

NOT BEING MIRIAM

a novel

by Marion May Campbell

CrookedStylesPress

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Not Being Miriam deals with childhood, adolescence, motherhood, and old age; with work, love and abandonment, but especially with the power of identification. Seemingly very different, the lives of Bess, Lydia and Elsie are illuminated and shadowed by each other, and by the fictions that haunt them: those of Ariadne, Cassandra, Katerina Kepler and the unnamed second Mrs de Winter. When the women finally come together, by default, in the image of the late Miriam, the forces released are such that things can never be the same.

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ISBN

Reviewers on *Not Being Miriam*

Not Being Miriam is about the "danger of certainty." In its composition of shifting frames about the tendencies of things, the world is "a tissue of complicated events only tending to occur." It is a fiercely celebratory vision, in which Campbell's remarkable energies and intelligence play across the intense inner dialogue of three women.

Helen Daniel Marion (May) Campbell Biography

'Campbell's writing is dazzling. For virtuoso performance there is no one to compare her with other than Janet Frame.'

Stephanie Dowrick, Vogue Australia

'A work of wit and audacity, power and complexity, a dance, celebrating and justifying the women's stories it tells.'

Delys Bird *The Good Reading Guide*

'Marion Campbell's inventiveness, intelligence, ear for language, absolutely fine descriptive faculty and more, make Not Being Miriam a masterpiece.'

John Weyland *The West Australian*

'A fiercely intelligent novel.'

Dinny O'Hearne *The Good Reading Guide*

'A remarkable imaginative energy fills every line of Not being Miriam, just as it did in Lines of Flight.[Campbell] is a writer who is intellectual, socially concerned and an entertainer. It is a rare combination.'

Susan McKernan *The Bulletin*

'Campbell's reader is strapped into a raid on the edges of language, a raid on the possibilities of fiction which can leave the determined reader with hair streaming in the wind. Reading it can be an exhilarating struggle, but it's a struggle worth engaging in, because it breaks through the barriers of conventional fiction.'

Bill Ashcroft *The Listener*

'... Not Being Miriam plays with the instabilities of language itself. Campbell's splintered narrative and dense, quicksilver prose mock the claims of language to representation, celebrating the heights of metaphor, pun, allusion and illusion.'

David Matthews *Overland*

'The novel can be read, thematically and formally, as a script for pluralized selfhood.'

Colleane Keane *Meridian*

'Not Being Miriam is a deeply subversive book, as all modern Ariadne narratives need be.' Don Anderson *Meanjin*

'Campbell has established for herself a place from which to write which is neither in the margins nor in the authorized canon of cringeworthy tales of growing up in Australia.'

Philippa Tandy *Westerly*

About the author

Marion May Campbell has lived in Melbourne since 1999, where she is now Associate Professor in Professional and Creative Writing at Deakin University. She has published eight books, including five of fiction, along with poetry, theatre, essays and reviews. Her most recent work of fiction *konkretion* deals with language and social contestation (UWAP 2013), as does her critical study *Poetic Revolutionaries: Intertextuality & Subversion* (Rodopi 2014). Her books have been short-listed for major prizes, including twice for the Canada-Australia Prize for Literature, and *Not Being Miriam* won the 1989 Western Australian Literary Week Prize for Fiction.

For
Morgan Campbell Gasseng

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The Lydia stories are dedicated to the memory of Asta Molyneux.

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THE BOXERS AND THE BUBBLE BATHERS

Bess wiggles the toes she has painted with clay. *Scalliwag*, her mother says, seeing as she often does without noticing. *Scalliwag*: the word works its charm electrically through her. Bess takes her painted toes over the railway line and down the zigzagging path into the depths of the gully. There she finds Sean with his nose dotted with freckles and his staring eyes. They scramble together down into the cove behind the houseboats. She strips and paints her whole body with clay. She strips Sean and paints his whole body with clay. As they swim in the green water, a milky fog forms around them. Now we can swap over, she says. He accepts this; he accepts everything. Bess pulls on his boxer shorts with the elastic rippling the rows of stitching and helps him into her bubble bathers with the penguin pathway down the front and the rabbit-ear loops at the back. Wait, just let me pull the straps through the rabbits' ears. He likes this he gives her his gappy smile. There! This time, you're the bride and I'm the groom, she says. We'll go honeymooning on Kosciusko and I'll bring you tobogganing down with my legs wrapped around you. They stand under the ledge with the sheer waterfall before them. They watch how the granite boulders and the white gums are rippled.

This is the wedding

This is the wedding

I take you for my wife

I take you for my husband

This is the ring

This is the ring

This is the kiss

This is the kiss

This is the cave we'll live in

This is the cave

BUILDING ON THE ROCK

I'm sorry I can't marry you Peedah cos I already promised Sean in Berowra ...

Who said I wanted to anyway, Peter says.

It's at Sunday school Bess realizes what it is about Peter. In the high-pitched weatherboard church on its lead-capped piles, they sit in a circle and to the out-of-tune piano, they drive the fist of one hand into the palm of the other. The fist is meant to be the mallet and the palm the rock. It seems a bit flimsy and Bess's palm flexes around the wrist every time it comes down. *Build on the rock, build on the rock* they sing. But they build weatherboard churches on piles coming out of the grey sand. The teacher in her stringy pale hair explains about apostles, about Peter, Pietro, Pedro, Pierre, Petra, rock, rock, rock. The rocky foundations of the church. She doesn't answer Bess's question about the piles. Bess looks around: their heads wobble as they sing:

Build on the rock
Build on the rock
When the lightning strikes
And the thunder shocks

See if I care! Bess calls after Peter next time he goes off with Cass and won't play her game.

Now as Cass comes back from Peter Petra's her eyes won't meet Bess's. Her face is sort of smudged and rosy. There's clover caught between her toes, pressed into the plastic of her sandal. The other sandal?

Oh look! Bess says. Peedah's left his cap. You'd beddah go in, Cass. Mum says you've gotta get ready for Auntie Mamie's. I'll take this over to the Pedras'.

Bess reckons she can slip up the back and see what they've been playing. Him and Cass would've been in the cubby. It's just an ordinary Davy Crockett cabin made of pine logs. Two little square windows at the front are hung with red and white checked curtains. Seeing these

again, she is briefly jealous but inside the flare dies down. Again she is glad to see that the logs are simply halves and that the cabin holds no magic. It's really just a store for broken toys, a couple of bikes with flat cracked tyres and Peter's scooter. She can go to the back door and hand over the cap. She makes a fist to knock but something bright and ruffling catches in the corner of her eye. The lemons hang against dark leaves. A big tabby cat stalks something in the clover. As if it's breathing between the rocks, a red tartan rug bulges, sags. This is meant to be a roof for the low sprawling thing he has built out of old bricks, slabs and plaster board. It says at the front: PETERS LABRINTH ENTER AT YOUR RISK

This is what they've been up to then. It's that vivid with the red and the swollen lemons and the red against the green, she could scream. She bites her lip, *red, red*. The cat tenses, wriggles at the hips, pounces.

Inside it's warm and dark. She feels the crushed clover through her knees. She can smell the earth coming up at her in little fumes. What if red-backs? Light leaks through the cracks and strains through the weave of the rug. She squeezes her lids, more frightened by what the light might uncover. Let the darkness be just a sleeve, let her feel with it. Now there's an opening; she can sense a deeper zone of air around her. There are different textures here: satin, corduroy velvet. Her fingers are on the plastic sandal with its diamond tread.

Above her own fast breath, Bess hears rising voices: Whatever got into you, Peter to take that little girl in there? Didn't I tell you about that family? Why do you think your father built you a cubby house my boy? Well, you can pull down that disgusting thing right now!

Bess grabs the sandal, throws the cap into the clover and runs zigzagging along the plaster board, *labrinth*, between the banksias and the tuarts, *labrinth, labrinth*, back to the myth book where she has seen it. *Labdacus, Labdacids, Labyrinth*. With a Y. So. Trust Peter Petra not to spell it right. Here's Ariadne who helped Theseus find his way out of the maze. So there, Peter and Cass with your 'Labrinth'. This is who Bess can be. Ariadne who learnt the plan, drugged the guards and gave the thread. Who knew.

A FAR CRY FROM THE ELIZABETHAN WIRELESS

Bess says: Come on, one lissnuh is enough. Peedah, you'll have to do. She has stretched the hessian over the front and sides of the work bench in the yard. She takes the scissors, thwack, thwack, the metal eats the rotten thread and leaves a slit along the top. She says: This is the dial. She thinks that it makes a good visor too. This bright strip is the World of the Listeners. She crouches behind the dial. Her eyes are black and quick in the blue shadows.

From behind, it doesn't convince Peter. The buttons are undone at the back of her dress and the soles of her feet are black. He is tempted to plant his juiceless chewing gum on one of them but he moves it slowly on his tongue. Bess says: Roun the front, stupid. Right. You run the stick along the slit, Peedah, and say if it stops on my side, then it's my turn, it's on my station, and if it stops on the other side, then it's Cass's turn. Cass, you'd beddah come or you're ouduv it.

Cass completes a cartwheel, following through like a diver. She scissors her legs together and crawls in beside Bess. Right, Bess says again, if the stick stops here, it's my music, here, it's my news. On your side, Cass, do what you like, stories, songs and that. Whadever.

Peter presses the gob of grey chewing gum into the bark of the tree. He cleaves it off to look at the print it has made. He scratches his head and moves the stick slowly along the slit. His tongue curls out: he'd better stop it on Bess's side first.

GOOD MORNING LISTENERS, she says in this new posh voice. She's hopeful, he thinks but checks over his shoulder just the same. You never know with Bess. THIS IS THE ELIZABETHAN RADIO SHOW, she says. What? he says. SSSH! You're not allowed to talk back, Peedah Pedrah. You've just got Bess's Best on your dial. And here's for Number One: It's Peggy Lee singing 'Fever'!

Never know how much I love you

Never know how much I care

When you put your arms around me
I get a fever that's ...

Peter's not watching. He's bored. In the song, a space has opened up which she can't fill. Or has any time passed? She's been doing a good breathy whisper, so what's the matter with them?

Romeo loved Juliet
Juliet she felt the same

The stick runs towards Cass. He likes her better. It's just because of her blond hair. This pounding in Bess's ears: why is her blood so noisy? There's all this activity in the garden too: the non-stop tinny pulse of cicadas and the hiss-HISS of sprinklers. He likes Cass better for her smoky green eyes and her golden skin. Bess promised God last night not to boast any more and to stop being bossy. But Cass asks for it. You can never make out what her ideas are. Does she have any? In any case, Peter and Cass just wait for her to direct them. They seem to expect it. As for Peter, she saw his Grade Six report. He's pretty dumb. Well, he's not super bright. Each time they're with her, they just squat saying nothing, drawing with sticks in the sand. The Conference Spot, that was her name, is under the she-oak and then there are the nuts to use for money. That was her idea. Bess has named all their Places. They're all theatres, inside, outside, up trees, underground, behind the shed, down near the jetty. There's the Battlements, the Grotto, the Amazement Park, that was her best one, that's the spare block you can cut through to the river. It has giant weeping peppermint trees on it; you can use their leaves for stage curtains. They expect her to perform and to give them roles. It's only lately, since the Labyrinth, that they've been throwing one another looks as she's telling them who they are and giving them their lines. These days, they've got what her mum calls this hohummish attitude. Don't bother, she says, if you're going to be so hohummish about it. Cass is giving her News. Bor-ing! Her voice sort of staggers along. She calls herself 6PR too, she can't even make up her own station name.

A VICIOUS PRISONER SERVING A LIFE SENTENCE FOR MURDER HAS ESCAPED FROM FREMANTLE GAOL, she sings.

Peee-ter, Peee-ter! It's Mrs Petra from over the track. She's a tall thin woman who's always calling Peter! Peter! from the verandah of their green fibro house. Here they call it asbestos though. They're Methodists. Mr Petra wears brown suits with black shoes. Bess's mum says

she'd never have gone out with a man who wore brown suits. He goes off to work with a little plastic lunch box which he sets on his lap. Bess saw him on the bus. Poor Mr Petra has to take a packed lunch and like a good boy promise not to eat it before lunch time. Peter's obedient too: he races to his scooter and zigzags along the plaster board. This has been laid down as a crossing between the houses until they build the road.

THE ESCAPEE IS FIVE FOOT EIGHT HE'S GOT A SCAR ON HIS CHIN AND A STOCKY BUILD

How does Cass know escapee and stocky?

HE'S GOT VERY PALE EYES THEY ARE THAT PALE THE OTHER PRISONERS CALL HIM THE GHOST

Sandy? Bess calls her sister Sandy when she's getting carried away. SANDY, you'll have to be the Listener now. You can have another go when Peedah comes back, okay?

Captain Smith and Pocahontas
Had a very mad affair
When her daddy tried to kill him
She said 'Oh Daddy don't you dare!
He gives me fever.'
Fever!

Bess can feel the sorts of pictures in people's minds. She can feel across the darkness whether Cass is asleep or not, even whether she's dreaming. Now there's just the noise of all the insects and Cass moving into it. Bess opens her eyes: she was right. The stick has been dropped.

This is what happens now, simply. Bess enters the News. This can be her bulletin. What she sees somehow finds a voice and words. She feels deadly accurate. The voice says: *Cass tries to make her escape. The way Peedah did on his scoodah, she runs along the plaster board trail. She is chased by the Ghost with the scar on his chin and the pale, pale eyes. The Stocky Ghost. Until now, he's just been watching the three children, but especially the Blond Girl with Green Eyes who was the Second Station in their game. He's been behind her eyes ... The Ghost can come back as anything: it can be a Dugite, a Butcher Bird, or a Racehorse Goanna, or a Frilled Lizard or ... This time he's the Tiger Snake. He's a really angry tiger snake. The block next door*

is being bulldozed. When they finish, there'll be one blackboy and a sick banksia left. This'll die later when they put fertilizer and stuff on the lawn. The snake tries to get to the break, going very fast towards the crossing where Cass runs. The bulldozer is roaring behind her, pushing up a cloud of black dust. Its shovel is up and it charges towards her. The driver might be going to bring it down on her. He does bring the shovel down – listen! – and he cracks it into the back of the snake. Cass has gone pale. The snake stares at her like she's the one who's broken its back. The shovel comes down on it, again. The driver jumps out and picks up a broken branch from the edge of the block. He finishes it off. No, the snake still struggles and looks. It's the driver who's the Ghost now: his eyes are see-through pale. They have pin-prick black dots at the centre. She's dizzy.

Bess is jolted. She opens her eyes again. Her fingers are pressed white against the broken branch. She drops it. Her throat is dry. At her feet there's a beautiful snake, battered but still moving, its tongue flicking, its eyes ...

YOU MURDERER MURDERER MURDERER, Cassandra yells.

Her eyes blur. Behind them, there's the roar and gear-shifts of a bulldozer working.

BIG AS THE SKY

As long as she's teaching, then she can stave it off. It's after the final siren that it hits. The sense of litter collecting against the cyclone fences, the footprinted floor of the school hall, the carpark with one or two Toyotas and Datsun 180Bs, teachers' cars. The sense that this is her imagery now. There's the cats' meat to buy at Coles, something to liven up last night's rice and eat straight from the wok in a nibbling sort of distraction. Again she's forgotten to remind the kids to pile up the mattresses and return their costumes to the wardrobe. There are the screwed paper missiles to pick up from the floor.

Most of the buildings on this coast have been thought in terms of barracks or bunkers; for the pubs, it's the bunker, in the case of this school, it's barracks: aligned in U-formation, metal and glass returning their own blank stare, few of the classrooms framing a view of the sea. From this studio, if you go up on point, you can glimpse a series of miniatures in the hopper windows, powdery sea, a few sails, hovering, like tossed bones. And sitting above them, the Bond Corporation blimp.

Perhaps middle age settles in as quietly as this, a slightly sour veneer on the tongue, that's all. She can almost accept the defences people adopt against the soiled romanticism of the alternatives. Superannuated hippies, they snort. She just notes the fading of candour in friends' faces, the couples entrenched, the families forming ranks. Finally interest on savings is important and houses are to be extended.

To think glory was once one of her words. Even Cass, as she stared back from the mirror, seemed to endorse that. Funny it was never fame she said but glory. GLORY, she saw flamboyant trees in welcoming avenues somewhere else, certainly not the banksias she and Cass used to climb. London, Paris, New York, perhaps Sydney, just as it read on the label of the Max Factor bottle. While Peter, sweet dumb Peter, who never used the word, has made his way,

favoured architect of the futures market rich, confecting infrastructures for their caprices, their domes and canopied walkways, their gazeboes, orangeries and towers.

Glory was her steps followed in synchrony by a chorus of brilliantined tap dancers, small and vaguely male. It was her shoes lined up for cleaning in the passage-way of some foreign hotel, like animals queuing for the Ark. Glory was being serviced by an army of invisibles that someone else would rally. Perhaps she thought it would be Cass. Shade was the mind name she gave her. Her quick deals and subtle name-dropping were to clear the stage for Bess.

It's all right for Bess, Cass used to say, she can talk. She thinks she knows where she's going, never loses the thread ... Whereas Cass spread herself through words, questioning, is *this* it, *or is this*? And Cass's voice, with its rising intonation would beg for someone to supply the full stop. Bess would supply it. With Cass cueing from the wings, she would make her definite appearance, again and again. Age was to have no hold. Bess would stay in the present. Cass could change. She could grow, shrivel and warp through the range of roles Bess needed. She was child, adolescent, lusting, mature, feeble, fool wise beyond seasons and sex.

Bess raged out on the temporary heath in front of the kitchen table:

Blow winds and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd the steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head!

Then Cass was her poor fool, her Edgar's Tom. But Bess took an awful pleasure in a later line:

Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart.

She so wanted to ransack her sister for her secret that she made her do Regan all the time. If Bess chose Hecate she'd sap the glamour from Macbeth. He'd simply be a politician, pale with ambition, ready to pay for prophecies. Bess would dance through the verbal foam, and she'd make it last, until Macbeth was no more. It became Hecate's play.

It was at Mamie's that Cass began to challenge her. As they ran from Mill Point Road through the arcade of climbing roses, they would chant, even at fourteen and sixteen, the ritual question:

Has he gone, Auntie Mamie, has he gone? And Bess sensed about this time the rising excitement in Cass's voice. Coveting Bess's role, thinking it was time she played the Stranger, Spiro. It's all right for you, Cass, but I'm sick of these childish games, Bess would lie. Each time. Mamie's old arthritic dog would stagger towards them, giving his routine half growl of welcome. The cats would rise and stretch on the verandah and lead the way, tails upright, wavering. Then Mamie's face was at the window, always with the silence of an apparition, her lips moving to the script they knew by heart. *Yes he's gone dearies, he's gone. Come around now, come through Auntie Mamie's Magic Zone, the Vestibule, and get ready for your parts.*

Mamie, as ever, beautiful in the jade and gold silk dress and the shoes from Florence, her black hair loose and her eyes shining almost too much. They knew the clues. First they would each take one of her hands and watch in the direction of Ernest-Justin's disappearance, over the wide Swan River. *Yes, my dears, it's all right, we can play now,* she'd say. Then she'd lead them down the hall to the little table called the *guéridon* where the marble light was set. Each time they would ask: *Tell us about the wishing-well light, Auntie Mamie, tell us, was it the kind Greek man you met in the hotel lobby who bought you the wishing-well light?* Mamie would lead them to the walk-in-robe where all the costumes were hung. There, on one side, wall-to-wall, were Ernest-Justin's summer suits. There the racks and racks of shoes, there the set of drawers just for hankies, each initialed EJS.

Because of Bess's darkness, because as Mamie said, she looked more like a boy, because her voice was deeper, Bess always got the stranger's role. Cass was Ernest-Justin, and her job was to *be gone*. But she began to improvise a little, to stretch the role, and then ... her terrible intrusions. There her Ernest-Justin was, spying, measuring, double checking. There Cass conjured him, in the depths of the vestibule mirror, hovering at the hedge, treading on the water, barefoot and grey-suited, *being gone* and always watching.

Bess walks the carpeted studio, picks up the screwed paper missiles. She stacks the plastic chairs. She wipes the scrawl from the blackboard. This is the only sort of billing she gets these days and is grateful for it. They show Bess Valentine as an arrow-struck heart.



They see through her masquerade, bad parodist of disciplinary gestures that she is. They sense her weakness, that she needs to bind them to her spectacle. Distances have to be kept and they do their best to reduce them. She likes this tension; is there anything perverse in that? Do us your body language thing, Miss Va-len-tine, they chant, ple-eeea-se, the one you did for 8A, go on, the withdrawn person and the hyperactive person and the drunk ... Come on, it's not fair!

Today she gave in to her English class and did her soliloquy from *The Old Woman in the Shoe*. They thought it funny enough but by the time they found the page number of their official text the siren went. Then they had their whingeing reflex: Hell, Miss, we've got an exam on this in three weeks and we're only up to Act 2! She stared at them, contempt welling on her tongue and wild curses forming: *May you all become stockbrokers and geologists then!* Do they fear contagion from her blackness? At times she can locate a source of raw savage laughter in herself, laughter that would be full of shrapnel if it came. Knowing this is perhaps the beginning of a cure. She has to accept that she is childless now. Give up on Rico. That she can only perform for these other children. Not let them get too close. Oh she can get inside them all right and use this to cut them down to size. The accuracy of her thought translations leaves them gasping. She finds herself wanting to shrivel their egos further, intoxicated by a kind of witching eloquence, unable to change tack.

But Rico, she still finds him, in the carriage of a head, the contour of a back, in a ripple of laughter. It caused hilarity this morning, with her Year 10s when she automatically cautioned Lucciano: *Do you have to do that, darling?* She had to leave the room, then. When she returned, there it was on the blackboard: *Valentine has the hots for Lucc.*

Yet she's tried to learn to attack the images. To see Rico as his father's son, bright, quick to flatter when he wants something, enjoying the easy adulation of the street kids he cultivates, fast with all the nifty gestures, fanning the cards, eyeing the billiard ball along the cue, doing tricks with matchboxes, lethally accurate with the joystick on the video game, arrogant, full of bravado, heavy in the bum and incapable of recognizing a joke delivered with poker face. She sees him as a gadget fetishist, blocking fantasy, studying diagrams and business pages while making claims in his dressing and the films he sees to some diffuse sort of artistry.

Her daily exercises. Practising distances. She does this with Cassandra too. She reads in *Performance* and *Theatre Australia* of her street shows, her tactical theatre, her happenings,

Infiltrations, she calls them. Bess has to accept that Cassandra somehow escaped the mirror hold she had on her. She tried to keep her little, as Ernest-Justin did with Mamie. Cass, Sandy, she called her, never allowing her the prestige of Cassandra.

She tried to stunt Cass with a terror of growing. She led her to the mirror behind their mother's door. Cass was still narrow hipped but her nipples were swelling and there was a blond pubic haze. Bess untied the girdle of her robe. (She has worn a white peignoir over silk pyjamas ever since they saw Suzanne Pleshette in *The Birds*, a teacher too and punished in the plot for independence, darkness, deep voice and cigarette smoking) so Bess unpeeled her robe (slowly sensing that suspense was just that, a literal striptease) and let it fall to the floor. She stood her developed image next to her sister's.

Her own breasts at the time were small – she's checked the photos since – but she pointed to their impeding load in the mirror. Soon Cass would not be free to run any more. They would *swing*: she would either have to wear some rigid structure with whalebone and wire or keep retrieving them from over her shoulder, they would *flap* and *sag* that much. And then, with the kind of pregnant look that St Anne has as she points to the sky in the Leonardo, Bess pointed to her pubic hair. She took one curl between thumb and forefinger, the sort of gesture a wool classer might make, and said: See, yours is going to grow and grow too and won't stop growing. She slowly stretched the curl out, one inch, two ...

They both saw its growth as inevitable in the mirror. The beginnings of spring were in that light, milking them warmly. Cass cried out. She grabbed her own dressing gown (candlewick, pale pink with shocking pink highlights, looping scrolls like an exercise in running writing all around the hem) and she ran. Her cord flapped behind her. She ran into the back yard. The weeds were high: wild oats, pussy willow and the buffalo grass was higher than the bush pelargoniums. (Their father was away and their mother had started to mow but the Victa's tank sprang a leak and there was no car to take it for repairs.) So the weeds were high. The crickets and cicadas excited Bess. Cass fell and Bess tumbled with her, they wrestled in the weeds. Cass cried: No, no, no, it won't happen to me. There were real tears clinging to her lashes. Then Bess had this huge sense of charity. She was as big as the sky. She said: No, I'm sorry, darling Sandy, that was mean of me, it doesn't necessarily happen. She said it in a slow, plummy way, like their family doctor.

After that, Cass cultivated secrets. Bess raided her cupboards, searched her for heresies, teased her for her diary entries. Cass started her code. Bess deciphered it, after weeks. The solution was: the letter plus five for the consonants, minus five for the vowels. She can still see that sentence now, like a telex message tapping out on the studio wall: GZXX YMDSPX XMZ'X YMZ TSQD VHYWZXX DS YMZ KVRDQD. Bess thinks she's the only actress in the family.

With the glittering prizes raining down, Bess kept Cass eclipsed for a while yet. Most Promising Junior Actor. Main role at the Patch Theatre. Understudy at the Playhouse. Then she failed the audition for NIDA. Ahead of her was a dancer who was doing a bit from Wilde's *Salome*. She was all arabesques. Sumptuous, confident. It probably wouldn't matter that her voice was tinny. Her auburn hair was gathered at one ear, falling in cascades. She rehearsed her piece, movement, voice and gesture, in front of Bess in the foyer. Bess was to be a mutinous, anorexic Antigone. She'd come in a black sloppy joe, tight black jeans and black desert boots. The man from NIDA sighed when she told him the text she'd chosen, glanced at her bitten nails and looked out the window.

ES IST UNSERE HAUSHILFE

Now languages, Bess's mother says, that's where your talents lie. You've always been a good mimic, had an ear. They need an *au pair* girl, nice family, and you can get your German fluent, take time off to think about your future. I thought it was a dangerous thing anyhow rushing headlong into theatre. It's probably a blessing in disguise NIDA didn't take you.

You'd 've been on drugs, no doubt about that, suggestible as you are, Bess's father says.

So partly because Cass looks with envy at the photo of the smart family in front of the very modern Swiss house, the Bossy Sister takes her audition-diminished ego off to Switzerland, to give it repose, fatten it up, *yodel-ee-eye-oh* and becomes the nice young *au pair* from Australia. Bess is it, *Bess ist es*. She is the one whose face is flickeringly lit by the regulation Willem Tell bonfire where the Good Mistress has brought her children, and the *au pair*. They hold their candles on the green plateau above the good town of Baden. *Eh-leez-a-bet* as she's now called, prepares her replies in High German: they will rise from the valleys within her and hover seemingly above the polished grass on this the communal green.

Ach, Frau Müller says, *Ich hätte Sie für deutsch genommen*, would've taken you for German, but here that is the enemy, I am the enemy *Haushilfe*. The good mistress says to Frau Spritzli, the *Tierärztin* – is she the veterinarian or the veterinarian's wife? – and to Frau Höchli, *the Bäckerin* – the baker or the baker's wife? – *Ja es ist Elizabeth, unsere Haushilfe*.

Bess is it, *Bess ist es*. And by the way, you might like to borrow *it* when we go on holidays next month. Perhaps they call her *es* because it's *das Mädchen*, neuter, but all the same, the good replies do not rise from her in High German. Want to borrow *it*, needn't buy *it*, but feed *it* up – well, this one has an appetite alright, but *it* works reasonably – under supervision, of course. They take their voices up-hill, down-vale with this maddening musicality and are still talking about the whole problem of *Haushilfe* in Swiss German. Bess is tactful; she only joins in if addressed in the enemy language. Swiss German is strictly for those who have inherited the right from Willem Tell. Now that's a hero for you, to believe so much in his aim he'd risk his son. The

good old Abraham-Isaac syndrome, but in this case, patriotism, the founding of a nation of neutrals. They are thus saying, but in Swiss German: You've got to be careful about these girls, can't trust them for a minute, something to do with that servant mentality, promiscuous... This one wears kohl on her eyes, did you notice? It's not the best example for the girls, but I'm watching her, she's already made friends with some young wretch, a *Gastarbeiter* from Yugoslavia, met him at the German classes. I've let her know where we stand on *that*. I told her what happened to our last *Haushilfe*... *Raus! Ach ja* out the door. That little slattern actually had him climb the balcony into her room. So, with this one, we're holding the keys to those French doors.

Eh-LEEZ-a-bet! Frau Reinike drawls – German is a suspenseful language and the *Haushilfe* holds her breath for the past participle carrying the secret of her crime – *You have once again on the bath the Ajax dust trace left!* And from the basement where the happy Swiss family has queued its paired shoes up for polishing, Bess is summoned to the third floor to erase her trace. *Luegen Sie mal!* Frau Reinike says, lifting her white powdered fingertip. Also, this morning I noticed that the security lock on your bathroom still fastened was: are we to understand that you our breakfast without so much as washing your hands prepared have?

Eh-LEEZ-a-bet, would you be ever so kind and clean out my parrot's cage for me? I have my music and gym before school and *Mutti* will be ever so cross, could you be *ein Liebchen*, *Eh-LEEZ-a-bet?*

Of course she wants to be *ein Liebchen* for Sonja and attends to the hygiene of the parrot, who at least is not adverse to her version of the *Hochdeutsch*. With him she practises her datives after prepositions *aus*, *bei*, *mit*, *nach*, *zeit*, *von*, *zu*, *gegenüber*, and he squawks through the paradigms, a glow in his eye.

Herr Reinike is an earnest man with bony brow and thinning white blond fuzz. He takes a vigorous walk with Frau Reinike after the evening meal, skirting the woods on the edge of town and recommends the same *constitutional* for the *Haushilfe*. If the girl were just not so slow clearing the table and stacking the dishwasher, she might afford herself more leisure. Herr

Reinike would try out his English with her if his wife didn't frown on it. One should be wary of trying to reach them *on their own terms*.

Herr Reinike went, out of sentiment for his idol Engels, to study economics at Manchester but sure enough he grew up, mended his philosophy, and on his return to Switzerland became a specialist in hardware für *Damen*, hard pants to suture the cleavage between buttocks, hard *Büstenhalter* to maintain the discipline of the breasts, and stays for the drift in the middle. He now has twenty-six stores and is still expanding thanks to the same phenomenon in the dairy-fed ladies he serves. Sure he does naughty lingerie but that is not a line he pursues in his hometown. Of late Herr Reinike has developed nerves, and even Bess speaks of his *Nerven* with a respectful hush in her voice. When she tiptoes into his study after the washing up sequence has been set, the hotplates re-blackened, the kitchen floor treated to its postprandial wash, it's with a tired smile he greets her. She glows with longing for his kindness, for Daddy Kindness, a Charlie Valentine sort of acceptance: *That's my clever girl; that's my darling dark-eyed Bess. This girl's going to become something, I can tell you. Put your money on this one for the career, the other one, well, her looks will get her a long way, if she doesn't end up taking the veil. Feet in the clouds that one, couldn't tell you where her head is.* But Herr Reinike nods gravely, takes the *Nerventee*, and with a second nod eases her in the direction of the door.

Es ist die Haushilfe ja indeed and while the family chatters one about Girl Guides, about the hike tomorrow, about the release of annual profit figures to shareholders, Bess is transported by the creamy medium of the penne piled before her and the sausage afterwards – *und ja gern noch eines, danke vielmals!* – they encourage this, and salad, and cheese, and a chocolate mousse. They are generous with food: You must keep strong my girl, I do believe you are still growing, Herr Reinike says. Oh how she longs to be loved by him. She has developed such visions of herself, as elongated Alice, feet in the basement and feather duster at the apex of the peaked house, that she eats with renewed application. Even these children, plentiful as their flesh might be, pause in awe, forks hovering. Numb from this silent trafficking from dish to mouth the *Haushilfe* takes the dishes to the kitchen while the Reinike family talks and talks. It is in fact about women getting the vote. *Mutti* is against it, says women vote too emotionally, that they'll be swayed by a handsome face. Of course, she laughs, *with the exception of myself*. The *Haushilfe* is now

cleaning up the rest of the mousse from the mixing bowl but pauses in her spatula-licking to register that the evening's amorous tussle has begun. Mistress of the arts of hygiene and the rational lines of the Bauhaus style she might be but Frau Reinike seems to find an enthusiastic way at night, laughing as her husband catches at her waist. Slim enough to do without his hard pants, she lets him give pursuit with the children racing after, up the stairs to the first, and laughing more, on to the second where the master bedroom with *en suite* is. To the hum of the fridge and all the sublimated digestions of the kitchen, the Haushilfe scrapes the dishes and eats the great platter clean of the last penne. Now she climbs the stepladder to the jars of dried apple, pear, and apricot and steals a token fruit from each. It is not out of vengeance or even mild resentment but out of some need to fill the spaces where no talk comes, no High nor Low nor Swiss German. Sometimes, when they catch her licking a finger, tearing some bread to mop the sauce as she does her work, the children scold her, naively, as if it were a simple matter of ignoring local custom – *this is not done here* – and she wishes she were dumb in Peter Petra's way, a sweet holy dumbness with the assurance of the faith to follow, but this silence comes from something else, not discipline or deference or knowing better all the time. This is the Bossy Sister who is dumbstruck and no one here knows what her eloquence once was. Maths she can do – she's fast with a ratio sum or a quadratic equation and she comes to the rescue of Sonja and Klara, but when *Vati* checks their homework, do you think they give her credit? No, they shine with his praise, future economists both, and the *Haushilfe* stays dumb.

Bato Pavic, who doesn't always use the dative after *aus, bei, mit, nach, seit, von, zu, gegenüber*, says as he leaves her at the Reinike gate: How I long to love you; last night, after I hold you *ich bin kaput* in my trouser!

Is this the way men are then? Bess wonders what else was behind the metaphor her mother used: Come here Bess, you were asking what an orgasm was, I'll show you something like it. She led her into the laundry where the twin-tub washer was agitating and threw the switch. On the sloping floor, the machine danced for a while and shuddered to an unwilling halt. Bess laughed: I could do without that!

Her mother said: Well it's the closest I could find. With a man you love, mind, who's committed to you it's a beautiful thing.

Last night, last night, I am *kaput* in my trouser. Do all men say these things courting? Did the young Charlie Valentine have these white daydreams and offer them in talk like a bottle of perfume, a bunch of flowers? Perhaps Frau Reinike knows more: she can see through to the type who'd be *kaput* in his pants. Or is it because he's a *Gastarbeiter*, like any *Haushilfe*, finally, that she calls him a wretch? The whole man dissolved, is that what it's like for them? What does he mean, *kaput*? Busted? You'd better go now, or if they find me with you, I'll be *kaput* too. He does not see the joke. His eyes glare, fixed on her. You my Goddess, he says, *Du meine Göttin*.

Dear Cass,

*Do you know that if you took an aerial photograph of the activities of the citizens here, you'd get a perfect wallpaper repetition? Everyone, I mean every good woman on Monday at 10 on the dot is pegging out the washing, unless of course, one can boast a *Haushilfe* to do it; Tuesday, coffee for the girlfriends after tennis, with the *Haushilfe* to carry and collect the cups, hand round the cakes and disappear; Wednesday, after lunch, that's when the mothers and mothers-in-law are parked out of hearing, out of sight on the terrace lollabout, again the *Haushilfe* is handy, since she can sit with the mother to practise her German while father drinks his *Nerventee* in quiet. It is a truth universally acknowledged that the mother of the wife is bad for the nerves of the son-in-law. At least this mother-in-law speaks to this *Haushilfe* in *Schweizerdeutsch* and gossips about them! Thursday, that's for mowing and after polishing the family shoes, the *Haushilfe* is allowed to show her strength with the mower at the back; at the front, the Master mustn't appear unmanly and performs the task himself. Friday, all the grocery deliveries are received, and the *Haushilfe* is required to check the list but not to chat too long with the delivery boy. Saturday night is designed by the family man, and this night alone he alone drinks a ritual red wine (taken in a special goblet which this *Haushilfe* has just broken. She must of course replace it from the fifteen francs a week her good employers grant her). Every morning at 7.00 am is for beating eiderdowns and airing them, flogging the mats on bars*

which jut from every window; 9.00 after breakfast is for disinfecting every ceramic orifice and vacuuming all rooms ...

Cass, I've met a man at classes they disapprove of who says the most extraordinary things: You my goddess; last night I am kaput in my trouser! I'm sure it's just for lack of words. Whatever he's trying to say, he seems to mean it. I think I'd rather be a straight Gastarbeiter; at least their position is clear. Even the children in this family lecture me, on what is seemly, what is Swiss ... Being au pair means I'm on a par with the family parrot but at least he doesn't cop the moral instruction I'm expected to swallow. It means pocket money on a par with the children for seven days, fourteen hours a day. Ach, they do give me two hours off in the afternoon but if I decide on an excursion rather than crashing into bed, they think up some sort of harness for me. The last time, it was to meet Frau Reinike's mother at the tea gardens for the brass band. When Bato Pavic strolled up I pretended I didn't know him. She wasn't fooled; she said with a wicked twinkle: Nice fervent young man, but I'll keep it to myself. Afterwards she had me back to her flat for a glass of kirsch. This, too, she said, is between us, my dear girl.

Sundays are for children passing rollcall as they enter church so that credit points are gained when names are checked at school. Sundays are to be observed ... But here I broke the pattern: I was asked to get all the windows clean during the week and made the mistake of finishing them off on the Sunday morning. Eh-LEEZ-a-bet, it is unthinkable that you be seen working on a Sunday, please come in at once. It is offensive to our neighbours. Besides, I still had vacuuming to do.

Look at the slattern paint her face, she says, cigarette smoking in the tray, plying finger to and from the foundation bottle, in sudden nostalgia for the luscious thickness of grease paint, now for the eye-shadow, green and thick, and kohl with a vengeance this time. She will demand they notice her after all, she's grown big enough: with her hair teased in a high beehive, and perched

on stilettos, she makes five foot eight by her little school ruler. She'll give them a surprise, rock them off their pew, this *Haushilfe* in mini-skirt and fishnets sprawled on the stairs to welcome home the good Herr Reinike. As a joke. He's got a sense of humour somewhere, she's sure. He will see she's got some style. *He's* gone to Freemasons; *she's* gone to Bridge. He'll come in first and will give Bess more than a nerve tea sigh this time. That's him, that's him and now the phone is ringing. She is expected to answer it, so that everyone knows they have domestic staff as well as twenty-six stores. The phone rings insistently but it's ten pm and still he doesn't answer it. All the same, as a good eighteen-year-old *Haushilfe*, she should be asleep, tucked chaste in bed. Let him take the call. His voice sounds puzzled. It's English he's speaking. Footsteps... He's coming; he's coming to her... He'll ... The way he's knocking she can't pretend any more...

E-LEEZ-a-bet, *es ist Ihre Mutter*, your mother, from Australia, he says. His voice is kind, at least, but then, it's always soft. His voice is velvet soft in fact. He won't mind, he'll see the joke. She can come out. She does.

But *mein Gott*, he says, what are you up to my girl?

I was just trying out...

Quick, you are costing your mother money. We will talk about that... later. He gestures at her costume, especially at the legs.

Darling, darling, her mother says, we are so worried. Cass showed me the letter. No, she was right. She didn't betray you; she was worried. You sounded so miserable... Just try to answer yes or no. You're not happy, are you? With that family.

No, no, I mean yes, yes I'm happy.

Look perhaps it's awkward for you to answer. I'm sending you a bank cheque, so you can get out if you need to. But, Bess none of this Bato chap! He sounds awful. I know he probably *seems* nice but we worry so much, you can't imagine. Your father wanted to come over himself to give this man a talking to. You may laugh but it's different for us here, all we have to go on is

your letters. Look, you can join your friends in Italy, have a couple of months there, may as well make something of your trip, cheer yourself up. I'm terribly sorry, darling, I thought *au pair* was a good... I had no idea it would turn...

No, I'm okay, okay, really. I'll see it out, the *Haushilfe* hears herself saying. I've got to go. Thanks, thanks.

SILENCE.

SILENCE at the breakfast table too. She has set the coffee jug on its little flame, the rye loaf, bulky *Bauernbrot*, the cheese board, the three pots of jam, the fruit bowl... She comes and goes, finally takes her place with them. Grace, grace is said, then silence. He clears his throat. Bess sees Klara snigger and Sonja kick her under the table.

What did you tell your mother last night when she asked how you were enjoying your stay here?

I said I was ...

Go on ...

But he is so civilized, keeping the softness in his voice. Sonja is starting to choke on her bread.

I said I was fine. I told her I was happy. The *Haushilfe* hears herself say.

SILENCE.

Frau Reinike says: It has not escaped my attention that you smoke cigarettes. The smell coming from your door was dreadful. They are all attentive. They have rehearsed this. They know the speech.

You know we disapprove, but that is another matter. When you went out, I thought I'd give your room an airing and change the cloth on your table since you had stained it with fruit or something. My eyes couldn't help falling on a sentence or two in a letter presumably addressed to your family. All I can say is that I am shocked, as is Herr Reinike, that you reward our hospitality with such treachery.

He clears his throat and says: Yes, my child, it's the deceit. We wonder too how much ... Well, what does the behaviour, that terrible ... apparel you were in last night mean?

Silence from the good Reinike family for six days while the *Haushilfe* waits for the bank cheque. That you lied so ... He sighs occasionally after taking the *Nerventee*. That you were all the time with such hatred seething. And the children no longer hold her *lieb* but avoid her eyes.

At the station he says: You might be so tall outside, but inside is a tiny person with a lot of growing up to do. Alas. To have squandered the opportunity we tendered to you in the best of faith. No, tears are too late, my girl. *Adieu. Adieu.*

Neat woodpiles give way to ragged sprawl and her heart sings for Italy. She shines for the man opposite. He doesn't take her for a nerve-tea-serving robot with no ideas, no body, no charm. The man next to her offers to give her the length of the bench. A family gets in with bread, olives and salami. Soldiers. When she wakes up there are six men opposite all watching her. She feels as if she's back in the theatre.

With my ear, she assures herself, I can pick up Italian no time at all.

THERE'S YOUR RICO

At change of shift the nurses dispense the baby trolleys from the ward door. Their aim is accurate. One after the other, the trolleys veer across the vinyl to maternal destinations: Finch Jakobsen Sunfly Robinson Cavatino-Valentine Ozouf. Baby fists jerk to the cool syncopation of hunger. They bleat vaguely. They are new. This is Cavatino-Valentine's gliding across now. See, he has Fabio's nose, a bit potato-form at the moment and will the jaw firm up Fabio's mother's a bit lacking in the jaw department and the black lashes squeezed between the lids, whose signature are they, his or hers? There is definitely a smile shaping up of course he's advanced. What do you expect; he'll be bright, this one, Most of them only smile towards the six weeks' mark.

Bess reaches down with hands astoundingly huge against the baby, cupping it under the wobbly head and the rounded back. She draws out the breast. This is me, this is me, having a go at feeding.

Hey, no you don't! It's Cheryl from opposite. NO you DON'T. That one's mine! That's my little Derrick! Cheryl rolls her eyes and engages the others with a pointed sigh. See, there's your Rico coming across now.

Thanks, thanks for the information, Bess says.

She is shocked to find herself wanting to apply a conventional lacquer to her man when he comes. One in a clean white cotton shirt would do, his smile could beam too big, she could allow him that behind the flowers – irises, please, and why not, a veil of baby breath. As Fabio comes in now at the end of the visiting hours, it's with a two-day razor shadow and with grass seeds on his back. These other couples, whose second or third time round it seems to be, look across lazily as he approaches Bess, but they record all right. No flowers.

Ah my son, my son, my little Rico! He gives Bess a full frontal kiss which insists a little long, saying When? When? He says it in fact: When are they going to let you out of here? Work's giving me the shits. They treat me like the Girl Friday. File this, measure that, paste this up. He lies down next to Bess, his hand softly exploring the still pregnant contours. When?

When? the hand says.

Hey! You'll crush him!

Crush him? Eh, my little Rico's not that fragile, are you, boy? Look at this fist. Like his Grandpa, eh?

Are you eating, darling, you're looking thin.

Eating? he says. Eating? When I'm not dragged off to restaurants by the guys at work, it's your mother who's stuffing me. When do you two come out, then? I'm sick of being shut out of this.

Stitches, I've got stitches. And then, after they're taken out ... They say it'll take a few more days.

Eh, eh, he says. Since when have you been tied to rules?

I am a mare, my belly heaves and this is my horizon. First I have to make the effort to separate from myself, have to take my line and walk to the other country. Between us lie many boundaries, marshes where hooves find no resistance, fences whose metal knots will catch my flesh and the rolling sky, Flemish heavy, a slow dark surf from the horizon, where he needs to breathe, to here. I follow my pulsating lead am all lung and nostril and each breath brings me nearer, must let him be, must cut him off must sever it. Follow the cord through a closed country now, along dark shadowed lanes, walled in on either side. Heave, hooving, sight clotted. There are road blocks and police with two-way radios. I try to explain my connection with what's beyond but they say: Visa. You need visa for this country, lady.

I gallop through, unsettling the zebra stripes of the barrier. Am horse-to-horse connected but still looking for my human baby. The country opens up again and where the lip of the world catches silver, I locate him. No human baby it's my foal. He is quite flat, quite still. But it's all right, I've found him. So what if he's a bit different. Since when have I been tied to rules? But

what do I do with this now? This is the question I ask. I do not answer but lie down with him at the edge of the world.

You'll come out soon, and it will be good, Fabio says. We've made a fine baby. But don't cut me off, please my love. When you lapse into that ... You become so like a stranger.

PIGGING OUT

Harry Grogan, Head of Social Studies, wears his hair longish, more by neglect than design, Bess suspects, flaxen gone to grey with darkened strands at the back. He slings his shabby corduroy jackets over his shoulders with a kind of absent-minded flair. He goes for nice edible colours, dark reds, ginger, chocolate. Except for a network of broken capillaries at the cheeks, which light up like an emotional litmus, his skin has not a crease, not a wrinkle. A man either at peace with himself or untouched by life. Does anything rouse him to anger? He's a man who listens, who waits and lingers. Yes, she could give him that, he seems quite selflessly attentive. Still caution is necessary. Surely though, there's no hidden scenario with this one. He's beyond that. He could be a mate in fact. Past the troubles of sex. She can afford to tease him. With others on this staff it's dangerous stuff. Hot confessions follow. Strange all the same that he's always there, shuffling papers, closing an exercise book as she returns to her staffroom desk, even after a late rehearsal. He says he prefers to get his marking done first, likes to go home empty-handed. Always at the urn too, ready to tilt it for her when the water's low. The kind of petty chivalry that might irritate her but somehow doesn't with him or is it just his generation? In any case, this is the sort of small kindness, she tells herself, that she'd show to anyone, woman or man, so why not accept it from Harry? In the tilted urn his reflected face chases hers.

Dare you to compose an ode to this one, Grogan!

Aye thou always ravish'd source when cooms recess, he says, Thou foster child of slow time ...

He missed out *silence* but his singing voice, she could listen to that for ever. Silver historian, she laughs.

Well, my dear, you couldn't be accused of flattering me, but I troost it's the *urn* you're still referring to. He leans on the word urn, makes it sound like *yearn*.

But I'd be careful, he says, I have still have a sylvan satyr within, you know, just waiting to break out.

Fancy that, not too many of those in suburbia, sylvan satyrs, she laughs. Low enough but a bit exaggerated? Does he think she's a ham? No, she says, silver's really going a bit far, Your hair's not quite at that stage of refinement. There's still some brown at the back. Let's call it ... Cinnamon.

Ta very mooch for the reassurance! At least, you make it spicy!

He follows her as she strides back to her desk. She keeps her back perfectly straight. She shows him her poise. Doesn't rattle the cup, doesn't slop the coffee, unlike him. He follows her. Ploddingly. She wants to call him Mr Plod. *Dear Mr Plod*. But again she resorts to the Keats for cover, laughing over her shoulder: *What mad pursuit?*

And he: *What strooggle to escape?*

No really, at best she can see him poking his stick at interesting things in the gorse, under rocks, cheeks florid in the Yorkshire winds but never in *mad pursuit*. Running would disturb the placid lines, jar them. And besides, he's overweight, he'd get puffed. But he stands there, so simply, so honestly staring, smiling absolutely without irony. She could bask in it.

Aye he says, yes indeed. *What mad pursuit?* But seriously ...

(*Oh no, he's coming out with it already. The hot confession.*) She must keep her cool, raise her attentive eyebrow.

Seriously?

Seriously, we *must pursue* our plans for Rottnest Island, for the excursion next term. I have to put in my proposal now.

He pauses, watches her face a long time. Has she shown she was expecting something else?

You were asking how I see it? Well, I've been thinking, if I can get some of that roobbish about European Discoovery from their little minds, I'll count m'self a huppy mun. And you're going to workshop it with the students, for a performance, I gather? Soom of the stoof from this Excursion?

Yes the *Rottenest* Island. The place it was for convicts, the Aboriginal concentration camp, the boys' reformatory, now West Australia's Favourite Holiday Playground.

Well, yes. Yes. I'd have to agree with you there. I suppose we'd all be a bit horrified at a picnic at Buchenwald or Auschwitz, wouldn't we ... But ... where would it stop? Where *would* it stop, my dear? There'd be few places, if you think, not a point, not a single point on this planet that wouldn't recall some horror ...

Oh, Bess says, I think most of us here have been guilty of it too. Forgetting. Or never wanting to know. To remember. At least I have.

So what does the Dramaturge have in mind then?

The Dramaturge imagines doing it around the tourist pamphlets, lacing all their saccharine odes to sea and sun with the other stories. The stories of brutality and genocide against the charm of the villas, the scenic bicycle rides, the picturesque wrecks. The way our Tycoons blast away the reefs for their yachts ...

My, oh my, you're going to make sure my dear, that these children can't enjoy it conscience free!

Oh I suppose I do sound grim. But it won't be entirely grim, what do we do. It'll be a voice and movement piece. It'll be called something like *The Rottenest Picnic*. We'll use all the historical stuff your students put together. You can do all the real work, Grogan, we'll arrange it for performance. How about that? By the way, do you think anyone'd mind if I brought my son? Haven't anyone to look after him. My God, I forgot ...

Your son? You forgot your son?

Yes, Rico! From his sax lesson in Fremantle! I always pick him up. He wouldn't, be seen dead here. Knows some of the Year 8s. Hates anyone seeing he's got a mother who teaches. We have our late night shopping ritual. It climaxes in Pizza Hut, or Hungry Jacks, or Red Rooster. Don't you envy me?

But I do, I certainly do. What I'd give for some fast food! These days it's Pritikin, Pritikin for me. I'm sat behind a mountain of grass and yoghurt and told to eat my way through that.

I'm sat, he said, *sat*. He eliminates *her*, what's her name again?

Sounds like you're in an accelerated agistment pasture, Bess laughs.

Her laughter dances in his eyes. Now she's betraying *her*. But no, Bess corrects herself, that's silly. She's just being an accomplice to his greed. But she'll have to respond. Of course he knows that she knows he's hinting.

Aye, I loost after that good old cholesterol. Oh for a pan fried pizza! And Lydia out gorging on Black Forest cake with her friends. That's her Thursday Night climax.

Why don't you *coom* with *ooss* then, have a pig out, as Rico says?

Can't say I wouldn't half mind, if it's not intruding. He rubs his hands.

Dear Porky, she thinks. Come on then, Harry, or he'll disappear into Time Zone and I'll never retrieve him!

There he is!

Well, he does look a fine lad.

Bess sees him with a stranger's eyes. He is simply a glowing boy. For a moment's panic she thinks she's starting to love Harry for this gift of an image. For seeing her own son like this.

Oh he is. He has his moments. But I've got to give it to him: he's a sweetheart. Basically. (Will he think she's a sappy mother? What these men call them: doting, clucky, over-indulgent? Too bad.)

Harry turns around to the back seat.

Hello, m'boy. So. You're Rico, I take it. And I'm Harry. Heard you and your Moom were pigging out on pan pizza. Well, I invited myself along.

What's it to be then? Harry says, looking across at Rico, You're the Specialist.

Let's have a mega-humungous one. The Special! Pan Fried. Family Size!

I'll go with that, if your Moom does. Harry stretches out his hand to shake on it with Rico. Now, let's see about these poozles! I take it they expect us to wait a while, giving us entertainment like this. Let's start on this one: *Find the owl in the barn*.

Goddit! Goodit! Rico says.

Harry gapes: But I'd barely had time to focus on the thing! Got to be quick with this one, Bess. So, show me the owl, Rico.

There. Can't you see it, there. There!

Bess wishes Rico would use language. He's lazy. He's not showing his real intelligence. He's just pointing. Tell him, *tell* Harry, Rico, she says.

Harry shakes his head in a *this-woman-has-been teaching-for-too-long* way and locks Rico in a new kind of complicity. He's shown me where, Bess. See, in that tangle of straw. Well coom and choose some wicked sauces for my salad, m'lad!

Yes Harry wants a real cholesterol binge tonight.

Yeah, let's PIG OUT, Rico says.

As he leads Harry, he swings back to Bess and smiles. As if she'd given him this lovely man.

FIVE GAZEBOES

It's an odd sort of sentimentality that makes Billie use the gas-lamp in here. There's a cable connecting the house up to the electricity. The pool of light isolates them, over the board. Harry's reading, Lydia says, and she leaves me to the penumbra. Looks like a seance going on. Billie, studying the tiles, works away at her jaw. The movement makes the pinned back zebra tuft of hair jump. Odd departures: holidays for her are a break with the taste codes more than anything, the rules she sets herself in the city. She leaves behind all that infrastructure of corsets and things and lets the massive breasts have their way under the windcheater. She leaves the old butchers' and real estate agents' calendars on their nails, hasn't bothered replacing the lumpy velveteen furniture, the sofa with its embossed triangles and nebulae of sparkles, springs popping through in places. Lydia sighs, rattles the ice in her scotch. Juvenated by the soft light.

Gaze! Billie says between her teeth.

Lydia has put down *gaze*. The curve of her cheek relaxes a bit. The high seriousness of it. That's where the problem's always been: the emotion she spends over little things.

The immense effort she made that day, all lathered with soap in the shower, to rescue an albino cricket. It had been mishatched in the drain. When do they get their colour? She got herself into a frenzy, anyway, skidding on the soap, covering the poor bugger, as Billie here would say, with lather. If it had the heart, she would have applied artificial respiration then and there. What do they use to breathe? Apertures? Little holes in the abdomen somewhere. What kind of fluid transport do they have for food? Kind of clear liquid when you squash them. *Liquid*, good way of adding to someone's *quid* in that game. But is *quid* slang? These two don't allow slang, makes the game too easy, they think. *Gaze*, she put. Always fancied crossing *eye* myself, with the Y on the triple letter:

E
EYE
E

That'd be, say, one plus three times four plus one, that's fourteen twice, that's twenty-eight. Trouble is though, the single player can't do it, can't go in two directions at once. Just the two of them, night after night, at the Scrabble.

Harry would rather read, Lydia says.

Would Harry? Does Harry? Billie asks.

I think he's dozed off already, Lydia says.

What can I do but doze off when they leave me without light? Look at that, the small flat spread of my thighs. Were they ever ... And then this old baggage. Lydia never said anything, but for how long has it been? Five, ten years, more, that she's been buying these formless trousers with the low crutch. *Harry Grogan spreads his toes: see his pale old horny nails.*

Ageing, it's got her too, of course. Except in this glow, there's the peachy down on the cheek as reminder. Still the same nervous quiver in the lip she had that first day. Lipstick sometimes gets canalized in the fine cracks running up. No use saying anything, though. First time I walked in on her plastering herself with night creams, she gave a little screech. I said: Come on now, Lyd, a face with one or two lines is more interesting, more touching. A face that has lived, felt.

Withered and sagged, she hissed.

She must have taken it that I was glad to see age catching up on her too. If I said that her face brings out a kind of sorrowful tenderness in me, she'd take it that the old man was just trying to wheedle something out of her. Something like forgiveness. Her old cornflower blue eyes with that touch of real violet, they still have the occasional flash that goes right to the heart. No, not a flash, a sudden flooding glow, more like it.

I didn't consciously go for the opposite in Bess. But there it was: Bess all olive with the scattering of black freckles over the nose. A hint of a moustache. Her rousing bitter wit. Something like savagery at times. What kind of excursion was Harry Grogan for her anyhow? Harry, she said, there's something almost amoral in your placidity, your British control. Something Lydia has never done, attacked me for my Englishness.

Lydia with her poodle perm, peroxided, and the Australian wrinkles I know are there at the back of the neck. The bowed nape calls out for touch. There's a tacit taboo against my wandering over to take a peek at their letters. Perhaps that's what's in this game for them: the tracing and crossing of little stories they won't tell out loud. Or they can't tell.

Lloyd's muzzle is quivering, he lets out a groan. He shrinks and ripples his skin: it's the irritation of the salt. My bringing old Lloydie slightly resented. Nothing said, of course. But Lydia has Rätsel on her lap. That's all right, but that dog of yours smells, Harry. Burmese travel well, she keeps on insisting. Despite the operatic yowl he maintained through the ninety minute trip here. Billie asks: What is it between you two and your pets?

They relieve us of unnecessary talk, Lydia says.

It's true, she makes little speeches about men to Rätsel, who's a bloke anyhow for God's sake. But she felt bound to sterilise him, poor bastard.

Rätsel, she says, you'd think he would have learnt to carry his muesli bowl to the sink, wouldn't you?

And I fall into the game too: Old Lloydie, I say, let's take a walk, take a break from these fusspot women.

There she is, anyhow, applying her palm to the sleek elastic body of her beloved castrato.

Five, Billie says. That's a double letter, that's eight and one, that's nine and four and one, that's oh dear, that's pretty poor isn't it, that's fourteen.

Don't worry, Lydia says, I don't think I can do anything much. Oh. Wait, wait. It might be just ... *das macht dreizehn und sieben, das macht zwanzig und noch drei, das macht dreiundzwanzig dreimal, das macht neunundsechzig.*

That's how they catch spies out now who told me that? they get them to count, to add up. Not many, amongst the best linguists even, who can add up in an automatic way in a foreign language.

Gazeboes, Billie says, my God, on the triple too. That's what, that's ... sixty-nine. Harry, Harry, Lydia has *gazeboes* on the triple word score!

Five gazeboes, Lydia laughs. She gives Rätsel a long deep caress this time.

That house with the gazebo in East Fremantle is going for three hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Billie says. Did you see that? Seems the first owner stuck it on for her cigar smoking husband.

He probably planned it all. Probably took up cigars so she'd have to give him his own space. Could tell them about the bloke on the Costa Brava who built seven gazebos onto his own place, one hexagonal turret for each of his daughters. In that case, for display? Seven daughters embroidering their complaints through the latticed stars, their dark limbs aglow. Lydia catches my look; what has she meshed into? Or does she want my accolade for her *tour de force*?

Silly songs Bess improvised. Her laughter, gypsy warm. Inside the gazebo at South Beach, she stretched out in a very lewd reclining pose, like an odalisque, she was, and sang:

Honey just when you think you're spying on them
you find your bodies make a harem
inside it.

I've got it here, that's what Lydia doesn't know. The postcard inside the *Anna Karenina*: the *Turkish Bath* as the only memento from all those years back. Lydia's not such a psychic that she'd see a connection in that. Keep it more for its negative charge anyhow. Bess said she'd never seen anything so repulsive. Ingres was *the* painter she most hated, she said, when I confessed my fascination. Especially his *Turkish Bath*. It's not just cold, she said, it's arctic. It's an arctic celebration of voyeurism and you like that, Harry Grogan!

Perhaps, perhaps there was something of that, but there's more to the picture. As you stare, it's the three dark bodies that come alive. And the dark recesses, the false exits, arresting your gaze. Bess, Bess, never did unlock her secret. Bess, the landlord's daughter tying a dark red love knot in her long black hair. Stock Road unribboning towards her. But not in the moonlight. It had to be in the glare of the afternoon. Catching my breath on the bare porch of her ugly little house in Palmyra. Bess who mocked me for entering my ticks for present and A's for absent in my register. Bess, I said, it's your larrikinism that's a problem, not the observation of a few rules. I mean, the way you cook marks is downright dishonest. Bess, too much the actress, exhibitionist even, to keep discipline. Children need a certain predictability, consistency, and she was never that, consistent. Her classes always riotous. Doubt if they picked much up from her lessons but a certain fascination for her un Australian animation must have lingered. I would find her leaping around, darkly flushed after school, picking up plasticine pellets and paper darts from her classroom floor. Once she lost her whole class to the lavatory block. They had made their exits, one after the other, all miming desperately overburdened bladders.

Harry's back in his Tolstoy, Lydia says.

Harry is not. Harry's watching Bess in the classroom. Her surplus of energy replenishing mine. But when we came together, I suppose I failed her in some way. Or is that her legacy to every man? Harry's just all talk, she jibed later in the staffroom. Henry's into the History of Crime and Punishment: so she introduced me to the other guests at the Rottnest Lodge.

And Elizabeth is into Histrionics, I said.

But that night, she was quite unable to give way to her normal sexual exuberance. In one of the cells converted into guestrooms where from 1864 they locked away mainland Aborigines. And when they broke them with brutality, deprivation and disease, buried them in mass graves. It was as if she filled the cell with those tortured bodies and couldn't stand the sight of my white flesh intact. Well, this time, the failure was hers. That was the last time. The texture of the moth-eaten candlewick spread, can still find its sad grooves and ridges under my finger tips. Finally we fell into an uneasy sleep in our disunited cots. The next morning, Bess had a terrible darkness under her eyes. Overnight she'd aged twenty years.

Might as well shuffle off now. They're set to play for ever. Lydia puts off sleep and claims that as a kind of virtue. Against my fondness for siestas. Unnecessary siesta sleep breeds the best dreams. Lloydie bows in a prolonged stretch, yawns. He tags along.

Look at that: his hip against where I am meant to lie. The sheet drawn up to his side. What is it now? Close on twenty years that we've had our separate beds, ten that we've been in separate rooms. He never got used to eiderdowns. Nor Rätsel. The sea's suspenseful crashing in this room full of breathing, dog breath and his shallower kind. Window white, blue white and then darkened, whitening again. The lighthouse beam. He holds his face pouched on the cushion and the mulberry capillaries lace the retina after the beam has gone. These distances he establishes. *Diese endliche Ferne*. Although Billie knows it, we didn't play in German. But I could have used ferns. Ferns on the forest bed in that sifted light. Not this sweeping alternation. *Das brausende Getöse des Seegangs* says it better for these rhythms, for the push, the big push, the hush and then the stifled roar again, with the light curtain lifting. If I had this place, I'd have no curtains, only the shape of dunes shouldering the house, the rhythm of those and the light. Nothing to do with the metronome; an irregularity slight enough to keep you in continual suspense. His sleep breathing. The frilled seam of lips forced apart by that slight whistling expulsion. He was doing it already on the Isle of Wight, on the honeymoon. The energy he withholds; hence his

admiration for the cactus. Permanently erectile because it giveth not of its sap. Too much arousal would diminish chances of longevity. One flower in five years, that pet cactus of his. The ritual tea ceremony he staged when it opened. Suppose there was a kind of poetry in it. The effort of that flower: far from the Bavarian profusion for which I sobbed. And then the boys I had laughed with and chased suddenly stiff, abstract and bright in their blue-grey uniforms. My *Sehnsucht*, my censored longings.

Well, my little gravitationalist, Father said from his hospital bed when I got the research scholarship. Now you can do the sums you love and be paid handsomely for it. Most of Germany mobilised and you rewarded like this.

Didn't tell him about the medical examination, that they'd taken their callipers to my pelvic girdle and rated me Al Bearer of Warriors, didn't tell him those sums I loved were lethal. The cardiganed Englishman immersed in his phrase book, his calm regular profile taken up by the corner mirrors in the Bremen bar, was more than that from the first moment. He could offer ways out. And I looked closely as he turned his vague blue eyes on me and then on Lotte and back to me: *Gnädige Fraülein*, he said. We laughed later at that, *Gnädige Fraülein*, and I thought of the caliper measuring my hips and my sums turning to bullets and rifle butts in the Ruhrgebiet. *Sprechen Sie vielleicht English?* he asked and I laughed into the foam of my beer and back to him and said that *perhaps* I did. I spoke my way through my entire lexicon as we walked the length of that sullen sea front.

The bulk of the elephantine back he gives to me fills the room, full, too full. How he can sleep and sleep. Forgive me, he said that first morning. Forgive me, beloved, I must have fallen asleep.

I said nothing.

You see ... I felt ... It was like I'd come into harbour. And at last I could sleep, he said.

There are other ways, Lotte said. Other ways of escaping this nightmare. You could simply travel.

Hamburg

Rotterdam

London

Penang

Rivers and estuaries, estuaries mouthing seas. The sandbar builds as the river loses energy, grows more sluggish. Even children can make it across. No, no. *Das brausende Getöse des Seegangs*, I'll go that way in the sweeping cone of light.

If I'm seen walking in this, they'll say: madwoman. Old madwoman. But rustling for clothes might wake him. Let them say it then, let them say it. There's the towering vulgar house with the lit shapes of drinkers leaning from the balconies. They will joke about madwoman, old madwoman walking to the dunes. Lit, dark, they see me fluctuate as I walk. Here is a row of asbestos readymades on iron stilts: just carport plus living area above. People generally make do with little here. A brief holiday into simplicity. Even Billie with her drier, dishwasher and video says she prefers this: she leaves the BMW parked. Like Marie-Antoinette playing dairy maid. Billie walks. Tries to teach me the difference between these saltbushes, this dune vegetation. But the names escape and leave this trail of tendrils, suddenly illumined. The lighthouse closes the horizon in its surveillance. What is its warning? Are there reefs here? A computer must do it all now, of course. A computer with briny hardware. So long since I've had this underfoot: first the dry rough bitumen and now grainy limestone and soft talcum dust. *Ich die immer der Wildfang war*. Always the ... tomboy? Old feet with their horny nails reading it like Braille in the sudden dark.

Small things scuttle away as I walk. They feel the vibrations in time. Rabbits? Rabbits, even here. What can they eat? They must be adapted to the salt diet. The egg and bacon, the flannel-like smoky things. They must be genetically geared to the alternate fanning light and dark: they are not transfixed when it comes. It's always different when I lie at night: can recreate all the vigour in my limbs, the strong calves I had. Good mountaineering stock, don't put it down, Father always said. But now, is it just the lack of oxygen, this heaviness, dark pain dragging. Do the watchers from the vulgar arched house see my eyes cat-flash when the beam comes? Do human eyes see so far? Madwoman walking in her nightie. But this is an Indian dress, beautiful, diaphanous, not a nightie. Too transparent, I would say, for a woman of your age, Harry said. So use it as a nightie.

If I can just get to that: the slow sea heaving beyond. It's normal. There's no menace in this, this rustling nightlife in the dunes. There'll be snakes too. Snakes hunting the rabbits. Hidden slaughters? Anaesthetize yourself. To have small pleasures even, you have to stifle the squeals.

Too many memories. And Germany follows me, even to Gingin. I was the enemy: they couldn't have me contaminating their scones after friendly cricket. If I played my Schubert, it was the enemy woman playing enemy music. Playing for the Führer. You'll just have to anaesthetize yourself, Harry said. It's not the first trial you've had. And it won't be the last, I'm afraid.

For a moment, there seems to be a wisp of smoke relayed from one swooning form to the next. She touches my shoulder to reassure me that it's just fancy playing tricks again. They are as sleek as ermine but with a rabbity vacancy in their eyes. No, rabbits' eyes have more lustre. They have a smug composure: they know they belong here, in this design. I know the name perfectly well but she puts me off saying it's called *Surveillance*. Something with sauna. Baths, *Turkish Bath*. They are obscenely pale, she says, and hairless and she wonders about the round composition. Seen through a keyhole? I begin to preach on this theme, I must recognize, impossible to stop though, she must understand that. I tell her that it's not surprising, after all, to find this here, inside the rotunda where the wardens must have sat to survey all sides of the octagon around it. Reassurance, I say. Not only can they get their routine sense of mastery sticking their rifle butts into Aboriginal shoulder blades, making them circulate in this compound on the bald grass, which as I look, is scorched, but also at night, when the prisoners are locked in their unlit cells, the wardens have nothing to prove their power, and so they turn to this: these infinitely soft, auto-eroticized bodies to rob of their circular pleasure. Pleasure is finally ... I begin, but she interrupts. Grogan, you're sounding more and more like the superannuated schoolmaster. Aye, but that I am, I want to say, but decide to deflect the insult and find a torch handy for the purpose. I let the little disc of light travel over her face, looking for signs of superannuation, as she calls it. An intolerable hilarity takes me as the torchlight finds a line-crazed cushioning under the eyes and a decidedly unattractive line running from the corner of the eye down through to the cheek. The skin under her hair is bluish, like cat's skin, and I note the possibility of future baldness. I try to get rid of this viciousness; after all, we were happy a moment ago. She fingers a sign on the rotunda: HAREM, it says, and I recall those stupid lines:

Honey just when you think you're spying on them
you find your bodies form a harem
inside it ...

Grogan, she says. Really! Sssssh.

We reel out of the torchlight towards our room. Only, it's a cell. Someone else was directing that light on us all along. She is shaking now and machine-firing the syllables at me: it's some kind of warning.

Don't turn on the light! Lie low!

But we can't lie low. This room has five candlewick covered cots. They're in flesh tints from a Rubens rose, to coral, to beige. No space between. Lying on one of the beds would put us on eye level with whoever has the light. It's especially the eyes I'm afraid of now.

Rather than unbolt the door, she takes out her tools and dismantles the whole assembly. Now the door swings useless on its hinges.

At least the torchbearer seems to have lost his focus, I say.

Or hers, she calls out, not maliciously, over her shoulder.

The cell window up near the ceiling has been bricked in. The other, more recent, leaves me terribly exposed. And she has to leave me alone. She's forgotten her fear or, more likely, was faking it all the time. She pokes her turbaned head back in: Off to the Turkish Bath, she laughs. Here! She tosses me a small bottle of oil. Oil the bolt and reassemble it, if you're nervous, she says. I perform the task with alacrity. Lydia will be proud of me, but then, I can't tell Lydia. I'm laughing now: in obedience to Bess, I've barred her re-entry. Now I can surprise her with some rearrangements. These beds are surely modular or at least restackable. I can, in fact stack three to the side in a tier and leave the other two free for us. The tubular steel legs of one slot niftily into the headrest of the next. Ugly, but practical enough, like a meccano set. And now to dislodge the atrocious walnut veneer wardrobe I hadn't noticed before. It seems to have taken root, will only lurch forward. It groans and staggers. It's not from my efforts. I know the laughter as the small key breaks in the lock. It's Bess. In the door, there's a little Judas. And there it is again: the *Turkish Bath*. I am looking at the *Turkish Bath* through the peephole. Only it's Bess, the dark one, it's Bess who has taken up a languorous pose inside the picture. She makes this low deep laughter at my efforts to drag the last of the cots together.

Jack be nimble, Jack be quick,

Jack unite the candlewick,

she laughs. I get a small pleasure in thinking that her wild gaze and her skin, which has indeed become very dark lately, disrupt the composition. I leave the Judas and check: the beds are together now.

Jack be nimble, Jack be quick,
Jack ignite the candlewick,

she whispers. She is frankly sniggering. For how long has she been mocking me now? Well, let her find her own way back in. I peel back the candlewick: sheets seem decent enough but there's this increasingly heavy heat closing in. Still she doesn't join me. There won't be time if she doesn't come soon. It's the sheets after all, it is the sheets that are smouldering.

Don't worry! she calls. Can't you see, the cells are set in the octagonal frame. We're in the frame: nothing that happens here is important. It's only in the rotunda that it matters. That's the thing about it. No matter where you sleep, walk, eat, defecate, you're simply framed. It's all a frame: this, the arcades, the compound itself, all frames in frames for the rotunda. You'll always be peripheral for the central eye in the rotunda. If it's a fire you feel, don't let it worry you; it's just peripheral.

This time the bolt obeys. I have to get to the centre, away. The grass is smoking now, starting to flicker. A million tiny tongues of fire lap me. I can escape to the centre, after all, I am no prisoner. I paid for these days here, they'll allow me in. The window's easily reached. On the wall opposite, it's written clearly enough: PROCURATOR. Underneath, there's a portrait. To make identification easy, I suppose. Or perhaps no, it's a mirror, rather. And within it, my face. Dark red, like old meat but uncertain in this flickering light, caught within two frames: window within mirror, the window quietly smouldering. I look for the comfort of the Ingres picture we've seen in here. It's here all right: clear, cool, untroubled. I'm glad I've left her behind. She's not in it. The one in the wardrobe must have been a trick. The white women's faces pucker, take on a lazy animation under my gaze.

This childish elation in reaching the top. Why am I so subject to the impact of tiny delights. Like that idiot sense of victory in getting *gazeboes* on the triple word score. The strange wounded look on Harry's face at that moment. The *if only* that dominates our days. If only he hadn't always had to be the warden those first years. His fear that I had simply used him as a means. That if he didn't have my passport locked up yes, that must have been in Malaya I would get

away with some officer, that if I learnt to drive, I would drive away from him. But finally, I've been the one locked into fidelity, not Harry.

Here, I couldn't think what you needed.

The five pounds he gave me on my fortieth birthday.

I'll get a dress.

A dress? But haven't you got enough dresses?

Then I'll get some of those copper-based saucepans.

Aye, you could. But the ones you've got seem perfectly good.

I'll get out of here, then, I nearly said.

I know what. I'll get some driving lessons. Stuck here without even being able to drive Robert to town.

But ... You haven't got a car ... How on earth ... I mean, the Chrysler's too heavy for a woman to manage.

I'll get a job then. I'll work. I could teach.

But, Lydia, they wouldn't recognize your degree here. And you're too old to ...

Well, what would you like me to do with it?

Oh, I suppose I thought you might put it in the bank. Put it aside, you know, for something special.

Aren't you being too hard on old Harry, they say. Even Billie, at times. The historical excursion he took to Rottneest when he was teaching at John Curtin High. Do they know about that? Forty years of parsimony with money and sex and he has to prove himself in a banal dirty weekend. The way he let it slip. It could have been deliberate. The ridiculous cots they gave us, he said. Like planks.

Us? I said.

Well, you know. The party.

Then, nothing more.

Harry has shifted to a deeper plane of sleep.

Lydia walks, calf-heavy, to the smooth wetness at the edge of the beach.

The horizon flares, darkens. The sea is raked by the on-off cone from the lighthouse.

Harry sings himself silently into the deeper recesses of the Ingres.

Lydia weeps. Long deep gulps, insatiable childish weeping that will never find its release. The raked waves tremble their blurred contours.

Around her, a gazebo forms.

Along the wave wake of the Gilderton Beach, from the estuary mouth to the groyne, the gazeboes multiply.

As she kneels on the wet sand, she feels a sudden thrusting warmth against her. The sleek snout pushes into her hand. Rätsel has followed her here.

Ach du, ach du. Now I suppose I'll have to take you home, old boy.

She looks from his dangling loose fingers to the floor: there, in a tortured coil, is the sheet. Beneath this, face down, the Tolstoy. She can relight the gas-lamp, take this back into the loungeroom for reading. Maybe tiredness will come, take the edge off this terrible need. A cigarette. She inhales greedily. A residual sob finds its release as she exhales. Funny old man with his strange secret tastes. This, for instance, this postcard he keeps as a bookmark. What could he see in these boneless bodies glimpsed through some sordid peephole? She supposes that is why the painting is round.

She makes the flame spurt again from the lighter, lets it lick the edge of the card. She twists the postcard around, slowly directing the ring of fire; the frame begins to curl, blackens and flakes around the image.

What she has stolen she doesn't care. The flames are enough for the moment.

ACTING INNOCENT

I can see Bess's back from the restaurant door. Sitting straight, taut even, the head held high. I watch Lydia as we approach the table. She keeps her head level, her eyes steady. Only that mouth of hers ... Will it behave? Will she have me read in those lips more than the trouble of nerves? Will it show between Bess and me? After all this time, will it come out? What could I do after all, it's a reunion, and one Billie's organized. Chances were Bess would be here. I couldn't ask, now, could I, as a condition, like of our coming or not. And then Billie insisting on my bringing Lydia. I wouldn't put it past her to have known about it all along, without Lydia saying anything. That's a cunning one for you, Billie. I expect there's no malice in it, but she's curious all right to watch how people handle these moments. Lydia makes as if their lives are meeting for the first time: a slight graze, no that's wrong, more like a soft bumping, like a moth at the window, nothing jolting, as if it's to be one of those encounters with no sequel. Nothing lost, nothing gained. Lydia's eyes find Billie's quickly. They embrace as always, Billie nodding hello to me over Lydia's shoulder. I'm not sure I like the knowing smile she gives me and then, there's something quite unsuitably festive alight in Lydia's face ... Strange enough but stranger still is Bess. She's moving into performance, I can tell; have to brace myself for the consequences. When Bess is shaken, she always takes up the mask, launches a topic no one is prepared for, one you've got to counter on its own terms or that's the end of it. A real conversation stopper. It's perhaps this living alone that does it, that and the thespian problem, of course. As if she talks her way through these dialogues at home, stores them up and then slips into them as soon as there's an audience. She's aged, something haunted and drawn, not exactly haggard but you could be excused for thinking it. There's something in the downward set of the mouth and the shine in those eyes that makes me fear for all of us. What's she out for? What kind of kill? With Ronnie here too, now there's one who can go for the jugular. A man has got to watch his step with that one.

No, really, it goes like this ... Bess says, to no one in particular. She begins with a nasal drone, recognisably prime ministerial. An infallible ear has Bess: AUSTRALIANS CAN REST SECURE. THE RADIOACTIVE JUNK WILL BE DUMPED ELSEWHERE AND WHEAT FARMERS CAN SLEEP TONIGHT. THERE'S SPACE MADE IN THE UKRAINE FOR THEIR EXCESS OF SOFT GRAIN ...

One gets used to these broadcasts of Bess's, I say to Lydia and wish I hadn't started. In whose betrayal, whose defence? They have to be taken with a grain of ... Thespian salt, you know.

It's certainly better not to act as if I don't know the woman. Was on the same staff after all. This could pass for a comradely tone, casual and warm in an acceptable way. Lydia smiles at Billie, Billie raises her eyebrows and watches.

Okay, Bess says, let's get down to real business. The question is whether we'll go for the carbonara or the al pesto and whether at ten dollars fifty a serve we can go on eating here. The whole place's been tarted up for the Cup. This is what we're paying for. Look at all the little arches they've put in ... And the mural, she says to Ronnie. Wow! The muscular heroics of yachting!

Ronnie actually turns to me. Good target, she must think for a little lecture on sport and chauvinism, or sexism or whatever they call it now but she says: You wouldn't like to be in it now, Harry, teaching. We spend our time trialling new modules, locked in brainstorming sessions on the implications of all this so-called reform, half our time at meetings and the other half cross-marking with moderators breathing down our necks.

No I wouldn't, I'm sure, I say.

Assessing, assessing, Billie says. Criteria for measurement. If you want to actually talk to a kid, you've got to justify it with five memos in triplicate explaining where it fits in the Global Programme.

The only measurement device they'll need soon is a Geiger counter, Bess says.

Oh-oh, that apocalyptic stuff won't get us anywhere, my dear, I say.

My dear, I said. Again, it's plausible. I can be paternal, it's what they expect from me. *Paternalistic* this, *patriarchal* that. Can feel my neck taking the flush of the shiraz and still no carbonara.

My dear, he says. Suppose he thinks he can get away with it now, polite but warm, thinks it can pass for old man's talk. But again I feel the old swoon in my blood despite his stoop and singing drawl, it gets me. It's still a hypnotic undulation and then the way he sets his calm blue gaze on me, and then on her and her and her. And this an old man now. No need to wonder about Lydia. It's too late: she's known too much always. But she follows him, alert to any pain he might be feeling, minor ridicule at our hands. She's sceptical, but only mildly so about his need to relieve those he loves of darkness, what he calls the burden of darkness. All he has is his voice. His voice is his activity. He's lazy, ultimately. Voice is not enough.

Ah, the Golden Age, the Golden Age, he says. Everyone sees it in the rear-vision mirror, but I'll wager on the future.

Do you still believe in progress, Harry? Ronnie says. She looks sympathetic, as if this has been a chronic disorder that might have at last been brought to treatment.

Yes. Yes I do. And I do think it follows something like a spiral. Despite what you pessimists insist on seeing.

I think, Lydia says, or I thought, that most people put it in their childhood, the Golden Age. No matter how awful it might have been ... objectively, I mean. I do. I put it in my childhood. When I was a child, at least I believed in the human ... spirit.

When I was a child I spake as a child but now that I am a man I have put away childish things, Harry says.

Have you indeed, Lydia says, and flattens out her napkin.

But what is the HUMAN spirit, Lydia. What do you mean? Humanism? Ronnie tries too late to soften her objection with a sisterly smile.

I did not say *humanism*, Lydia says quietly. I just ... Of course, what happened makes *spirit* and *soul* dirty words. Hard words to use at least.

Their eyes make Lydia responsible for the whole of Nazism. Australian innocence. This is Lydia. If there are lines, they are filigree traces under the skin. Violet pulsing through the blue of her eyes. A nervous shiver in her upper lip as she talks ... Hard to fix her. I can't talk. Can't come out to support her with the human spirit. It will never have been long enough ago, Harry and me. Perhaps what I was looking for there is where we meet, Lydia and I: a need for Daddy Kindness? Has he ever really been Daddy Kindness?

Billie can talk. Billie says, her ring-laden hand on Lydia's, the other raising the glass to a toast with hers: I say, here's to the survival of the human spirit! If you stop believing in that, if you resign yourself to the uncontrollable evil out there ... Well, all right, that's the end of the human spirit. But what can one do?

Lydia says *one*, like Harry. Had not imagined this only faintly German accent along with the Yorkshire inflections. The musicality of the voice, more subtly modulated than his. A *Sehnsucht* in it for something this kind of conversation does not allow.

There's a pause, a long pause, it seems. And where's my carbonara. Mustn't seem too greedy; that's a bowl of butter scrolls and three slices or is it four of the Italian bread I've been through. I move my fork along the seersucker ripples and say, just to fill the gap, funny word that, *seersucker*.

Ronnie takes it up, at least you can count on these young bold ones to take up any cue. She says: Yairs I know a sucker when I see one, Harry.

And would you believe it, it's tears that swim in Bess's eyes. You wouldn't think an idle joke ... But then I suppose you never know what ripples spread. As long as she doesn't break into confessionals. It's the wine before the food. It's that making her maudlin ... But this Ronnie isn't going to let me off. She says: Now that you mention suckers, tell us what there is in history to make you believe in progress Harry?

Need to answer something but it's Bess, who comes in now, she takes the moment cleared for the actor. It's as good as any other cover up, this Maggie Thatcher act of hers: BRITAIN'S NUCLEAR SAFETY RECORD IS ABSOLUTELY CLEAR BUT WE AND THE UNITED STATES ARE CONCERNED THAT THIS ... CHERNOBYL DISASTER MAY SPUR A RENEWAL OF ANTINUCLEAR FEELING. I mean, Bess adds more modestly, switching to something more like conversation, I mean, there's always, always will be human error. In any case there's always computer error that can trigger the end.

Human error, I say don't feel like splitting hairs at this stage human error can occur in any industry. Take Bhopal, for instance with err ... Union Carbide. If you strip away the emotionalism, in theory, nuclear power is the cleanest energy source.

In theory, Harry? In theory? Oh *fuck* theory, Ronnie says. I see Lydia's eyes following. The language hasn't made her flinch. Still no carbonara.

Sorry, I mean ... Well bugger theory, anyhow. I suppose you also say the whole movement, Greenpeace is just hysteria and that ...

Say? I never said that. I was just saying, well, it's a pity. In theory, and I repeat, in theory, it is clean energy. I'm sorry, Ronnie, but I think you've got the wrong man.

Harry just likes to play the Rationalist, Lydia says. Secretly he is ...

Oh Lydia, I tell her, do stop saying what I am see-cretly. I'm sure it fascinates everyone. Umm and does this carbonara hit the right spot!

Stop evading, stop evading, Harry, Billie says. What you are secretly is of the greatest interest, on the contrary.

Enough cholesterol count is it? ... Lydia says. *Secretly Harry is just a greedy man*, I'm sure she wants to say.

Ah yes, must have my cholesterol! But coming back to progress, Ronnie, now you as a ... er ... feminist, I take it, surely have to concede that things have been improved for you women?

Been improved for us? For us? Who did it? We've fought every inch of the way and we're still fighting!

That's the problem with some of these young women, you try to reach them on their own ground and they're all tooth and claw straight away. A little humour would do their cause a favour, I should think. But I say nothing more.

Harry's blush is welling up, at ear level now. Funny that: he doesn't like to be seen to blunder. But he does it every time. This Golden Age conviction doesn't help him foresee the impact of his words. He's the one with the rear-vision. So much faith in the benign old boy mode. But Ronnie's anger is only staged. She claws the air and laughs in a generalizing way. Doesn't want to be dismissed as the rigid ideologue either. Her cheeks bulge and flatten, the fierce eyes pop and roll as she tugs at tufts of her very bright red hair. Like alfalfa sprouts and about the same length. She'd got the guts to handle her freedom, doesn't seem to accumulate personal guilts. *Guilts*, feel it as a plural, like gallstones, each releasing its daily dose of moral contamination. Perhaps why acting and living are too hard to handle at once. Deep identification leads to terrible sympathies at times: a complicity with a whole range of monstrous behaviours. Never learnt to be the kind who demonstrates rather than become the role. Alienation technique ... Summon it, lock back into the table talk.

I'm glad I'm not in Social Stoodies at the moment though, Harry says. You'd have to address this whole nuclear question. The children would be looking for some kind of reassurance which I'm not sure I could give them any more.

I think children can only stand so much truth, Lydia says.

Should've had an entrée size, Billie says. You tell Harry off for cholesterol, Lydia, look at me.

It depends on what can be metabolised, Harry says. Always was a one to mimic the surface vocabularies of knowledge. They don't argue.

Take radioactive iodine, for instance, seems that concentrates in the thyroid gland. Where does Lydia think we put our cholesterol though?

But the whole food cycle, I try to say.

Here he is trivialising it all. Great perspective for a historian. And there might be plutonium, I add. Shouldn't have said that now he'll serve us a speech on control rods.

Yes, plutonium, Billie says. And who cares about cholesterol then! She takes another slice of bread from the basket and presses it into the sauce on her plate. I must say though, I think these pine nuts are overrated.

We all laugh, this time.

The stockmarkets are getting excited about it already.

Wall Street, I say.

Not just Wall Street, I'll bet, Ronnie says.

If it weren't for men, Lydia says.

Harry sighs, calmly, stoutly centred there on his chair: a placid target. He sets his mild eyes on straight ahead, pinches at his upper lip and makes the smile spread.

Eh, eh, is all I can manage this time. Just let the film roll. It does.

Yes, if it weren't for you lot, Lydia says. Shanghais aimed at little birds. You never get past it. Boys waving sticks. She's talking about our own son now but they wouldn't know. She's always kept that sorrow to herself.

She looks straight into Bess's eyes. Is it Rico, does she connect with that? Have I ever told her? Or is she sending some message about Bess and me? It's like, in any case, she hasn't chosen bitterness but wants to share some kind of knowledge.

I don't believe boys are essentially like that, Ronnie says. They're fed that stuff from the beginning. Brutalised.

You should see them in drama, Bess says, acting out gender reversals. But it's not the masculine that makes them laugh, it's big boys acting feminine that has them in fits. It's not that ...

Bess has stopped. She knows it's boring, that we've heard it all in the staffroom, we've heard it for years. She says, just to Lydia this time: Anyhow, I still try. Sorry, can I push past, Ronnie, got to go to the loo.

The seersucker, is that what did it? Where's the Bess with the acid humour? Where does this tired earnestness come from? What's she trying to show Lydia. Sisterhood is stronger than all the rest? A neat kind of casuistry, that. Indeed.

Lydia and me? Harry once said it was after the parents' meeting, at the urn in the staffroom she won't have anything to do with me anymore. Oh we pass in the hall outside the bathroom. Silent meals. She talks to her cat.

Of course she'd find anything coming from me hollow. I the other woman, who had stoutish, ageing Harry renewed for a few months. He forgot to eat. He was tremulous with desire. He would break into song. He rushed into classes unprepared, but had the kids more entranced than ever. Harry the devoted teacher with stacks of books unmarked. Despite his spending long hours somewhere after school. Of course Lydia would find anything coming from my mouth fake.

Blonde Lydia to whom I am the dark other one. What they used to call the Devil. The Dark One, the Other. Who's the shade now?

As Bess leans against the door jamb at the back of the restaurant, she finds the back of her head taking on that rather trapezoid shape she fancies is Lydia's; she can feel the pressure on it. She feels this as natural. It rivets her to this moment of ... gravity? She can feel knots of tension building at the nape and satellite knots radiating, pulling towards her lip. It quivers. Bess fingers her brow: the definition between hairline and forehead is blurred. There is a light down there, like Lydia's. At touch, her fingers find Blondness. Until now blonds have always been out of sight, off, somewhere in the wings. There she let blonds fuse, overlap their boundaries, features circulating in a constant and random redistribution: a smile, gently puckering, would travel from

one pale madonna to the next, a blue eye would swim from soldier to watersprite, Blondness would blaze briefly in a nordic witch, melt down to Madonna again, become as nothing in the milky current through fiords from Scandinavia to Germany, move in slow glacial crawl to England and then, in a migratory mass to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and in the classroom too, blond children were hard to name or else they all became Kylie or Sarah or Kristie, no matter, the names of blonds would slip and dissolve in the great wash of sameness. Until this. And now Bess is anchored in Blondness. Where is her alienation technique?

There are bulging white luminous clouds coming in a slow drift. Day clouds in an ultramarine night sky. And sea smells in the air. Don't say this is going to be one of those awful epiphanies. She must break out of this. There is a scuttling movement at the bottom of the stairs. Now the teacher's irritation bedevils her. What are these kids doing in the streets at this time? What chance have they got? Where's the supervision? Parents getting pissed somewhere. And then they expect teachers to sort out the mess. But this is no place for her reflex policing. The kids, two of them, thread through the shadows in the lane.

Bess lurches against the morning glory tangled around the dunny. She must break out of this or speech will be impossible back at the table. The electric sky is theatrical, but then, it isn't. The clouds move on, slow, opalescent. In the gutter there is a trickle. Fish scales are scattered like sequins. A lettuce leaf swells in the gutter water, hanging on the surface like a parachute, briefly anchored by some soft fallen body. But whose sensitivity is this? Harry said once how Lydia oversensitised the world. That was when Bess realized that he loved her still; that he sorrowed for her. A terrible case of anthropomorphism, he tried to joke, as if this were a terminal affliction.

One of the boys leaps into the street light. He has betadined knees. Someone cares, at least some of the time. His face is flat, secret. The mouth makes a short straight line. His eyebrows are white. His hair is blond-white. Right, he says. I'm the US and you, you're ... Vietcong. The ginger boy is so intensely freckled that his face is bronze. His jaw moves lazily, as if on gum. He says nothing, nods. He accepts the role. US spreads his arms, becomes a plane. His thin lips frill as he makes a high whining. He balks. Wait, godda get some ammo ... some missiles and that, he says. He rifles through the garbage cans. Eh, mint-OX! He waves two empty tomato cans. For a moment Bess thinks she sees his pupils contract to tiny dots. Like the Ghost Cassandra conjured.

All expression has died in the little boy's face. It's like psychosis, Bess thinks. The little boy looks psychotic.

That's the jungle there, right? Okay?

He points to the weeds along the newly ochred wall which cuts the blue of the sky. Vietcong slithers there, on his belly. He hacks and roots at the weeds. US retreats, sets up the whining again, gives it the throttle, arms stiffened, outstretched, the cans clutched upside down. He's going to dump his load this time. The tomato trickles down, under the loose sleeves of the T-shirt, towards the armpits. Bess thought they had fresh ingredients here. At ten dollars fifty a course. US's face contorts: Whaaa-whiii-kachooo-whiii-kachooo-whiiiiiii! He empties the dregs of the juice. Vietcong slithers away, a ruddy smear, into the shadow.

But there's another boy, further down the lane. Approaching, but making as if he isn't. He toys with something slack in the gutter. He pokes it with a stick. US shouts into the darkness: Haha, I've sprayed you with napalm, Vietcong, you're STUFFED. But Vietcong is no longer there. He has come up behind Bess from the other side of the dunny. She has been giving him shelter. He leaps, whites of eyes flashing as he whips around her. He comes down on the plummeting US plane. They fall in a tangle of limbs, grass and tomato juice staining their flesh.

And now the Third has come.

What poise. A grave Italian looking face. He stops a metre away. He could be Rico at eleven. He has the rag. Now slowly, almost ceremoniously, as if he has all the time, he plasters it over his face. An awful mummifying bandage, it drips. It glitters with fish scales. He moves in a suspended staggering. His power seems to come from the disgust he is mastering. Bess can see the mouth move under the rag, the in-out suction of his careful breathing. He approaches the savage wrestlers in the weeds. His voice comes, gurgling. I AM AGENT ORANGE. Vietcong and US are locked. They freeze, breathing hard, faces furious through the juice. They gasp. US tries to take up the high whining to show his bomber is still in operation. He forgot about his wings for a while, the drama teacher notes. And now, here comes the hooded monster, glinting with fishy sequins. US, crumpled under Vietcong growls: Arrrgh, stuff this. Here comes Agent Orange anyhow.

The cans roll down the cement path. US and Vietcong shrink away, in opposite directions down the lane. Agent Orange takes off his mask. His black eyes gleam their victory at Bess. He kicks a can right into the gutter.

Who needs to teach kids acting? Bess gropes for the light switch in the dunny.

LAPSE

Bess wakes on the sofa to the static hiss and blue flickering of the TV. The rock videos she was watching have drained away to this. They were the easy eighties' brand of dada, cynical collages mixing horrorscapes with erotically charged dreamtime. She was mildly thankful for this tranquillizing fix along with the scotch. She watched, even acquiesced to, robotic bodies delivering deadpan lines like I WANT TO PIN YOU FLAT FLAT FLAT ... Bess mirrors this emotional vacancy. It seems so long since it was different. When there was intense friendship, commitment. When she believed, when she opened up without panic, when she gave without fear of loss. She wasn't surprised, after Fabio took off with Rico, that people veered away from the smell of failure, the smell of sadness without dramatic relief, a quiet mildew. She recognized what should have been brought to consciousness earlier, that there's a collective fear of contagion from the sexually abandoned.

They had thought Bess showed a strange failure of imagination in handling the Latin male, as if this were a special category. They also said that only a loving father would steal his son, that with his temperament, Rico needed strong handling after all. And then, Bess's final resignation to the ruling of the Italian courts meant that the maternal pull was, in her case, weak indeed.

Bess's pile of marking is still there on the table. The lies, the relative truths, the lazy adherence to cliché became indistinguishable, leaving her unable to commit praise or protest to the margins. Who is she, after all?

A chop bone has fallen on the floor, or did Platypus drag it there? Either way, she won't move to pick it up for the time being. It's as inevitable as the stalk of broccoli on the plate, dull under its set butter. With the lights off and just the empty flickering of the screen, she can almost enjoy the dark reflections cutting across her space. Her mind can move into this, accepting the mesh of illusion instead of thought, before sentences, sentences. She can forget tomorrow. She can stay here, in this jungle of negative spaces, between the chairlegs, the fronds of the tree fern, the

elephant-eared philodendron. Is becoming unhinged as simple as this? If only she could stay on her back and fiddle with the world this way, a modular game with panels of landscape and cityscape and aerial shots of suburbs swinging on their pivots, screen dissolving into alternative screen and no real estate to be chosen. No house to live in.

Now the garden provides an almost gruesome shade for the room, facing south as it does. It snags the odd vagrant ray of light, sieves its warmth and pastes it flat green on the cement, like a cheap acrylic. The stains, rust and moss give it all a sub-marine look, opening up depths below the fallen leaves. Growing in a chaotic mesh are unfashionable plants: rubber trees, some ten metres tall, pink-flowered hibiscus and cape lilacs, each thrusting its own forest of secondaries through the cement. Still, when you are simply a tenant, you needn't get obsessed with the stability of the foundations and the threat posed to pipes. This room, a lean-to tacked onto the back of the house was possibly conceived as a sunroom, to be filled with soft, refracted light. Now it builds up a kind of compost warmth and is dark. Conveniently dark. Bess can identify definite eight o'clock sounds. There's the steady hum of traffic from Leach Highway, the noise of wheels knocking and brakes screeching as skateboards tick-tack and grind, BMX bikes kerb hop and chuck wheelies. As Rico used to say.

Whatever it is now that pins her flat to the couch, it was a student's story that brought her here. *My Sister and Me* it was called.

I'm sort of smart but no one realizes, except well, Mum, in a way. 'Lou has the flashes,' she says, 'but Carla's the Thinker.' It's true, Carla gets there by planning. Plotting things out, she calls it. If she does an imaginary country, a planet, say, she'll have the angle of the axis to the plane of rotation and work out the latitude and longitude of the place and length of the day and the composition of the atmosphere. So then she has a sort of world that makes sense. She doesn't imagine things. She was writing a play for drama. She wanted it to be around this dinner and the main character is a sour faced girl. I reckon it's based on herself. Her mother has invited this bogan boy from Willagee or Coolbellup or wherever to try and bring her out of her grumpy mood. He picks up a felt pen and writes AC/ DC on the tablecloth but really, it's just because he's embarrassed and she's such a grouch (like my sister) and he doesn't know which knife to pick up first. He's a really bright science student (I

know the kid it's based on) but no one asks him what he wants to do with his life, just what his dad and mum do and that. So he starts saying anything that comes into his head and some of it's really rude. Well, what Carla does is tape me when I'm talking to my brother (she reckons he's a bog too) and she tries to take us the way she wants the script to go. So, she's got the beginning of her play without really imagining anything.

I'm not jealous. It's just that it gets to me sometimes. 'Lou's slapdash and careless,' Mum says, 'heaven knows how she gets there.' So for this play, Carla has them sitting around an oval table all stuck for words, especially after he writes AC/DC on the tablecloth and says these rude things. She said she didn't have time to draw the setting and if I could be bothered, would I mind. Well, I could just see it, so I did it. I used these Chinese tempera paints I'd been given and I reckon I used too much yellow for the girl's face but there was this cobalt blue and sap green. Well I used those for the walls and I did the sour faced girl facing the sap green wall. I did her in profile and had the green reflected on her face, to get the sourness. The bogan I just did grey with a sloppy red mouth like he couldn't control it and peroxided hair falling over his eye. I did his clothes black. I did him staring down at the bright red AC/DC he'd written on the table. I did the mother serving him as if nothing had happened, with blue eyes and orange hair. I said, 'Well, Carla. Here's the set for your play.' But then she didn't seem to want to use it. So I entered it in a competition and it got a prize. Do you know what the judge said? He said it showed a wonderful colour sense, putting the green and blue together like that. But Carla said, 'That was lucky, wasn't it? When all that happened was you ran out of blue.' So from now on, I'm going to keep my flashes to myself. P.S. I don't know why I'm writing all this. Please don't say anything when you hand it back.

Now all the synapses scramble. What Bess needs is simply a routine pull to get her back onto the normal path. Or to make official this lapse from the time-table. A few simple gestures: cross the room, dial the number: she is ill; she has slept in; her car won't start; she has called the RAC; she has phoned a taxi; she can't face it anymore; she will be in later; she has an appointment with her doctor. Let the Year 10s go on with ... what? Oh hell, Act 2. *Death of a Salesman*, but they'll fight over parts; there'll be an uproar. The Deputy will come in.

Bess doesn't move.

What she needs first is a single technique to hold it still in her head, to find a centre of gravity, something to stop the waves of chaos scrolling through. She practises this: a head rehearsal. Focus on a Holland blind. She pulls the opaque skin of the blind downwards through her head. She must take care to keep it flat, not a wrinkle, keep all disturbances at bay. The trouble is, as she practises, there are variations and now the blind misses its notch: she has pulled it too far and it zips upwards in a violent ravelling around itself and the outside breaks in again, dispersing in tatters the mental mist established.

These loud assertions. Lydia. Rico. Her need for Cassandra now, across the years of silence. Mamie. Or is it just that she has only ever been a Carla but without the pragmatic energy? The flashes denied? She had the ability once, to give way to the flashes. Maybe she should just give in, be attentive to these unnameable accents, be subject to strange migrations from one key to the next, let the one voice give way to the clashing and sparring of others and accept, below the surface, the knotted course of something else.

No that is terror. That is dissolution. What she needs for the moment is an empty room. A white rectangular prism to inhabit, a blind-sealed Zen space, cut free from the tugging world. Let all the jetsam remain suspended. Again the blind is lowered: gently does it. As Harry says, *gently Bentley*. It works: the blind stays down. But soon the mind's eye invents a scalloped fringe, in part unstitched, and this break in regularity cries for attention. One unstitched loop of fringe stands for all the chaos held beyond, the pain held back.

At least she should be able to maintain a quiet pose. She knows this from her training. She can teach each muscle a foetal relaxation. She can make it last. People should be allowed this once in a while, not to have to dial the work number, to connect with the work voice. 335-7235. Number, still more numb. Why should she be tied to teaching anyhow. Nothing keeping her at it but her fear. She was born to act after all.

Do, she cannot do.

Look at the undone around her.

Even mentally, she can't tidy that. This mess is her expression. Her identikit. After the murders up the street, people came to gape at the litter in the back yard of the suspects. There's a moral

mystery in mess. When she first moved into this place, she had a kind of directed energy. She cleared her space in the wake of the previous tenants.

There was a forest of tall dirty jars under the sink, some with rags in them, stiff from strange soakings, others full of yellow liquid topped with a lid of fat. She cleared them out, the arteries pulsing in her neck, beating in her ears, her brain: one, she knew, would contain, half mummified, the image of her failure. But later, when the previous tenant called for mail, he explained the annual plague of bees. Keep them there, the jars, he said, otherwise they'll be back, you'll see. We had a man out: the rags are soaked in a chemical. And the rats, we had them treated too. Rentokil, we had. Bess knew about that, the evil cure, devised to make the blood stop clotting, so that each time a rat bungled a move, bump-bump, she heard it in the ceiling at night and the shocks went through her blood: *internal haemorrhage*. She still hears it at night but chooses to think it's simply possums. People kill possums too, or cart them off in cages. Dial Rentokil. People will share their space with flea-ridden incontinent old dogs. Harry does, but for the rest, Rentokil rules O.K.

She had the energy when it seemed that Fabio was going to let Rico come back for the summer. That tricked her just like his offer to take Rico surfing that day. Rico waved carelessly, without turning around: that was okay, he was excited to be with his father. Seeya, he called. Was the stripe of pink zinc cream still across his nose as he boarded the plane? Did Rico leave in thongs and board shorts? Did Fabio prepare himself beforehand? Rico on his passport? A visit to K-Mart? What evidence did he produce before the Italian court to prove her inadequacy as a mother? Did he even have to? Green, white, red, the Italian flag, and so it seemed, Italian sperm, green, white, red, it came, making Rico an Italian subject once and for all if his father so willed it. What evidence would he have trumped up? The mother is an actress ... You know their priorities: the stage before the bassinette? The boy needs a strong hand, approaching adolescence as he is ...

Did she tread carefully enough in a language that became a minefield for her once things went bad with Fabio, fighting for her motherhood in his father's tongue? And her own lawyer was an inscrutable patrician. For all she knew a Cavatino family friend. Fabio consoled, flushed and generous in his victory: You will understand, I'll give him a future. To grow up without a father is disaster for a boy. And I'll do my best to send him out for holidays, we'll see. Bess had

confidence in the half-promise, in this concession to her need. She made all the confident domestic gestures, every wall, corner and alcove was haunted by Rico's face, fixed in her mind, at thirteen.

She repaired broken furniture, glued and stapled, hired tools whose names alone had once terrorized her with their cutlery, as an uncontrollable battery of blades and prongs and scoops: she planed and bevelled, inserted plugs, bought a chuck key for the drill, quarter round for the skirting; discussed calibres of sandpaper, the formulae of paint strippers; she soaked the bilious wallpaper in the lounge and kitchen with wet newspaper; she scraped, stripped, repainted; brought the architraves back to the original jarrah, the old chest of drawers back to its Oregon pine. She painted the kitchen ultramarine and hung baskets of ferns from the beams.

Now it's not the renovated surfaces she sees, but the flaws, cracks and blisters. Like a bad cosmetic job on a burns victim, she feels the house as if it's her own tissue stretched almost beyond endurance. Rico it seems will not be coming now. The lino she stuck down with Aquadhere has curled away at the edge, become brittle, trips her and breaks under foot. The red and blue flowers of the under-layers scream from under the beige: *Rico is attending a music workshop in Bologna, Rico is staying with cousins in Milano, Rico is growing up, Rico ...* The last metres of quarter round are still there, propped in the corner. The ginger and black cockroaches have returned, along with the tiny mice to be tortured by her overfed cats, her heritage from Mamie. Of course this mess, this accumulation of aborted gestures, is her moral portrait. It's over a week too since she's given Mamie even a perfunctory visit. Mamie's pleas, her joking reproaches make it hard to get away.

Chaos threatens from underneath the floorboards too. If only she hadn't inspected there. Now she takes a grim pleasure in letting the inventory impose itself: exhaust systems, carburettors, rusted radiators, fan belts, fridge motors, twin tub washing machines, dismantled record players, split bicycle seats, cracked lavatory bowls, hundreds of aerosol cans without their nozzles, beer cans and bottles, bottles, bottles. Things climb and scuttle nightly in the cavern between the asbestos and the mock-brick cladding. She tells herself there is no cavern but each night it yawns in her head, accommodating murderous rodent and reptile activity.

Rico has his own life now, after all. And judging from the laconic postcards he sends, he likes Aurora, Fabio's new lover.

In this room, it's the wallpaper that clamours for attention as soon as you turn your eyes from the rubber trees at the windows. It's a motif of ivy sprigs over white bricks which her friends once admired as kitsch. She locked into the arrogance of the kitsch designators by trying to grow real ivy from shelved pots, real ivy to shadow the false. Now only the black pots remain, with a few grey sticks and pallid Osmocote beads punctuating the earth. Plant failures multiply, in fact. Still standing sentinel at the front is a pot of yellowed jade from Elsie next door and then, dusty and webbed, a cactus she cannot name.

It would be easy to give way to a total vegetative stupor. Bess once read of a caterer who had prepared, months in advance, for the requirements of the Christmas season. When the time came to cook, she found, deep in the freezer, in suspended animation, a very slowly pulsing bird, its claws curled, snagged in the wire partition, its knobbly wing stump giving it no shelter either. The shock had made it wind down to the neighbourhood of zero all operations, a metabolism designer-made for the underworld. The cook noticed a little movement, so slight, as if the beak itself had softened and a memory of life was humming through.

Let animation come later, later.

Let the days pass by the window in a slow crawl. Let her not have to squeeze her lids against the light. Let the sun etch to dry point each blade of prickly grass. Let the flat evil weeds spread their negative vigour; let the little trees she bought from rip-off nurseries wilt; let their root systems be struck with fungal canker; let the foliage blister beyond recognition with pupal sacks erupting in every leaf. Erythrocorys, Torquata, Macrocarpa, Macrandra, Caesia, Fcifolia — let the names be silenced in a blanketing aphasia.

Let the work place be animate without her; let it rattle and shake with its chalk and talk clatter. Chalk and talk, chalk and talk, Phil and Ross and Graham and Dick, Maurie, Maria and Wilf, and Billie and Ron — she sets them in a musical routine: a chorus line of men comes first in beige safari suits or olive-green Bermuda shorts. They wave three choices of hands: padded with little tapering fingers or brown and square with the murderer's curve to the thumb or finally, flat and ginger freckled. And Teachers' Knees, Teachers' Knees, she sees them dimple above the Bermuda socks, bulge and sag, flex and stiffen to the rhythm of shaken bells and siren signals and crackling PA announcements. She makes her dancing men come and go before the blackboard, each with chalk pinched between thumb and forefinger, craftily hooked behind the

back. She makes them pause to suspend the terror time between the question and the answer: the moment is fired with the quick artillery of stiletto heels, followed by the soft shoe shuffle. Here come the women in pale florals, in bone or rust or eucalypt green and then the sports teachers at a jog, they rattle their cups on saucers, rustle their memos, add a quick grade to a paper, they gabble and sigh, stage pronounced tantrums and the last voices echoing ring with elocution training.

The car is still in the driveway. The old racing green Alfa Spider she bought with Rico's visit in mind. She rehearsed it often enough as she slipped the gears through their gate and gave the car full throttle: Rico next to her offering his chirpy commentary on everything she'd missed, his saxophone, his friends, his school report, his room in the apartment in Bologna. The Spider no longer gives her such pleasure either. It has begun to blister in places, the rust breaking through the quick re-duco job they did for sale. Elsie will see the car still there and come solicitous. She'll believe in Bess's 'bronchitis' and return with soup and sandwiches on a tray. Of course Bess need not answer the door. She can always say that a friend from work came to pick her up, flat battery.

Is this it? One day you know the flashes don't happen for you anymore and you simply leave the car in the driveway, the dishes on the table, the marking undone and let the questions heap up, the letterbox overflow, the weeds outgrow invited plants, the car still there, but slumped on its tyres.

Sliding back towards sleep, Bess finds Elsie anyhow, embodies her. Her veins become knotted, tumescent. Blood throb blurs all. She is not on the sofa at the back of Number 66. She's in the front, the pink room at 68. Elsie gave her the story about her morning ritual; she can try it out for transport. Bess's mother once said she could act her way out of any scrape.

The nylon foams around the double bed, filling the tiny front room. The pink foam carries her far. She is glad that the dressing-table mirror blocks the light from the window and that the rest is filtered by the curtains, also nylon, also pink. Elsie hasn't yielded yet to the temptation, what she calls My Awful Habit. She hasn't looked at Her this morning. She hasn't even peeped at Miriam. In her head, though, it starts to happen by itself. Roger's trousers jostle on their hangers and part like an obedient curtain at the theatre.

The poster-sized photo of his Poor Late Beautiful Wife is still there all right. Bess rocks with Elsie's shame. She winces with recognition. She hasn't refused from Elsie the mixture of awe and worship she offers. Miriam in that foggy enlargement could be Bess. Spitting or bloody splitting image do they say? Elsie asked. There was the same dark skin, the eyes as she felt hers once to be, calmly confident in their seductive power, but not Bess's signature flaw, the scattering of black freckles over the nose. Bess is Elsie tracing out these features. Hers. The Other Woman's. Bess loses herself finding Elsie's pleasure, Elsie's pain. She contracts back to something like a reclining hologram of Miriam, the Late.

OR ELSE

The wind shrieks for a while; then it hisses and sucks through the cracks between the asbestos sheets, under the open eaves, down the funnel into the wood stove. It blows ash across the floor. Tim spreads his hands out as he moves in close to the fire. He treads on a piece of kangaroo meat that Scruff has dragged off the saucer. He limps off with it, flattened into the tread of his galoshes. How long I been tellin ya t'leave them boots outside, Timmie? Mum doesn't look up as she says this. She just bashes at the block of frozen peas floating in the saucepan. Some come free. Couldya be a love and get the milk for the mash, Else? She stares into the colander as she drains the potatoes. Arrgh, I dunno, she says. She often says this. You don't answer her. The skin under her chin makes little gulping movements. What's the use of telling her about Stan? She'd just stare ahead and say: Oh, Else, you're talkin dirty. Like she done that time after Uncle Ted got her to come and listen to the Kalgoorlie Cup on his car radio. And then Stan would bash her up for telling. Does Mum ever look at his swollen turkey gobbler? Arrgh, bloody hell! Them chops are burnt again! Got the milk love? Canya warm it up for me in the little saucepan? There, that's a pet.

The rain's coming across so hard you'd think the tin was going to lift off the roof. Scruff circles and circles on Elsie's bed. Gunner make yer mind up or aren't ya? There you are mate, she says. That's a nice cosy spot. Thadda boy. Not much room for both of us is it? Stan got her this stretcher four years back. A temp'ry cot for y'lass. His voice still has this bit of a Scottish sound to it though he's been in Esperance twenty years. Or so he says. If she can just hold out till the days get warmer. It was crazy to try to do it this afternoon. The rain was being flung down. Flung. Did people ever break under it? Dissolve? It would depend what was in the rain.

The wind was violent too. The bushes crouched low under it, pretending they weren't there. She thought of doing the same, lying down in the flattened grass and letting it rain until the sky was empty. She might have been dead by the morning, what with the cold and then with the cliff-

edge being impossible to see, she might've rolled off without knowing it. In the end, lying there waiting was just too much. She just slunk back to the house. Mum got mad about the wet dress and that but she was too busy to ask much. Anyway, it was for Timmie she come back. Poor Tim with no one else to stand up for him. Snivelling little siss, that's what Stan calls him. Mum doesn't dare argue back. Timmie's started to twitch lately. Also, where the skin broke along those welts he's got across his back, it's puffy and there's a bit of an ooze. He's started wetting the bed again too. Else knows this without checking his mattress because he comes whimpering to her in the night and curls up into her back and he's all sweet and damp. Elsie props her chin on her fist to watch his sleeping face. It's not a good sleep. The lids aren't really closed and just under the lashes, the eyes make quick movements. She watches his fingers loosen around the ball of orange wool she's given him. It soothes him to tickle his lips lightly with it.

Now Elsie makes the best plan ever. There are suddenly steps she can take. She sees them in the mirror as the headlights swoop across it. She can't make straight for the highways. She'll have to leave the cities till later. Bunbury? Kalgoorlie? That'd be closer. She can't just disappear but. Because she's handy round the place, Stan'd call the cops to fetch her back. And Mum, she'd cry, for sure. If she gets a job and brings back some of the pay, that'd be different. Maybe he'd leave Tim and her alone then. And later, once Tim's older and can stand up for himself, she could take a bus to Kalgoorlie or even Perth.

Except for galoshes when it's really wet and sometimes thongs for town, Tim and her mostly go barefoot, even on days like this. But Stan's always got his work boots on, like now. He moves like a human crane, Mum says. He's making a looping rhythm as he swings from down to up and hurls the blocks of jarrah onto the trailer. He must be doing a delivery. He's got a clean white singlet on but it's the same old oily football shorts he wears on his hips, below the belly. It's a tight, fairly high belly he carries in front, like he's taking it for a walk, like he's proud of it. Even in winter, his tan's almost black and there's a blacker splash of freckles on his shoulders. He whistles as he works. It's always *Some Enchanted Evening* or *Strangers in the Night*. Whatever's been going on, he always whistles, even after him and Mum have been having a row. Sometimes Elsie could kill him for it. Shove his head in one of the kindling bags, for instance, tie it up and load him on the trailer. She could dump him somewhere; leave him to blind man's bluff his way home. She can do the gears on the truck. He was really nice that time he showed her. How long

ago was that? He mustn't catch sight of her anyhow in Mum's shoes. They pinch at the toes and cut in at the heels but no one would know.

The mud splatters her calves as the heels strike the gravel track. She should've brought a damp flannel to clean up before she gets there. On the other side of the highway, she'll be invisible, anyhow. She can already see the shiny silver of their roof going down behind the hill. Does that mean they can't see her anymore? If he calls after her, she can say she's going shopping for Mum. The sky is heavy; dark clouds rolling over. The sea crashes; like in a dream. Like in *Rebecca*, that she's seen three times, surging up, calling you in. *She was beaten in the end*, that housekeeper, Mrs Dnvers said. *But it wasn't a man. It wasn't a woman. It was the sea.* But who'd want to be like either of them: Rebecca, the wild beautiful one they treat like she's a witch and who's dead, anyhow, or the second Mrs de Winter who doesn't even have a first name. Or does she? In any case, she's a real mouse.

Elsie hauls herself up the path to the vacant lot. There's a burst of hot light. It does this in spring. The scrub glows really bright. She feels the heat escaping in little ripples from her cheeks. They mustn't see her flush. Let them just notice her eyes. Her eyes are all right: sea-green and edged with thick black lashes. Elsie knows this geographical fact about the place and lets it fill her head now. It must cool her, control this flush. The current coming up from the Antarctic makes the sea here freezing, even on the hottest days. She thinks: eyes sea green up from the Antarctic, body filled with cold sea, sea-smelly since he ... Seaweed sucks and strains through the rock, body trap for weed rotting it, weed and algae mustn't let their secret out, keep body clenched, shut, tight.

Afterwards, when she held the shower nozzle up close to get rid of the slime, she wondered whose it was, his or hers. That's what their towels on the rack said back to her: His, then Hers. Elsie hauls herself up the rise, and now the road is flattening out. It's broad and open. Oh, she does know another fact, she knows that when the French called this place Esperance, they were being sarcastic. They couldn't see anything to hope for, no crops growing ready, no deer to hunt for in the forest. No forests like the ones in Europe. But she can hope, she can. Mum reckons hope's just thinking positive. Where'd we be without hope, love? she says. As long as she doesn't run into any of the kids from school. She can chant the tune all right, she can do it even better than them, the words and the slow time:

Hey-dee hey-dee ho

Else the Elephant

Watch her go

So many times she's dreamt of curling up in a cave where no one would think of looking. With the sea whooshing up through the blow holes, you wouldn't know one day from the next, sun up, sun down and the fat would melt away as she lay there on the rock ledge, catching the sun. She'd get brown too. No one would recognize her when she came back, except for the clue of the eyes. They wouldn't be able to get over it. But Mum doesn't seem to understand: whatever she looks like, she's just good ol Else to her. There's the stack of white sliced bread and jubilee twist, the pat of cold butter and the pot of jam on the table every day after school. Nothing better for the afternoon munchies, Mum says. If you've got to diet, Else, it's better just to eat a bit of everything. Nothing truer than a little of what you fancy does you good. It's okay for her. She's skinny as a ... rabbit? That's what her mum's like these days, a rabbit. Nervous, twitching. Sad too.

Stan made Elsie come out with him one night on a rabbit hunt. She had to hold the spotlight, direct it at the rabbits. It was hot and close on the bench seat of the ute between Stan and Brian. In the back the dogs were going mad even before they spotted any rabbits. Elsie dropped the light and Stan yelled at her. Brian was nice, he said: Lay orf her Stan and passed her the spotlight. The batteries made it blink for a moment and then come on full bore. Then there it was, the rabbit; the light had it pinned and trembling. Were its eyes really pink? Brian's rifle let out a blast and the rabbit slumped. Stan whistled for the dogs. With any luck there'll be foxes further on, he said. That was when Elsie heaved. She tried to push past Brian to the window. She really did and if she'd talked it would've happened anyhow. The vomit went over Brian's legs into the tread of the rubber mat.

She is like a rabbit, her mum. She once said: Look, I know he's giving you two a rough time at the moment. Don't think I'm happy about it. But Else, for all our sakes, I've got ter make a go of it this time. Otherwise where would we ... what would we ...

Else could have said it for her. She can answer it too. What you do is get a job. Else will get a job. They needn't be trapped. She's not going to be forced to stick with a man if he turns nasty like Stan. What is it that's made him go nasty? He was young and happy in the marriage photo.

He was nice to her too, said she was a great flower girl. He used to laugh a lot, then. What happens?

Elsie goes around to the latticed area at the back of the hotel. It's a green shade that she enters. The air is wet. Water seeps up through the cracks in the cement. The smell of choked drains. Grey mops are propped against the wall, bottle crates stacked up by the kitchen door. Nothing's to stop her going straight back home now and she won't have to say anything about it. They'll take one look at her and laugh at her thinking she could get a job here. Their eyes will track up slowly from her mum's shoes, up the mud-splattered stockings to the puckered hem of her dress.

They'll see what the kids at school see, Elsie is fat, Elsie is slow and they'll laugh. Elsie has to point to the words to stop them dancing on the page. Elsie has to point, they point at Elsie pointing. What they don't know is she can read all right in private. Well, she can, slowly, if no one's counting how long she takes to turn a page. Sometimes, if she's at the kitchen table, opposite Timmie, who can already read faster than she can, she'll turn the pages in a blur, just in case he's counting and then she'll turn the book face down and pick up the story a few pages earlier on. One word, then the next. If only they'd let you keep on pointing. No, she'll get this job and show them she can do a few things. And they'll be standing at the bus-stop in their lumpy uniforms and their shiny red noses and won't recognize her when she steps off in her smart clothes. Somewhere the things she knows will count. Like she can tell by the way people turn their eyes if they're true or fake. She can pick what's fake. And she can trust her hands. Her fingers practically think. Dishwashing, never breaks a thing, butter spreading, never tears the bread, vegie slicing, even Mum says bloody perfectionist, sewing, plaiting, knitting. Her fingers carry through. She'll knock on that screen door.

It's a boy who thrusts the door open with a broom, pushing its load of dirt and fluff and crumbs forward. He sweeps it past her into the drainage grid. His eyes flick over her. He sniffs, rakes his fingers through his hair. It springs back again, in greased coils down his forehead. He's serious. He has a job. He knows what he's doing.

What's he seen then? That she's fourteen and her breasts have started but they're more like a fat boy's breasts, more like Larry's. Larry's not in with the slow kids but, not dumb like her, he doesn't need to point to the words. The sun sort of leaks between the new leaves on the Virginia creeper. She knows the names of a few plants. And birds. Does Larry? The leaf edges go bright

gold, like egg yolk running over the toast crust. Does Larry think things like that? Is that thought? Larry's thighs rub, overlap; rub, overlap. She's watched him on the steps. He used to wait for her at the bubbler on the way to the bus shelter, maybe just because she's fat like him. He hasn't been doing that lately. Let him walk alone then, catch his breath around the corner.

Norma said to ask for Doug. In her quick sharp voice, like glass breaking, she said: Wanna job? Ask Doug, he says there's always work, always someone leaving, that's if you want that sort of work. Norma's in Remedial too so what makes her think she can be so high and mighty? Now the rain comes down like bullets on the corrugated iron over the trellis. How's she going to get away with the light floral dress now? Maybe men don't notice things like that. The water bubbles back up the drain, bringing to her feet all the stuff the kitchen boy swept into it. Elsie gulps and knocks.

He looks a bit like a jockey, small and sunburnt with comb tracks in his ginger hair. He sucks on a flat hand-rolled cigarette. He holds it inwards, towards the palm.

Yer want?

Norma said to ask for Doug. It's about work. About a job.

Did she now? Well, I'm your man.

MILK BAR

The jars of mussels and pickled onions are stacked in rows on the counter. They seem to be the thing these days but no one buys them. It's just the snapper, shark really, the minimum chips and the Chiko Rolls they want. The Chiko Rolls have taken off all right. The jars send back this ballooning face, over and over. Like a school of bloody blowfish, Elsie says and swells out her cheeks. She won't wear the nylon to work again. She flaps out the skirt, releasing its plastic grip from her thighs. The overhead fan wobbles its blades through their lazy circuit. Just stirring the heat.

She could do this work blind, the batter stirring, the spud washing, the dead accurate slicing. She could've been a drummer, left and right hands with their own routines. Each with its range of strokes, loose and rhythmic, scaling, scouring, chopping, peeling. But it's the spuds she's best at. The blade slips like a dream around the bumpiest ones, the scarred and eye-pitted ones. At least the men are leaving her be for the moment, at the poker again in the back room. She has shovelled out the gravelly bits from last night's chips, strained them through the wire basket, not wasting a drop of oil, and now she tops up the tank, watching the tiny clusters of bubbles clinging, loosening, rising, popping. The Wettex drags the dust through a dull smear over the mussel and onion jars. Well, if Mike insists on displaying them here, that's his problem. And now it has to start, this tugging at the nipple.

Funny no one talks about this, thrilling right through your blood. Must be some sort of long distance signal, like the radar they use. If only the milk wouldn't seep through, but the apron bib should cover it. And Kevin's a good one, almost too good. Sleep and sleep. Talk about placid. Rosie'll be looking in on him, doing her rounds at the hotel with the vacuum cleaner, the Big Bertha. The way she hauls it up the stairs. Built like a bird, you'd think she'd be too weak for that kind of work, but that's wiry for you. As long as the baby doesn't interfere you can't have it

here, mind well, that's your business, Mike said. You can always look in on it during the lunch break if you want. I like that: if you want, Elsie says to the mussels and onions.

When she first came to Kalgoorlie it was hard enough fronting up for jobs, what with the belly that wouldn't go down. In the end she bought the panty girdle but it rode up and practically split her in two and just pushed the fat to other places. At least she's got her eyes, big and clear. I like you, Else, Wal said. I like your green eyes and your stubby black lashes. I like your little white teeth too, he said and kissed her laughing mouth. Just remember your Wal next time he comes through and don't let that boss of yours go taking advantage of you. Then he reached for his watch, his big furry leg still draped over her. She wanted to say: I like your peeling, freckled nose and the way you blink when you look at me real close. Seeya next time, ol doe eyes, he said. Not even a photo. But she could just about draw the tattoo: a panther, a black one, climbing up his arm, clawing at the muscle and below, on a curling ribbon, the writing: DEATH BEFORE ... What was it now? She'd half expected the tattoo to show up on Kevin but when he came out like a flipping seal, he was that vigorous his arms were bare. Maybe it was just the freak floods on the Nullarbor that brought Wal there to share her little cot at the back of the Eucla roadhouse.

There's always this little moment of peace when she can listen to the buzz of the fly zapper and watch the light easterly lifting the plastic strips at the door. Mike doesn't like her using the stool for some reason, even when it's quiet. Elsie can feel the varicose veins snaking up her shins and the purple ones spreading at the backs of her knees. Perhaps there'll be a place soon at the Railway Hotel and she'll be able to join Rosie on the team, squirting the green into the toilets and doing the hospital corners on the beds. At least they could have a laugh. The tugging at her breasts has got so bad, she can hear it, like tomcats wailing through her.

The fly strips part she doesn't look up. She must calm down. It'll be that pale-faced boy. The Rocker. Always alone, always silent. He stands there, every time, with the fly strips caught on his shoulder, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his black jeans, expecting you to read his mind. Well, let him say it this time, what he wants. Sometimes it seems he doesn't come for the Chiko Roll at all. He just jiggles, thrusts and tugs at the handles of the pinball soccer until the lunch break is over. He always does both teams, never plays anyone.

The crying comes in real loud snatches and Elsie sees the pram pushing through the strips, red, green, yellow, blue, the little pink fists doing their jerky shadow boxing in the air. All the

tendons straining, Rosie's skinny arms push down on the handle. The pram rears over the step. Rosie's shallow chest moves in and out very quick, He was kicking up a riot, Else. Look, can't wait. There was old Mac complaining and I reckon you could lose your room if it happens again. I've still got Twenty-nine and Thirty to do before two and Elaine's around inspecting already. Says I've left the Bon Ami trail on the baths again. You know what I reckon she has them black gloves on her trolley for? It's just come to me! To test the bloody Bon Ami dust. Hahahaha.

Sssh, Elsie says. The boss'll hear.

Well, godda go anyhow. Have a good feed, Kevie, you little bugger. Seeya love.

Elsie swallows hard as she unhooks the front of the bra. The breast is swollen, marbled with blue veins and the milk oozes blue-white, squirts now, like a jet stream. Kevin's fists uncurl and hover vaguely around the breast as he sucks on this power. She'll have to get it over quickly: five minutes right, five left will have to do. They're still lost in their poker; just the slapping down of cards on the rickety table and kind of spitting, disgusted noises coming from Jake. Mike'll be stripping him of his wages again. Kevin blinks and the hazel light comes through. It's the soft puzzled look Wal had. He could've loved her, he could've loved them both, if he'd come back. At least he told his mate off that night for goosing her each time she passed their table. Kevin draws on her whole body, the feeling comes up her legs and pangs sweetly through her.

The skinny black jeans break through the plastic strips. It's the Rocker. Elsie whispers to Kevin: Thinks he's in bloody *Gunsmoke* or something.

She shifts Kevin onto the other breast. It's below the counter anyhow. He can't take offence. Can he see it on her face? He kicks at the crack in the lino. She packs the left breast in, still leaking. The milk blisters at the corner of Kevin's mouth. His little fingers blunder for her nose. The pink gums part, he gurgles. That's better, isn't it? The Rocker gives her a look. Be with you in a sec, she says. What is it? A Chiko and a minimum serve? He nods once. He walks lazily over to the pinball soccer, rattling the coins in his pocket. How there's room to get them out, she doesn't know. A chair screeches in the back room. If only it's not Mike. Jake she can handle, Jake's all right, even when he's lost at cards. The footsteps stop at the doorway and now there's just the knock-knock-knocking of the rows of stiff players in the soccer game. It's Mike's voice that comes, harsh between the teeth.

And what in the bloody hell do you think this is? A flamin nursery? I told you the baby was your business as long as you didn't bring it here. Are the chips ready no? You've got a customer and have you served him no? I'm telling you now, if I have to see that disgusting sight again, it's the boot for you.

Elsie rips Kevin off the nipple and almost throws him into the pram. He bounces a bit and the pram rocks slightly on its springs. She saved for months at Eucla to get those springs. His toes are caught in the dancing bears she strung across. She hasn't even burped him. Two, three, four customers have appeared: red, yellow, green, blue, the fly strips part, drape on shoulders, whip faces, flip back, shiver there in the door frame. The hot light whitens the gaps so you can hardly make out the shops opposite. Mike hasn't given up, he's using his audience: Look at this would you? This is the kind of service you get. You come for fish and chips and what do you find it is? It's a bloody milk bar! But I wouldn't recommend it. No way. It's not even bloody pasteurised.

The bra hooks keep missing the eyes. Never mind, just the buttons on the dress. She could turn on the pressure and squirt them all, like a fire hydrant and watch them blink through the milk. Mike is rattling the wire baskets, scribbling orders on the pad, tearing off the slips, jabbing them on the wire spike. He calls over his back, to no one, to all of them: Like Mr Menzies said, there are some people who always should be unemployed. He has them laughing. The colours of the fly strips run together but someone snatches them aside, she doesn't feel the sting she expects. The smart-arse types of course always make a wedge with their hands as they come through and part them neatly. Like Moses and the Red Sea.

Don't worry about the Chiko Roll: it's the Rocker's voice, softly mumbled. It's him holding back the strips. You wanna hand? he says. What does he think he is now, a boy scout or something? Scout's honour! That's what it was, that tattoo: DEATH BEFORE DISHONOUR. As if she hasn't had enough sarcasm. She tries to answer him, though, and finds she has set up this tiny wail. She can only gulp and shake her head. If she can just get to the corner: it's not that far, and then across Hannan Street and down Wilson — that'll be the quickest. If only she could see, the light's blinding and the bitumen is that soft, it sucks and pulls on the pram wheels. She jolts Kevin and he breaks into a stuttering cry, his arms flailing the air. Full of wind. Now she can feel it, the endless breadth of Hannan Street. Easy. Easy love, she says. There, there, we'll soon be home and you can have a real long guzzle. There seems to be a crowd somewhere close

by, all these voices together and stupid laughter. Well, she can take the laughs if they think it's that funny, a woman pushing a pram. She can use the magic, the particular trick she did as a kid. Walking down that bald hill and then into the wide flat streets of Esperance. She would turn their words over and over in her head like a player piano: *fatso, fatso, wobble bum, fatso, fatso*, if she kept her head right down and bit hard into her lower lip, they wouldn't see, they wouldn't point, they wouldn't sing the elephant rhyme, which was the worst. It's not that she's so fat any more. It's just that she still lugs this phantom bulk around. If only Kevin wasn't so loud with his screaming, with his legs scissor-kicking and the pink bears catching in his toes, then she could work the magic. Then she could look up and stare them out, whoever they are.

Oooooouch! JE-sus bloody CHRIST!

Elsie looks up, her lids squeezing against the light. It's a man in a black suit and a bow tie, in this heat. He's hopping around, clutching his shin. She's rammed him with the pram. Beads of sweat stand out on his forehead. The gums bulge like knuckles above his teeth. Where d'ya think ya bloody goin? he yells.

There's not just one but ten or more and women, too, in these fancy clothes. A man is making faces behind a camera. There, against the Paddy Hannan statue with the water-bag dribbling, is the bride. Her white nylon trail foams down the steps. She locks Elsie with a stare. Elsie feels her swollen lips part. Well? he says again. Where do you think you're goin? The woman next to him peers through the veil tacked onto her little pill-box hat. The veil has dots on it. She must see the world spotted. She opens her clutch bag. Patent leather. Elsie was going to save for one like that. The woman takes out a tiny lace hanky and makes a tiny sneeze into it.

Where d'ya I think I'm goin? Elsie's voice has come, strangely calm and loud. Well I'm walkin my baby back home aren't I? What I'd like to know is, where do youse think you're goin? she says to the bride and the groom and the best man and whoever it is behind the net with dots on it.

NOT BEING MIRIAM

The hangers are hooked away from Elsie. Here's the set of wooden ones with their knitted coats still on, survivors from her primary schools days when coats were knitted for everything hot water bottles, tea pots, the little red maid with the holes in her head which was the ironing water bottle, and the family dog. He's got quite an army of trousers, navy serge and flannel mainly. Why he keeps them all, heaven knows. Some of them date from way back when cuffs were in fashion but they all have the razor sharp pleat. He insists on that. Meticulous is Roger. His lip sits in the shadow of his nose, waiting to curl. His sarcasm! She gives him the chance often enough.

The hooks slide along smoothly. She's done it so many times that the metal is worn. There she is. There's Miriam. Her black eyebrows are arched as if the world owes her something. Roger had the photo blown up poster size. There's a spot of rouge sitting on the cheek bone. The way he's never let up on the skin she had. Wouldn't hold a candle to Miriam, he said about Bess next door. Ogles her enough but. No, that one's starting to get the weathered Australian look already, he said. That one's no spring chicken any more. But Miriam had the finest skin, not a flaw, not a single flaw. Always says everything about Miriam twice. He still puts the notice in the In Memoriam column every year. And the wedding photo with the veil all around her, he keeps that one on the dressing-table. Even the mouse in Rebecca, the one who doesn't have a name, she finally says it to the housekeeper, Mrs Dnvers: *I am Mrs de Winter now*. Elsie could say it too: *Get rid of all this, Roger. I'm Mrs Millar now*.

The scissors are in Elsie's hand. This time she has parted the trousers with a purpose. The scissor blade caresses, tracing loops on the glossy skin on the poster. It doesn't break the surface.

Your untimely passing, darling Miriam
Threw my mind into delirium;

Though later, with the years,
A harsh sun dried my tears
And I've made a home with another,
Deep at heart, I'm still your lover.

That's to a word, the notice as it has appeared each anniversary for the past years, at least ever since she discovered the letter he was sending to the paper. It was funny how quick she was when it came to reading that one. How suddenly, that's what she was: *another. And I've made my home with another.* Fancy Roger talking about himself like that too. Well. Now the scissor traces out loops on the skin of the photo, on the skin of how she looked. Actually her lips were quite thin they make a straight line. As an old woman, she probably would've got a profile like Punch, nose jutting down to the chin. She wouldn't have looked so regular featured then.

But here's Elsie with the breakfast scraps again, her foot on the lever to pop up the bin lid, scraping off the bacon rind and egg smear and the cereal bits left in a soggy soak at the bottom of the bowls, mopping up the milk puddles from under the toaster cord, picking up the shoes they shook off under the table last night. She sinks onto a stool. What's the use, there's nowhere to stack the dishes anyhow. All the appliances that Roger gets on discount and seem to be jinxed from the word go, that's what takes all the space. There's the juicer and blender, the kitchen whizz and the soda-pop machine and the jaffle maker and the sandwich toaster and the greased up microwave and the electric can opener and the vertical grill. Or did they all fall off the back of lorries too? She never really knows with Roger. Still, he does try to please her with these things. He's not like that with Kevin. Even reported him to the cops for taking the Cobra for a spin before Kev could pass his Code. And do you think Roger was willing to go with him to read out the test? Kev still has a thing with the reading like his poor old Mum. Roger help him? Not on your life he wouldn't. So there's Kev still riding the old bike to the surgical bed factory in O'Connor. He won't cut much of a picture with the girls; they expect boys to have a licence at least. And all the kids have the cars done up with mag wheels and fenders and chrome-plated exhaust pipes and the baked enamel repaint jobs these days, that's what poor Kev says. But do you think he's got any sympathy out of Roger?

The dent in the side of the microwave, that's when he pushed Kevin out of the way when he asked him for a loan till pay day. Well, he got his answer soon enough, a lump on the back of the

head. Whereas Julie's all right for the moment, for as long as she's Daddy's Little Girl. You've got your Dad's brains, Jules, he says. Oh yes, nothing but the best secretarial college for Daddy's Girl. That's what he's decided for her. As long as she does what she's told and as long as she keeps away from the boys, she'll be all right. He's already put a lock on the phone: She's not running up my bill for boys, he said.

The handles of the jaffle iron are broken too. That's from when he threw it at Elsie for asking what the pink cardigan with the pearl buttons was doing in the back of the car; that was the time he was hot on Ruby.

Be careful, Elsie, she says. Don't go back into the bedroom. Don't part the trousers, don't look at her. Don't pick up the scissors. But the other voices crowd in: Let them see what it's like when the work isn't done, with milk puddles under the toaster cord and the soggy flakes in bowls and the shoes under the table and the bits of nibbled toast that missed the tidy and the washing and the beds and the vacuuming and the shopping . . .

A bit of the old sherry, why not, it's rare enough she has a drop and a Mogadon, that'll take away the panic. Play some music, let the mind wander off. They can't do any harm. You've got to fix yourself up a bit old Elsie, she says to the face in the mirror backing of the drinks cabinet, get yourself a perm, what about a blond rinse this time?

Maybe even the Organ Demonstrator will be there at Garden City, the lights above him like dandelions blowing out the colour. Like an aerosol spray, sticky droplets of pink and green light hanging in the air, reflections playing in his Brilliantined hair. There'll be the non-stop blaze of his teeth shaped like . . . That's what it was, like the grill of one of those old Anglias. He kept his black eyes on the plant display in front of him, never once looking at the keys. What a smiler. He pulled out the percussion button. That's when things really started to move. The brass. And then he did it. He smiled directly at Elsie. She sagged at the knees but he was beckoning and patting the bench next to him. Come'n join me m'lass, see what sounds this thing'll make fr'ye. Eh? Try some musical magic for once, no obligations! She hadn't felt obliged. The shine on the Monstera Deliciosa and Philodendrons in front was all she could see but then the feeling of his thigh pressing alongside hers! See, didn't know yer could get such a sound out've them fingers, did yer luv! There had been the money Mum left her, that at least was hers. Didn't prevent Roger

flipping his lid, though. He didn't like the idea of the Five Free Follow up Lessons in Your Own Home.

Since then at Garden City there's been the Staghorn Fern Society and the Booragoon Ladies' China Painting Association and the Skate Board Champions from the US of A and the Kung Fu Demonstrators and the Estonian Dancers and the Matchstick Model Builders Association and the Nativity Plays but never Sammy Schultz, the Organ Demonstrator with the music in him. Back she comes all the way along Leach Highway in the 105 bus with her K-Mart bags full of compensation shopping.

Of course there are other photos of Miriam she could be looking at. There's the one from the Raffles Hotel up in Singapore. He'd taken her there on the honeymoon. She's standing, her face half in shadows, one knee slightly bent in the pencil skirt. Talk about slim. Or there's the romantic one with the Spanish lace fan at a restaurant somewhere. There's an open cigarette case on the table and a long one burning in the ashtray. You can tell she wasn't a serious smoker or she wouldn't have wasted a good puff like that. That's why Roger has to switch out the light just before he hits the mattress. He's had his peek at her just before and has to keep her safe, right behind his eyes, so that it's all he sees as he moves towards Elsie in the dark. Even that he's doing without these days. How she longs for a good cuddle. Sex, well, that style, the quick poke, wham bam thankyou ma'am, she's never cared for but a real affectionate hug would go a long way.

The scissors trace out looping scratches on the poster. Of course, it isn't a crime written anywhere, is it? Or would this rate as vandalism? Could he be charged like he tried to do with Kevin? It's not like public stuff, not like painting graffiti on bus-stops and that. And after all, it's only a photo. There should be a law against this anyhow, having the First Wife hanging about everywhere. She can cut up the photograph; she can try to do it properly, like peeling an orange, all in one piece, for good luck. She can wear it like the bandages those mummies from Egypt have on. She can get under the cover with the picture of Her Face wrapped around Another's features. Just to bring him to his senses.

When he stoops to kiss his Sleeping Beauty Miriam, he'll find something else. She laughs a raw laugh. Silly bitch! The dressing-table mirror holds her smile as she turns. Now she's unpeeling Miriam. This'll give Else a cosmetic job all right. She can swallow the cocktail and dream a

while. What was it now she put in the sherry? Was it Valium or Librium or Serepax or Mogadon? Not to worry, she'll give him the bleedin fat lazy cow under the skin he so admires. How's this for packaging then, Rod-ger Dod-ger? This is really somethin Else. She giggles at her joke.

Who cares anyhow? Who spoke one word to her this morning? *I've made my home with another.* Oh yes. Does he even give her a peck on the cheek these days? Does he give her one kind word? Even Kevin's stopped talking. He's got so moody since that car business. And then Julie comes to breakfast with her Walkman headset on.

Who has a word for Elsie then?

THE MAGIC OF IT

To find a window out of Hamburg 1933, you need to read between the lines. Lydia's father says you will, her mother says, before the silence takes her, Lydia there is nothing you cannot do. Learning is for connecting with other selves, other worlds. Learning is for making windows into other spaces, other times. Only then can we create. Always think of music . . . Think: will this add to someone else's song? If it doesn't, don't pursue it. There is nothing Lydia cannot do by reading between the lines, telling stories from the gaps. She finds the magician in the scientist, the poetry in maths; she flies through windows, windows.

She reads, this young Lydia. Giordano Bruno, Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, she reads and reads. In 1600, Bruno the poet monk calls out above the crackling of his pyre: This is but one of an infinity of solar systems and God is simply that, the universal World Soul. We should be dancing on this little planet, on this vibrant point in space, singing of the vastness of creation, where everything is energy and God is everywhere. Publish and perish, he jokes again as the flames lap his sandals – or would were the bit not already through his mouth to stop him from blaspheming.

Johannes Kepler encloses a recipe for Easter Cake in his letter to Fabricius announcing his new cosmology, writes poems in the margins of his Euclid, hymns of praise to the Creator as he calculates the elliptical orbits of the planets.

Newton leaves the food in the passageway at Trinity, breakfast, lunch, dinner, for the passing rat to consider. Now, there's a sign of the noble mind, these writers say, that he could so abstract himself from the needs of his body, but Lydia knows it's magic, magic that hath ravished him. That he spends more time on alchemy than maths, more on magic than mechanics. When he surfaces for science, he says to Halley, Wren and so on: Sure, rummage if you like, I do believe you'll find that in my *Principia*, mmm, twenty years ago, oh yes along with the *Optics*, it must

be buried under that stack of papers. Yes my dear gentlemen, we'll find a way to harness Nature yet, that lascivious slut, that lewd chaotic dripping whore.

Now that's more like it, the modern mentality of mastery emerges; even Kepler, that last musician of the spheres, finds a moment of sanity, according to these historians, when he says: I'll show them that the celestial machine is not something like a divine organism but rather like an immense clockwork in which a single weight drives all the gears. Mother, he warns, for there are rumours abroad that she's a witch, stop circling through your peasant rhymes, stop chanting to your herbs, and calm the movement in your skirts. Keep the broom they say you travel on tucked away in a pleat of your mind. I really must get on with it, but send messages if I need to come. And he turns to the notebook where he writes:

$$\frac{d^3}{t^2} = k$$

My pamphlet was a flimsy thing, an extravagance of youth, and I'm sorry mother, if they say the witch is you, old Fioxilde, eh? When they come to your door, tell them that you know no cures. Throw away the skull the neighbours are talking about, the one of Uncle's you had cast in silver, burn the herbs you dried last summer. Keep your flights of fancy to yourself, and so shall I do with mine.

Sehen Sir nur? Frau Echtigen says as she turns from the blackboard. There are only tendencies for things to exist, for particles to be. These nice little rules for force, acceleration, motion are all very well, but in a limited frame. To quote the philosopher whose name is better left unsaid, matter is a convenient formula for what happens where it isn't. There are only interconnections in this world, that's all we've got. Pull one thread and see what happens. . . But for the time being we can play with these fiddle sticks for ordinary things:

$$d = \frac{1}{2}at^2$$

She rests her hand on Lydia's shoulder a small moment and now says: *Siehst du? Siehst du?* That night Newton's little laws run amok in Lydia's mind and the whispered words *siehst du, siehst du?* course through her. Do you see? What does she want Lydia to see?

There are no books striking sparks off the pavement below, no dogs bark. Tonight is a miraculous break. The apartments opposite are curfew quiet. Little light seeps out. She lifts the

lace and there it is, towering into the sky, a noctilucous cumulus. She is ablaze with thoughts of the future in that teacher's look, those words, and finds it exactly in the thrill of the towering luminous cloud. Nerves, lace, clouds, stars, galaxies ... The world is a tissue of complicated events only tending to occur.

No matter, no matter only tendencies. But there's magic in this too. This is a way; this is a window out of here. This is only tending to happen, the shattering of shop windows, the Brownshirts in a pack coming out of the shadows. Mother is only tending to act strange; she has a tendency to silence. Father's friends tend to have sudden departures from their jobs, prone to dark moods. The universe is a tissue of tendencies dreamt by an infinity of dreamers, never conferring, but in the spaces, in the near-misses, maybe the planets still hum. Maybe there's a tune somewhere as Johannes Kepler wrote it. The closer you get to something, the more emptiness answers your need. Who wrote that or did she read it in the gaps too?

Lydia is a clever skater. On the frozen canals to the east of the Alster she traces out the curves she loves in maths: hyperbole, parabola, the asymptote, the one she thinks always aims at God. It has a tendency to be a religious curve, she jokes to herself. She is content for the moment, having read Pythagoras too, to find God dispersed in the numbers that blink, fade, blink in space. She skates connections, trajectories, the orbits of the planets.

As she braids her hair, she laughs at her face, forgets to be vain. She's just tending to be there, pretty, some tend to say, of the violet of her eyes, the way her lips are etched, the broad clear brow. She is just tendencies in space, little sparks through emptiness. She winks at her image all the same. As she kisses Dieter against the warehouse gate, as this event, mouth-to-mouth, thigh-to-thigh, tends to occur, she thinks *I'll never be able to think of solid bodies again* but still, she is ablaze as she skates home.

She skates confusing the kiss with Echtigen's promise for what she'll be. All this fires her muscles as she skates.

Her traces melt, congeal, efface.

I think, my child, you have a rare mathematical imagination, Frau Echtigen says, and if I am exposing you to some of the paradoxes that have opened up in modern physics, it's because you have the courage. You must learn now the danger of certainty. The Brownshirts are certain. Soon

we won't be able to say this anymore. Ludia she says, *Ludia*, you've been named well, you must continue to have the courage to play with these ideas and to fight if necessary for the right to play them. Remember, cheap certainties lead to terrible technologies.

Lydia decides she'll go like Bruno if necessary, she won't give in like Galileo.

Lydia and her brother Helmut call their mother *Moth*. It started as a joke. When Lydia first learnt the English *Moth-ur*, she said it just like that. But now it fits. Like a moth, she loses substance in her constant brush with the sharper edges of life. She bump-bumps, ever so slightly, against furniture, words, reported events, losing each time ever so little of her substance. Moth has become very thin, translucent. Lydia tells herself that she's just charged emptiness after all but still hopes there are limits to this refinement. Moth has given up eating and speech. She smokes and smokes. When the tobacco is exhausted she collects the butts, empties them of the blackened chaff and fashions one more cigarette. Her fingers tremble. Listening to her breathing, Father says, makes him think that he's back on the North Sea. It's like the surf rolling in, he says. Moth doesn't react. She exhales into the folds of the heavy brocade curtains, which these days it seems, are always drawn.

Father has placed a miniature urn on the mantelpiece for every beloved book they've burnt. There's Kafka, there's Heine, there's there's . . .

The Navy has hospitalised him, it seems to be an ulcer. Mother doesn't go to bed. She smokes and stares.

Lydia lies in the damp grass near the canal, thinking of Echtigen, who's been replaced, of Dieter who's been avoiding her. The waters ruffle. Summer has brought little warmth. Her pulse upsets the ticking of her watch. A truck packed with stricken ghostly faces rumbles past. Even in the grass, there are cries. Fading in the distance, a phrase of Brahms. *This is only tending* ... she tries to tell herself. For the first time, the magic fails her.

FRAGMENTS FROM A PAPER WITCH

Mrs Grogan is a Kraut, Mrs Grogan's a Nazi spy, the children chant at Lydia's door.

Now the worthy citizens of Gingin are gathered in the sitting room for tea. Some, at least, of those invited have come. Schoolteachers, nurses, one or two farmers, the banker from Moora who didn't know about the wife. But Harry's a good bloke after all.

Harry, Lydia says, show them the passport. See, here it says that I am a British citizen. Why do you think I got out if I wasn't horrified by what was happening? *Ah was Harry just a means of getting out then?* she hears their silence say. Here too she is caught. The English teacher says: But didn't it always worry you? Hasn't this kind of militarism, this self-mythologisation always been in the German Culture? *These innocent Australians with their white history*, she thinks. They smell blood, their grip will not loosen.

You only have to listen to Wagner, he says.

Wagner is not a composer I can listen to, let alone play, Lydia says. That music hurts me physically.

But we hear you playing your German music, she knows they want to say.

Lydia's father was poisoned by the Nazis, Harry says. He went into hospital for an ulcer investigation, didn't he? And he never came out.

Later, one of the doctors told me, Lydia says, what he suspected.

Lydia hears the Inquisitor's messenger again at Katerina Kepler's door . . .

Listen to the charges Old Mother Kepler:

Frau Thausa had a glass of wine with you,
she's had stomach cramps for days.

It's true, Katerina Kepler says, she said she came with news of my boy. Now for news of Johannes, I'll always open up. I poured her a glass of my best moselle and served her a slice of apple cake.

For news of your son, who is a heretic too? We have read the pamphlets he's put out. Mother Kepler, don't think we don't know about you. Now listen to the other charges, what do you have to say to these?

You rocked the cradle of the tailor's twins,
now one of them is dead.

You bewitch the village herd of cows,
their calves do not survive.

You asked the butcher for veal chops,
he now has pains in the chest.

You brushed the Paefflin girl with your tattered
shawl and now her arm is numb.

These are the charges, Mother Kepler, what do you have to say? We know that you boast of many cures and that the villagers have come to you. It is witchcraft Mother Kepler, is it not? Do you know that when a woman thinks alone, it's evil, *böse, böse*, evil, evil, all she thinks. Evil buried in the folds of your old flesh. For your information Mother Kepler, I'll quote for you, here written in the book the Pope has blessed, the *Malleus Maleficarum*:

All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in woman insatiable. From Proverbs xxx: There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, a fourth thing which says not, it is enough; that is the mouth of the womb. Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts, they even consort with devils.

Now in the Melville Library, the midday silence hooks Lydia with its question marks. By all accounts, this historian of science writes, Katerina Kepler was an evil woman, and certainly a burden to her son.

Ah but that Bess is a witch, Marte consoled her, when Lydia told her of her suspicions. Do you know she gave up her son? Must've been something wrong. What normal mother would give up like that? And then she's one of those *femme fatale* types, you know, likes to toy with men, to

see how much damage she can inflict but basically hates them. I told you he'd see the light and come back.

Lydia reviews again Harry's returns: he never needed to confess. The animal disturbance in his flesh, his features blurred. His hair random plastered, tufted at the back. She'd wanted to laugh but was somehow touched too. At his age, after all.

Again she hears the Inquisitors' envoys shake the words loose from their Thesaurus like a nightmare Scrabble game: *vixen, bitch, harridan, whore, vitriolic poisonous Kepler crone . . .*

This woman whose husband had stumbled out the door and onto a ship of fools to emerge as a mercenary somewhere else and whose son had left while still a boy. With the woman abandoned, the woman alone, any gesture becomes suspect. She, locked in her illiteracy and her wisdom, her son donating his singing universe, each planet with its signature tune, to a mechanistic physics.

Certainly come, Mother, if you wish, but I'm afraid we can only put you up for a few days. I've got to put in a lot of computer time at M.I.T., you know I won the Army contract for that resin for boot soles? Now hush, Mother, I can hear your protests even from here. There is nothing morally compromising in the project. The peaceful applications of these resins are endless and besides, the money will be enough to endow a dozen scholarships for graduate students. So, no arguments please. You can sleep in Martin's room and Father can sleep on the couch. Does he still snore?

Robert Grogan, now so formal, so distant. What happens to these boys?

FRAGMENTS FROM A PAPER WITCH II

Katerina Kepler's son, Johannes, wrote a story, sent it off to amuse his learned friends: it was a voyage to the moon. Mother-motor, she earned a reputation as the force behind his fictive ship from which he saw how pocked it was and marvelled more than Galileo. She could also summon less ambitious demons as transport to closer foreign shores. She polished the rod and lubricated the brush. Exhibit one: the broom behind the kitchen door. Fioxilde of Iceland she became in his Arctic Circle where she had him dream of tropics, of zones of rhetorical change. That's where the magical boy heard the music, got the connections. The learned friends scribbled notes to the Inquisitors. The Inquisitors' messenger read: That's no story, boy. Exhibit two: the herbs laid out on your mother's racks to dry. We know the old lady isn't picking for her vases. She brews her herbs quite cannily, sells them to the unsuspecting sailor, sending him off course.

Later, in another world, in broad daylight, you walk into the mystery. A glowing rock of immense bulk hangs before you. You stare, your gaze coursing through spaciousness, encountering, encountering. You say: I came here to get away from shoreline wisdoms, contour drawings. I can only hear the spirit maps ringing, welling. I don't refuse the menace in the mouth of beauty. The night yawning in the brightness can have dog's jaws. I can accept that, along with tremendous yearnings at times. I can hear through the hole of my calm the old blood gurgle. I know my child is taken. Again, again. Who wills it escapes me. Always. The campers come and stare, the can-openers dangling from their hands. You are very still. The stars shrink out of the blue. They are compact and crystalline. You say it quietly: The dingo took my baby.

Memories of prison settle. Katerina's skin is papery now. He's made me that, a paper witch with his stories, she says. But where his words knock, I bruise, I really bruise. There are real ulcers under this chain. I stand against the pillar for as long as I can not too much flesh left on this old rump to cushion it.

Tonight it was some soup from the kid's carcass Fritz Tümmel brought me. The taste endures through the pale cabbage water. Each time he slops it down in front of me, I have to pass him the coin. This is our Swabian justice. We have to pay our gaoler for his food, clothes and wine. He, in turn, whistles softly. It's his way. I see it flicker without malice in his eyes and then, through the slit in the tower, the fires all through the forest. In other villages, others already on the pyre.

Perhaps she was monstrous, you can almost believe it now. Where the water seeps up between the flagstones and puddles form, you see yourself in bits. It's been a long time since you've found yourself in any jigsaw the world offers. You may well have always been monstrous, muttering in the margins of their wisdom, caught in the tangle Euclid left out, a blur in the shadow of their Republics. Even Johannes, you can see him at his desk now, reluctant to put his pen down: The cube of the distance from the sun divided by the time the planet takes is a constant! he writes. If Katerina is Fioxilde of Iceland in their eyes, what can she say? Let that be a constant too, like gravity. A constant for those who cling to limited frames.

What happens?

It's the same question that returns, like a phrase of Satie, it runs towards words, balks at the sudden bleakness opening up, retreats, quivers. What happens to our boys?

Open the *Gymnopédies* again and let Katerina's voice take you through the turning corridors. it is a great deciduous forest.

Mother Kepler says: Johannes has been astray a long time now, tracing his ellipses, he says. Ellipsing indeed. He seems to think it's just one great curved singing space. He hears music in colours, no trouble at all, despite this endless war that tears the countryside. Ah it's been a long time since he trotted off to teach the mathematics at Gratz. Such a dreamer he was, in no time at all he only had two students left. They said he raved. He embarrassed them. They couldn't understand. But when he left he was full of trust. He was going to share with them every gift he had. I can see him now, his saddle-bag full of papers; his light cough hack-hacking. I can see our old mare too, her ribcage catching the light, her muzzle whitening. She believed in wherever he was going. I knew then it was to be a harsh absence. He was a bright boy, you'd say so too. He could predict the arrival of birds from the insects at the lake. His voice was barely broken and he went off, his faded cloak coiled in a scroll behind him. A cold breeze had risen. In the dark dawn, I knew a styne was forming on his eye, a boil on his poor thin little bum. He just invited

these mishaps. I tell you, I tried to teach him to be in his body but what can you do? It's the age; it's this Protestant thing we've got into. Oh the glistening machinery turns in his mind, the stars in his eyes, the music in the spheres, he reckons. It happened to that Tycho Brahe, the one Johannes worked for up in Denmark. He wouldn't leave the conversation at his banquet table to take a simple pee and he died for it. Yes, his bladder burst, I tell you.

I pluck the belladonna. Dagmar Schweitzer will not miscarry if she takes this. This is my body knowledge. Oh Johannes as a boy knew things like this. He would finger the leaf cluster of a cabbage and marvel at this kind of recursion. He only wanted connections, fusions. He lifted the skin of the water and slid under it. He accepted the slither of reeds combed by the current; that reflections of reeds bright with sun would appear on someone else's seeing surface. He would run to me chattering his teeth. I gave him shelter, then. They told me it was no way for a son to grow, in the underbelly of things, never surveying. Silk-spinners, dream-weavers, they said. The Inquisitors are on the alert for them. And they had a point, mind. Johannes coughed and his ribcage shook for all imprisonments. Oh, he chanted numbers; declined the names of trees.

Later, he said, when I was in trouble: Mother, what if the second focus of the ellipse is empty, even of the idea of God? Johannes, I told him, Johannes, the sums you are playing with are holed. Accept it. Accept it and let me travel through.

THE BLACK AND WHITE TAXI

Festlich, she wants to be festive. The sapphire ring Harry gave her in the early days, still in the Bremen courting, she'll wear that. The lilac scarf to bring out the violet Harry insists is in her eyes. Oh it might have been once. You can't contradict someone else's perception. She will *be festlich*, this is to be a celebration. Of the end of bitterness. She will make her peace with Bess. The sorrow in the woman's face at the restaurant the other night, the look that said: *I want forgiveness, I want friendship, I feel with you but this is not my right*. Five o'clock, Bess would be home by now. And Harry still deep in his siesta.

She needn't go in; she can tell the taxi driver just to continue down the street, that she's made a mistake. That she just wants to get the feeling of the area. If the look of the house tells her it's the wrong idea, if the look of the garden, the way a car door is left open, the way shopping bags are dumped on the front porch, tell her it's the wrong moment, then she won't go in. She has no trouble remembering the address she found in Harry's tweed jacket. Sixty-six Demeter St, Palmyra. There she was, acting out the cliché of the wife finding evidence because she sees to his dry cleaning. From Hilton to Palmyra, that's a cheap enough taxi ride, even if it's wasted.

What can she say to the driver? Does she need to give a motive? How very silly; why should she? There's a house up for sale I want to look at, a house I'm thinking of renting?

Perhaps they can even laugh together about Harry, laugh about his habits: the love of comfort finally that wins out, the way he prefers to have experience in the rear-vision mirror as he calls it, a small travelling frame to bear on the present even though he claims the opposite. *The Golden Age, I'll wager on the future*. Yes indeed. And if their bodies really met, how were they tossed together on that bunk in Rottnest, did they sweat it out in a darkened front bedroom at Palmyra? She can tell Bess about Harry's phase of furious exercise, his attempt at jogging at least he bought the expensive running shoes his jowls jiggled nightly by the exercise bicycle in the back room. Oh yes, come to think of it, *The Turkish Bath* on the postcard. Did they sauna together?

Yes, Lady, the driver says, this part has really taken off. Reckon, for someone like you, you know, who's a bit older, this'd have to be a real good choice. Shops quite handy you've got the Melville Plaza not too far and it's reasonably quiet. One of the villa units'd do the trick, eh? But this street, no can't say I'd go much on this one, nothing much here, unless you go for sugar gums, filthy things if you ask me and bloody stupid trees they are too for verges, what with the wires.

No, Lydia says, what's it called already, a ... bungalow house I am interested in. I like a garden with trees. I might look ancient but I can still use a spade, she laughs. And could you slow down here, please? The house I want to take a look at is one of these, I think.

Sure, Lady, anything you say.

Near the house the garden is dense with trees that store darkness. These Lydia knows now from years of Scrabble and walks with Billie. The names come in handy. Virgilia, Oleander, that's the poisonous one, and towering over the roof, from the back of the house you can see a dark mass of rubber trees. Near the street, she has obviously made some effort to lighten things. Unusual for a tenant. An effort to lift things out of darkness. These are juvenile trees: a stand of Caesias, their trunks rising blood stained out of the earth and then breaking free from that, as if painted white, wavering their drooping branches and meshing together. As if in a quiet will to corroborate. Then there are blue wattles, their branches flexing and probing. This part has been cleared and gravelled, you can tell, but the weeds have pushed through, and then there are some small gums, tattered and blistered. It must be insects.

There is a dark green sports car in the driveway. Could she be at home? The blinds are down, Venetians and then a Holland blind, its fringe unstitched. The house looks shut down. Outside time. It's mad to have come. How could she explain this? As a German peace-making custom? No, it is mad. Perhaps this is the wrong address, after all.

The taxi driver is watching in the mirror, the car idling. What if Bess is watching through the blind? But then, it would be hard to recognize her from there. A huge blue and white car, with some sort of snake transfer on the side goes past, veers outwards and swoops into the driveway next door. The hand-brake is wrenched upwards. A man in white overalls thrusts open the door. Elsie? You there? he calls.

These people wouldn't have gardening problems. What would have been flowerbeds has been filled with blue metal, where it's not red cement path and driveway, that is. Still, there is an attempt at something next to the porch: a painted wheelbarrow filled with petunias. The letterbox is a Swiss chalet. These Australians like to make features of their letterboxes. Perhaps taking your dial-a-pizza, carpet shampooing or K-Mart bargains brochure out of that would somehow be less disappointing. So long since Robert has written. When he does, the letters read like circulars. People say it's the American way. Is it? The meter is ticking over: Well, Lady, he says, aren't you going to ask to see over it? Got a meeting with the agent?

No, no. Lydia says quietly. I like to think about the outside first. I'm not sure I . . .

There is the painful sound of saws and grinding blades. In the house next door, doors are being slammed and there is shouting. It's hard to make out. He sounds very angry. It's that hoarse animal sound people make . . . It's bloody something and fuckin something he is shouting.

Driver, I think, I do not think I am interested. I think I have seen enough.

I'd reckon so too, Lady, with neighbours like that.

The screen door at Number 66 scrapes open. Again the grating of metal on cement. Lydia shudders, Driver please, she says, I think I'll just return to Hilton now. Instead of heading straight up the street, he has decided to back into the driveway. Lydia has a childish urge to duck. She bends down, as if searching in her handbag. It is really Bess who has come out blinking in the light, her hair squashed against her face, like an invalid. Lydia looks up now to see her running, barefooted, to the house next door.

HE NEVER MEANT IT

There is no storm. The fridge makes intermittent chirping noises; the neon light, still on, fizzes; the cat rattles the cartilage in his ear. Sleep has lacquered her face. How long has it been? Oh my God. She didn't ring. The Venetian slats crack open to her finger: light still drenches the street but in the garden the shadows have lengthened. On the road opposite, a Black and White taxi idles. Driver must be checking bearings. That'd be a break from teaching, taxi driving. You'd meet a big range of people. Beyond the chainsaws and edge-trimmers grinding on cement, something barely human, rising sobs, cut by shouts. Guttural. Close by, next door. It pulls, a magnet on her blood, and she is at the door.

Once on a day like this she saw through the slats a woman sit down on the kerb, dumping around her the bags of shopping. In front a young girl on a creaking bicycle wove in desultory loops. The woman had walked block after block in the heat. It seemed like hours with just the creaking, looping. The woman's head was between her knees, her legs spread out in front with the battered canvas shoes dangling from the toes. Then the girl's voice came: Mum, come on Mum. Come home. He never meant ut, I swear he never. I'll ask'm t'help ya in with the shopping, Mum?

A moan rose from the slumped woman. Her face followed it as the slats snapped together and Bess caught something in those unseeing eyes. Compared with that her pain was a midget thing.

The face which is also Elsie's is a blur before her as she runs down her driveway, where the taxi reverses. Is someone slumped in the back seat?

ROGER DODGER

Meat, meat that's what I am, a tired old piece at that. More more meat, m-m-more more meat,
Elsie hums as the slowness mounts.

Chefs from Rome to Paris
Would really be embarrassed
If all the world could have a chook like owers
We've got red red red red ready red red
Red Rooster

Music, proper music. Why do the jingles take over each time she tries to remember? Butchers
pummelling and poking, so happy, it's all that flesh that does it; must get it out of their system
and they're so expert with the blade. These days, she keeps changing butchers. Even walks the
distance to Willagee so they don't ask too much what sort of day she's had. She asks about the
round steak. Is it tender?

Tender love? he says. Tender, you're asking if it's tender. Why it's tender as a woman's
heart. On payday.

Oh she says, dunno about that. Suppose I'll have a kilo and I'll have twelve sausages and two
packs of roo for the cat.

Two roos? Two roos for the puss eh? Well that'll be ten dollars fifty just for you.

Tat-tar then.

Tooroo to you too, love, he says.

Say goodbye to Hollywood
Say goodbye to Baby

She can sing okay, she can pick out a tune. She'll take the percussion and brass, thanks. Well! If it's not Sammy! she says. Play for us, Sammy boy while I adjust my face. Pretty eh? Had meself a face job all right!

Love was just a glance away
A warm embracing dance away

Why does it always have to be that one that comes back. That or the jingles. Bloody lips gone paralysed. Hey plenty room here when ya get tired. On me pink bed Sammy Schultz.

Stay awhile don't you worry
Stay awhile what's the hurry
Stay awhile what's the run now
You know the night's just begun now
Oh oh oh oh honey please won't you stay awhile with me

Slut, she says to the dressing-table mirror. Bleedin fat cow. Just lemme close me eyes for a sec, Sammy boy. Need a little bewdy sleep. Play on. Make yesself at home. Feel free.

Hold on. Ssstop shakin me. Just lemme be. Whosssh there. Well if it's not Rod-ger Dod-ger? Whaddy want Rod-ger Dod-ger? Eh, stop bloody shakin me! Lemme wake up in me own time. Whereya been? Whereya been sweetie? Whereya been Rod-ger!

What in the bloody hell is this?

He's bellowing, like a wounded bull, what's he going on about?

What have you bloody done to her!

He pulls at the ripped poster.

S'not a crime is it? she says. All I done's put on her face. You should try bein your wife with her, that Miriam stuck all over the place.

Don't you dare speak her name!

I will! I can! Miriam! Miriam! Miriam! S'all I bloody hear about. I'm saying, I've had enough. *I'm* Mrs Millar now.

My bloody arsehole you are! You've been drinking too. Do you realise the kitchen's a fuckin brothel. That's what I have to come home to?

But I done the kitchen Roger. Who thanks me anyway? I don't count for nothing with any of youse.

Done it? Done it? It's done like a dog's dinner.

Stop shakin me. Stop it. Lemme be!

I won't fuckin let you be. Ya never were a full two bob, but I'm gunna put some sense inter ya now once and for all.

He is bent over her, shaking her head so that it wobbles dangerously. He punches once, seems fascinated by the jellied response of the head; repeats this.

You lay your hand on her once more and you'll have me to deal with! Bess winces as she hears the Deputy's voice come out.

His eyes swing wildly onto Bess. He has drawn blood on Elsie's face, looks as if his ring has caught her cheek. Anything could become a weapon here, the brush and mirror on the dressing-table, the china spaniel, the scissors — my God, he's picked up the scissors. The Eiffel Tower in the snow dome on the organ. It's in Bess's hand.

Leave her alone Roger, she says. Her voice is the dark one she used for Medea. It freezes him for a moment. He squints at her, breathing hard.

Souvenirs. Mamie's souvenirs. Paris, Milano. Rico with his zinc cream on, gone to Bologna.

Roger's lip is curled. He points the scissors, at her, at Elsie. He doesn't move though. He's thinking it through?

But her fingers have already curled around the dome. It's smooth, satisfactory. Some sort of stabilising weight at the bottom. She has hurled it through the air, anyhow. It doesn't have any effect. He is still as a rock. It glances off his forehead. Stupid to think that would do the trick, bring him to his senses. The snow in the little plastic dome settles against the sky as it rocks on the floor. He hasn't noticed. He stares ahead. His eyelids are parted, as if in mild surprise. He seems to sag at the knees. Bad actor. He is crumpling. So he's becoming the wounded little boy now, is he? Well, at least that gives Elsie a break. He sways towards the organ. His head will hit the keyboard if he isn't careful. They have mattresses for this purpose in the drama workshops. Free falling. Elsie seems to have retreated into sleep. Whose dream is this?

MAN DEAD: NEIGHBOUR QUESTIONED

A Palmyra teacher has been held for questioning over the death of her next door neighbour.

Roger Millar, 46, household painter of Demeter St, Palmyra, died of head injuries after a domestic argument in which the woman allegedly tried to intervene.

Detectives seized electrical goods and paints from the victim's garage.

They are investigating reports that a Black and White taxi was seen outside the house towards 5.20p.m. yesterday, when the incident allegedly took place.

Detective Sergeant Ritchie shakes the little dome inside the plastic bag. The snow rises in a flurry through the gold lace of the Eiffel Tower. Well I never, he says, well I never.

FROM ARIADNE'S YARN

A for Abandonment

ARIADNE, daughter of Minos, was abandoned on the island of Naxos by Theseus during their voyage to Athens after Theseus had, with her assistance, overcome the Minotaur in Crete.

Robert E. Bell, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*

I finger the shell. It's like an ear the snake visits with prophecies, only revered in retrospect. I finger it again, calling it ammonite, recoiling into being. Am Ariadne now beached in the sway between am/am not. In the breach between Pasiphae and Phaedra? The ammonite lisps to me to attend to the wake of the tidal pulse. What poise I have on this lip of history. My endless migrations have brought me here to the Antipodes of Naxos, when they would have me fixed in a star. What a career. You see me rocking slightly but this is my poise. This is my particular emergence. I still drip from the grottos, from the tunnelling caverns. I have travelled too far, too slowly, in the wings of their theatre, listening for a break, queuing with the other understudies. The plays have been mainly about bankers, soldiers, explorers and sexual athletes. The only entries I've made so far have been into their dictionaries. I found one under A for Abandonment. Some entry into being! Before I am named, the waves suck at my toes. My itch enjoys the grit of shells.

Theseus? I gave him a break all right, supplied him with his birthstring. He can visit my father now he plays judge down there in Hades. Theseus does without the psychopomp; he has diplomatic immunity. Charon-ferried, he clenches the bankcard between his teeth. As usual, he has the passport, garlanded with visa stamps, the torch, pencil slim, in his pocket. The unseen they call obscene, everything off-stage, he says he's mapped it all. He demonstrates it clearly: the torch, its Eveready batteries pole-to-pole, peeling back the dark. Still in dreams I feel the tiny

disc of light inspect my flesh. See, it's okay, there's nothing there, nothing at all, he calls. And the monster? What of it? A minor tor in the hopscotch he played on the threshold of manhood, never letting the cracks get to him. That's why they despise puns, they upset their curricula vitae.

I'm not going to be myhttaken, fixed in constellation. Their tidying up jobs afterwards. I'll underpun their purpose, sound the lisp as a way of saying, whisper monstrosities, but I'll come to that later.

Minos built a great reputation for just Lawmaking. Like Theseus his son-in-law. And what of his annual conscription of Athenian youth? Oh, that was just to school them in underground tactics. He sent them back enlightened all right, a fact that Athens didn't always have the grace to acknowledge. Father and son-in-law are immune to my knowing lisp which would trouble their neatspeak, wobble their scales. Theseus folded his map and shouted from the deck: This is what you wanted. This is a new start I'm giving you girl. May your vision be well-compassed, he laughed. I saw his teeth blaze through the foam.

Of course he helped Minos clear his name: minus the minotaur that haunted his reputation. The one his wife, Pasiphae visited upon him, mother to energies beyond him. It's true she could at one stage invent new contours for her sensuality. If she was a sculptor, she was an actor too, taking on the pain-filled udder, the moist muzzle and the silky lashes she blinked through to him. He stared in steady horror.

I gave Theseus his birthstring so he could shut them up about the mystery. What he found and if he slayed, he didn't have to tell. He let the rumours elaborate his story. There was a kind of murder. What he overcame was an idea of a boy, left behind this kind of initiation. Only a boy fingering the tunnelling bas-relief he sculptured through his adolescence. A boy who heard nothing of Just Heroes, who swam in the undercurrents, his flesh water-withered. On his reappearance, Theseus let the crowd applaud. He simply held up his sword, the fake blood clotting. Did they even speak? There was a terrible certainty in his eyes, as if nothing would elude his torch now. In the boat afterwards, I saw him against the black sail. I saw the sinews knotting in his neck. I watched him pull and flex his fingers systematically, joint after joint. I knew there could be no meeting for our bodies, unless like Pasiphae ... I longed for my mother's fingers unthreading my braids. I let the salt wind shred them instead. I cried no. I cried no to the bludgeoning of his loins that night, anchored in the cove at Naxos. That's when he said it: I

suppose it runs in the family. Well, if bullying is what you want . . . I'm not joking, he said. He wasn't. As if giving me the yarn wasn't a come-on. Or have you been in another story all along? It was you, you hussy, who came to me and drugged the guards.

I remembered a sculpture my mother did of her face. Eyeless. She was blowing the pan flute. She was blown and bulging, pucker-stitching like a pickled person. But this was then, in granite. I found the fissures with my fingers; was sightless in reply. My fingers searched the mouth but it was fused with the music played, the pipes grew out of it. I found the swelling in her throat. Before Minos, way before. I set this huge memory on the beach. Theseus' boat was just a minor flaw on the horizon. I bathed in the shadow to the left of the nose. To the right, the way was parched. Then the sands rippled a confusion, violet swayed with lemon. Music liquefied the idea of stone. The head was something they never found when they ransacked her studio, after the Minotaur.

ARIADNE'S UNDERGROUND CINEMA

You've got to accept this, Bess, as a beginning, Ariadne says. You might have been the filmmaker's wife for a spell, the historian's lover, but where are you? You've got to lie down on the platform and take on the imprint at last. Come on, spend the night with me on the newspapers for a start. We've been depth travellers for too long. This is the beginning of a new kind of vagabondage. From now on we've got to make do with the provisional. Face it. Death isn't something that erupts by itself. Death is a message someone chooses to carry. Don't let the necrophiles win, face them at their own game: Look at this one for instance:

Your untimely passing darling Miriam

The necrophiles are surface walkers I can tell you. Take this, nasty as it might seem, as your first texture: she points out, as if they were touristic icons, squashed butts, gobs of spit, tooth-printed gum, the patina from several million stiletto stabbings and shoe-metal lesions, dark stains losing their edge in a general merger. Bess wonders why she doesn't resist this hieratic style but there's a dull constriction, something like sorrow, that she feels in her arteries. Whose death? She is serially exhorted, beckoned, teased, provoked, prohibited as the escalator takes her down, fusing her frames of reference. When will this regression stop, when will doors stop opening onto antechambers to this beginning? Where will Ariadne? Bess tells her she'll try to make it to Grand Peripheral for her release into the inter-city network, but for the moment, she's got marking to do.

Marking time, Ariadne says.

Bess knows as her tongue slips through the words that it's going to be one Those Promises, but then she flinches against this kind of slick fore-knowledge. I'll see that it's not a throwaway line, she says.

What? Ariadne is getting irritable. What?

Nothing, nothing.

You see, we've got to give up this addiction to the metaphysical quakes, learn to manage the surfaces as well, or we'll be left falling through potential while they slide along, it's easy does it, a shallow, slow stroke, barely dimpling the surface, from simile to simile, from mountain to molehill, mapping it all the same. You see, it's finally what's brought to the surface that counts in this world, it's the gold that comes up that counts. Or the dross, or the slag, not life in the pits.

Bess cannot say how she's longed to be free from falling since the day she fell through Cassandra's voice, to be free from the terror in the collapse the metaphor effects. Simply from simile to simile. She presses her fingers into her arm muscle wishing she could tweak like balloon skin, feel it all as a matter of surface tension. She leaves Ariadne alone on the *News of the World* and listens to the echoic shuddering down the tunnels: departures, departures and arrivals no one will know.

Depth travellers!

Now it's a ferry she's on. Of course she can get to the other bank. She'll get there for Mamie, for her sake. She's in an immense room, a cafeteria full of rain-wet travellers with comb marks in their hair. Marking time with a beer or a cider. Ariadne's back, but in a role it sickens Bess to negotiate. She's in school uniform: navy box-pleated tunic, white skirt, red tie and red crest embroidered on the pocket of the blazer. She's bent over an exercise book, compass in hand, protractor at her side. She's practising surfaces, it seems, plotting routes, alternatives for the ferry perhaps. A wild hope beckons in that direction. No, these cosines and tangents and inverse functions mean nothing but her trigonometry homework. They have no bearing on where this boat will go. Ariadne doesn't seem to feel the cool breath of menace seeping in from the corridors. Bess wants to warn her but feels she can't presume. Ariadne's lace-up shoes sit quietly on the rung under the table, clear of the puddle below. She is very dark but her braids have gone. Her hair, still massively thick, is lopped at shoulder length. The skin under her chin pockets in and out as she sips her wine. It's the woman of the future catching up, an adolescent boy's voice breaks into laughter. It's the nymphette ageing hahaha!

Through the smoke and beer mist, Bess can see that there is to be an act. An old woman is perched on the edge of the stage. Her features are puffed in the foot-lighting, her gaze is averted. Her flesh, which is not abundant, sits in grey rolls. The belly puckers along an ancient scar.

Harry returns, stout and benign with the soggy chips and yellow battered fish. Don't let it bother you, he says, motioning towards the old woman in her sequined bikini. As he puts down the tray, the house retsina wobbles in the carafe. She's put herself in that position, he says. No one forces her to strip. What seems to be expected by this crowd leaning forward at the Laminex, chrome-trimmed tables, is that she strip her body further, this time of its ageing layers. You're part of it too, Bess, whether you like it or not, Harry says.

The audience is mainly male. Bess knows now that Rico is sitting somewhere behind. Who let that happen? She? He will become one of the same, jeer with them. He is now unreachable by any tender connection Bess might try to invoke. Ri... she bleats once. Her voice is depleted. This is the community of men. Some sort of bucks' night? The evening runs on its rails, the ferry sticks to its foregone route. Ariadne is gone: the compass lies next to her empty wine glass.

The air is increasingly urinous with something nauseatingly sweet mingling in, like a cheap disinfectant. It might be the Sunny Valley Rest Home they're taking Bess back to. She wants to get to the fresh air; maybe Ariadne is out on the deck, but all the doors are locked, the windows sealed, salt-encrusted. Bess settles back, fingering a soft pale chip. She's struck in an abstract way by the cool calm with which she has relinquished any influence over Rico. She can sense his face fusing with theirs. They have claimed him now. Bess hears him laughing at the old woman's pleated belly, he clears his throat noisily. His eyes now pass her by. His features are set. Bess sees that she must leave the trigonometer and the stripper to their different kinds of absence.

There's a thin bloodline along the corridor wall leading to the cinema. Bess can follow it. She can will herself to watch the screen. Where does it originate? What does it illustrate? These are not questions she asks. She accepts that she is now moving in a field which the camera pans. Crossed and recrossed by it. This is given to her as a FIND THE GIRL IN THE TANGLE sort of exercise. Bess remembers doing a dozen of these at the Pizza Hut with Rico: finding the bull in the landscape, the bird in the barn.

The camera is fixed or is it she who's transfixed by it? The image is black and white. The house is suburban recalling the older part of Wembley or is it South Perth? It doesn't matter, this isn't about real estate. Bess feels the loss of colour as a haemorrhage, a loss of the reds especially, at least, now it's the red range returning in the rods and cones behind her eyes: the variegated red leaves against the porch wall, the purple shock of less than purple roses caught in the memorial

triangle where the path bifurcates. The house squats, the short fat pillars meeting the gable with its schematic version of Tudor and the low overhang of orange roof. Bess's gaze enters the negative visor above the porch walls, between the pillars, through the leadlight. The inside colours come to her as the film holds the porch in black and white. The furniture here is to be auctioned soon: from beneath the sheets shrouding its bulk, Bess recalls the burnished gold of the velvet, its motif of scattered triangles and their nebulae of red sparkles; from below the protective canvas she treads, she can feel the wall-to-wall carpet repeating its autumnal leaf-to-leaf. It's the forest floor she played on as a child, her original vegetable jigsaw. The air hoards darkness here. Bess makes her way to the back of the house but here again, shadows choke the spaces. Grey light trickles through the mad myrtle into the cage where a cockatoo contemplates, his comb feathers folded, nothing but the uncommitted clasp of his feet on the perch, as if somehow, this were the origin of the wire mesh imprisoning him and the lattice work developing its lozenges of darkness beyond. Hello, hello, you're late again! he cracks into the words, tearing at their husks. It's he who taught Bess these very words that her mother called to her returning father: Hello, hello, you're late again. The nictitating membrane moves slowly over the once pink eye, now cataract-clouded. It seems to be the signal for darkness to thicken. Bess thinks with dread of the rooky woods. The back door slams behind her. She needs to go back where latency ticks. She wants so much to start again, to be that female child happening in the next frame. Will it just be a return of the expected? In whose nostalgia will Bess be figuring? She walks back towards where the reel turns and ticks. She knows that the car idling on the sound track is the materialization of someone's fear. She can recognize that fan belt noise as its signature tune: it's a Ford Cobra, five litres, a real muscle car. He's waiting. He hopes to resuscitate Bess's story. He wants to pace it out, to chalk out where the body fell. But at the moment, he's just killing time. There are no knots in this line Bess is unravelling, nothing monstrous he could point to. The dresser in the kitchen, for instance, holds only gentle moments: again Mamie turns the key slowly, pulling back the glass door which is frosted and bubbled, the texture of seersucker. Mamie nods to the consolation the shelf offers: it's a row of full-bellied jars. What'll it be, lovie, she says, a bull's-eye or a mint leaf perhaps? She does not turn back to Bess. Her gaze is lowered to the space where the other woman fell, her shape chalked out on the linoleum.

Ariadne perhaps wants Bess to occupy this. Bess remembers her on the underground platform, the death notices tapping out a tattoo on her skin.

Bess walks through the turning hallway and finds the picture hanging in its varnished oak frame from the dark rail. It's a clearing in a great deciduous forest. Germany? A shaft of light falls on the forest floor, fixing on a stag's ramifying antlers. It stares back to Bess in some kind of recognition. Once again, it's the animal standing in for the human, which is the event. The rest, the play of light, the forest world — all that is just treated as background. In black and white: the rooky woods.

When was it they came, then, to map out where she lay? Bess doesn't remember: was it her mother, was it Mamie, or was it some joke about herself? Is it Bess's son with the man in the idling car, waiting for her to have done with all this? With guilty relief, Bess feels herself filling the frame as she comes to light. Is she subject to their fear? Is that it? She fills it, so big, so big — as big as the sky. She has come so close-up, perhaps they will be blind to her. She will refuse to be the event. What does the camera know?

She must work with gravity: meet it with the same force, not fall through the gaps opening up in the carpet. The red pathway stays grey, bifurcating like a Shanghai and the colour which the policing film has bled trickles back behind Bess's eyes. Now it happens all in a rush: all the blood falls to her legs, leaving her head and torso vacant. Simple fear occupies this vacancy. The Cobra driver has kidnapped her son. Bess's journey backwards has been set up for this.

Her face, which she watches spreading in a silent scream, is evidence of this. She flattens her fingers against the ball of her palm, all except the index. This she points stiff, exactly like the barrel of a gun. She steadies this hand-gun by cupping it in her left hand. Flesh stiffens, metal shudders, she pumps the windscreen with pretend. It crazes. The car idles, still. The Driver, already crumpled as a target, but emergent for revenge, ricochets serially from the pelvis up, as if machine-gunning her. She crouches amongst the memorial roses. The thorns rupture something. Within this prickly cold calm, a new fear comes: now she can save Rico even less. Her body has been dealt with in this frame, to fill the need of the chalked out shape on the kitchen floor. But the Driver's body, shot off-camera, survives this scene. His body, being off, frames Bess's.

Ariadne says: You want to make him Theseus, but there's no such luck. It's just, and always was, the man next door.

CRIMINAL SCRIPTS

The set has always been ready. The courtroom lighting dismisses any recall of daylight, endorsing the authority of old carved oak, studded leather and the wigs.

The dark gardens have always filled the wings. The Moreton Bay figs twist their branches in an implacable tension against themselves, returning aerial roots in a rebel rain to the bitumen, already buckled from the branching urge of the roots below. And then the Norfolk Island pines, webbing green shade with violet, enlase the eye, up, up to where black cockatoos shriek and tear at the cones, flinging them down as the last of the jury duty recruits scuttles in. It's the Carnival of Shadows. Bess feels her body presented like its press release.

It's that last rehearsal when immersion in the role claims the actor's chemistry, gives the adrenalin surge yet cautions muscles against tension, signals relaxed vigilance, brings her close to ecstasy if that is simply being out of place, out of mind. This is isolation from anything but the connections to be made, the spinning *now, now, now*, of the past brought back.

Phantasy envoys are caught breathless in the torchlight, fingers in the soft dough, greased lips apart, pressed to confess the fires lit, the melting limbs, the windows smeared, the lewd graffiti scrawled.

This is a script she's lived in for some time. Will they cut the audition before it's heard, flick, snap, click, over? And the other players called – do they have the same script? Is this the play they think they're in?

She tells herself she's poised for anything. She knows what it's like to be leaden, drugged, to be plump yet buoyed by air, to feel her buttocks rising as she walks, she knows how to be fast and thin, to feel the skeleton's immediacy. She knows how the word held back can grow, a pustulating abscess in the throat. She can feel the swelling now she can hold breath for an eternity if necessary. She also knows the fear that cuts breath and makes the easy melodic line

obscene. She's been the rapid talker, rattle-snaking through language, faultless, lethal in delivery. She can be servile, crawling, blubber out confessions, numb with drink and self-indulgence, pompous, quick to praise. *Excellent, just what I was looking for, spot-on, exactly*, she's said in quick dismissal of what's being tried. She's risked cruelty for cleverness, been shrivelling with a laugh, deflating with a *yes but isn't it rather?* She's also known when to dispense a smile that sends the old light flooding home.

The chorus is in line, passing the book in the jury box, stacked up in the public gallery, it's about to move through its minimal choreography. Bess receives its voices as a low eulalia. They can read each tiny motion, if she smiles, if she keeps her mask still, if she trembles, if she looks the Prosecution in the eye, if she's too elegant, if she's sloppy, bobbly cardiganed, and drooping at the shoulder, she's capable of anything. As she walks in now, her body pulled and probed as their eyes track it, as she takes the oath she can be the dark woman capable of ...

Always knew it, could she turn on a tantrum that one!

And talk about bucking the system! She made it a point of honour, too high and mighty to deal with any of the red tape. We had to carry her load. Always had to go running after her, knew she was going to crack somehow. Must say I didn't think it would be like this, did you?

She's showing the strain though, look at the shadows under her eyes!

And that stare sends my marrow cold.

As if she could read your mind! A real Medea.

Bitter, the woman's got it in for men.

Heard that Fabio of hers was really gorgeous ... You know he's made a name for himself? Producer for Italian TV, saw something he did on SBS.

Bet she put him through his paces before he gave up!

Yes! She thought she was the only one entitled to a career, resented going back to teaching so he could get himself established here, I mean he had to start from scratch.

Bess a good teacher? Well, I'm not so sure, you know. She could be pretty destructive with those whipcrack lines of hers.

Apparently she'd become quite a recluse.

Oh but with all of that a husband snatcher ... You know she was having it off with Harry? Took the poor fellow for a ride.

But take a look at that! What's she trying to prove now? Always wore pants to school – in an executive suit of all things, padded shoulders, linen, and high heels!

What? They gave her bail? Who would have raised that?

She could've easily; she had stacks you know.

Well, no dependants or anything, all that salary to herself...

Must've been a bit of a miser – still lived in that awful place in Palmyra.

Oh but maybe she was saving it up for her son. You know, if he came back ...

Bit late if you ask me. Now who's she trying to fool? Can't be for nothing she was denied custody.

That's for sure. One of those hard-line feminists if ever there was one.

I'd even go as far as saying a man-hater, all razor blades for them ...

Off with those and put this on.

It's a buttonless housedress, size sixteen at least. One skirt, linen, beige, one silk shirt, green, one jacket, striped fawn and white, one pair green leather shoes, checked, one digital watch Seiko, checked. Two silver bangles. One wallet, black leather, forty-five dollars, Visa Card, Bank Card, RAC.

This is the quarantine station, showers and toilets open, cement gutters running with the disinfected stream, every orifice and crease inspected, annotated, numbered, sanitised. Scrubbed raw. No mirrors here.

Weight?

58 kg

Height?

I 76m.

VD test.

Aids test?

Blood group.

A, RH positive.

Now, size twelve. This'll do. Jeans. One pullover. Size ten. Now, now you can't be choosy in here.

A film of greyness from the laundry lingers on these clothes. But underneath, the rawness of her flesh.

The cement grid with its interlocking circles could be a 1960s feature wall but for the iron grills beyond, and beyond, and beyond, space locked into space.

It's the power in being able to dictate the pace, she knows this and so does the screw. She too knows intimately this quiet despair giving way to something worse, the grey *ennui* they share, but the screw has suspense on her side, she can lift the finger, pace her stride from gate to gate, slow down, hold, pause, accelerate the timing's never quite predictable. In the way she hums as she looks the prisoner in the eye, avoids her look, or fails to hear the request, jangles her keys, shrugs her shoulders, answers with a *non-sequitur*, you know that time is on her side.

Oh you want the ablutions block? Wait wait. All in good time. This isn't a hotel. Want hot water for coffee? Want room service? You don't say? Well, you'll just have to wait won't you?

Keys clatter, turn, footsteps echo, left, right, follow me, left right, courtyard, gate, courtyard, gate and down the dark arcade.

The interlocking O's of the grid, slide over Bess and through them, the rippling light from the swimming pool.

Don't be fooled. Want a swim? Think it's a bloody motel don't you, well, you'll soon learn, you'll have to wait, there's the Born Agains doing a Baptism in there, see? Unless you want to see the light too, do you? Didn't think so.

Footsteps pad away, metal doors grind and clank, keys turn and silence settles finally. This is a cowgirl lying on the bed: with these flared jeans, the red and blue checked shirt with its pointed collar, all she needs is the fringed leather holster she had as a child. *Give the manslayerer a toy gun too.* She looks at the ceiling for the first time, these are organs pretending to be technology: the bald light globe in its wire cage, the sprinkler nozzle, there'll be a video eye in here too, the P A voice box ... Now she's got to apply a silencing fix before the voices return, O O she hears the mouths breathe a *sleep if you can* and as she turns to the wall, she finds herself straining for that susurrant, seeping through cement, mortar, brick, through the pocketing corridors, linked by dead-locked doors, a palimpsest of all the questions ever asked:

What do you have to say for yourself?

(Say for myself? I'm an actress, I never say for myself ...)

I have nothing to say. (Your Honour? I did it for myself? For Elsie? For Rico, for or against Fabio?)

I have nothing to say. I did it. I meant to hit him. I didn't mean to kill him ... I just wanted to stop him beating her up.

But you said he was just shaking her, trying to wake her.

Yes, that's correct. But he picked up the scissors.

Does picking up a pair of scissors warrant such a blow?

I didn't have time to think.

You didn't have time to think? But the coroner's report shows the object was hurled with considerable force. And yet, apart from the tranquillizers, Elsie Millar showed no ill effects. A small scratch on the cheek but no bruises or lesions indicating assault. This violence, which you say you witnessed, Ms Valentine, was perhaps more a trick of your imagination than anything else? You intervened in what was a run-of-the-mill domestic altercation and saw fit to fling a potentially harmful object at Roger Millar.

I said I didn't have time to think. What more ...

I am suggesting that perhaps long before you ran into 68 Demeter St, Palmyra, you had come to some conclusions Ms Valentine ...

Now she has time to think.

Time moves in, massive night, squats on her chest. The past collapses in on itself: it folds image into image, all relative Edens, anything that was before. Even lying on her vinyl sofa with a flickering TV taking time out from marking time, becomes an Eden. Not opening the door, not dialling the work number. She now discovers identity, being identical to herself, she's the string of all the I's ever knitted into actions, yes I was there, thought this, did that, lived there, married then ... This cell is the simple tidying up job, the collapse of all the I's.

Can you explain why you didn't go to work on November 18th, Ms Valentine?

He says Ms with heavy irony.

I was feeling depressed. I slept in.

And yet you didn't phone to explain your absence?

I didn't phone. I couldn't come at it.

Can you tell the Court how you spent the day?

Sleeping. Sleeping in my loungeroom.

Perhaps, you might like to reflect, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, that this is what is wrong with our country now, that our teachers spend their days asleep?

Laughter.

Order! Order in the court!

Objection, Your Honour. This has nothing to do with the charge my client is facing.

Objection sustained.

Well, let me phrase it another way.

So your passivity was such that you neither phoned your school nor answered repeated attempts to reach you and yet you shook it off, this passivity, leapt into action, rushed next door when you heard something like a domestic tiff going on?

The hilarity invades Bess, vacates her of everything else. She lets it rise through her, shaking, rolling, launching her in waves – the courtroom is far away, a flat low beach. Her laughter grows – a thing of its own.

The Court will adjourn for half an hour so that the defendant might recover from her regrettably inappropriate mirth.

Can you please tell the Court how well you knew Elsie Millar?

I knew her as a friend. I became quite close to her over the years. I liked her. I enjoyed the stories she told. I also knew her to be unhappy in her marriage. I think she needed someone to talk with about what she was going through.

Ah, this then is something you understood? Being separated from your own husband? Was this the basis of your friendship?

I don't believe it was at all. Of course all marriages are different. I think I understood, as any woman might ... She had to live with another woman. He, Roger Millar, had photographs of his former wife everywhere. He deified her. Elsie also suffered for her son. Roger could be pretty cruel to Kevin; he always resented him.

Apparently you've been a bit of an actress in your time, Ms Valentine?

I like the theatre, yes. It's my job too, after all. I teach drama. I don't see what bearing ...

What were Roger and Elsie Millar doing in their bedroom when you came in?

He was screaming things at her, terrible things, and shaking her violently. She seemed sort of drugged. I wasn't sure whether it was alcohol or what. He was in a rage. He wouldn't stop. I couldn't make him ...

Had you previously seen the photograph, which Mrs Millar had cut up and wrapped around her face?

Yes, I had, Elsie showed me. She said he used to stare at it when he was getting ready for bed.

Look at the photograph Ms Valentine, even with the bits missing, I think you'd have to agree that it bears more than a passing resemblance to yourself?

If you say so. I wouldn't know.

You wouldn't know? Surely Ms Valentine, you've on occasions looked in a mirror?

I can't argue about how others see me. Roger Millar seemed to think there was a likeness. He said something about it. In fact it was quite ...

Quite? Quite what Ms Valentine?

It was as if he was making some sort of advance towards me.

Really? Was this fancy, Ms Valentine?

Objection, Your Honour. This has no bearing on the case.

Objection sustained.

Let me rephrase the question then. I believe Your Honour that Ms Valentine's feelings of repulsion or otherwise to the deceased have every bearing on this case. You found it objectionable, that is constituted an advance, that a man compared you to his first wife?

It was typical of his sadism towards Elsie.

Ms Valentine. It is something of an exaggeration, surely, to call a passing compliment an act of sadism. It seems as if it was more than a simple impulse to neighbourly assistance that sent you running that day into your neighbour's house. I would suggest that there might have been other reasons. Perhaps more to do with ideology than emotion? Ms Valentine, you persist in the use of your maiden name although legally you are Cavatino. Would you mind explaining?

When I teach, when I work, I am myself, not my ex-husband's wife.

Husband's, surely Ms Valentine. I understand that you are not legally divorced.

My husband left me and kidnapped my son. I do not want to use that name as a reminder.

He was granted legal custody of the child I gather, Ms Valentine? Hardly what one can call kidnapping?

He was granted custody in a system which left me with little power to ... I had to fight for my son in an Italian court in whose eyes any child born to an Italian father has automatically the right to Italian citizenship. The father has sovereign rights ...

Thank you Ms Valentine. You have brought me to my next point. I gather you practise your feminism in the classroom and that there has been parental concern expressed on occasions. I understand that you get your students to do what you call *gender-bending*, that your lessons have been quite offensive to some of your male students. As if being male was a real handicap in your classes?

CRIMINAL SCRIPTS II

For this performance, Cassandra has come home. Does she want to make an issue, a polemical case out of this trial then? Play saint to the criminal? Her hair is ashen now with white hot tips. There's a pulsing aureole around her. Saint. She's on fire with something. Has she come for *material?* Cassandra turns her limpid eyes on Bess. Cass enters through the tiny hole of the pupil and Bess feels it's as if she herself is falling through this breach, no handle, ledge, foothold ...

She is preparing for the final night. It's our play; it's made for us, Bess says to Cassandra, but secretly claims it as her own. It's *The Maids* by Jean Genet, about two sisters locked in servitude and trying to play their way out of abjection, out of the mirror-hold one has upon the other. Except that Bess is Solange, whose role it is to enact the Revenge of the Maids before Cassandra's Claire, who plays the Mistress, Madame. In the photo taken in the dressing-room you can see what is happening. Bess and Cassandra have withdrawn far within themselves. Bess watches, rising in the mirror the Revolt of the Maids. This is *Haushilferin*, the humiliated *au pair* Bess taps but she can't say the same for Cassandra who only has her sweet sympathies to go on, and her intelligence, she reluctantly concedes. She supposes that it's the same passionate venom that Cassandra summons now. The concentrated imaginings of love and hatred, coursing through them, but rigorously canalised, grave, ceremonious, slow, have them in a state of control-burn, leave them singed, abated, empty, every night. They have done without a director for this production. They suspect it is a mistake but then would like to do without an audience too, just play out these intense ceremonies for themselves. They have also dispensed with Madame, so intimately bound is she with their own destinies, Bess-as-Solange-as-Maid, Cassandra-as-Claire-as-Madame, Mistress of Mistresses. When the plot demands Madame's entrance, it is an effigy which is wheeled in, animated by a pre-recorded voice: Bess's. Bess has drawn back her hair tightly, a severe part in the middle, a bun at the nape. She sits perfectly still; she will extinguish

perfectly the Madame-in-Claire tonight and make the Maid be, ultimately. She has plucked her eyebrows radically, two severe arcs. A vein snakes at her temple. At twenty she has become ageless. Cassandra has clung to a vestigial softness, two tendrils escape the hairline. Her black dress is only a prelude after all to her immersion in a sainthood that Solange will venerate and execrate, the white dress: the ultimate ascension into diaphanous beauty of the rich.

The moment of glory approaches, Bess-Solange-The Maid has flung Cassandra-Claire-Madame on the linoleum. She is sprawled, demonstrating death. Blood rises tidally through Bess, igniting thighs, brain. The Revolt of the Maids drums its slow ceremony in her ears, she is rising, rising, the procession she summons advances through the city of her words, she whispers hot love to the Inspector of Police, who leads her courteously, with such deference, the manacles a decoration bestowed, to something like an amorous climax and Cassandra-Claire-Madame, the evidence of criminality achieved, sprawled on the floor, allowing this. Hot and rising, up the steps to where the guillotine blade gleams for her, feeling already the red ring mark her neck, and, all the time keeping her eyes on the scene of her crime, Solange sees her victim rise, prop herself on an elbow and through the crystal gaze of Claire-Madame, she sees an acid irony registered in Cassandra's smile. The spectators glimpse for a moment a slight fluctuation where the ghosted personality of Bess comes loose from Solange, making her stumble, nearly fall on the flat boards.

It is now that something savage rears in Bess. This devoted sister she has allowed in her play, who steals her substance, mimics her, takes the same courses at university, learns the same languages without costing her parents the way Bess has, who imitates her speech patterns, forges her handwriting, now the shadow signals its superiority in this smile. Friends and flowers have arrived backstage, but Bess is crouching in the wings, her teeth driven into her lip, rocking in her little black maid's shoes, in her little black maid's dress. She will never be able to give up this role, to stop playing out this sister's anger, this maid's revolt. She's addicted to this repetition. To the frustration of the revolt never fulfilled.

Of course it's at Mamie's that Cass first learns to improvise, to stretch the role.

Oh, Mamie says, as Cass slips out of her navy tunic, into the white shirt with the stiff starched collar, and the dark pinstriped jacket, cuffed trousers, aren't you looking nice, E-J! I do hope your meeting goes well! It's with some industrialists, isn't it? From Milan? Yes, you take the chauffeur, enjoy the Bugatti. I'll be fine: just wander about the streets; have another look in the

Ufficci; go to the Bargello and see my adorable little Donatello, my sweet, gentle David in his flowered hat — that's my favourite.

Darling, Cass says, looking out from under the felt hat, do take care. Ask that nice young English woman to accompany you. You can't trust these Italian men.

This is a new line, even Mamie shows pleasure in this concern. Bess knows it's to delay things and slides quickly into the cream trousers, the ones Mamie had made for E-J but which he's always refused to wear. This is what the Stranger wore. She buttons up the fly, then the silk shirt, knots the white tie, loosens it just a little. Gold cuff links, like the ones He wore. The cream double-breasted suit jacket. She flattens her hair, brushes it back behind the ears. The panama summer hat. Inside, of course, he carries it. Mamie has gone; she doesn't like to watch her transformation into Him. Each time Bess strolls past the aspidistras in the vestibule, past the hydrangeas in their great Chinese pots, and up to the cane chair opposite hers in the sunroom, Mamie is to look up from her *Childe Harold* and see Him for the first time. This is the hotel lobby. The rotating doors are over there; you never know who might come in. See, Mamie's restless, lifting the curtain, watching the Bugatti disappear around the bend. She is startled by a touch at her shoulder. Well, she thought he'd left, but here he is, Ernest-Justin back again. You'll need money my dear, he says, I almost forgot. Mamie seems to enjoy the unexpected. A little thrill ripples through her as she purses lips to the cheek he tenders.

Now she sighs and opens her book again.

The cue for Bess's entry. Cass will have to accept that she's made her exit for a while. Bess ambles up to the chiffonier which is Reception, speaks in a low voice to the chair next to it; signs the register and gestures to her bags. With this hand wave, this poise, she becomes Him. Over on the coffee table are guides to the museums and galleries, brochures about day tours. He takes one of them and as He straightens, His eyes meet Mamie's for the first time. Ah, He says this is the line He must start with Lord Byron, a great hero in my country!

You must be Greek then?

Yes, I am indeed. Spiro Konstantellos, and might I ask your name?

Mamie Seymoure.

And you are from?

Australia.

Australia? I have never met anyone from there before. It is a great country?

It is a very big country.

Mamie tilts her head attentively.

Do you mind if I wait here? He gestures to the lounge opposite.

The porter has not come down.

Mamie nods. She lowers her eyes to her book again, but not for long. The romance has begun.

I don't suppose you could tell me when the Uffizi opens? Mamie asks him.

At ten o'clock, if I remember right. What a good idea! Are you planning on going on your own? Yes? But ... I do not advise that. Could I be so bold as to suggest I might accompany you?

Spiro offers Mamie his arm. They walk through Florence. Ah yes, Spiro says, the bas-relief doors by Brunelleschi. Beautiful, no? Ah the *Lady with Ermine*, if such a painter could have painted you, you would outshine them all. Spiro gazes deep into her eyes, hands closing around her tiny waist. Mamie struggles a little, as she must.

My husband, Mr Konstantellos, my husband. He has spies.

Forgive me. Forgive me Mrs Seymoure, I quite forgot myself.

Bess knows Cassandra is spying on them too, hovering in the hall where the concave mirror records the first real kiss, at the Bargello in front of the Donatello's *David*.

It's the slouch of the hip, the grace of that neck that makes it so touching, don't you think? Mamie says.

It's the grace of this neck, the line of these shoulders I love. Let Donatello keep his *mignon!*

Now it's the car ride to the village outside Florence. Bess loves this part. They conjure the landscape with their words, she points out olive groves, roadside chapels, monasteries. As they take a bend, Mamie lurches towards Spiro. This is when the arm can slide protectively around her shoulder. This is when his hand can brush her cheek. So soft, so soft! he says.

Cassandra must give them the music, the record of Caruso, set ready, on the gramophone: this is the restaurant; this is where they dance. Spiro's friends have gathered around the table. They outshine one another with the compliments they pay Mamie's beauty. It's gone to her head. It goes to Spiro's head. They are back on the terrace, breathless from the dance. The air pulsates

with light and warmth, confused with Mamie's cheek. Their lips brush, again. *Sagapo poli*, he says.

Oh, oh, she says. What? Oh oh, her eyes are closed.

Last night ah yesternight betwixt his lips and mine, she says.

What, my love? Ah! He takes her tightly this time, her arms enfold him.

Mamie! Mamie!

My God, she whispers. My God, it's him. He's followed us here!

This was not meant to happen. This is not in the script at all. Ernest-Justin is only meant to glimpse him in the hotel lobby afterwards. But here he is, approaching them on the terrace.

His hands are shaking. He's forgotten to take off his hat. If you'll excuse me Sir, I'll take my wife back with me. I'll have some questions to ask you later. Is he contemplating a duel, is that it? In any case, for the moment, Spiro is out of the play, left on the hotel terrace. Mamie gives him a frightened glance over her shoulder as they go. She bites her lip.

Back in their own kitchen, Cassandra rakes the tablecloth with her fork. You're really twisted, Bess, she says. You get right into those love scenes, don't you, I reckon ...

I'm not, I don't, I don't, Bess says, the hot tears welling. I hate doing it. I hate playing those games.

Liar. Liar, Cassandra says. You lap up every minute of it. She's a little sorry now: there's more of a hush in her voice. She reaches for Bess's hand. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It's just ... Oh, it doesn't matter.

SEERSUCKER

Bess, you can't just give up. You've got to fight it. You, I couldn't believe it, pleading guilty, accepting it all, all that nonsense. I've never seen anything so passive. And now you've got the time, sorry, that's an awful joke, well what about doing something with it, for yourself?

I've got a job here, Billie. I'm a good baker, don't you know. Even made some wholemeal croissants for breakfast. They were a great success.

You can't tell me that that's the summit of your career. You can't give up like that.

After her mother's funeral, Bess's father said: I don't know, Bess she just gave up. Once she realized you and Cass had your own lives and I suppose I neglected her, away all the time, she just gave up. Heaven knows, she had no cause to be miserable. But that's what comes through living too much for your kids. She just threw in the towel — began drinking.

So that was why Bess's mother had held her head away when Bess went to kiss her, why she excused herself: don't come too close, I've got a cold, love. It was the sherry on her breath. And then there was no hiding it. She must have lain there for two days, they said, on the kitchen floor, her hand still clutching the seersucker cloth. The bottle, knocked over, empty.

Honestly, though, Bess, what game are you playing? You've never had this victim mentality before. I thought you were one I could count on to always be a fighter. You were always the stirrer at work. God, school's a mournful place these days. Everyone treading the line. Talk about sycophancy with the Deputy.

I looked in on Mamie for you by the way. I tried to tell her about the trial, but she seemed to know already. The nurses said: Oh, you've come to see Mamie, give us a bit of a break, eh? Can't say it's not overdue, she can be a handful, that one. Tries to get the other patients to play her childish games. Oh, Bess, you needn't worry. I took her up to Gilderton for the day. I played along with her games. Tell you what, I'll ask her up there this Christmas. What d'you think?

MAMIE'S EVERAFTER

MAMIE:

This is your Auntie Mamie's Everafter Christmas Show. Like it, or like it not, you've got me on the airwaves. This pronged thing on the cord, this'll do for a microphone. So, at Christmas, the Sunny Valley is a great supplier of aunties and grannies and smiling strays. Some of us sing too, you'll see! It's now that they decide that I can be, for half a day or so. Bess, she used to turn up, sure as clockwork at eleven. She'd drive me a few streets and stick me in a comfortable chair. I asked her to get me one of those with the extendable head and foot-rest like we have here I don't want to lose my bearings, do I, and I like to stretch a point! Ha. Then after the turkey and pudding, I'd play a bit with the controls of my Adjustachair and she'd drive me back here, to the Sunny Valley Rest Home and a whole year I'd have to digest! Here comes Sister with the drugs!

SISTER:

Swallow your pills now, there ... wide open, that's a good girl! We don't want to have any more of our funny turns, do we?

PATIENT:

Sister, please Sister, there's spiders under my skin, they're nesting there, that's what the black marks mean ... Sister, they're laying their eggs there, Sister ... Sister!

MAMIE:

I've had enough clothes to dress the cast of *Ben Hur* and exotic too, dresses from Tokyo, Florence, Paris and as for the boys, well Ernest-Justin's suits from London he only ever dressed conservative they would've made bankers and brokers of you all.

You should see yourselves shuffling past, rheumy eyed and piss-stained, ttt-ttt, you've got your cheeks on inside-out, red-rimmed and sag-eyed you are. A little effort, pull yourselves together for Christmas Day after all ... Come on boys, show a little spirit and join in the play. Auntie

Mamie's got some parts for you! This is what they call the Happily Ever After, we might as well get into it and you girls in wheelchairs there, let's join in the Happily Everafter Shuffle and Slide. We'll show them we can do without the Joys of Yuletide from the combined Bicton and Palmyra Primary Practice Recorder Groups; who needs the Brownies working for another badge to give us their singalongs? Come on, sing with me: *This is the Everafter Shuffle and we can call the tune*. Come ON now, come close, I won't bite, in fact I've organized a treat for you, it's fruitcake and sherry, see! ... Sssssh! Now, now, Dot, stop your tantrums, I'll give you a part and Will, I'll put you in a starring role, I'll make you the Broker and you can wear this suit I've got out for you, see, it's pinstriped and double-breasted, you can look like Mr Holmes a Court and roll your possum's eyes in your loose face, you'd like that, wouldn't you mmmmm? You'd like to be a Speculator, wouldn't you, like Ernest-Justin, my late husband, you can nod to important rivals on the Terrace and make strange remarks to the Media and smile away to their tele-lens like Mona Lisa sitting on her nest egg, you can go to the Weld Club, Gentlemen Only, it was, and Very Exclusive and you can drop hints and misinform them about the All Ordinaries and the Metals. Come on, sing with Mame:

Strontium and Platinum
How's Nickle and Zirconium
Don't forget Plutonium
Good ... as ... Gold!

Dot! You ... Dot! (mmm cake's nice!) Dot, you can be er ... Cassandra, my prettiest niece, she's back from Melbourne now, and I'll be ... I'll be me (that'll take some acting hahaha and Bertha, you can be the other one, the other niece, Bess, very intense she was too, gipsy blood, we always said, you can be her.

Look at me! How about it? SOLID GOLD. It's me on my honeymoon. I'm his rock solid capital. Might be empty inside, might be nothing in the shop window either, that's what you nurses like to think, isn't it? But if I'm emptied out as far as they're concerned, that's how I like it, it leaves me free to roam. Ha. I've kept my legs. *They're* good as gold. See: dancer's legs. Slim ankles. The envy of the whole of Geraldton, Bunbury and ... Perth a little later. Florence, they bumped into each other staring after them in Florence. Got more looks than all the Madonnas in the Yuffici, I can tell you. But dancing. Ah, no Ernest-Justin, I kept my promise not to dance.

Well ... Look, the high calf muscle and the tight thighs. Search in vain for varicose veins! My hands? I'll put them in the light for you. Look! White and pure, never any red knuckles, never any broken nails. Never scrubbed nor touched hot water. Never even had to rattle the Velvet Soap in the shaker, let alone dee-tergent. Ernest-Justin wouldn't let that happen, would you? Here, Will! Come on, it's your turn, read what's on your paper, Will, oh dear, there is a bit of spare room in that suit, isn't there? Oh well, never mind. That's right: give him some light, Tess. Now read your thing, Will. Use that Mr Menzies voice!

WILL:

Never ... will ... wife of mine damage herself
Never will her legs stand for too long
Never will her hand touch washing up water
Never will she double as a domestic labourer
As if I can't afford a caterer on occasions
A housekeeper for every day
But children of course are out of the question
I'll not have nappies soaking in my house
Nor trip on nasty little toys
Nor have my wife attend the baby's midnight screaming
Let others do the demographic thing
No wife of mine will sag and drip
Be stretch-marked oedematous and varicose
She will remain my little goddess
Serene
Intact

Now I would like you to examine the conditions and recite them, Mame.

MAMIE:

You, who are like a father to me,
Have shown me kindness
In return I'll think of your age and let you sleep
I'll understand that you will

Only on occasions want to claim your conjugal rights
Otherwise I'll be as good as gold in my twin bed
Parallel to yours
Thank you, thank you Ernest-Justin
For this, my Going Away Dress
Green watered silk with gilt
Peacocks peeping through from the Garden of Eden
On the underskirt
Thank you dearest Ernest-Justin
For the tour and its many souvenirs
The stuff of Everafter
My sisters, Glad and May, one married to an army man
One left behind to nurse our poor old mum
They see me on these postcards
On the Ponte Vecchio
On the Bridge of Sighs, the Isle of Saint Louis
My shoes, peekaboo toes and heels stacked
In finest oak from Firenze, that's Florence,
Florence, in Italian!
Leather soft as a cupid's cheek
And the stockings, a sheer caress on my dancer's legs
From France, where else, and the finest of deniers
They are too ...
(Oh, the recitation, I forgot the recitation)
I will not seek beyond the separation
Of our twin beds
I will caress you when and where you like
(I'm sorry, Sister, but that's how it was;
those were the conditions and I tried to keep them)
I will not look upon another man with lust
Nor will I flirt with him

Nor envy any man's wife

Nor wilt with want for what she has.

I told you that in return love was out of the question. Respect and kindness I could give and appearances. I would make all the appearances required of the wife of a man in your position.

Dot! Come here Dot, and Bertha. A bit more white paint and now, let's see ... A little black comma on either side for eyebrows. That's ... looking ... nice! We're going to play the bound women, the shuffling poets of Japan. This is the game I played with my nieces long ago. He let me see them when he was at work. Otherwise I was available just for him. Anyhow, the signal was: HAS HE GONE? Say it girls ...

DOT AND BERTHA:

Has he gone? Auntie Mamie, has he gone?

MAMIE:

Yes, he's gone now, he's taken the nine o'clock ferry.

He always was a simple man at heart.

The Bugatti and the chauffeur stay with me.

And if he comes back to surprise us all,

I'll smuggle you off for some cakes and sweets at

Sprunts' Tearooms. Oh, the sweets!

Come on girls! Tell us what sweeties you'd like today!

DOT AND BERTHA:

Musk sticks and mint leaves

Sherbert sucked through a licorice straw

White knights and all day suckers

Boiled lollies six a penny

Humbugs and rocky road

Red raspberries, lock-jaw toffees

Bull's eyes and snowballs

And don't forget the

Don't forget the

ChooChoo Bar

MAMIE:

And then there are the pies and sandwiches, cup-cakes and lamingtons and the best vanilla slice south of the river. Or I can send you off to the zoo. Cass! You like the snakes best, don't you love? And Bess does a lovely imitation of the gibbons whooping it up! Look at the tame birds that walk your kimono hems, though. They were Ernest-Justin's present to me in Nagywhatever, Nagy ... Nagasaki That must have been before ... Come on, spin your parasols, loviaes, let the colours run, nice and fluent, nice ... and ... fluent with the wrist and now, tipitoes into the tiny thongs – don't you like the way the stockings have the toe division there? Come ON, read your thing Dot, read what's on your card ...

DOT:

Hear the crows' black hunger
Beaks knocking at the midnight glass

While the fat dove coos or sleeps
Peace at noon on a fragile branch

MAMIE:

Read yours, Bertha, read it I used to watch him on the ferry!

BERTHA:

He has the undertaker's poise Watching for the other bank
And settled on his Gladstone bag
His hand is soft as talc

MAMIE:

And this, this one's mine, my very wickedest one!

They dredge the river for the man
But the broker's at his club
Eating neat white sandwiches
He speculates on crumbs

Ladies and Gentlemen! You might say meaningless verse if verse at all it is, but let me tell you, I was the one they were dredging for, I was the crow's beak knocking, I was the broker's broken

sandwich. I had to make with the flotsam in Ernest-Justin's wake. So come on, girls, it's another visit, it's another day, start me off again, ask me the question, ask me ...

DOT AND BERTHA:

Has he gone? Has he gone, Auntie Mamie, has he gone?

MAMIE:

No lovies! I can feel him right behind me, deep in the mirror at the end of the hall, locked in the leadlight diamonds of the window, walking on the water, barefooted now but with the coin on his tongue, always prepared was Ernest-Justin, always had ready in his pocket the hanky ironed into neat little squares with the final triangle flap showing the initials EJS intertwined. Well, he never used it, I don't even think he had to blow his nose. Oh, he always looked like a mild enough spaniel, he looks like one now: his sloping eyes with their sad fringed lids, his loose mouth smelling like ... What was it now? Geraniums? Geraniums, that'd be pretty close.

Listen:

Oh he smelled like geraniums

Into gerontium

Twenty years ahead

Oh yes. The age difference meant other things too of course. And being watched, I can tell you. I can see, you don't need to tell me. Trust the old bugger to track me down here. Oh well, Ernest-Justin, draw up a chair, you may as well, and here's a plaid rug for your lap that's the uniform here, we're torsos on plaid laps all of us. Take a sherry from the tray and have a slice of cake. Look! He's swallowing! His Adam's apple jumps above the stiff white collar. Bet you don't know what this is Ernest-Justin, this is Mamie's Everafter Christmas Show! But now you've put me off, you've stanced my flow. Yes. Who measured the level of the sherry bottle every evening when he got home from work? Who checked the mileage on the Bugatti to see if she'd been out and cross-examined the chauffeur to find out when and where and how long it took and what her mood was afterwards? Well, have your fill of Mac Williams now, parsimonious ghost, and hear me out. Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, do you know how Ernest-Justin got his money? Well, nor do I really but the general idea was this: he was a journalist for the Paper, in Finance. And he'd write up deposits, mines, which weren't exactly there and in the meantime his friends,

no I won't name names, I'll call him Max, well Max would float a company for the mine that wasn't, the deposits that weren't really. Max built a huge mansion on Ernest-Justin's stories. Well, the Little People, Ernest-Justin would quite fondly call them that himself, the Little People, they'd buy up these shares to try and get a leg up out of the Depression and of course, well, there was nothing there. Leave him then? I tried once or twice, I did. I took the ferry once, myself. I thought, I'll change my name, nobody'll know, I'll get ... a job. At least I had my legs. And then I looked inside my purse. It didn't even look enough for one night and then I didn't know how to catch a bus, which number, what stop. I took the ferry back and dressed for dinner. The more he shadowed me, the more I lost myself, I was going down, a tiny, tiny person inside the one he partnered. Far below the surface. I couldn't come up. Except when my nieces came to play.

BERT:

Mame? Are you ...?

MAMIE:

Oh yes, bring it on Bert. Show them the Wishing-well. The nurses keep telling me I know it very well, if we're going to be sensible it's a light for an occasional table, my *guéridon*. They let me keep it when they brought me here, wasn't that kind of them? What's that you're saying, E-J?

WILL:

Mame, I've floated a new company ...

MAMIE:

It's what? It's Metals, it's Chemicals? What is it Ernest-Justin?

WILL:

Well, let's say it's Futures I'm into now, it's a bit like a wishing-well, it's ... gold in the eye of the beholder, isn't it, Max?

BERT:

It's riding on a ratio, it's the future feel of the thing, like how much mercury to how many eels hahaha ...

WILL:

It's Culture to Nature and let's open a book on who's going to win ...

BERTHA AND DOT:

Let's play at the wishing-well, Auntie Mamie, the rain's coming and keeps on coming, the sky's in the water and the water's in the sky. They say he's floated a new one. What? Why? There's no telling where it'll end, which is bank or water ...

MAMIE:

He'll have opened a book on the flooding too. He'll be at the Weld Club now and I'll bet his socks are dry.

BERTHA AND DOT:

Tell us again, tell us while he's gone. Was it the kind Greek man you met in the hotel lobby who bought you the wishing-well light? Was it the kind Greek man?

MAMIE:

Perhaps, perhaps. But you're drenched, both of you. Little drowned rats. You've come from school? What's your mother going to say about those tunics? I send all our stuff out to the laundry. It comes back in neat piles with pins and paper in between the folds that's the main thing, isn't it? Come around to the lane entrance, dearies, come through Auntie Mamie's magic zone, the Vestibule: I'll tell you the funny faces the Magic Zone makes for you as you turn through the kaleidoscope. I drew the birds myself for the stained glass: the kingfisher, the kookaburra, the willy-wagtail, the rosella parrot their faces slide over yours as you turn through the light. And the cats, too, I had them made up in glass. See, there's Platypus and Octopus and Oedipus. The real pussycats are inside, as always when he's gone. You give them a cuddle while I heat up your Milo. Untie your shoes, that's right and drape your socks over the fire screen, good, good, my sweet rain daughters! You've made a puddle down the hall, but never mind. Getting warmer? You're getting warm all right: we're coming back to the Golden Age. Can you feel the light? The air's crackling with insects. Their wings are gilt and bright. Look at the prism rippling through the dragonfly! Come and kneel like the children at the edge of the well. Never look up at the changing sky. See how her silk sock lolls over her shoe, how they wear one another's arms around their shoulders. It's like a gentle oil, isn't it. It's like sinking into a marriage, the world is just an eiderdown and their soft hats protect their eyes from the cruel things. Here put on your hats now, lovelies, you can be the children at the well ...

PATIENT:

Sister! Sister! The fire's broken out between my toes, one, two, three, gone in the flames already, they're melting. Sister! Sister!

MAMIE:

It's autumn already. It's October; it's Italy. Listen. The Florentine hills ring with the song of migratory birds, the blackbird, the lark, those that have escaped the nets stretched between the hills of Lombardy ...

WILL:

Sing a song of sixpence

A pocket full of lies

Four and twenty pence a share

It's going to be some pie

MAMIE:

Cassandra, Bess, you haven't heard him, you haven't heard. Your ears are cupped in your soft hats. The hall is marble quiet, there's food in the larder that nobody killed for. The world ends there. You are pastel soft. The dragonfly hangs, still as a haiku, in your minds. Stay with me, my lovies. Don't let the Health People in again. You'll stick up for me, won't you? They say it smells. They say I shouldn't have the cats. They've only had an accident once or twice. He's getting on like me, aren't you, Oedipus? They say the weeds have grown too high. Just don't open the door. Look at the light globe in the depths of the well. Beneath the milky jade it glows. This is our special place you won't tell them, will you? This is our secret. See, what a pretty filament it is, like a dragonfly to haunt you. When I go, I'll let my cats escort me over the dark water, not before. Ernest-Justin has found his future between the chemicals and the eels. Haven't you, E-J?

WILL AND BERT:

Ring a ring a Mamie

The mercury's in the gravy Eels bloated, eels bloated Float on into town

MAMIE:

Don't look now, Bess, Cass. Colour sits on you like pastel dust. The whole prism is pollen again. The dragonfly ...

SISTER:

What are we doing talking to our little lamp? Mamie? Our niece has come to pick us up. We hadn't forgotten had we? Come along now. Mamie?

PROCESSION

Now if you want to go out, Mame, you'd better take a little siesta like everyone else, Sister says and hands me my cushion and rug. So here I am, a Good Girl in my adjustachair. Dot's knitting, *pearl plain, pearl plain*. Must be moss stitch she does wonders with no wool at all, says she can't keep up with all these babies. Bertha's out to it already no one's coming for her this year and Will just winked, still asking me to marry him, says he's writing me a love poem. Well, I'll read it and write him a reply. Soon we'll have a cycle.

So Cassandra says she and this woman, a neighbour, are coming to pick me up. At least it gets me out, doesn't it? And I won't have to bleat along with the Brownies or the Melville Women's Choir. Still, *Silent Night*, always had a soft spot for that one. Talk about silent nights. That Billie will have something nicer than the flagon sherry they trot out here. Oh they're trying to Do The Right Thing by Mame for Christmas, poor dears. Pick her up, settle her in a room full of strangers; drop her off. It's the dropping off that's the hardest, back to the *Come along now, got a bit too merry this Christmas, did we Mame, now, now, stop your raving ... Be a good girl, take this pill, we don't want your disturbing the other patients again like last year, do we and a nice long sleep would do us good*. No nonsense. One of these days I'll show them what a pantomime can be. A real song and dance show. When Bess comes out of that place, we'll have some good times again. Bess, my darling, who would've thought she'd end up like this? Of course it's not an ending. That's the thing, you should never accept their endings. Come to Greece with me, my Spiro said. Oh Bess was upset all right when Cassandra put an end to our games. Ernest-Justin cutting in just when the good lines began. She loved that role all right. She had me believing it myself. What a charmer she was in the summer suit. And when we danced! Never had the heart to tell her, of course, what'd be the point, now? Konstantellos, I found it in the phone book.

It's me at last behind the wheel of the Bugatti. It wasn't auctioned after all Sister found it in the carpark, waiting for me. So the road is a ribbon of moonlight along the dark foreshore. The

sprinklers shoot the water in great arcs ... I slide through tunnels, along whorled cement ramps. This is the freeway whirligig. There is a miniature deciduous forest, in the island that the freeway loops create, trapped waters where the animals come. Here is an avenue of plane trees, they interlock dappled branches. The headlights pick up a strange couple at the roadside, waiting. I press something and it seems to slow the car. A rabbit, with softly folded ears and this other one, a kind of dog, perhaps. The dog makes a musical stutter like a goat's bleat. It's as if the dog has no body, as if its head is attached directly to its hind-legs. But they have nice expressions. Should I let them in; souvenir them? It's as if they've strayed from one of those paintings we saw in Holland, his pictures of Hell. Why am I afraid? Ernest-Justin says I fill my shelves with the strangest things: Thought you would have learnt some taste after all these trips I've taken you on, he says. Well, I recognize this couple as my creatures, my travelling companions. I like the unfamiliar, I say. His voice comes from somewhere; is he in the car? Impossible he says, by the time you like it, it is no longer unfamiliar. I cannot struggle against his reason and open the back door to let the couple in. Does this funny bodiless dog include rabbits in its diet? This is a worry. Will the Health Inspectors stop the car? The rabbit raises wonderfully newborn eyes to the sky. They reflect the wind-torn clouds. The moon is a ghostly galleon, tossed upon stormy seas, I tell him. He is pleased with this. What if Rabbit gets under these pedals I am meant to press? The brindled spots are so placed on Dog's pinkish face that it's impossible to see where his features are, let alone whether they are functional. Dog, this walking head has no chance. Ernest-Justin said he always wanted to be surrounded by beautiful things; he always insisted on beauty. He will never let me in with these animals. A different voice, almost holy, comes to me and says: Take mercy upon the roadside beasts, be they non-functional, be they deformed. And should they arm themselves against you, sink tooth or claw into you, you will still obey the road signs, slow to the swoop of the road. At the intersection, I do not have to decide. The car takes the road to the left. I cannot read the sign. Someone's blocking it it's Ernest-Justin in his grey suit. What can I explain to him? He will have us all put in quarantine. This tenderness is warm, so warm. This time I will challenge him once and for all. I will keep these animals, or shield their escape. But I lean to him, through the window: I want to describe them in such a way that he cannot refuse me this company. I check the back seat: the red leather upholstery is perfectly clear they have made their escape. E-J looks perplexed; his very quiet kind of anger is there in the pressed whitened lips. Now he has seen. It is in the grey

wash of his eyes. I put my fingers to my neck and find the rabbit there, coiled around me like a stole, its tiny feet clamped into its jaws. Such tenacity! As I try to release it, I find the dog also there, hanging on. The rabbit's fur feels dry, matted like flake pastry. Is it dead? My God, I say to E-J, why did you hold me here, I could have prevented this. Now it's too late!

It's years since you fell from your pedestal, E-J says, but I see you're still attached. Well, that's your funeral, he says.

Funeral, I say. Whose funeral?

I leave him standing at the roadside, his suit fluttering in the wind the car makes. Dog and Rabbit have released their grip and are sitting nicely in the passenger seat.

It depends on what you look through to find any pattern. Sometimes, so often now, it's a tunnel I look through to the past, gaping on nothing, nothing I willed, dreamed, said or did. I just find there a rip in the fabric of reason and it is through this breach that the *tendencies* come to weave their tissue, a wild multiplication parodying life, it's in this black web funnelling backwards, on and on into space that I must find the cause of this effect, the beginning of where I am now, and then Harry, shuffling from the sofa to the window, benign and morally numb, and then our son, orderly and polite, working for the war machine.

Or we find our destiny afterwards in mindless gestures, the most vulgar little object that seemed to have no reason at all. Like the souvenir that brought us together in this strange ceremony, grave and brittle in its attempts at some sort of Christmas cheer. They laughed when I sang *O Tannenbaum, o tannenbaum wie grün sind deine Blätter!* to the little sprig of saltbush Billie had propped in the bucket of sand. Then Billie called for charades it was as good as anything I suppose. We were all stiff, awkward, waiting for someone to animate us, to call the tune. It was like a wake for her, for whatever we've all lost. When she flung that little plastic dome, with its contained snow storm, she worked the strangest configuration. Are we all too tired now to probe this moment? Am I?

I never asked, it was Cass who come on strong, not long after Bess went inside and she moved in next door. She wasn't taking no for an answer. Like I had to get my act together, start managing my life. First things first, she kept saying, what about this licence? Well I suppose I needed a bit of a push. I practised the code with Kev, and even Julie who was a bit pissed off at first. Well, what could you expect, my taking help from the sister of the woman who did that to her dad?

Trying to make up for it! She'll never make up for what that woman did. What makes her think she can take over, anyway? Julie said.

What I wonder is how Bess feels with her sister carrying on in her place. The house, the cats, the auntie who's in that home. Must make Bess think sometimes she's no need to come out she may as well let her sister live her life for her. Secretly even Julie'd have to say she's happier now he's gone. But really, none of us could actually thank Bess for it, could we? *Good job you done in knocking our old man off*, we could hardly say that. And then I let her down in the trial. That Prosecutor bloke really seemed to have it in for her, or for me, couldn't work out which. In any case I thought it was better to agree with him he got me so confused: *Wouldn't you say, Mrs Millar, that it was a mere domestic* and then *alter* something I couldn't catch.

So Cass come round and put us through the paces from the little code book they gave us at the Police Station. When it's okay to shine a spot light, what speeds you can do with a caravan. Fat chance we've got to have one of them. Then at the Station, felt a silly bugger having to have Cass with me. The others, it was all right for them, new here weren't they, Vietnamese, they had an excuse not to be quick with the questions, to have a friend there to help. Anyhow, I got through, and so did Kev. That's what I'm really pleased about. Then it was the actual driving. Cass insisted too, on me using Bess's car. I said: Oh I don't feel right driving the Alfa Cass. It was really something for her, this car.

And she said: She's not dead you know.

But what if I wreck it for her? It's not like the Datsun from the Driving School.

Elsie, she said, Elsie. The one thing she really wants is for us to get you on the road. Now, careful, the gate is tight in these cars, just feel it through first, clutch, Else, clutch, handbrake, wait, you're still in first ...

Then my foot slipped and the car bunnyhopped towards Bess's garage. I was that embarrassed, felt my face going purple. But she keeps her cool, this Cassandra, never makes me feel a fool ... And then, after a few times taking that car out, it really started to get to me. I even began to change those Alfa gears in my sleep and could hear the lovely roar it gives when you accelerate. And then when I got my licence, this invitation up to Bess's friend's place for Christmas. Yours truly the driver!

After I done my Mrs de Winter for the charade (first *Mrs sounds like kisses* and then I puffed and blew and shivered for *Winter*) they said: *That was good ... Who would of thought of that ... Ah oh dear oh dear, that was terrific, Else ...* I'm sure they meant well. But they were surprised that someone like me could have a thought in her head. Then Billie said to that Lydia woman, more of a whisper, but I heard it all right: Suppose we've all got our projection room out there somewhere ... Well I thought I'd try them out. I said: Don't count on me, I can't afford one. Just to see, you know, how dumb they really thought I was. They laughed after a while. They acted like I'd made a joke, even though they thought I hadn't. Then I said: I'm not joking. You need money for these extras, these extensions. That really got them worried. Not that Mamie though, no flies on her. We Christmas strays have got to stick together, haven't we dearie, she said. We had a few laughs, us two, I can tell you.

After the charades, a rather forced idea I thought of Billie's, she suggested a walk. But Billie has a commanding way of suggesting. Say we all go down? She insisted on everyone staying over, after the drinks and all. Since I'm always accused of dozing off and I wanted Lloydie to stretch his legs, I agreed. Fortunately the pace was slow enough, what with old Mamie, even I needn't be accused of lagging. Again this brooding darkness came over Lydia, even though she'd been wiping away tears of mirth just a moment before at the charades. She was walking with her shoulders stooped. As the lighthouse beam came across the sand, I saw her lip quivering more than usual. But as usual, I blundered. What's the matter now, I said. It sounded more irritable than I felt. It sounded like a reproach I must admit.

Surely, you of all people must know that, Harry, she said. Sobs only half suppressed in her voice. Then she said: *She's paying, she's paying for all of us.*

I didn't want to risk upsetting her further. I suppose she might have meant Bess.

Oh look, I said, we've left Else and Mame behind.

Lydia shook her head in that *He'll never learn way*. Lloydie and I took the chance to wander back towards them. It certainly is a fine beach on a summer's night. The sea seemed ever so slow, black and bulky, it came wrinkling in.

Come on you two, I called. You're not going to let the procession leave you behind, are you?

Who's to say *we're* not the procession, Mamie said. Then she gathered up her skirts and linked arms with Else. As they swayed together, the lighthouse beam caught them and this four-legged shadow danced for miles along the beach.

ARIADNE'S OPTION

The black sail may well still twitch on the horizon. Heroic futures don't touch her any more. Nor does the warmly ambiguous god stepping down through the rosemary and marble, promising the stars. The kid lying on the rocky ledge, its body broken, reminds her. Mother, mother. It's the founding loss repeated in these crazy sacrifices, that keeps the gods like kites on strings, or black sails stalling at the horizon. Her mouth full of sand and grit. Brain full of sea. She shakes her head: waters roaring, she jubilates in this reverse-thirst, these oceans pouring out, she spits: sluicing sand, beaches, dunes. Her mother is a huge head on the beach, a shape chalked out on the kitchen floor. Sightless out of some piety the gods of visibility called feminine. She gives them a gaze learnt from blindness, new, tactile, intimate. Slow. Beach mother sways: light in waves, rolling dunes, eddying air. Kitchen mother rises, draws her shape: passageway, porch, suburbs, freeways fanning out ...

In the wet sand at the cave entrance, Ariadne sees that the sun has made her dark. She is black in fact. She is ready.