and if he hasn’t shown up by then we’ll send out your search party.’

The first time Henry went missing I decided to find him myself because no-one was even warm. Five security guards, two other staff and my mother left the shop where Henry was hidden. They searched all over the plaza. The security guards muttered to each other without moving their heads. One of them put a hand on my mother’s shoulder. I faced my mother but looked right past her to where Henry was curled up like a butch boy under a table. Henry is the quietest little boy you’ll meet. He stayed under the table because we were playing a game. But they weren’t even warm and I got hungry.

My mother likes to look at herself in dresses. If she thinks she’s going to need help Henry and I squeeze into the change room with her. Mostly we wait outside on the floor. ‘I can afford this one,’ my mother says. She lifts her
boobs in the mirror and speaks to herself but really she is telling me that she wants to buy the dress and I say, ‘Why? You never go anywhere.’

This morning she said to me, ‘Why don’t you try this on?’ I told her I didn’t like it. ‘Of course you do. I see all the girls wearing these. Don’t be sour.’

I said, ‘I don’t want to try it on.’
‘What’s wrong with you?’ she said, ‘sulking all the time?’
‘I don’t want to try on clothes.’
‘Suit yourself. I’m going to try these on. Look after Henry.’

I took Henry for a walk around the plaza. His hand was hot and sticky inside mine. Back at the change room my mother said, ‘We must let Henry have some fun. Let’s take him to toys.’

‘But you never let him touch anything,’ I said. ‘He’s not allowed to play. He cries.’
‘We must take him.’

The first time Henry went missing and I’d dragged him out from under the table we went to find our mother. My mother stoops like a dead bird is going to fall out of the sky and land on her head. She’s not hard to spot because she’s tall and bent over. I found her standing in the plaza, wanting Henry to come back. She was stopped in the middle of the mall near the hairdressers. People bumped into her. She tapped a finger between her eyes like a bird taps at a window. Her mouth opened and closed. She was swinging her handbag in a little curve. When we got closer I could hear her. ‘Hush,’ she said. ‘Hush.’ Henry pulled my hand. He wanted to jump on the diamonds in the corners of the floor tiles. I clutched his hand tighter. Laughter from a group of men carried through the plaza to my mother. She turned in their direction and said, ‘Hush!’ louder than before.

She saw us. She lunged at Henry and grunted and Henry cried. She pressed her nose into the top of his head and gripped his arms. She blinked like she was trying to switch something off and said, ‘My mouth is so very dry.’

‘Henry needs his nappy changed,’ I said.
‘We’ll go home,’ she said.
I picked up Henry to stop him crying. I had to run to keep up. In the car I buckled Henry’s seatbelt then my own. Henry dropped his car. My mother spun around as if the falling toy had reminded her to hit me. I pulled my legs up. She couldn’t reach more than my shoes. I could barely feel the smack through my shoes. She turned back to the steering wheel and started the car.

My mother puts the money the shop assistant has given back to her into her purse. She puts her purse into her bag and walks out of the shop. She heads towards Myer. The woman with bread in her teeth trots after her. She is taken by surprise when my mother leaves the shop. She expects her to stop. She expects my mother to say something but my mother has said something: she has said she is going to Myer. The shop assistant stays where he is but I follow the woman and my mother. I call out to my mother, ‘I swear, Mamma. I didn’t hide him this time. I don’t know where he is. We’ve left him behind.’

My mother stops. She says, ‘I’m treated very poorly, don’t you think?’ She is asking the woman what she thinks.

‘Mamma I swear.’

My mother looks at me. I think she is thinking maybe this time I’m telling the truth, maybe Henry is old enough to hide by himself. But she walks away.

‘Madam you must come back.’

‘What are you going to do?’ My mother’s head scoops at the end of her long neck. ‘What are you going to do, call the police?’

‘Yes,’ the woman calls back. ‘Yes of course. I must call the police.’

Henry has fallen asleep. I crawl under the table and lift his head onto my lap. It is dark in here and I think no wonder he fell asleep. I can see his head but not his body. His curls are pressed flat on one side of his face.

I wish Henry doesn’t stop walking but he is tired and he wants to rub his eyes. The shop assistant sees us. ‘Come on, Henry,’ I say when Henry stops. He says, ‘My eyes hurt.’ We are worse than nothing, the shop assistant is thinking. He watches us like that while we’re walking out of the shop.

We look for my mother in Myer. We try every floor and I think we must keep missing her. ‘Come on, Henry,’ I say. I sit down on the carpet. I lean against the wall and sit Henry on my lap.
Well he came out of nowhere, she remembered thinking; she didn’t know he was home. He had the hose. The pressure built in the hose and he let go of the nozzle to pull up his trousers. (That was a thing he always did, pull at his trousers. They had a habit of sagging around his backside. It got worse before he died.) The nozzle wriggled at her disapprovingly. He pushed her aside with his shoulder; not angry; as if she was a piece of garden furniture in his way. He circled the tree with the hose pointed upward. Bits of black leaf blew around the backyard.

She’d lit the fire under the almond tree: cuttings from the fruit trees, a dead shrub, bits of half-rotted timber, a chair. There was more around the side of the house. Leaves. Twigs he’d tied into long bundles. It wasn’t like her to have anything to do with the garden but here she was, reaching a hand deep into the mound to leave a fire-starter here and here and there and one more should do it and the box of matches was in the pocket of her apron. Sparks climbed into the blue evening. The fire reflected in the kitchen window: she and the fire. She stood tall before it like a man with a fish. But in the reflection she saw the fire was giving up and she had to quickly search for more stuff. In the shed — newspapers, a cane basket, tomato stakes. She tossed another half-dozen fire-starters. The lower branches of the almond tree lifted the flames into the top of the tree and the backyard lit up orange and the fire glowed on her forearms. Then she couldn’t look away.

‘Costa!’ It was their neighbour. He had seen the fire. He had walked up the drive and stood in the backyard yelling, ‘Costa. You need some help?’

‘No, thank you, we are good, Peter. Thank you,’ Costa called. Peter nodded. He looked sort of sad, she remembered. Not shocked. The neighbour looked sadly at her. And the glow of the dimming fire on Costa’s face made him look sad too. An upside-down face in the dark.

Why was she remembering this now? She squeezed the dishcloth. Cutlery scraped in the sink. ‘Costa was my husband,’ she said to the box she had left on the coffee table behind her. ‘He was a kind man. You would have liked him.’
No one was around this morning when she saw the box on the other side of the Reserve, lordly as a rock on the flat dead grass. She knew to check boxes. As a child she found kittens the size of mice in a shoebox. Costa once found five stringy black chickens in a suitcase on the Reserve, feathers jet as burnt wood, combs shriveled. He put them on the back lawn. 'We could fatten them up,' she had said. The chickens sat, one after the other like valves on a trumpet. Costa eyed them. They were too weak to move. The sun came out. ‘Their feathers have red in them,’ she said, ‘look.’ Costa wrung the birds’ necks and buried them. This morning she looked around the Reserve. A crow on the power lines flew away when she started across the grass. She lifted the cardboard flaps. At first she thought she was looking at a doll, but it was a baby. And it was dead. ‘I could've fattened up those chickens,’ she said to the box. She didn't turn from the kitchen window when she spoke. ‘I thought I could fatten them up before he wrung their necks but Costa said it was cruel to keep them alive.’ The warm dishwashing bubbles were as reassuring as gloves. “Go inside Rita,” he told me — “you don't want to see this.” It was all done by the time I come out. Done and buried.’ Her house was small. She didn’t need to raise her voice to speak to the box.

*Rita, what is in the box?*

*It’s a baby, Costa.*

*I can see. It’s a dead baby, Rita. What are you doing with it?*

*I found it. I found it on the Reserve.*

*But what are you going to do with it?*

*Well I don’t know that Costa. I don’t know yet. I couldn’t just leave it there.*

*Take it back, Rita. Or call the authorities. No. Take it back. You will be in trouble if you call the police. Take it back.*

*No, Costa.*

*What about its mother?*

*Its mother left it there.*

*You don’t know that.*

*Yes I do, Costa. Sure as eggs its mother left it there.*

With her fingernail she scratched a dried bit of food off the kitchen curtain. She squeezed the dishcloth and rubbed at the remaining stain and
sloshed the cloth in the water between rubs. She dried the dishes. She put them away. Today was supposed to have been cold. She lifted the curtain to look at the sky. It was blue and clear. She pulled the netting across her face. She draped it around her head. It settled on her cheeks. It was delicate on her skin. She watched the sky through the nylon and heard the school bell in the distance and the kitchen clock say ‘tsk - tsk’. Costa called, ‘Rita!’ She saw him through the kitchen window. She saw him as if it was yesterday: Costa carrying their daughter, Jilly. She was fifteen at the time. He had found her passed out on the Reserve. He had carried her all the way home. Sweat trickled down his large brown cheeks. When he stumbled Jilly sort of poured out of his arms onto the footpath.

Do you remember the chickens, Costa?
I found them under the slide in the children’s playground.
Do you think a child put them there?
You remember those chickens, Rita?
Of course I do, Costa. I was just talking about them.
No I do not think a child would have left them there. A child would have put them somewhere for an adult to find them.

She would run a bath and wash the baby. That is what she had planned to do.

The water ran loudly. She took a blanket from the linen cupboard and tossed it onto the couch. She carried the box into the bathroom. She took the baby’s body out of the box and put it onto the bathroom floor. She bent her elbow into the water to check the temperature. She popped the studs of the baby’s clothing. She hadn’t intended to leave the baby on the bathroom floor but the smell of the nappy was unbearable. She took a plastic bag from under the kitchen sink and dropped the nappy and the clothes into it and tied it tightly and dropped the bag and the box into the wheelie bin. On her way back to the bathroom she returned to the linen cupboard for a facewasher. She rubbed soap into the facewasher and washed the baby's body clean. The body was dirty and was beginning to smell of death: poo and wee and blood and other liquids she supposed; muscle and skin and fat resolved to turning back to their source, even though the journey of growing had only just started. It was a strange smell. She emptied the bath. She turned the taps back on and
swilled the dirt out of the bath. She filled the bottom of the bath again and gave the baby a second wash. She lay easily in her hand (it was a girl), small and rigid and cold. She dried the baby's body and took it into the living room still wrapped in the towel. She folded a corner of the blanket and removed the towel and lay the baby down. She thought she saw it breathe but it was the little chest fooling her and the limbs which seemed to twitch against the wool like there was dreaming. The eyelids seemed to move too. She swaddled the cold damp body.

Rita lifted an eyelid. The eye was a dark wrinkled pit like a bit of shrunken Glad Wrap, but black, like the night sky on the Murray where she and Costa took Jilly for the holidays. She closed the eye. She smoothed the eyelid. She picked up the swaddled baby. ‘Sometimes,’ she said to the baby, ‘the sky up there was real bright with millions of stars. Or the moon was so bright it made shadows. But when it was real dark the river and the sky were like the same thing. You couldn’t tell where one ended and the other started. It was like you could throw a line into the sky and catch a big fish.’ Rita took the hand of the body in her arms. She held it for a long time like she was holding Jilly’s hand as they crossed the road. From where she sat on the couch Rita could see the sunset through the kitchen window reflected in the mirror on the living room wall. She watched the sun and held the hand, for getting that usually Jilly would have resisted by now, would have pulled away but this time, for whatever reason, she held on and on they walk to the swings or the car door or the supermarket. Then Rita remembered, with a jolt, her husband’s hand, the way it lifted and flapped on the bed and the beep beep of the machinery attached to the wall. She had tried to hold his hand but it went up and down and up and down with her hand inside it so she let go of his large fingers. They flapped. And his elbow burrowed into the bed. She sat back, she remembered, ashamed at not knowing what to do since Costa didn’t want to hold her hand. She sat back and watched.

*Did Jilly come to my funeral, Rita?*

*What? Oh Costa don’t ask me that again.*

Rita had let go of the baby’s hand. She looked down at the baby and told her, ‘Jilly left us. The day after Costa brought her home. We haven’t seen her since. Costa never saw her again. People thought it was me who suffered —
lighting the fires and everything — but Costa suffered. Costa suffered. He never saw her again.'

Did she come, Rita?

No, Costa, she didn’t come.

Agh! That is it, then. I have no time for her anymore!

You are dead, Costa. You have no time for anything anymore.

I have all the time in the world, Rita.

Jilly: incoherent, dribbling and smelling of the paint she inhaled from plastic bags. Rita had seen the Reserve littered with these bags, blown against the fence and all different colours. Rings of paint circled Jilly’s lips. Rita and Costa lay her on her bed. Her brown eyes flicked from under her eyelids and retracted again: out and in and out and in. Costa put a blanket over her and went to lie down. In the bathroom Rita dropped a facewasher into a plastic basin and filled the basin with warm soapy water. In Jilly’s bedroom she washed her daughter’s face. She pushed gently at the blue and yellow paint dried on the girl’s cheeks. Sounds came from Jilly’s mouth, formless and deep like melting tar. Then words. Unbelievable words. Thick and slow but unmistakable. ‘Fuck me again, Terry. Terry.’ Rita held Jilly’s face hard between her hands. ‘Don’t say that,’ she said. She gripped the girl’s cheeks. It was disgusting. ‘You don’t mean that.’ Rita rubbed a fresh layer of soap onto the facewasher and twisted it into a knot. She pushed the facewasher into her daughter’s mouth. The drugged head pulled away. Rita’s hand was too large. Jilly’s teeth dug into her knuckles. Soapy water slopped everywhere. Rita did her best but Jilly gagged and she had to stop. She couldn’t look at her daughter anymore. She closed the door. She found Costa. She never told Costa.

It was getting dark outside. She should get her shoes off the front porch. Outside the air was cold. She bent down to her shoes and brought them inside so they wouldn't get damp overnight. Grass from the Reserve was stuck to the sole. Winter was coming on but there was a drought and the ground was hard and everything was dead and dry. The grass on the Reserve was dead. It would take a lot of rain to bring it back. A shower or two would not do anything. The water would just run off the ground. It would take a lot of rain.
She came inside and put her shoes on the kitchen floor and in the living room lit the pilot light of the heater. The pilot banged loudly. Sometimes she was worried it wasn't going to light at all. She turned the knob to low and the flames spread orange across the face of the heater. The orange shone on the baby. She looked asleep. Rita went to turn the light on in the kitchen. In the mirror her face, like the baby, was lit up orange. It changed in that light like a fire changes with the shifting of a piece of wood or the sudden gush of wind and a cold rush went through her. Her own eyes looking at her looked through her as a person looks through another when they are distracted, when they don’t mean to be rude but they’re thinking about something else. Behind her, she saw, a baby’s body lay swaddled on her couch.
Pedal Boat

‘Grandfather,’ she said, ‘we have stopped.’

‘Yes.’

‘We’ve stopped, Grandfather.’

He dipped his fingers in the lake. She thought they had stopped to put
their hands in the water, stretched her small hand over the side of the boat. It
was a determined lean and her grandfather didn’t see how far her bottom
lifted off her seat. ‘Feel how cold my fingers are Grandfather.’

‘They are cold, Matilda’ he said. ‘Yes. Cold indeed.’

They had stopped. In a pedal boat. His leg had seized at the hip. He
was used to the pain. He took pills. But the leg wouldn’t push and it wouldn’t
lift. He said, ‘I suppose I should do something.’

‘What did you say Grandfather? Let’s go over there. Grandfather, go
over there.’

It was the black boat she wanted. Spotted it across the lake. A great
choice of brightly coloured boats were moored but ‘the black one,’ she
pointed. It putted beneath the long hillside of dark conifers. Something of the
maverick about it he agreed. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘the one to have.’

‘I can hold it for you,’ the boatshed boy offered. ‘Why don’t you and
your granddaughter have an ice-cream? I will hold it for you.’ He was
German. Austrian. Maybe Danish — a Dane. His cheeks were rosy from the
wind off the lake. The grandfather said, ‘Thank you. That’s very kind,’ and
they sat at a table in the warm afternoon sun on the deck of the kiosk
overlooking the lake. Matilda spooned ice-cream from a bowl and watched
her boat. By the time it was returned the sun touched the tops of the pines.

‘Why don’t you have a go at pedaling Matilda?’

‘My legs are too short.’

‘Try.’

‘My legs are too short, Grandfather. They don’t reach. You pedal. You
can pedal Grandfather. You’re better at it than I am.’

There it is, he thought. Condescension. She has learned it from her
father already. He said, ‘Try, Matilda. Have a go. You take us over there.
Look. There. The bridge.’
‘We’re not allowed to go to the bridge, Grandfather. The sign said.’
‘Where’s your spirit of adventure, Matilda? To the bridge! To the bridge!’
‘Can we go under the bridge, Grandfather?’
‘Yes! We’ll go under the bridge! To the bridge!’
‘I’ll try with my hands.’

Matilda slid off her seat onto her knees. Curled like when she draws pictures for hours at a time. On the floor. Stopping to exhibit one grown-up to the next. Always a number of drawings proffered together to be leaved through. Ask her encouraging questions, the mother, Janette, whispers into his ear. Janette has come from nowhere, bent over the back of his chair. What is that, Matilda — but it is she who asks the encouraging questions — is that a house? Isn’t that a marvelous house, Grandfather? When Matilda’s had enough she returns to drawing with a curled back and elbows on the floor.

Matilda bent her body under the boat’s steering wheel. She reached for the pedals but her arms were not long enough. ‘Don’t look at me!’ she yelled. Same bossy indignation as her father. ‘What are you looking at, Dad?’ his son Brian said with just the same tone. Brian and Janette trimming the wisteria. The grandfather tries not to interfere, tries not to get involved. In the garden. Eyes closed. Sun on his face. Sun on his legs. It should be removed, she says. They argue. (They do.) Wisteria whips her face. She screams. She takes up the saw and saws and he opens his eyes. ‘What are you looking at, Dad?’

‘Mount Spier this year, Dad. It’s not far from home I know but I’m anticipating problems with a project I’m working on. Might have to come back for a night or two.’ (His son is having an affair, he thinks. Not certain but certain enough). ‘But you can all stay put.’

‘Don’t worry about me this year, Brian. I’m fine pottering about here by myself. I have that latest recording of Mozart’s Clarinet. Quite marvelous.’

‘Don’t suck your teeth, Dad.’ It was true. He sucked his teeth. He had become an irritating old man. ‘Don’t suck your teeth. Please, Dad.’

‘I really don’t feel the need for a holiday, Brian. Don’t go to the expense.’

‘Nonsense, Dad.’

Brian and Janette had gone bushwalking.
Matilda hadn’t the strength. She climbed back onto her seat with wet knees and bluing lips. He removed his coat and wrapped it around her and buttoned it under her chin to make a cape, her life vest underneath, her tiny despondent face on top. The pedals took some effort to start but once the boat was in motion it wasn’t hard. But Matilda didn’t have the strength to start the boat. The grandfather pushed the left pedal with his good leg. The boat drew an arc on the lake. He tried to pull the pedal upward by placing his toes under it and made the same little arc in the water. Like they were toying with the boat, out on the lake, talking and chatting and laughing and playing with the boat.

‘Actually, Dad,’ Brian and Janette said last night. They said, ‘Actually, Dad,’ in unison. After the restaurant. Matilda was in bed. He had picked up a log for the fire. ‘No, Reg’ Janette hissed. ‘It’s not our place.’ She leaned over the map opened on the coffee table. When the hotel manager came into the living room she was flustered to see the fire going out. She opened the flue. ‘Can I get you a drink?’ she said. She stoked the fire. She put the log on the fire, the same log he had attempted to use.

‘Would you like us to keep an eye on it?’ he said.
‘Peppermint tea.’
‘Two, please. Peppermint.’
‘Help yourself to more wood,’ she said.
‘No. That’s too far. I don’t feel like such a long walk.’
‘But the views when you get there.’
‘I don’t feel like going on such a long walk.’
‘You’re right, Janette. I might get a call.’ (His son hopes he will get a call.) ‘You’re right. I’d have to walk kilometres just to get back to the car. I have misgivings about this project.’ The voice of his only child. Deep now: not a child. Moderated to a pitch of great importance. ‘I’m not convinced Phil can handle it. He doesn’t acknowledge his limitations.’

‘I’ll have the manager organise a lunch.’
‘The shit hits the fan and yours truly has to jump in.’

Eyes closed. Fire popping. Whisky on the throat. Voice of the parliamentarian. His son: parl-ia-ment-ar-ian. Brian O’Byrne, M.P. It has a ring to it. His cheeks were warm, flushed. ‘Early start?’ He put his empty
glass on the coffee table where there was space. ‘Where are we off to tomorrow then?’

‘Actually, Dad.’

‘Actually, Dad, we were thinking that it might be a bit far for you and Matilda.’

‘We thought you might like to have a go on the pedal boats.’

Shade from the conifers on the hill darkened the water from slate to black. No Swimming. Numerous signs. Dangerous Undertow and People have Drowned. When he was handed a life vest he said to the boy with the rosy cheeks, ‘Surely one for the girl is enough.’

‘Regulations,’ the boy insisted. He was stroppy now. He had tired of the old man and the precocious little girl. He had held the black boat for them because he saw consternation in the old man’s eyes. Now the old man was refusing a life vest. He had taken up enough time. Others were waiting. The grandfather decided he is not a nice boy; not helpful; no genuine concern for the wishes of a child. Matilda spoke. ‘Put your life vest on, Grandfather.’ Then he needed help to climb onto the boat. The boy’s young fingers pressed into the tender hollows of his elbow. He was lowered to his seat. Matilda on the jetty clenched her fists and let out an involuntary whine and the young man swung her over the water.

The grandfather had a phone. It was in the pocket of his coat. ‘I should do something.’ It hardly warranted calling the police: we are stranded on a lake in a pedal boat. Later he would simply say he had assumed Brian would be out of range.

Finally in their black boat, Matilda patted the side and looked up at her grandfather. ‘Charge!’ she cried.

He saluted. ‘Charge!’

‘Charge!’

‘Charge!’

His leg had worked then and he pedaled hard. ‘Over there, Grandfather. Over there!’ she pointed. Simply the furthest thing she could see. They were part of a gentle comedy of boats. Laughter bounced off the hillside. Matilda spotted a fallen tree in the water. He pedaled them to the tree. They studied it. The boat bumped against it. She pointed to reeds and ducks in
the reeds. Two other boats headed for the ducks: a father and daughter in one boat, a mother and son in the other. The parents folded their arms, the children pedaled. They chased the ducks. ‘They might be guarding nests,’ he called out. The ducks skirted around the boats, skated in and out of the reeds.

‘Who asked you?’ the woman responded.

‘Their nests.’

‘Mind your own business,’ the woman said.

His leg had worked then. Rested, he thought, his hip might loosen enough. Matilda’s sleeve was wet. She had been running her fingers through the water. She tried to conceal her shivering. She was watching another boat putt around a bend. It disappeared. The grandfather watched her watching.

Around the bend smelly runoff from gardens and the road trickled down to the lake. Matilda wouldn’t recognize it as the same place they had walked yesterday. She only saw people having adventures.

‘Grandfather?’

To the east, the bridge, the smell of mulched pine needles overcome by bird droppings on wet concrete. A smaller lake beyond. Matilda looked up at him, vaguely questioning. She had given up asserting her will. Perhaps it was the cold.

‘Matilda.’

‘Yes, Grandfather.’

‘What would you say if I told you that on the other side of that bridge over there is another lake, and leading away from that lake is a river that flows all the way to South America?’

‘I would say I don’t believe you, Grandfather.’

‘But it’s true. I read about it in a brochure at the hotel.’

‘South America is too far away.’

‘It’s a long river.’

‘To Argentina?’

‘Of course.’

‘Brazil?’

‘Brazil.’ He had more. ‘There are trees growing along that river that are so tall it is impossible to see the tops of them.’ What was she thinking when she looked at him? He was afraid to know. He was afraid of what she’d
heard in association with his name. Words she didn’t understand — but she
was bright. She stored them away, part of the jigsaw that made up
Grandfather: feeble, geriatric, fool. Now she looked at him. Now she put those
words into the boat with them and added them to the one indisputable truth:
their boat was stopped in the middle of the lake.

‘Grandfather.’

‘Yes.’

‘You said we could go to that bridge.’

‘Yes.’

‘Can we?’

‘Yes. Yes I did say that.’

He was losing steam. The sun had gone. It was chilly and close to tea
time and most boats had been returned to the boatshed. Only four remained.
The boatshed boy had been replaced by a boatshed girl. She pulled a boat in
and tied it to the jetty. She helped a woman climb out of it. It was the mother
with the duck-chasing son. The girl stretched her back.

‘A fish Grandfather!’

A rainbow trout. Gold in the sunlight spreading low from between the
trees.

‘It’s nibbling something off the boat.’ he said. It’s tail swayed. The sunlight
flashed in its scales.

‘What is it eating Grandfather?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why is it eating the boat Grandfather?’

‘I don’t know.’ The fish swam under the boat.

‘Come back fish! Come back!’

‘It might come up on my side’ he said.

Matilda gathered her grandfather’s coat in her arms and trailed it in the
puddle on the floor of the boat. She squeezed beside his knees.

‘There!’ he cried.

It was almost unreal. Mechanical. Metallic. Operated inside by a chip
and springs and a variety of plastics. Its pursed lips nibbled the side of the
boat. It was oblivious to the two of them hovering above it. He lowered his
hands. ‘I think I can catch it,’ he said.
‘No you can’t, Grandfather. It’s a fish. You need a fishing line to catch a fish.’

‘Shhh,’ he said. ‘It can hear you.’

‘Can you really catch it, Grandfather?’

‘If I tickle it on the tummy,’ he said. He lowered his hands closer to the water. The fish had an appetite for the black boat. ‘I think I can.’

‘Will we eat it if you catch it?’ Matilda whispered at his elbow.

‘Yes. We’ll eat it for dinner.’

Matilda was silent. The fish’s pink and green scales flicked in soft ribbons of sun. It was pure gold muscle, unencumbered by limbs. When first seen it had moved agilely, lyrically through the water. Now he saw the honesty of it, the resonance. Something unexpected: the deep timbre of life.

‘Catch it, Grandfather.’

Matilda believed he could catch a fish with his bare hands. That they would eat it for their dinner. He lowered his hands for her benefit, reluctant to ripple the surface of the lake. He had never watched a fish. He had never simply watched a fish.

It was the weight of the coat that toppled Matilda into the water. Her body was too small to accommodate it as she leaned over the edge of the boat. Her upside-down head dived in elegantly, as if she was plunging into cool waters on a hot summer afternoon. He caught the back of the coat. It was square and brown as a stingray. He gave it a quick sharp pull, an instinctual tug that had force enough to burst the button around Matilda’s neck. He thought too late to ease her in, allow a certain amount of give between tugs. The coat had weight. Was she attached to it or sinking to the bottom of the lake?

Matilda was out of the water seconds after she fell into it. Her teeth chattered, her lips thoroughly blue. She blinked wet eyelashes. He undid the buttons of the coat around her neck and pulled it off her shoulders. He took off her life vest and her jumper and t-shirt, the stripped wet clothes from the body of his tiny granddaughter, and remembered Brian as a boy. Mount Eloquent. Swimming in the waterhole. He balanced Matilda’s life vest on his knees and held her close to him for warmth and took off his own life vest, which he also balanced on his lap. It was late, he remembered, and he stood at
the edge of the waterhole and yelled at his son to come in. Brian’s lips were blue too. Brian’s teeth chattered. He wanted to play and he ran and dived in again and swam to the other side of the waterhole. The grandfather wrapped an arm around Matilda’s shoulders and pulled his jumper over his head. He put his life vest back on quickly because it kept sliding off his lap and pushed the jumper over Matilda’s head. It was huge on her. He wondered if he should fold it around her like a blanket. Brian refused to come out of the water and it was almost dark and he stood at the edge of the waterhole yelling at his son. Asserting his authority. He remembered Brian in the back seat, seat belt across his thin white body, crying, shaking. He made Matilda stand up. He pulled the jumper down over her legs and put her life vest back on and tied it tightly around her ribs. The cold ate into his hip.

It happened occasionally, the boatshed girl said, a boat that didn’t come back. Teenagers, usually. ‘If I’d known you were in trouble,’ she yelled over the idling motor as she tied them to her dingy.

As they got closer Brian and Janette pulled up. His son and daughter-in-law walked across the carpark. Brian stood on the bank of the lake and rubbed the air with his hand. The grandfather nudged Matilda. He pointed to her parents standing beside the boatshed. He held tightly to her. It was just possible in the dusk to see the wash rising behind the dingy. The spray seeped delicately into his trousers.

The girl cut the engine and they glided to the jetty. He watched Brian and Janette interpret the picture of Matilda with wet hair wearing his jumper. Matilda waved. The girl lifted Matilda onto the jetty then offered him her hand. ‘I can’t stand,’ he said.

* 

‘Do you have The Trout on that thing?’ The MP3 player was wedged into little speakers. The quality of the sound was remarkable.

‘No, Dad.’ Brian was in the bathroom, shaving. ‘You could download it. Use my credit card. Matilda will show you how.’ His son came out of the bathroom drying his face.

‘It’s OK. I can hear it in my head.’

‘Nonsense, Dad.’
It didn’t take long. The laptop. The credit card. Then he had the quintet. The lake, the sun, the boat, the fish, Matilda. ‘I wasn’t scared,’ she said, wrapped in a towel after her bath. The musical phrases parted and came together.
‘It’s hocus pocus. You don’t really believe it works,’ the wife said.

‘But if you believe it works,’ the husband said, ‘it works. That’s the placebo effect.’

Ida watched the fish in the tank. She said, ‘Fish are non-believers,’ to lighten the mood. You take yourself too seriously, she told Genna when it was just the two of them. If she’d wanted to be more gentle she would have told her she took things too seriously.

‘Are you drunk, Genna?’ Ida asked her. Waves crashed into the rocks below the restaurant, flashed in the light from the windows.

‘No,’ Genna said. ‘No more than any of you are drunk.’

‘Are you sure?’

And it was nothing, of course. They laughed at Ida’s joke about the fish and agreed that the placebo effect was powerful and ordered more drinks.

Genna dropped the beach shelter, her towel and her book onto the sand and looked up to find the birds that were heralding her arrival. The tide was up. The inlet was deep and amber and smelled of tea tree. She was not a strong swimmer but she swam for exercise when the inlet was deep enough. The water was cold. She swam until the water no longer felt cold. She swam with the wife on her back. Who had played with her wedding ring all night. Compulsively. Who had brought it up again, the same subject. The husband who stood and said, ‘Same again?’

The wife wanted to know if Ida had ever let Genna treat her.

‘Anything,’ the wife said. ‘A cold? A sore toe?’

‘I never have,’ Ida said.

‘Well then.’ The wife was satisfied.

‘Because I’ve never asked,’ Genna said. ‘Ida would refuse so I’ve never asked.’

‘I’m pretty conventional,’ Ida said. ‘I prefer real doctors.’

‘Absolutely,’ the wife cheered.

‘I’m with you there,’ the husband said, putting the drinks on the table. He said, ‘I’m with you there,’ again and drank and in the silence they all drank. Genna said, ‘Would you?’ to Ida. Ida gave little attention to medical
science outside belittling Genna’s work. She said Genna practised in ambiguity and heresay. She demanded scientific evidence. She called for rational thought. She liked to say she wasn’t a sceptic, that she was simply reasonable. Genna said the history of science proves there are no absolutes. It was her argument. She argued the same argument again.

‘You’re drunk.’

‘Would you? Let me treat you?’

‘Go to bed. Go back to the van.’

Genna had said she wasn’t going anywhere.

The couple’s son appeared on the beach. Genna waved good morning to the boy. He recognized her. He waved and dived into the inlet. They met a few days ago. Paul. Genna read the paper while Ida played table tennis with him. She won two games. He won three. He said, ‘Awesome,’ when Ida bought him a coke. Paul introduced them to his parents and the following day Genna bumped into the husband in the laundry. ‘Malaysian?’ he said. ‘Tomorrow night, then.’

Genna and Paul had the inlet to themselves. Genna swam lengths. She tired. She stood. The light in the water played about her ribs. She squinted, searching again for the birds. She saw the boy was in trouble.

Genna and Ida went to the same beach every summer. There were shops where they could have a coffee or buy sun block or a book. They stayed in the same caravan every year. They didn’t own the caravan but they talked about buying it if it ever came up for sale. The caravan faced the sea. It was the middle caravan of a row of seven on a plateau of pressed earth. Couch grass had knitted the earth into a kind of mat. Without the grass and the tea trees, they said, the caravan would end up on the beach. The cliff crumbled a little more each year. But they would have bought the caravan if it ever came up for sale.

In the mornings Genna went down to the beach first. Ida watched her walk along the beach. It was forbidden to go directly down the dunes because of erosion so Genna walked in front of the row of caravans and turned down a roped path that led to the beach. She walked back along the beach below their caravan to where they could choose either the surf or the still water of the inlet to swim. The inlet was wide. A sand bar held the water in when the tide
was out. It was safest not to swim out as far as the sand bar. When the tide was in the inlet was very deep in places. Ida mostly swam in the surf.

Every morning Genna walked down to the beach and from the beach looked up at Ida. Ida wore a red sarong and stood under the annex holding her coffee and a book. On holidays they did this every morning. On holidays Ida made coffee with condensed milk. She made a pot of strong coffee and drank it slowly and read. It took her an hour to drink a pot of coffee. It was cold by the end. She enjoyed her sweet coffee and reading in the annex and she took her time so Genna went to the beach before her. In her red sarong Ida looked like a goddess, except for the mug in her hand. If the sun was high Ida removed her sarong. She said it was the warmth on her skin she wanted. She waited until Genna was on the beach below her before she put down her coffee and untied the knot behind her neck. Ida’s white skin turned gold. Genna listened to the ways the surf rolled and the fell onto the sand.

Genna carried their folded beach shelter and her book and when Ida came down she brought water and food. Mostly they had fruit but sometimes Ida prepared something in the caravan and brought it down to the beach. Genna could tell from a distance when Ida had made food because she carried it in front of her and walked where the sand was firm. Ida did this since the time her ankle gave way and pancakes slipped off the plate onto the beach. A dog ate them. They laughed. They were hungry but the owner of the dog was funny to watch.

The inlet was a different colour to the sea. It was rust from the tea trees that lined the river at the base of the mountain. There was another caravan park on the other side of the highway. The river ran through the other caravan park and it was pleasant to swim in the river instead of the sea sometimes. Ida was a good swimmer. She had grown up by the beach and she was confident in the surf and Genna would go out far with her but never by herself. Some days Ida would go out as far as the surfers and swim the length of the beach and Genna lost sight of her but she was never concerned because Ida was a good swimmer and she was sensible in the sea. Genna was often afraid in the sea. She wasn't afraid of the river. She liked the metallic smell of the tea tree and silt and freshwater. They swam in the river at least once on their holidays. The owners of the caravan park didn't mind as long as they
spent money in the kiosk. Ida and Genna bought food from the kiosk and set up a picnic on the grass. The water steeped in tea tree did them good.

They were usually ready to leave the beach at about three o'clock. They didn't watch the time but it was usually about three when they got back to the caravan. They had a light lunch because by then it was very hot and they liked to go to one of the restaurants in the evening or have a barbeque if they didn't feel like going out or if they had run short of money. After lunch they took off their bathers and made love in the airless caravan. They tried not to make any noise. They made love and fell asleep.

The caravan park across the highway had an entertainment room. Non-residents were charged two dollars to use it. The room had a TV attached to the wall, a table tennis table and three couches. It had a kettle and tea bags and instant coffee. They used the room if it was raining. Mostly they stayed in the caravan but if it rained and rained they walked across the highway and paid their two dollars. The entertainment room was where they met Paul. His parents were watching TV.

Genna remembered the wife reaching across the table to her husband, twirling the ring on her finger even as she held her husband’s hand. The three of them laughed. The laughter followed Genna to the bathroom. She needed to pee. She could hear it now, the reverberation of throats and chests rolling on as if the sea had washed the laughter into a cave and she was left alone listening to it rumble and echo, her feet in the sand, the water lapping her breasts, waiting for the sound to return so she might drown it at last. She stumbled as she stepped away from the toilet. Her underpants were looped around her knees. She dropped back onto the toilet seat and sat for a while to recover herself. She left the cubicle. She threw up in the washbasin. It was a small amount. She cleaned the sink with water and wiped it dry with paper towel. Another diner came into the bathroom while she was cleaning the sink. She left the restaurant without saying anything. It was difficult to negotiate the stairs. The highway was quiet. From the beach the tracks through the scrub all looked alike in the dark. She climbed the dune in front of their van. She climbed over the fence. Ida came home hours later. She said, ‘We saw you leave.’ She climbed into bed. Her hair was wet. She had been swimming.
Paul had swum out to the sand bar. He was swimming hard but the tide was going out. The ocean heaved at the mouth of the inlet. He was being dragged out to sea.

Genna ran. Ida stood under the annex wearing her bathers. Her body was lean and muscular. She held her coffee in the air. She was watching the sea. Genna thought she must look small below Ida, an object on the periphery of the beach surf and sky. Ida looked down. Genna defended what she did for a living but she was not excellent at it. She wished she had more confidence. But what she did required an open mind. Ida’s beliefs had been shaped smooth and indelible long ago. But it wasn’t the inflexibility, the narrow-mindedness. The laughter broke through again. It was Genna as subject, Genna as material. Ida held her coffee in the air. She looked down at Genna standing on the beach. The boy is drowning, Genna wanted to say. She felt small and dug into the sand like a peg.

The tide pulled the boy away from Ida. She swam hard. The two came close and parted. The boy’s father fell over in the sand. His legs failed him. He tried to run. The boy had gone beyond the mouth of the inlet. Ida let the tide pull her out to sea. They were gone a long time. Genna watched the ocean break silently over the ridge of the sand bar, rippling a fringe through the water. Ida pulled the boy’s head over the bar. She held him under his chin. Someone was ringing an ambulance. She swam against the rip and dragged the boy onto the beach. He wasn’t breathing. She dropped onto her knees and coughed violently. She began CPR but she was exhausted. The caretaker of the caravan park took over the CPR and the boy vomited onto the sand.

The husband leapt down the dune, calling his son’s name over and over. Paul. Paul. Genna left the beach. Behind her the husband’s voice pealed above the surf and the seagulls and the agitated voices of the small crowd.

‘How is he?’ Genna asked Ida when she returned to the van. Ida opened the fridge. Beer, prawns wrapped in butchers paper, pickled fish and tzatziki. The dining table was large as caravan tables go. It took up most of the floor space by the door.

‘They want to interview me.’

‘The police?’

‘The local paper. He’s been taken to Sydney.’
‘Helicoptered. I heard it.’

‘It landed in the beer garden of the pub. He was talking. Chatting away like nothing had happened.’

Genna sat opposite Ida and tore into a fresh loaf of bread. Ida pressed the beer to her cheek. Her cheeks were flushed. ‘Are you OK?’ Ida nodded behind the bottle. Beyond the window the tea tree lurched and twisted then stopped in its usual posture of deference to the wind; the wind here came off the sea in bursts, drove up the dunes, the cliffs, spread and sang in the trees, the eaves of houses. The caravan shuddered.

‘There’s going to be a storm,’ said Ida.

The interview never happened. Genna wondered if Ida was supposed to have contacted someone or if it was the weather keeping the reporter away. A bigger story, perhaps. A flood. Ida, anyway, was unwell. Perhaps they had interviewed witnesses instead. Perhaps the story had already been run: nothing remarkable in a young boy more confident than he was capable of swimming in the inlet.

Ida stayed in bed all of the following day. The storm started soon after she had arrived back at the van. After eating she undressed and flopped naked onto the bed. She instantly fell asleep. Genna opened the windows and the rain spat through the flyscreen onto the floor. The air was sweet and damp and cool. She pulled the sheet over Ida and when it was dark she found a nylon quilt in the cupboard beside the bed and covered Ida with that too. In the morning Ida’s cough had improved but by the afternoon she was in bed again.

‘I have something for that cough.’

‘No thanks.’

‘A doctor then?’

‘There isn’t one. Just the hospital. I swallowed a bit of water, that’s all. He was so strong. He grabbed me and pulled me under — my hair in his two fists. I took in some water, that’s all.’

‘Let me give you something.’

‘You know how I feel.

‘Hospital, then.’

‘No.’

She slept.
The rain enveloped the caravan. Genna could see only the shapes and shadows of things: the tea tree, their car, the amenities block. Occasionally Ida asked for a drink of water. The rain lasted days. Ida slept and woke and refused Genna’s help. Genna heard Ida’s airways quietly pop and click until a cough dislodged the obstructing phlegm or sputum. Ida’s lips appeared cyanosed but perhaps it was the bluish light off the clouds, or that the light was filtered by the rain or dulled by the flyscreens. Genna timed Ida’s breaths and wondered how to accurately monitor the shallowness or depth of each inhalation.

The sound of the sea could be heard during a single break in the rain and Genna imagined she heard in the waves the traffic of home, the traffic of the freeway clearly audible from the window of her apartment. Inside the caravan, precarious on the edge of a cliff, having the sense of it being about to topple in the storm, everything wavered in a state of equivocation. In recalling the freeway — predictable and constant in its companionship — she knew at home her decision of what to do for Ida would be clear, barely a decision at all.

Over the next two days Genna braved the rain to bring her treatments from the boot of the car into the van. A number of small boxes with herbs and phials, that was all, placed on top of the fridge beyond view of Ida. Genna also rang the hospital. Ida may have pneumonia, she was told. She should be brought in.

Ida’s fever made her thirsty. ‘Gen. I feel awful. I think you should take me to hospital now.’ Genna gave her warm water instead of cold. When Ida’s lips puckered in anticipation of the cup in Genna’s hand her mouth and her needy stare reminded Genna of the fish in the tank at the restaurant.

Genna began simply. A tonic, essentially. Dissolved in water. Gently was the right way to begin. Half a day later, something to release the stagnation of the chest.

‘Do you feel better? You look better,’ Genna said.
‘I feel shocking.’
‘You have colour in your cheeks.’
‘I ache. I can’t move.’
‘It will pass.’
Ida’s breathing had become quieter. Genna had stopped monitoring how deeply Ida’s lungs were filling with air or the rate of her breaths. The terrible noises had stopped. The lungs were clearing.

The following day, waking from a very deep sleep, Ida did not climb out of bed in time to get to the toilet. She urinated on the mattress. ‘My god,’ she said quietly.

‘You’ve been drinking a lot of water,’ Genna said. ‘But it’s doing you good. You need to keep it up.’

The beach towels were damp from the rain. Genna shook the sand onto the floor of the annex. She moved Ida’s legs to one side and pressed the towels into the bed and mopped up the urine as well as she could. She spread the nylon quilt over the mattress and lifted Ida’s legs on top of it. Ida fell asleep again.

The rain was clearing. Ida had not eaten for days. Genna washed a load of laundry and waited for Ida to wake, take some water then fall back to sleep. She ran across the caravan park in a light shower and crossed the road. She cut through the chemist to the supermarket and purchased what she needed. At the entrance to the chemist a woman threw her hands in the air. It was the wife.

‘We don’t know how we can thank Ida enough.’

The husband said, ‘He was out of hospital in forty-eight hours. So we came back. Why not? But the weather, hey?’


‘But no swimming. Doctors orders.’

‘So dinner. Tonight?’

‘Tomorrow then. Vietnamese. We’ve heard it’s good.’

‘It is,’ Genna said, ‘very good.’

‘I’ll come too,’ Paul said.

A large spider, a huntsman, moved up and down and up and down the window of the chemist. It was confused by the glare. The wife saw the spider too. ‘Of course, baby,’ she said to the boy. ‘I’m not letting him out of my sight now.’

‘We have something for Ida,’ Paul said.
‘Nothing could be enough to thank her, of course. But we wanted to give her something.’

‘We put a lot of thought into it while Paul was in hospital, didn’t we Pauly?’ the husband said. ‘I travelled halfway across Sydney.’

‘Oh it’s just small!’

‘Tomorrow then.’

‘On us,’ the wife said.

‘God. Yes. Dinner is on us. For Ida. For both of you of course.’

Ida looked better. She was sitting up. ‘You must have had a good sleep. You’ll be up by tomorrow.’

‘I pissed myself again. I need to go to the hospital.’

‘No. You need to eat. Look at you sitting up.’

‘I didn’t want to lie in my own piss,’ Ida said. The anger triggered a long session of coughing.

Genna left the van. She returned with the beach towels, dry and clean now. She folded them and left them on the table. Ida was trying to speak. Genna took the food out of the shopping bags and tied the bags into a knot before putting them in the drawer with the others. She moved a beer along the shelf of the fridge door to make room for a carton of soymilk and one of cow’s milk and a jar of roll mops. She took the empty crisper from the fridge and sat it on the table next to the towels and filled it with vegetables and juggled it back into place. She laid the celery across the bottom shelf of the fridge because it wouldn’t fit in the crisper. She had bought eye fillet and T-bone steak and chops, cheeses — four types — and yoghurt and olives and more tzatziki. Two loaves of sliced bread went into the freezer and the cob from the bakery she put next to the fruit bowl, which was on top of the fridge. She put three oranges, two avocados and three mangoes into the fruit bowl and a punnet of strawberries beside it. She filled a glass with water and drank it. She bent down to the cupboard under the sink and retrieved the toaster. She sliced a thick piece of bread — as thick as the toaster would manage — and decided, at the last minute, that she would drink the beer. There were plenty of beers in the fridge. She finished it and had another.

‘I can’t believe you don’t see,’ she said to Ida, ‘that you’ve turned a corner. You look so much better.’
‘Are you going to clean me up?’

It seemed a shame to soil both towels. One clean and dry towel would do the job of two damp dirty ones. She pressed the towel to her face to smell the laundry powder and the sunshine. It was still warm. She lifted Ida’s ankles and moved them across the bed. It was too late to save the mattress. The quilt had not absorbed any of the urine. It was soaked into the bed in a large elongated V. She would hire another set of sheets from the office and hope the smell faded. Perhaps, now that the sun was out, she could wash the mattress when Ida was up and about. She pulled the sheet from the bottom half of the bed and slipped her hand under Ida’s back. Ida gripped Genna’s hair in her two hands and pulled Genna down. ‘I want to go to the hospital,’ Ida said.

Genna’s face was clamped to the bed. The sheet smelled of days old sweat and urine and boiled herbs. ‘You wouldn’t have managed this three days ago,’ she said. She laughed. ‘You’re fit enough to fight me. You’re getting better and you don’t want to admit it.’

Ida let go of Genna and lifted herself out of bed. It took a long time. Genna opened another beer. Ida pulled a pair of shorts over her legs and stood to pull them up. She found the top half of her bikini on the floor and asked Genna to fasten the clasp. She pulled a t-shirt over her head then rummaged through the pockets of their clothes to find the keys to the car. The van was heating up quickly now the sun had come out. The cold of each new beer felt good in Genna’s throat. They hadn’t driven the car since they had arrived. They walked everywhere when they stayed in the caravan. They walked to the beach, to shops, to restaurants and the pub. There was no reason to use the car.

Ida was weak because she hadn’t eaten. She sat repeatedly while she was dressing and again when she was looking for the keys. Genna did not ask Ida if she would like some food. She would not ask her again. Ida gripped the table as she passed and leaned into the doorframe of the caravan before stepping down to the annex.

Genna put her beer on the table. ‘I’ll drive you,’ she said.

It was dark when Genna arrived back from the hospital. Ida had been admitted. She was to be put on an intravenous drip and given intravenous antibiotics. She had walked easily from the car to the hospital entrance. She
was like a child who had faked an illness at school only to brighten immeasurably when sat in front of the television.

Genna took another beer from the fridge and cheese and a mango from the fruit bowl and a large chunk of the cob loaf. She wrapped the food in the beach towel she had left folded on the kitchen table. She climbed over the fence behind the caravan and scrambled down the cliff onto the beach. Above the van a crescent moon hovered low and large and golden. The tide was out. The inlet would be shallow and safe to swim in but Genna felt like a swim in the surf. The birds slept now. The ocean alone made sound. She was aware of something taking hold in her chest, fierce and cold as steel. She would have appreciated the sound of birds. Seagulls. Or the birds that called to her from the hills behind the inlet, the ones she had never sighted. She stepped into the water. A skirt of thin white bubbles rose around her ankles and retreated, rose and retreated. She cried out. Her name. Genna! The cry cut through the low rhythmic hum of the sea, lingered like a tolling bell.
Standing in the Plaza: Problematic Place in the Short Story

Volume Two: Problematic Place/Non-place and the Short Story

Sally Sian Lily Fermer

Thesis submitted for the degree of
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School of Humanities
The University of Adelaide

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Abstract

There are places in the contemporary world where the predominating feature is a kind of worrying absence. We negotiate a relationship with these problematic places in order to live with them or in them or in close proximity to them or in order to use them. They are ubiquitous in the contemporary world: carparks; demolition sites; shopping centres; pieces of fenced-off land called reserves; freeways; service stations; animal refuges; train stations; main roads; empty buildings; abattoirs; residential subdivisions; sites dedicated to solely to tourism; prisons; boarded up rooming houses; detention centres. How does one talk about these problematic places in fiction? How does a writer describe and understand the in-between place, the temporary place, the ugly place, the bland place in terms of its effect on the people who inhabit it?

The exegetical component of this thesis takes a work of anthropology as its starting point and asks can an anthropological thesis on place assist in writing fiction about place? In looking for a way to describe and understand the nature of the problematic places described above and their effect on the individual, Marc Augé’s Non-Places: an Introduction to Supermodernity provides a useful linguistic and a philosophical approach. He attributes the term ‘non-place’ to places defined by particular characteristics of excess, temporality, representation and effects on identity. This exegesis will examine the interface of place and the individual in two short stories using Augé’s thesis of non-place. The short story “Safety Procedures” by Nadine Gordimer exemplifies the characteristics of Augé’s supermodernity and non-place. The second story examined in this exegesis is Raymond Carver’s “Kindling”. Responding to a number of authors who have critiqued Augé’s thesis, this exegesis will ask whether the definition of non-place can include places other than sites of supermodernity. “Kindling” is studied with this question in mind.

The creative component of this thesis is a collection of eleven short stories titled Standing in the Plaza, Wanting. Each story is set in a different problematic place and, drawing on features of Augé's thesis to better understand the nature of problematic places, each story investigates the...
influence of that setting on the characters who inhabit the it, rather than the setting itself.
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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2.1 Introduction

How does a fiction writer understand the interface between place and the individual? More specifically, how does one write fiction that acknowledges the influence of the tangible and intangible features of problematic place? Can an anthropological thesis on place assist in this project of writing fiction that quietly critiques the influence of noise and silence, vastness and confinement, the intended use, the cultural meaning of a place as characters wait, converse or dance within it, watch from it, move through it or head towards it?

This thesis consists of an exegesis and a collection of short stories called *Standing in the Plaza, Wanting*. The exegesis examines the influence of problematic place on the individual in fiction via a reading of two short stories using anthropologist Marc Augé’s *Non-Places: an Introduction to Supermodernity* as the framework for discussion. Nadine Gordimer’s “Safety Procedures” exemplifies Augé’s model of supermodernity. Raymond Carver’s “Kindling,” however, is critiqued with a broader analysis of non-place than Augé himself provides. Responding to this research and motivated by a desire to explore the nexus of problematic place and subjectivity in fiction, the stories in *Standing in the Plaza, Wanting* each attempts to express nuances of this relationship.

**Problematic place and non-place**

Problematic places are the in-between places, the neglected places, the monolithic, inhospitable places. Places where the originating purpose has overridden meaningful consideration of their effect on the human beings who use them. Places where the concept of habitation is not simple: public places that are continuously frequented but where nobody lives; places not designed to be lived in but where people reside; domestic places no longer inhabited. Problematic places are places nobody wants to think about and places rarely given a second thought. What, then, is the impact of problematic place on an individual? How do problematic places affect an individual’s sense of themselves, their sense of otherness or isolation, their sense of community and togetherness? And how does a writer express the effects of problematic place on the characters who inhabit it: the habitation of train stations by the
homeless; the dehumanizing and isolating motorcar on a freeway with its paradoxical appeal of speed and freedom; living in outer suburbia; seeking substance for the soul in a large shopping centre?

In Non-Places: an Introduction to Supermodernity Augé states that non-place describes both the physical place and the effect of that place on the individual: “[…] the word 'non-place' designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (76). Augé’s “quantifiable” (physical) non-places are the sites of supermodernity: sites of air and rail travel, motorways, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, refugees camps, shanty towns, temporary abode and electronic communication (63-4). According to Augé the “essential quality” of supermodernity is “excess” (24). He defines three categories of excess: an excess of time (“an overabundance of events […] makes it difficult to give meaning to the recent past” (25)); “spatial overabundance” (a result of travel into outer space as well as faster modes of transport by which our “experience of the remote has taught us to de-centre our way of looking” (29)); and an excess of ego (“In Western societies, at least, the individual wants to be a world in himself” (30)).

Augé contrasts supermodernity with modernity as it is particularly represented in the writing of Charles Baudelaire. Place in modernity, Augé argues, is “relational, historical and concerned with identity” (63). In contrast to Baudelaire’s Paris, the non-places of supermodernity “do not integrate earlier places” (63): history is diminished to spectacle (89). Spoken communication no longer exists and the relationship between individuals and between non-place and the individual is mediated by written or electronically modified text that alerts, instructs and regulates (76).

The second “reality’ of non-place (as mentioned above) concerns the effect of non-place on identity. Augé describes ways in which an individual behaves and feels when entering non-place: they submit to the contract of the non-place; they relinquish their identity; they experience the complicated desire to be alone at the very time they among others; they experience spectacle by experiencing themselves as spectators.
The user of a non-place enters into “contractual relations” with it and with the powers that control it. The individual is required to “prove his innocence” (82): passports are presented, tickets are purchased, instructions given on electronic signage are read, road signs are adhered to. But this contract is a “solitary contractuality” (76). Part of the deal upon entering non-place is to forgo one’s identity in favour of assuming the fabricated “shared identity” of the “average man” (81). And there follows, paradoxically, a kind of pleasure in letting go of one’s identity, in “being relieved of [one’s] usual determinants”. One is alone in the throng, indistinct and silent. The experience of non-place, therefore, is one of “solitude and similitude” where one becomes “no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, driver” (83).

Although Augé employs Baudelaire’s modernity as a foil to supermodernity, in one instance he finds the poet’s “act of looking” in the poem “Landscape” applicable to features of supermodernity. The poet’s “shift of gaze” becomes, writes Augé, “a spectacle in itself” and, now in more “systematic, generalized and prosaic fashion,” has become one of the characteristic features of supermodernity, exposing “individual consciousness to entirely new experiences and ordeals of solitude” (Augé 75). The play of spectacle and identity is notable in sites of tourism and in tourism brochures that encourage a “reversal of the gaze.” The traveler “feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of spectator were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of spectator were his own spectacle” (70).

In this exegesis the short story has been chosen as the form best suited to an exploration of the interface between place and the individual. In his introduction to a collection of essays dedicated to the short story, *The New Short Story Theories*, Charles May argues that there is a relationship between the short story form and the “experiences embodied in the form” (May xviii). The stories written for the creative component of this thesis, in which it is possible to identify a problematic place, are not about problematic places per se but characters may engage with or be engaged by place in a way that holds sway over the events of the story. That is, the second reality of Augé’s thesis
“the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (76) — is a feature of each story rather than the physical places themselves.

“The travelers’ space,” writes Augé, is the “archetype of non-place” (70). A number of well known short stories set on trains or at train stations attest to the appeal of this particular travelers’ space to the writer: Flannery O'Connor's “The Train”, Ernest Hemingway’s, “Hills Like White Elephants”, Raymond Carver’s “The Compartment”, Anton Chekhov’s “Champagne”. The features that Augé ascribes to non-place — contractuality, spectacle and solitude — can be read in these stories (even if the train technology is far removed from Augé’s idea of supermodernity). In Flannery O'Connor's “The Train” the awkward Haze communicates ineffectually with passengers and porters while longing for the security of aloneness when he might watch the passing night through the window beside his bunk. His "ordeal of solitude," as an observer of the passing landscape and of the spectacle of his own absurd attempts to engage with others, is compounded by the discovery, towards the end of the story, that his much longed-for bunk has no window. He is left in darkness, with the recollection of his mother's body in its coffin and "the rushing stillness of the train" (Flannery O'Connor 62). O'Connor, like the other writers above, has written here about the effects of the stasis of waiting, the immobility of confinement and the speed made capable by technology upon the individual.

The choice of writing a short story collection for the creative part of this thesis can be explained further.

Firstly and most simply, a collection of short stories, each with a different setting, allows for an exploration of a number of different problematic places. As a common thread throughout the collection, problematic place becomes a focus in a similar way to the consequent focus on place in Sherwood Anderson’s Winesberg Ohio or Yoknapatawpha County in William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses. Character, writes Leonard Lutwack, “owes its identity through consistent orientation” in place (17). Although these landmark collections are “about” something other than the place in which the stories are set, the characters are formed, in part, by place, and place becomes a predominant feature of the collection. As a concern with problematic place was the initiating motivation for the creative part of this
thesis it made sense to write a collection of short stories that will, by their grouping, extrapolate this common theme.

Secondly, the spatial and temporal features of non-place suit a fictional form that has its own (and similar) characteristics relating to time and perspective. In supermodernity there is no “interweaving of old and new” (Augé 89) and, according to a number of authors, a characteristic feature of the short story is the absence of an interweaving of past and present. That is, the short story does not often embed character or story in personal or historical context. In the introduction to The New Granta Book of the American Short Story Richard Ford refers to the “audacity” of the short story writer in assuming the reader's ability to forgo any need for character background (vii). In The Lonely Voice Frank O'Connor says, “the storyteller must be looking for new compositions that enable him to suggest the totality of the old one” (22). In the short story time and chronology are variously discontinuous disconnected compressed or intensified. Gordimer famously wrote that short story writers “see by the light of the flash [...] theirs is the art of [...] the present moment” (“The Flash of Fireflies” 265). The short story’s dismissal of the past suits writing about non-place where the past is denied its significance, place that is characterized by “the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (Augé 63). Related to this characteristic of being snipped out of time is the short story’s “property of illuminating something beyond itself” (Cortazar 247). Harking back to Ford’s and Frank O’Connor’s reference to allusion, the short story “de-centre[s] our way of looking” (Augé 29).

Finally, features pertaining to character in the short story remind us of two aspects of Augé’s thesis: non-place and solitariness; and non-place and ego. Frank O'Connor defines the subjects of the short story as "members of a submerged population, frequently unable to speak for themselves" (28). Augé’s idea of “solitary contractuality” infers a subject with direction motivation and a reason for inhabiting the non-place to begin with. Interestingly for the short story writer, those who are unable accept the terms of the contract are most vulnerable to being silenced: the submerged population of non-place.

2.2 “Safety Procedures”
"Safety Procedures" was published in Nadine Gordimer's 2007 collection, *Beethoven was One-sixteenth Black*. It fits so comfortably with the beginning of Augé's epilogue and with the narrative of Pierre Dupont in Augé's prologue that it is almost as if Gordimer is commenting on supermodernity itself. The narrator (who is not named) is taking another business class flight across the world. Despite his wife's uncharacteristic misgivings about the threat of terrorism at the beginning of the story, everything about the flight appears to be as it should be until severe turbulence causes a forced landing. Another passenger — a well-groomed woman — sits beside the narrator. She is his ideal aircraft companion: she keeps to herself, allowing him to abandon himself to the solitary pleasures of flying. But her response to the terrifying turbulence, when all other passengers fear for their lives, is to remain implacably calm. She tells him that she has tried to commit suicide three times: the plane will not crash because she is on board and is apparently incapable of dying. Augé’s thesis about the impact of supermodernity on identity is useful in extrapolating what this story says about living with problematic place in the twenty-first century.

For the first part of "Safety Procedures" supermodernity is laid in uncomplicated fashion before the reader who, it is assumed, is familiar with the non-place of air travel. But Gordimer exploits her readers’ familiarity with the features of supermodernity to comment on some of the deeper psychological implications of living in the contemporary world. She achieves this by using certain narrative techniques that will be discussed but, importantly for this exegesis, an understanding of the intended meaning of this story is assisted by an analysis of its non-place setting.

If the travelers’ space is the archetype of non-place (Augé 70) then air travel is the quintessence of it. According to Augé, individuals, the home and the urban space have undergone a “triple decentring.” The airport is at the outermost periphery of these “spaces of circulation, consumption and communication” (Augé vii-iii). Air travel is defined as a site of consumption early in “Safety Procedures”. Like Augé’s Pierre Dupont who enjoys reading “with a certain smugness” the benefits of business-class travel (3), Gordimer’s narrator, also flying business class, reflects on his company’s “no more first class wasteful expenditure” (“Safety Procedures” 67). The beginning of the
story moves the reader briskly from the narrator’s conversation with his wife in their home to the supermodern setting and — to use Augé’s term — its willing “contracted” user: flying, says the narrator, “is as much a routine as going to my executive office of the company every day” (“Safety Procedures” 66). Gordimer wastes no time in establishing her narrator as a subject comfortable with the expectations of frequent flying: he is Augé’s archetypal user of non-place.

Gordimer has written that the short story “suits modern consciousness - which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near hypnotic states of indifference” (“Fireflies” 265). The “fearful insight” in “Safety Procedures” appears at the end of the story, but at the beginning the narrator achieves his “near hypnotic state of indifference” readily; he fits into his role of passenger enthusiastically, submitting to what Augé calls the “power of attraction” of non-place (96). The narrator of "Safety Procedures" expresses the pleasure of shaking himself loose from the markers of his identity during his flight. “Nothing. Up there, out there, I do not have within me love, sex, wife, children, house and executive office. I do not have a waiting foreign city with international principals and decisions... Freedom” (“Safety Procedures” 68). The desire of Gordimer’s narrator to submit himself wholly to the role of passenger is an inherent characteristic of inhabiting non-place: “Subjected to a gentle form of possession, to which he surrenders himself with more or less talent or conviction, he tastes for a while […] the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing” (Augé 83). It is with a similar sentiment that Augé's fictional Pierre Dupont speaks about his identity at the airport: “[…] freedom […] now he was 'sorted out', his identity registered, his boarding pass in his pocket, he had nothing to do but wait” (2).

Augé’s description of how an individual behaves in non-place assists in understanding the way Gordimer presents her protagonist. “Solitude and similitude” appeal to the narrator of “Safety Procedures” who does not wish to talk to anyone: “I dread … someone in the next seat who wants to talk and will take up a monologue if you don't respond” (“Safety Procedures” 69). After exchanging only “Good evening,” the narrator notes the expression of the passenger sitting next to him. She has a look “as if the face is something
she has assumed as you take along an umbrella” (68). In perfect similitude the woman’s expression reflects the narrator’s own solitariness: “What he is confronted with, finally, is an image of himself […] The only face to be seen, the only voice to be heard […] are his own” (Augé 83). Augé’s fictional Pierre Dupont likewise cuts himself off from his fellow passengers by listening to music through earphones. He too yearns to be “alone at last” (5). But in non-place communication via “non-human mediation” (96) is less easy to avoid. The narrator dreads the “unavoidable distraction of the fold-out individual TV screen [...] flickering away in my peripheral vision” (“Safety Procedures” 67). He hears the amplified voice of the pilot “exhort its charges to sit back and relax” (68).

Augé says that an “essential preliminary” to understanding place and non-place is an analysis of Michel de Certeau on place and space (64). He refers to Certeau's Wandersmanner, the walkers of New York whom Certeau observes from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre. Certeau experiences the immense height, the flying-like vista, as a shifting of consciousness and an emptying out of identity. “I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of "seeing the whole," of looking down [...] this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (Certeau 92). Augé describes French TGV trains as being “aircraft-like” where passengers are reminded of “the need to live on the scale (or in the image) of today's world” (80) and Certeau's reading of train travel could be similarly applied to the passenger of Augé's supermodernity or the position of the narrator in "Safety Procedures": “The unchanging traveler is pigeonholed, numbered, and regulated in the grid of the railway car […]” (111). For Certeau air travel offers even more. As with the quality of excess Augé attributes to supermodernity, what flying offers Certeau is "more abstract [...] more perfect [...] the ("melancholy") pleasure of seeing what one is separated from" (114).

When Augé looks through the window of an aircraft he finds there is nothing: “Actually there is nothing to be seen: once again, the spectacle is only an idea, only a word” (84). In "Safety Procedures" the narrator’s gaze also moves to the window of the plane. He too finds nothing, but his identity, like Certeau looking down from the World Trade Centre, falls away in a state of exhilaration and ecstasy.
[I] look — gaze — at what's outside. The window: nothing. All right. The void that, from the ground, is called the sky. Intruded by puffy herds and castles of cloud for a while, scribbled across with a fading vapor trail, a chalked rainbow drawn by another plane out of sight. Other times become an enclosing grey-white element without latitude or longitude or substance like blindness descended upon the eyes. Perhaps what I'm saying is that I've half dozed-off, there's an in-between form of consciousness that's not experienced anywhere else but up here. With nothing... it's another form of being I have for a while [...] (“Safety Procedures” 68).

The narrator turns the world outside into words: distancing, like Certeau's description of the porthole in Jules Verne's *Nautilus*: “the more you see, the less you hold - a dispossession of the hand in favor of a greater trajectory for the eye” (112). But the narrator’s representation of the material becomes a representation of his identity as a passenger in non-place. The word “nothing” is repeated throughout "Safety Procedures" in almost mantra fashion. “Shifts of gaze and plays of imagery, this emptying of consciousness” is a characteristic feature of supermodernity, writes Augé (75). In Emer O'Beirne’s reading of non-place in fiction, the sky is identified as one of “nature's “non-places,” indifferent to human proximity and keeping no trace of our passage” (400). Gordimer’s narrator's fairytale imagery of the sky eventually gives way to a linking of the sky with his own consciousness, but he is more cognisant of his own responses to the vision than to the material world itself. The “blindness descended on the eye” brings the reader back to the source of the gaze, makes the narrator's own position as spectator more prominent than the sky outside: “the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle [...] the spectator in the position of a spectator [is] his own spectacle” (Augé 70).

When Certeau wrote about New York from the vantage point of the top of the World Trade Centre he was not to know what was to happen on September 11 2001. In "Safety Procedures" Gordimer undermines and critiques the narrative of fear that has been part of public discourse since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. It is another aspect of Gordimer’s story that can be examined using Augé’s theory of non-place to better understand the influence of place on the subjectivity of her characters.

In "Postcolonialising Gordimer," Ileana Dimitriu examines the preoccupations of Gordimer as a writer in post-apartheid South Africa: “What
are new are her excursions beyond the national question: her aspiration to step beyond cultural isolation and enter a larger, post-ideological world scene” (160). Gordimer introduces the theme of the West’s anxiety about terrorism at the beginning of the story when the narrator’s wife, Lorrie, voices her concern about the choice of the airline her husband is flying with: “You don't know whose enemy you are [...] By boarding a plane you become one. There's the line's insignia painted on the tail. Logo of nationality” (“Safety Procedures” 66). The co-existence of globalism and the frontiers of nationalism in air space (and in the twenty-first century in general) complicates the identification of place and non-place. In the Epilogue of the 2008 edition of Non-Places, Augé writes that while flying over Saudi Arabia passengers are forbidden to drink alcohol. This regulation, he writes, marks “the intrusion of territory into space [...] anthropological place, fleetingly inscribed in space.” Leaving Saudi airspace, returning to non-place, was like “a return to something resembling freedom” (95). Due to their size and the number of people passing through them, non-places are “the particular target of all those whose passion for retaining or conquering territory drives to terrorism” (Augé 89). Gordimer plays upon her readers’ knowledge of this but ultimately undermines it: the crisis that eventuates in her story is not an act of terrorism but turbulence. Gordimer exploits then cuts through this feature of supermodernity in order to offer a deeper political and psychological meaning.

For Augé there is no recognition of history in non-place other than an “inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present” (84). This cannot be so for Gordimer. History has a potency in her country that cannot be usurped by the forces of supermodernity. In the introduction to her Selected Stories (1975) she says, “in writing I am acting upon my society [...] all the time history is acting upon me” (5). Since the end of Apartheid, Dimitriu argues, Gordimer cannot “avoid the baggage of South Africa’s traumatic transition” (Dimitriu “Civil Imaginary” 35). When the narrator in "Safety Procedures" says “We've never gone in for steel grilles on our doors” he surely makes reference to the high number of home invasions in contemporary South Africa. Martin Trump argues that Gordimer's short stories often reveal the “spiritual impoverishment of the affluent” (344) and
Huggan has a similar position on Gordimer’s protagonists who, he says, expose the “moral bankruptcy of a white bourgeoisie intent on “naturalizing” its unearned privilege” (71).

This “white bourgeoisie” is Augé’s “average man”. Augé’s use of the masculine here is not simply linguistic convention. He states that the “ego-ideal” of supermodernity is masculine (Augé 85). Gordimer’s (male) narrator likes to boast that “fear is the real killer” (“Safety Procedures” 65), but when there is actual danger it is the woman passenger who has no fear. One of the common narrative strategies in Gordimer's post-apartheid writing, writes Dimitriu, is her pairing of a strong woman with a weak man (“Civil Imaginary” 33). When the woman passenger bears “no grimace of the animal fear that was everyone's face” (“Safety Procedures” 70) she “undercuts the dominant narrative voice” (Huggan 64). Gordimer not only undermines narratives about threats of terrorism but the very voice of privilege: the affluent white male “user of the road, retail or banking system” (Augé 81).

Non-place has its impact upon identity but the will of an individual is capable of asserting itself in reaction to the expectations of non-place. Individuality can become, in non-place, a link to a greater humanity, a triumph of humanity over the disempowerment of non-place and supermodernity.

Graham Huggan argues that Gordimer frequently employs “a deliberate strategy of textual interruption” and that readers should “treat the primary narratives of Gordimer’s short stories with suspicion” (63). This is true of “Safety Procedures.” The woman passenger jarringly reveals she has attempted suicide three times: “Failed. No way out for me. So it seems I can't die, no flight I take will kill” (“Safety Procedures” 71). Huggan writes: “It is precisely when the mind is arrested, when the flow of the narrative is interrupted, that the flash of insight occurs. The reader is informed, at these moments, that the primary narrative has been false all along”. At these moments, he argues, the narrator of Gordimer’s stories becomes, either purposefully or innocently, unreliable (66). When, earlier in the story, the narrator of “Safety Procedures” reflects on the absurdity of laptops and duty-free he is demonstrating something of the insight later revealed by the woman passenger. But ultimately he is a narrator who has diverted us away “from truths he does not fully understand himself” (Huggan 66). Gordimer sets her
story firmly in the familiar and privileged non-place of supermodernity then upsets the expectations of that non-place: an act of terrorism is now an expected possibility in supermodernity but Gordimer ruptures that narrative with an existential voice speaking a different, disconcerting reality. Gordimer, Huggan argues, uses the short story form to “articulate a submerged consciousness” (63). Here it is one that works against privilege and the masculine ego-ideal of supermodernity. Gordimer explains: “To write [a short story] is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving drop — sweat, tear, semen, saliva — that will spread an intensity on the page; burn a hole in it” (Selected Stories 7). “Safety Procedures” is not “about” air travel. Gordimer has chosen this site of supermodernity as the antithetical position to “sweat, tear, semen and saliva”. Dimitriu argues that Gordimer's pre-apartheid and post-apartheid fiction explores “existentialist ideas; individual responsibility and free will; choice and the “nausea” of choice; the indeterminacy and uncertainty of life and death” (“Postcolonialising Gordimer” 173). These concerns - the preoccupations of the female passenger who cuts through the dominant narrative and dominant narrative voice - are a far cry from Augé’s “average man”, content with the “gentle form of possession, to which he surrenders himself [and] the passive joys of identity-loss” (83).

In “Safety Procedures” non-place provides the backdrop of unseeing “blindness” and “nothingness” against which a seemingly unimportant character can provide a “flash of insight” about the modern psyche: an individual’s will exerting back onto non-place a very human chaotic charge, expressed in antipathy to the lost identity of the supermodern subject. Augé might offer a word of caution to the story’s narrator: “The world of supermodernity does not exactly match the one in which we believe we live, for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at” (29). Just when her readers surrender to the familiarity of supermodernity, Gordimer makes them look.

2.3 “Kindling”

Myers, the protagonist of Raymond Carver’s “Kindling”, is a recovering alcoholic. He is separated from his wife and is “between lives” (Carver
“Kindling” 7). He moves into temporary accommodation, a room in the home of Sol and Bonnie, from where he can hear the hum of the TV and the moving river outside his window. He learns the daily routines of Bonnie and Sol so he can safely emerge from his room each day confident that he will be alone. When a load of lumber is delivered to the house Myers offers to saw and stack it. This physical labour proves to be the redemptive salve to his psychological wounds: Myers gives notice on his room and chooses to attempt a return to his former life.

Bonnie’s and Sol’s house and the small town in which they live are not the sites of Augé’s supermodernity, but the relationship Myers has with his temporary home and the effect that it has on him can be critiqued via Augé’s proposition that the features of non-place influence an individual’s feelings, behaviour, their sense of past, present and future and their sense of themselves in a particular way.

Not all of the problematic places described in the introduction to this exegesis fit obviously within Augé’s definitions of supermodernity. However Augé’s statement that non-places are a product of supermodernity and that they are places that “do not integrate the earlier places” encourages a wider view of non-place beyond the obvious airports and freeways. Augé’s own list of non-places includes, for example, refugee camps and squats (63). Additionally, Augé acknowledges the mutable nature of place and non-place.

In the introduction to the second edition of *Non-Places* he writes:

> I have defined 'anthropological place' as any space in which inscriptions of social bond [...] or collective history [...] can be seen. Such inscriptions are obviously less numerous in spaces bearing the stamp of the ephemeral and the transient. That does not mean, however, that either place or non-place really exists in the absolute sense of the term (Augé viii).

This aspect of Augé’s thesis is overlooked by many of the authors who critique Augé’s definition of non-place as being limited (see below). However the potential Augé’s thesis has for being used in different theoretical arenas benefits from these authors’ desires to broaden concepts of what constitutes non-place, such as O’Beirne’s “infinite expanses of sea and sky” (O’Beirne 400). The reading of Carver’s “Kindling” in this exegesis seeks to adopt this
wider understanding of Augé’s thesis and examine how other authors on
place, such as Gaston Bachelard, might be included in this discussion.

In the chapter of Reading the Everyday titled “Non-Places”, Joe
Moran describes Augé’s thesis as raising a number of “ambiguities” (94).
Moran discusses the British “new town”, an equivalent of what we might in
Australia call “suburban sprawl”. He argues that Augé’s description of non-
places as “the mundane, repetitive spaces in which we live our daily lives”
fails to take account of the lives - working and cultural - within those non-
places (128). Paradoxically, he points out, many so called “new towns,” seen
as “the quintessence of modern placelessness,” were built in the post-war
period and are now themselves fifty-year-old sites with their own history
(117). Moran also compares Augé’s French autoroutes with the British M25,
stating that “Augé suggests that driving offers a kind of blurred perception, a
semi-virtual encounter with a floating world [...] Britain's motorway network,
by contrast, is a maze of bypasses, spurs [and] link roads” (99). Like Moran,
Peter Merriman also argues that Augé “fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity
and materiality of social networks” that exist in non-place (Merriman 147).
He points out that the historical accounts of the advent of train travel, the
telegraph and the motor car demonstrate a similar anxiety about social change
and technology as Augé attributes to supermodernity and that Augé
“overstates the newness and differences of experience associated with non-
places” (150). Not dissimilar to Certeau’s description of train travel, Merriman
writes of passengers on trains during the 19th-century, “disorientated by the
rapidly moving scenery, and turning their gaze to reading material as a way
of coping with the new speeds and the embarrassment of sitting in an enclosed
apartment with strangers” (150). Merriman argues that the effects on the
individual of non-place, such as feelings of “boredom, frustration, solitariness
or dislocation,” can be attributed to places that do not fit into Augé's
definition of supermodernity (150). Taking up Augé’s argument that non-
place is a masculine space, Neil Archer defines the road in road movies as
masculine non-place (138), functioning as “a hub of irresponsibility” (142) for
the male subject. Archer argues that this non-place is restorative, “[...] a site
in which masculine identity within patriarchy is imaginarily restored and
reassured” (138). He takes his gendered analysis further by suggesting that “the intimate space of the car itself” might be read as a “uterine space” (144).

These authors have found new ways of reading social, cultural, economic and artistic space using Augé’s thesis. Other authors view Augé as being reactionary. In a review of the first edition of Non-Places David Harvie calls Augé nostalgic in his representation of the French past (144). But in response to authors who believe that Augé’s position is a conservative one, video artist Christophe Bruchansky argues for recognition of the importance of Augé’s thesis in influencing current thought about the nature of place: “All these “questions [of placeness]” arise thanks to the concept of non-place” (“Reply to Kati Blom”).

As stated earlier, Augé’s recognition that there is no absolute demarcation of place/non-place is something often overlooked by authors critiquing his thesis. Augé states that “the possibility of non-place is never absent from any place” (86). When Harvie considers the political implications of defining place and non-place (giving the example that Indians living under the British Raj might have perceived British buildings as non-place) he fails to acknowledge Augé’s recognition of this mutability. Harvie writes “ […] any somewhere may appear/be simultaneously a place and a non-place, depending on your perspective; this in turn opens up the possibility of struggle, the struggle to create place from non-place” (145). Similarly, Bruchansky writes that ‘[…] any space can be perceived as a place or a non-place depending on the context and the perceiver’ (“Reply to Kati Blom”) and Merriman argues that particular non-places of supermodernity become place when they become sites of “extraordinary and spectacular events” (161) such as the destruction of the World Trade Centre mentioned earlier or, his example, the funeral of Princess Diana.

The final point to make when considering whether Augé’s thesis makes available a definition of non-place in sites that are not sites of supermodernity is that Augé himself recognizes the ubiquitous nature of non-place in the contemporary world: “In one form or another [...] some experience of non-place [...] is today an essential component of all social existence” (97). Such increased frequentation of non-place surely makes
defining it in terms of a particular kind of movement-through, habitation, use or experience less stable.

At the beginning of “Kindling,” Myers exists in a state of inertia and feels a loss of his identity. Carver writes, “Late that night, before going to bed, he opened his notebook and on a clean page he wrote, Nothing” (“Kindling” 13). It is in the change from observing himself within his non-place of temporary lodgings to having an impact on it (sawing the load of lumber) that Myers finds redemption and the strength to choose to return home: he writes, "I have sawdust in my shirtsleeves tonight ... It's a sweet smell" (“Kindling” 18). On the final evening of his stay Myers writes, "The country I'm in is very exotic. It reminds me of someplace I've read about but never traveled to before now" (“Kindling” 20). Augé argues that places considered to be exotic to us (he uses the example of Tahiti) become known to us simply through the words that evoke them: by this means place becomes non-place (Augé 76). This abstraction of place to non-place can be used in reverse to read Myers's epiphanic shifted sense of self. Myers has moved from non-place (“someplace I've read about”) to place (“never traveled to before now”).

Emer O'Beirne is one of the few authors who have read fictional works through the lens of Augé's thesis of non-place. She writes about the novels of three contemporary French authors (Michel Houellebecq, Jean Echenoz and Marie Darrieussecq) and their engagement with non-place: “In all three [...] the protagonists' relationship to the world is presented with critical emphasis on the alienating effect of contemporary western urban and suburban landscapes. These are the dehumanized architectures that anthropologist Marc Augé calls non-places” (389). O'Beirne's description of character in these novels could be a description of many of Carver's characters: “a predilection for male protagonists with an aura of neglect and a talent for loneliness and failed relationships, existing on the margins of society” (389). Gareth Cornwell notes how Carver’s characters “typically drift thorough life” (345). May notes that Carver's characters often “have no distinct identity but rather seem to be shadowy presences trapped in their own inarticulateness” (“Chekhov and the Modern Short Story” 213). These characteristics of identity suit the emptied subjectivity of non-place. When Myers enters the non-place of his rented room he is a familiar Carver...
protagonist who “lacks the authority to know what [he] want[s]” (Cornwell 345).

The shift that Myers makes from non-place to place makes "Kindling" an atypical example of a Carver story. Myers made appearances in previous Carver stories in which he, like Carver for much of his life, was an alcoholic. In "Kindling" Myers is a recovering alcoholic and the story ends with a forward-looking sense of redemption for the character. In writing about Carver and alcoholism, Chad Wriglesworth says of “Kindling”, “[…] it is evident that the author-creator went back to re-imagine Myers in light of a new horizon […] In contrast to the concluding disconnection of previous endings readers finish “Kindling” knowing that Myers is on a path to recovery and stability” (469). At the beginning of the story Myers has chosen to inhabit non-place, but his relationship to it is complicated by his desire to move out of it. By the end of the story Myers leaves non-place having found, in the temporary physical and psychological isolation of non-place, the means to return to place.

Non-places are places designed to be passed through (Augé 83) and O'Beirne identifies temporary accommodation as non-place in the novels she studies (393). In a physical and psychological sense Myers' non-place is a single point along a journey of deterioration and loss. O'Beirne identifies non-place as a site of abjection: temporary lodgings are notable non-places for these characters who leave “little trace […] thus impose[ing] transience” on the next user (392). A number of the features of Myers’ lodgings fit with the characteristics of Augé’s non-places. Although Sol and Bonnie are friendly and hospitable, his landlords inform Myers of the rules of his stay. He is in a contractual relationship with the people who govern the non-place and “is reminded, when necessary, that the contract exists” (Augé 82). Money is paid in advance. Myers is responsible for his own food and his laundry and making his bed: “This is not a hotel,” Sol tells him on the night he arrives (“Kindling” 9). And, consistent with the features of Augé’s non-place, regulations appear in the form of written text: “A little sign was Scotch-taped […]: MR. MYERS SHELF” (“Kindling” 13). Although Myers is not required to present a ticket, Bonnie and Sol attempt to check his identity on arrival: “‘Where you from?’ Bonnie said,” and, “‘What sort of work do you do?’” (8). Myers, a user of
non-place, is asked to “prove his innocence” (Augé 82). But he does not fully submit to this contract: his evasive responses to Bonnie’s questioning contribute to the instability of non-place and place in the story.

Cornwell argues that Carver’s “damaged” characters often compare themselves to a “model of ordinary stability and decency whose existence reveals to them their own failure and abjection” (347). Bonnie and Sol represent this model but they are an imperfect example. In Bachelard’s terms, they provide a “nest” for Myers, a “simple house […] an atmosphere of simplicity” (78), but there are aspects of Bonnie and Sol that Myers does not embrace and these can be characterized as features of non-place.

“Consumers,” says Augé, “find themselves caught among the echoes and images of a sort of cosmology […] a world of consumption that every individual can make his own […]” (85). Next to a photograph of Bonnie’s and Sol’s wedding is a picture of Elvis Presley. Myers overhears Bonnie talking as if her identity has converged with Presley’s: “Once he heard Bonnie say to someone on the telephone, How’d she expect me to pay attention to Elvis Presley's weight when my own weight is out of control at the time?” (“Kindling” 14). Television is a part of the “world of consumption” of non-place and Bonnie and Sol watch a lot of it. Myers hears it through the wall of his room but it is not loud enough to “bother” him (10). Bill Mullen discusses Carver’s use of television: “Television culture in [Carver’s] stories produces a kind of mass or generic longing” (Mullen 103). When Bonnie and Sol tell Myers he is welcome to watch TV with them he declines. Bonnie and Sol offer Myers a model of stability but one against which he contrasts his own desires, even if he is not fully aware of what they are at the time.

Myers is “between lives” (“Kindling” 7) and the instability of place and non-place in the story is a product of his liminality.

Bonnie and Sol show Myers his room. It is behind a door at the end of a corridor. Myers observes the furniture and immediately beyond: the view from the window. In The Poetics of Space, Bachelard says, “a door awakens in us a two-way dream” (224). Myers sought non-place - a temporary site to abandon his identity and exist in solitariness - but the desire for place is just under the skin. “ ‘Well, what do you think?’ Bonnie said. She went over and turned down the covers on the bed, and this simple gesture almost caused
Myers to weep” (“Kindling” 9). It is the glimpse of place that almost causes Myers to weep: “How big, how enveloping,” writes Bachelard in his evocation of the self in place, “is an old sheet when we unfold it” (81). Myers frequently returns to that window. In his journal he is “nothing”, but the window offers something. “Outside and inside,” writes Bachelard, is a matter of “being and non-being” (212).

Through his window at the rear of the house he could see up the valley to a series of steep mountain peaks [...] The river coursed down the valley, frothing and boiling over rocks and under granite embankments until it burst out of its confines at the mouth of the valley, slowed a little, as if it had spent itself, then picked up strength again and plunged into the ocean [...] Once he saw an eagle soaring [...].

(“Kindling” 15)

Leonard Lutwack describes the symbolic archetypes of place: “All places [...] serve figurative ends [...] they cater to some human desire or craving beyond present reality” (32). Beyond the window Myers sees the chaos of alcoholism “frothing and boiling”; the “bursting out” from his addiction; being “spent” and recuperating in this non-place; and hope in the soar of an eagle. As stated earlier Augé employs Baudelaire's "Landscape" as the exemplar of modernity against which he contrasts supermodernity and non-place: “How sweet it is to see, across the misty gloom, A star born in the blue, a lamp lit in a room [...] (The Flowers of Evil 167). Myers' room is the problematic space of “Kindling”: it is place and non-place. The temporary lodgings are non-place, but the refuge of the “lamp lit in a room” offers the possibility of hope. “The room is very deeply our room, it is in us,” writes Bachelard (226). From his room Myers can see the psychological possibility of beyond. Place grows out of non-place. Myers waits between his past and his uncertain future. It is the typical moment of stasis of many Carver characters, caught up in the “discrepancies between [...] present realities or present selves and what they think they once had, once were, or might have been or become” (Cornwell 346). In "Kindling" the stasis is undermined and the character is mobilized. From his room Myers can imagine himself elsewhere.

On the first night of his stay, Myers takes out a notebook and writes, “Emptiness is the beginning of all things” (“Kindling” 10). Although Myers immediately dismisses the phrase and closes the book, Carver is alerting the reader to the truth of the story: it is from a position of an emptying of his
identity - in non-place - that Myers will find his way back. Carver's personal history is well known. He came from poverty and struggled financially for much of his life. But Carver admired and perhaps envied the simplicity of his parents’ working class life (Harker 716). In "Kindling" it is the redemptive quality of simple physical labour that clarifies things for Myers. His epiphany comes in the observation of sweat on his body and the sweet smell of sawdust. Like the wilderness outside his window these are the most basic elements of life, charged with “a sense of transcendental significance” (Leypoldt 533). “In the end,” Carver said in his essay “On Writing”, “the satisfaction of having done our best, and the proof of that labour, is the one thing we can take to the grave” (“On Writing” 275). Myers shifts from non-place to place and in doing so he expresses “the outburst of one who has long been silent” (Bachelard 111).

2.4 *Standing in the Plaza, Wanting*

My initial motivation for choosing problematic place as a subject of fiction was a desire to understand the impact that it had had on me. Between the ages of eight and seventeen I lived in the outer suburbs of Brisbane in a place called Springwood, a development begun in the late 1960s. Of course life could be worse, and for many people it is, much worse than suffering the restrictions of negligible public transport and a lack of cultural diversity. But I was irritated by a sense that this network of streets houses telegraph poles and shopping centres had been dropped on-site, ready-made, without any scope for slow organic authentic human development. I was right and I was wrong. In researching the history of Springwood I found that it was a place planned and built in a matter of a few years with predominantly commercial and political interests. Now, over forty years later, it is something much larger and livelier and more complex.

However, I did not want to write “about suburbia” but about the more intimate connection between people and place: specifically about the effect places have on people; more specifically, about the impact of problematic places. I came across Augé’s term ‘non-place’ in the early stages of research for this thesis. It encapsulated much of what I was thinking about problematic place.
The creative component of this thesis is a collection of eleven short stories, each set in a different problematic place. The stories are linked quite loosely by the reappearance of one or more of the characters. For example, the absent daughter Jilly in “On the Reserve” is the same Jilly living rough in “Platform” and the same Jilly coping with being a single mother in “Bell Street Station”.

Researching Augé’s non-place, the poetry of Baudelaire, the writings of Michel de Certeau and the authors who have responded to Augé’s thesis has greatly expanded my repertoire of ideas about writing fiction with a focus on the impact of place. While Augé’s supermodernity was not always applicable to many of the problematic places I wished to write about, his thesis and critical responses to his thesis enabled me to develop the nuanced understanding of the influence of place on the individual that I wished to achieve. The creative writing part of this thesis has thus benefitted from this interdisciplinary approach.

Below is an explanation of the ways in which this research can be read in four of the short stories from the collection, Standing in the Plaza, Wanting.

“Platform”

Augé might call the setting of “Platform” the archetype of non-place. It is a site of transit, a Melbourne metropolitan train station that I frequented before and after the major renovations that have resulted in it become busier, larger and more dependent on technology for communicating to passengers. It is a problematic place, as all major metropolitan train stations are. The predominant users of this non-place, those who submit to Augé’s “solitary contractuality” (76), are the privileged. The constant movement of trains creates a façade of prosperity behind which lives, to use Frank O’Connor’s term, a “submerged population” (28).

Despite being a site of transit, place and non-place in “Platform” are problematised through the choice of characters and narrator. Terry and Jilly daily inhabit the platform at this station without ever using the trains. They are part of the underclass of unemployed and homeless. But their story is told by a first person, unnamed narrator who is one of Augé’s users of non-place.
The characters Terry and Jilly were inspired by pieces in Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen*. Terry is “a prattler” (*Paris Spleen* 46) from whom Jilly must escape from time to time. He has a taste “for masks and travesty” and “does not know how to be alone in a crowd” (22).

But Terry was non-stop. He was a prattler and he was predictable and sometimes Jilly’s look picked him up at the point of its blade and flicked him high and long into the distance. Like the dog’s turds. ‘Piss off, Terry. Leave me alone.’ Terry didn’t get alone. Alone he was moody and no good at his craft; his timing was shoddy. He needed company and he needed a crowd (13).

In a sense Terry and Jilly are subjects of modernity being viewed — their story being told — by a subject of supermodernity: anthropological place through the lens of non-place.

In contrast to the users of non-place who surrender their identity and wait in silence for the next stage of their transit, Terry and Jilly shun the expectations of non-place and express this dismissal through the way they use their bodies. They are loud and they move with intent: “[…] they strode in front of the commuters like a leading lady and leading man on stage: straight walking, shoulder to shoulder, eyes ahead. They behaved as if the station belonged to them, and the rest of us, motionless and silent, were their sentries” (11). Terry’s and Jilly’s sense of ownership, their sense of place, paradoxically gives them greater agency than the commuters who are bound by their contract of “solitude and similitude” (Augé 83). Terry imposes his will, his identity, with his theatrics on the platform and his harassment of people on the escalators. The young labourer whom Terry targets has happily surrendered to the requirements of non-place before he even steps onto the escalator. He has purchased a ticket, read the signs, validated his ticket. He does not expect the intervention of Terry and, having abandoned his identity to non-place, has no reserves from which to act. Had Terry accosted him in the street his reaction would have been different.

However, as discussed earlier, some authors have argued that the definition of place and non-place depends upon one’s point of view. When Jilly watches the old woman with the Pomeranian she fears her own future invisibility in the noise and movement of non-place. She knows deep down that she and Terry are a poor match for supermodernity. The story ends with
the narrator recalling Terry’s arms around Jilly’s shoulders, Jilly struggling with her demons made more potent by the early dark of winter: “‘The trains are eating into my head, Terry. They’re eating into my fucking head, Babe’ ” (17). Jilly buckles under the ceaseless ephemeral movement of non-place and the insistent unavoidable rhythms of place: “[…] dusk excites the mad — I recall two friends of mine whom twilight made ill” (Paris Spleen 44).

“On the Reserve”
Rita lives close to the Reserve. She walks across it often, part of her usual routine, but she does not inhabit it. The Reserve is a dry stretch of grass with children’s play equipment in one corner. Her deceased husband, Costa, once found a suitcase of dying chickens on the Reserve. It is where her daughter was found passed out from sniffing paint. Now she has found the body of a baby in a box. The Reserve is a problematic place.

The story begins with Rita looking through her kitchen window. Rita’s internal life and her external reality, her present life and her memory are difficult to distinguish. Like Augé’s place and non-place, Rita’s memories engage with the material presence of a dead baby “like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten” (Augé 64). Rita watches through the window. She sees (the memory of) her unconscious daughter, Jilly, being carried by Costa; Costa converses with her about the baby’s body; she tells the dead baby stories about her husband and her daughter, both of whom have long been absent from her life. Rita’s mind creates “an unending history in the present” (Augé 84). It functions, itself, as a problematic place parallel to the non-place of the Reserve.

Like Augé’s subject struggling with the excess of information and lack of “grand narratives” in supermodernity, Rita struggles with loneliness and tormenting memories and finds her own “individual production of meaning […] more necessary then ever” (Augé 30). The world of “On the Reserve” is the world of Rita’s mind and ego. She fleetingly takes control of the present by bathing the baby’s body; her shoes remind her that the Reserve is simply grass in need of rain. But like the narrative interruption in “Safety Procedures”, these are deflections away from deeper psychological injuries. Words might be employed to mask or dilute the impact of poverty and
isolation on individual subjects — “low socioeconomic area” and “the state is working to improve your living conditions” (Augé 78) — but the confusions of Rita’s mind, ego, memories and present life are rooted in disadvantaged place.

“The Whole of the Suburb, Nothing to See”

The problematic place in “The Whole of the Suburb, Nothing to See” is the outer suburban space, lacking in infrastructure and compounded by poverty. Violence in the story adds to the abject nature of this non-place. The suburb and the style of house are modeled on those I lived in growing up in the southern outskirts of Brisbane.

It is the day Angus’s mother is to marry the insipid Danny and Angus is asked to help Uncle prepare for the party afterwards. Angus blows up balloons for the occasion and watches Uncle descend into an alcohol-induced rage. “The empty beer glass slipped from Uncle's fingers, exploded against the stair rail and rained glass onto the sandwiches. Angus tied his balloon” (37). The act of inflating balloons is an anchor for Angus at this moment. But the balloons are also symbolic of the ephemeral and Angus’s possession of these allusions to a “movement through” paradoxically symbolizes a degree of control over this problematic place.

Later Angus yearns for the vista found at the end of a trail through the bush. He knows it will momentarily lift him out of his life: here he can be “a viewpoint and nothing more” (Certeau 92). The appeal of this non-place is a chance to surrender his much-abused identity. But it is not the houses or the shopping centre — markers of suburbia — that he wants to look at but the vast sky above, what O’Beirne has identified as “nature’s non-place” (400). It is indifferent to the people beneath it: “But above the houses and streets the sky was big and contemptuous and Angus liked that. The sky did its own thing. It could be hot and flat and blue or fat with cloud or milky-lemon ribbons might sweep all over the place and it didn't matter a shit what was happening underneath” (37).

The outer suburban landscape is the problematic place of this story. Like the effect of non-place on Augé’s user of it, the effect of this problematic place on Angus is to deny him agency. But reminiscent of the symbolic
wilderness in “Kindling” are the cleansing potential of bushfire, the hawk that circles, the woman who calls the bird in. These are figures of salvation and hope for Angus. He may not understand it yet, but his “movement through” this non-place is imminent. Like Myers in “Kindling” there is a sense that Angus is in a process of shifting from non-place to place. His failed attempt to strike the bird with a rock is a perverse, albeit half-hearted, denial that this hope exists.

“Pedal Boat”
The setting of “Pedal Boat” is archetypal non-place: a site of tourism. The story is set on a lake where pedal boats can be hired from a boatshed. Throughout the story evocations of the picturesque appear like postcards or photographs in tourist brochures: “[…] they sat at a table in the warm afternoon sun on the deck of the kiosk overlooking the lake. Matilda spooned ice-cream from a bowl and watched her boat” (58). And, “They were part of a gentle comedy of boats. Laughter bounced of the hillside” (61). From a distance even the grandfather’s failed attempt to get their pedal boat moving appears to be an expression of the joys of boating: “He tried to pull the pedal upward by placing his toes under it and made the same little arc in the water. Like they were toying with the boat out on the lake, talking and chatting and laughing and playing with the boat” (60).

According to Augé’s thesis, non-place is characterized by a proliferation of signs, instructions, rules and commands. Examples of this in “Pedal Boat” reinforce its setting as a non-place consistent with Augé’s supermodernity. Each is “a reminder of the rules of the game” (Augé 81). Around the lake signs warn of dangers and instruct users about what they can and cannot do. Already familiar with taking instructions from signs, young Matilda exclaims, “We’re not allowed to go to the bridge, Grandfather. The sign said” (59). There are many signs around the lake: “No Swimming. Numerous signs. Dangerous Undertow and People have Drowned” (61). When the grandfather tries to refuse a life vest he is told he must wear one: “‘Regulations,’ the boy insisted” (61). Even when he attempts to put a log on the fire at the hotel his daughter-in-law quietly tells him, “No, Reg […] It’s not our place” (60).
The grandfather is holidaying (at the expense of his son) with his son, his daughter-in-law and his granddaughter. Regular holidaying and the holiday destination are a part of the privileged world of his son but non-place in this story is not restricted to a site of tourism. Like the narrator of “Safety Procedures,” the members of this family, with the exception of the grandfather, are comfortable with the demands of supermodernity and with being users of non-place. The daughter-in-law has “read the instructions” (Augé 81) on child-rearing and tells the grandfather how to respond to Matilda’s drawings: “Ask her encouraging questions, the mother, Janette, whispers into his ear. She has come from nowhere, bent over the back of his chair. What is that, Matilda — but it is she who asks the encouraging questions — is that a house? Isn’t that a marvelous house, Grandfather?” (59). There is no room here for the genuine unmediated spoken word.

Desperately trying to entertain the forlorn Matilda, the grandfather, like Myers in “Kindling”, evokes the exotic. He fabricates the existence of a river that leads to South America. Never having been to South America, Matilda’s imagination “takes flight the moment these names are […] heard” (Augé 76). The grandfather then “authenticates” the river for the little girl by telling her he read about it at the hotel. Augé writes: “History and exoticism play the same role in [supermodernity] as the ‘quotations’ in a written text: a status superbly expressed in travel agency catalogues” (Augé 89). Highlighting his difficulty and reluctance to engage with this non-place, the grandfather teasingly plays upon the inauthenticity of tourist reading material.

Although his family are comfortable with their privilege and with being users of non-place, the grandfather is somewhat bewildered by it. He tries to encourage rebellion in his granddaughter when she insists on obeying signs: “Where’s your spirit of adventure, Matilda?”(59). He tells his son he has no need for a holiday. He resists the offer to buy a piece of music online. But fabrication and representation — features of their holiday destinations and of non-place in general — have had their influence. When he and Matilda see a fish he thinks it looks “[…] mechanical; metallic; operated inside by a chip and springs and a variety of plastics” (63). Finally he is wooed. Humbled by the events of the day and by memories of his own less-than-perfect parenting, he surrenders to the world of his family and purchases music online: “[…] in
the world of supermodernity people are always, and never, at home […]” (Augé 87).

2.5 Conclusion
There are many ways to approach writing fiction with a concern for a particular focus. In this instance, the study of an anthropological thesis has helped to conceive new ways of thinking about the nature and the implications of problematic place. In particular, Augé’s propositions about how non-place impacts upon identity — the way an individual feels and behaves in non-place; their submission to or resistance to the expectations of it; their assertion or otherwise of their identity; their willingness to engage; their sense of belonging. These can become a pivotal viewpoint for character in the short story, a locus from which problematic place can be interrogated by the writer.

In “Highway” two disparate characters, each embarked on their ‘movement through’ non-place, meet and criss-cross each other’s path. Non-place ‘loosens’ their identities, encourages points of connection that are, it turns out, almost as ephemeral as the moment of contact between tyre and road. In “Bell Street Station” a train driver has endured the suicides of people who cannot cope with the psychological consequences of a dehumanizing world. In “Standing in the Plaza, Wanting” two children are caught in their mother’s vortex of consumerism. In “Platform” the commuter narrator witnesses a terrible injury only to climb aboard his train simply because it has arrived.

My project of reading Gordimer and Carver, using Augé’s theory as the critical framework, was a means to find points of connection between this anthropological thesis and fiction, connections that had been examined only scantly before. However the origin of my motivation for focusing on problematic place was not a place that could obviously be described as supermodern. My problematic place had its own qualities of dismissing aspects of human experience. I wanted to develop an understanding of how the identification of a place as non-place or problematic place could come, not from the appearance of a place, but from the characteristics of its influence upon the persons who occupied it. I wanted to bring this understanding back to my own fiction writing. The setting in some of these stories, therefore, embodies the archetypal features of Augé’s supermodernity. In some it does
not. In “On The Reserve”, for example, I worked with the originating point of Augé’s triple decentring: the home. Unlike Gordimer’s narrator who leaves home and tells his story in the outer reaches of supermodernity, Rita lives isolated and diminished in a home lost in the vastness of impoverished housing developments.

Part of the decree of living with prosperity in supermodernity is that we leave our homes intermittently and travel to places known to us through stories and images. The holiday is a part of the collective imagination. It has its own picture and as we enter into it we feel ourselves, as Augé described, to be spectators watching ourselves spectating, becoming a part of the tourist experience itself. In this expanse — not only of space but of collective imagination — we become impotent dots immobilized on a lake (“Pedal Boat”), insecurely tethered to the sea (“Caravan”), in the background of someone’s photos (“Henry Miller Loved it Here”). The experience can be too psychologically expansive and we yearn to abandon the pretense of ourselves-as-holiday-makers, as constituents of the destination. We understand we are a part of the scenery but having a sense in our bodies and minds of ourselves back home we feel the discord between what is and what appears to be.

While it may be possible to write fiction emanating from a single theoretical perspective, the especial usefulness of theoretical research for writing fiction is often in engaging with both the precursors to the thesis and the arguments that have been made in response to it. Part of the research for this exegesis has been the reading of the work of Certeau, Baudelaire, Bachelard and a number of critiques of Non-Places. Augé’s anthropological thesis has been the starting point for this investigation but it is not his thesis in isolation that has facilitated new ideas about how to write creatively about problematic place. “Platform” explores the points of connection between the antecedent to Augé’s supermodernity — Baudelaire’s modernity — and supermodernity. The Baudelairian characters, Jilly and Terry, are fringe dwellers. Despite their situation in life their behaviour could be described as more authentic than the robotic compliance of the commuters who surround them.

Giving myself permission to leave supermodernity altogether, in some stories, as in my reading of Carver’s “Kindling”, I examine non-place as a
particular characteristic of psychological, emotional and behavioural being. Place is not removed from the equation but it is the influence of the features of non-place (beyond setting) that becomes the focus. Non-place can be a house that was once a home (“Aberdeen”). It can be the limitations imposed by poverty (“Bell Street Station”, “Surfers Paradise”). What becomes interesting then is the way we are able or not able to shift ourselves from non-place to find ourselves in place again.
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