A Wonderland of Possible Worlds

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A Wonderland of Possible Worlds

A novel extract and an exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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Declaration

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Sections

Section One: Novel Extract

Part One of Dreamriders (first 45,000 words)

Section Two: Exegesis

A Wonderland of Possible Worlds: How Writers Create Possible Worlds, or Where is Alice, Anyway?
If it happened at all, it happened like this
Section One: Novel Extract

Part one of *Dreamriders*

(first 45,000 words)
Turtle stands, too fast, and has to lean against the door to steady himself. This is all wrong; he’s in a rotten-smelling alley, a doorway... somewhere: a main road at one end and a dead end at the other, graffiti-covered walls, syringes and beer cans lie scattered; his head is pounding; and he feels ill. He shivers, even though he knows it’s not cold, brushes himself off, he’s alright, but his legs and arms are stiff, and heads — his steps hesitant — for the road.

Three taxis pass him by before one finally stops, and he hits his head as he climbs into the front seat. A deodoriser hangs from the rear vision mirror, but it can’t hide the musty odour trapped in the seats. The radio is tuned to a talkback show.

‘Where to?’ the driver asks. His voice is dry and harsh and he smells sour.

‘FiveWilsonStreetinPort.’ He’s slurring again. Turtle hugs himself to keep warm.

The driver studies him closely. ‘Which end, King Street, or High?’

Turtle pauses. ‘High.’

‘You sure?’

‘Ofcourse...High.’

‘You’re not sick?’

‘No.’

‘Tell me if you are. I don’t want to have to clean the car, you know.’ The driver puts the indicator on and looks behind for traffic. ‘I’ll go down Mahone Street.’

Mahone? He’s on the other side of the city.

The driver pulls out into the traffic, and despite concentrating on driving, Turtle can see he’s still not too sure about this. ‘Big night?’ the driver asks.

‘Musthave,’ Turtle answers.

‘I could tell, you know. Almost didn’t pick you up. This part of town, you know...’ The driver’s words fall away. Turtle’s head nods, but he catches himself before falling asleep. The driver continues talking. ‘... have a lot of people in my taxi, you know, all sorts. You work?’ He continues before Turtle can answer. ‘I’m doing a double today. Good money...’
Dreamriders

The driver’s voice recedes. Turtle closes his eyes and dreams: the night is overcast and cold. He is running and can see his breath — white mist — when he breathes out. Rain lands, swirls and splashes, and as the droplets connect they form streams on the streets, in the alleys, on the paths and in the gutters. He falls and water splashes his face.

Getting up he runs on…

‘Hey.’ The driver is poking Turtle in the shoulder. Turtle jolts his head up. ‘We’re here,’ the driver says.

‘WhereamI?’ he slurs, wiping a dribble of saliva from his chin.

‘Your house, you know.’

‘Howmuch?’ He opens the door and bumps his head again as he clambers out of the taxi.

‘Forty-seven. Hey, where are you going?’

‘Ok.Nowhere…’ Turtle throws fifty dollars at the driver and shuts the door, then trips backwards up the gutter. The driver swears at him from inside the car and drives off.

The early morning glare hurts Turtle’s eyes. He almost doesn’t recognise his house. The front door looks familiar, but still isn’t quite right; then again, nor is he: his hands feel like they’re bloated and don’t belong to him. When he finally gets his keys from his pocket he drops them. Picking them up, he fumbles them into the lock. Wrong key. He tries again. The door opens.

Lisa is in the doorway, holding a cup of coffee. ‘You should have knocked.’

He wants to hug her, but she doesn’t wait. He follows her inside, shuts the door, then bumps his way up the hall; knocking the phone table with his knee. Coffee and toast smells greet him; normally the smell of home, but today they make his nausea worse. Lisa waits in the kitchen — at the end of the hall — arms folded and a deep frown on her face. ‘That’s the third time this month.’

Silence.

‘It’s Monday.’

He looks at her; her long, red hair is washed and pulled back and he can smell her shampoo, she is already dressed for work. She looks tired, though. Turtle sways as he tries to kiss her, but before he can she pushes the cup into his stomach so he has to take it, and moves away. Even though she is his height, her fiery hair makes her seem taller, or more imposing. It was her hair he was first drawn to.

‘This can’t go on.’
He takes a sip, ‘I know,’ then sits at the kitchen table and almost tips the chair over. The phone handset is lying among toast crusts, used tea bags, dirty knives, the coffee plunger, and honey and jam jars. Lisa hates crusts. Out of habit he picks one up and nibbles it.

‘You’re slurring again. We need help.’

‘I’m not going back there,’ he says, ‘I’m getting more herbs from…’

‘You were gone three nights. I haven’t slept since Friday.’

He hadn’t thought about that.

‘I called all the hospitals.’ She’s crying. She sighs. ‘Look. I’m late.’ She walks towards the door.

He stands — he wants to hold her — but his legs crumple and he falls into the chair. ‘But…’

‘I can’t keep doing this.’ She wipes her eyes.

‘I’ll sort it out.’

She walks back towards him, but keeps her distance. ‘How?’

‘I don’t… somehow…’

‘Tonight. We’ll talk.’ She rushes down the hall, grabs her bag and hurries out.

In a way he’s glad she’s gone; he hates arguing. He’d like to sit here all day, but has to go to work too.

He dumps his clothes on the bathroom floor and examines himself in the mirror. The bruises are worse: one spreads from his left shoulder to his chest; another runs above his right hip; and a black bruise, purple and yellow at the edges, covers both shoulder blades. The one on his hip has a hard lump in the middle. All his muscles and joints are stiff, both knees are grazed and his face doesn’t look like his anymore: dark rings under the bloodshot eyes, cracked lips, stubble. He smiles and is shocked that the response is immediate, that it is still his face. The smile looks fractured and superficial, though, and the stubble is itchy. Before anything else he shaves.

The pipes groan, like always, when he turns the taps on. Leaning on the wall he lets the hot water — it leaves red trails on his skin — massage his shoulders and back. Putting his head under, he rinses the shave cream off, then washes his hair. The water is so soothing, and he is so tired, that he decides to blame being late on the trains and stands there until the water runs cold.
After dressing, he heads towards the station — the sun is heating the day now — where he has to run to catch the train; his aching body resists the exertion. The train is packed, but, somehow, he finds a window seat, and the smells of coffee and pastries swim so thick in the air-conditioned air that he begins to feel hungry for the first time in who knows how long. A woman with bright blue eyes is sitting across from him, and having never seen such blue, he stares at her, forgetting where he is, and his stare is too long. She smiles at him; he blushes and looks out the window, wanting to look at her, but not wanting to at the same time, so he tries to think of other things. As his thoughts wonder, the movement of the train repeatedly brings him back so he attunes to the carriage: a mobile phone rings, another train passes and the windows thump from the wind, a woman turns the page of her newspaper, a man sneezes, another man shuffles, the blue-eyed woman blinks. Turtle’s eyes unfocus and he leans on the window. The page of a book is turned, a briefcase opened, a sigh breathed. Everyday things wash over him and his head nods forward.

The night is overcast and cold. The street is wet and shiny. He is running and his breath becomes white mist when he breathes out. Streetlights attempt to light up the street. Rain falls. As the raindrops land they swirl and splash and connect, forming rivulets of water full of plastic bags, cigarette butts and beer cans. He trips.

Getting up he runs on.

He passes dipsomaniacs sitting in the rain on the side of the street. Their dirty mouths are open like baby birds waiting to be fed. He passes drug-dependents lying in the gutters; stopping the water-flow. Blood trickles out of bruised veins, while syringe-fingers on shaking hands lie ready for the next…

The train jerks to a stop. The carriage is rich with the smells of perfume, deodorant, aftershave, pastries and coffee — each a reminder that it’s morning and he’s travelling to work — but the faces of the other passengers are featureless. He’s at a station; no one is looking at him — not even the blue-eyed woman. He’s relieved he’s still in the carriage. To keep himself awake he stands for the rest of his trip.

Turtle is fifteen minutes late when he bustles through the front door of the youth centre: the bell above the shopfront door jingles.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he says on his way through to the back room. ‘I’ll just be a sec.’ Turtle dumps his bag on his desk and comes back out to the middle room.
'We only just started the meeting,' Louise, the boss, says. ‘Bad night?’

‘Didn’t sleep well.’ They know he’s got insomnia.

‘Camomile before bed and no coffee after 3 pm. That’ll help.’ Brett loves his camomile.

‘I’ll try it.’ He knows camomile won’t help. ‘Speaking of coffee. You want…?’

The others nod. As soon as Turtle starts making coffee at the kitchenette, three people walk into the shopfront. Not seconds later the phones start ringing.

‘Didn’t take long,’ Louise stands. ‘Looks like it’s going to be one of those days.’ She starts off helping the people in the shopfront while Brett and Turtle answer the phones.

The day is frantic and Turtle isn’t able to make the coffees until 1:30, during a brief break in the rush. It doesn’t last long, though, and as soon as they try to have the staff meeting and lunch, the phones start again and more people come into the shopfront. They deal with everything from people asking directions, to a client who’d been kicked out of home, and it doesn’t quieten down until ten to five. They close the youth centre at five. Turtle stays back fifteen minutes to tidy up and make up for being late that morning.

The familiar clutter of the shopfront comforts him: brochures, pamphlets and books are piled around the floor; a community notice board advertises gigs, rooms for rent and bands looking for new members; and a ‘Fuck Safe, Shoot Clean’ poster hangs next to a ‘What to do if a friend overdoses’ poster. A list of free-food providers and the after-hours lawyer’s contact details are stuck in the front window. Lisa did that job for a while, that’s how they met. As he turns off the lights and closes the door the bell above jingles. He could fall asleep right now the way he feels.

On his way home he stops in at Min’s — off an alley off an alley. Min is ancient and insists on burning incense that irritates Turtle’s eyes and throat.

‘Turtle!’ Min is sitting, as always, behind a glass counter, on the middle rung of a chest-high step ladder. ‘You bad today.’ Brass-handled brown drawers stand, floor to ceiling, against the wall behind the old man, and overladen shelves cramp Turtle. He always feels too tall in here.

Min hobbles out from behind the counter, avoiding the cardboard boxes strewn on the floor, leans in close to Turtle and looks at his eyes. ‘Poke your tongue,’ he says. ‘Your eyes bad.’

‘It’s this incense.’ Turtle says. The old man’s breath smells like liquorice.
Min snorts. ‘Poke your tongue.’

Turtle shows the old man his tongue. He can taste the incense.

‘Hmm… Interesting.’

‘What’s interesting?’ He hates it when people say that.

The old man grabs Turtle’s wrist and feels his pulse. Turtle winces. ‘You sore?’

‘A bit.’

‘Poke your tongue.’

Turtle sticks out his tongue again and Min leans in to get a closer look.

‘Interesting. How are herbs?’

‘What’s interesting?’

‘Herbs not work?’

‘I ran out.’

‘Run out?! You have three month.’

‘I can’t sleep.’ He clears his throat, the incense is irritating.

Min looks into his eyes again. ‘You eyes and tongue bad. I give another. Wait.’ Min hobbles back to the ladder, and with balance that, to Turtle, seems out of place with his frailty, he climbs up, opens drawers — he has to stretch for the higher ones — grabs handfuls of herbs, gets down, pushes the ladder across, climbs up again and gets more herbs from other drawers. It’s like a dance. When he comes down off the ladder he gets herbs from drawers nearer the floor, and then blends them — in the blender on the counter — with some sort of oil, until they form a dark paste. Turtle has always wondered what type of oil it is, but has never asked. He should. When Min finishes he puts the paste in a plastic container. ‘Take two spoons in cold water before bed.’

Turtle takes the container from him. ‘Thanks. How much?’

‘Don’t take too many. These very strong. Last three month, ok.’ He sits back down on the ladder.

‘Ok.’ He coughs. ‘How much for the herbs?’

‘Three month. Yes.’ Min nods and points at him.

Turtle nods.

‘Yes.’ He stabs the air with his finger. ‘Important. Three month. Ok.’
‘Ok,’ Turtle repeats.

‘Three month.’ Min smiles and nods. ‘Ok. Three month. Seventy dollar.’

He gives Min the money.

‘Don’t take too big.’

‘I won’t.’ Turtle is glad to get out of there, away from the incense.

Turtle gets home before Lisa. By the time she arrives dinner is almost ready, and Turtle is sitting in the lounge listening to a John Coltrane CD, drinking the red wine he bought after leaving Min’s. He almost didn’t buy it he was so tired, but now he’s glad he did because the wine is helping to get rid of the taste of the incense from the back of his throat. The bottle and a glass for Lisa sit on the coffee table in front of him.

When he hears the front door open he pours her a wine. ‘In here!’

She comes in, slumps on the lounge and kicks off her shoes.

‘That’s for you.’ He points to the glass.

She picks it up. ‘Dinner smells good.’

They sip their wine.

Silence.

He looks at her.

She looks at the table.

Silence.

He doesn’t want to start, so grabs the bottle and fills his glass again. He places the bottle on the table and stares at it, reading the label with undue care.

Silence.

He shifts in his seat and sips.

Silence.

She sips.

Silence.

They both know what is coming.

‘Good wine,’ she says, starring at the bottle.
'Yeah.'

'Where’d you get it?'

'That bottle shop near Min’s.' As soon as he mentions Min he knows he’s started it.

'I’ve been thinking,' she says, without looking up from the wine bottle.

'Me too.'

'We have to go back to the Sleep Disorders Centre?'

'I told you this morn…'

'Turtle,' she implores, 'This affects both of us. They might be able to help.'

He doesn’t want to hurt her. ‘They didn’t last time. And, anyway, I’ve already got more herbs from Min.’

'They aren’t working.'

'These ones are stronger.'

She faces him. ‘That’s not the point.’

'I told you, I don’t want to go there.' He stands and walks to the kitchen.

'Why?’ she calls out after him.

'I don’t trust them.'

'Why not?’

'I just don’t.'

'I don’t want to fight, but…'

'Then drop it.'

'I’m worried!'

Turtle bends down to open the oven. His vision slips away and the smell of the food overwhelms him.

He falls to the floor, drops his glass, and smacks his head against the tiles. The slate is cold and feels like it’s burning his skin, and the sound of glass fragments grinding against the tiles hurts his ears.

'Turtle!' He hears Lisa in the distance…

The night is overcast and cold. The street is wet and shiny. He is running and his breath becomes white mist when he breathes out. Streetlights attempt to light up the street and rain falls. As the raindrops land
they swirl and splash and each droplet connects with others, forming torrents of water full of plastic bags, urine, cigarette butts, faeces, beer cans and blood.

He runs on.

Alcoholics sit, trembling, in the rain on the side of the street. Their dirty mouths open like baby birds waiting to be fed. Junkies lie in the gutters and stop the water-flow. Blood trickles from punctured veins, while shaky syringe-fingers wait for the next shot. Their eyelids weigh on their faces, drag the skin down and stretch their foreheads.

He runs on.

The only sound is the water-muffled noise of his shoes on the bitumen; that is until he splashes through a deep puddle and the polluted water soaks the bottom of his pants.

He runs on.

He is being followed…

He hears someone yell. ‘Wake up!’

He drags his eyes open. Awake-and-asleep, he can feel himself being shaken. He lashes out in front of him, at the junkies and the alcoholics (and Lisa), they’re (she’s) too close. He looks straight at them (at her).

Where is he?

‘Wake up!’

The distant voice is familiar and foreign.

‘Wake up!’

He thinks he wants to wake up. The shaking feels like a violent push and pull and he recognises the voice as Lisa’s, but it’s so close to him that her breath sounds like a storm; it smells like vinegar. The alcoholics and junkies are gone. It sounds like she is shouting. He turns away. ‘Talk softly.’

‘Sorry,’ she whispers. ‘Can you stand?’

‘I don’t know.’

She helps him up. He wants to be close to her, but has to pull away because her touch hurts. He stumbles.

She grabs him and makes him lean on her. ‘I’m calling the Sleep Disorders Centre.’
Turtle can’t protest, his headache is so severe, and has no choice but to let her sit him down and call the Centre.

2.

Lisa knows she has to keep this together — for Turtle. She’s good in a crisis at the time, but falls apart later on. She hates seeing him like this, and when they get to the Centre she has to help him from the taxi and support him as they walk up the driveway. The front door is locked, so she presses the intercom button.

‘Hello.’ Someone answers.

‘I called earlier. Lisa and Turtle. We’re here to see Dr Evans.’

‘I’ll come and get you.’ The intercom clicks off.

She’s never seen Turtle this helpless, he’s leaning next to the door, his eyes are closed, he’s twitching and his breathing is forced. She gently massages the nape of his neck, but he pulls away. ‘Sorry,’ she whispers and starts massaging again, softer this time, but he pulls away again. She runs a hand through her hair. He’s falling from her — or worse, maybe he’s pushing her away — and she doesn’t know what to do.

The door opens and the man in the doorway is so tall he has to hunch to avoid hitting his head. Lisa smiles, relieved there’s someone else to fill the space between her and Turtle. She can smell coffee, he’s holding a chipped brown mug, and stale cigarette smoke.

‘I’m Doctor Evans. Come through.’ His voice is comforting. He slurps from the mug and steps back into the dim hallway.

‘Thanks for seeing us on such short notice.’ She hates that slurping sound. Turtle does it when he eats soup.

‘We’re open late.’ He smiles. ‘This way.’ Despite his size, he moves in that quiet, confident way graceful people do without realising. They follow him down the hall, and at each door they pass Lisa feels more uneasy, as if the walls are falling in. Turtle can’t help her, either; he can hardly walk. It’s only when they pass the ‘QUIET PLEASE’ sign that she realises what’s wrong. As soon as the front door was closed it went silent. From outside, the building looked like a simple weatherboard house, but here there’s no noise at all, apart from Turtle’s breathing and the odd squeak from a loose floorboard.
At the end of the hall Doctor Evans ushers them into a simply furnished office: a desk, four lounge chairs, a coffee table, a bookshelf and a coffee maker sitting on a wooden stool. No curtains or blinds on the window. Compared to the hall, the room is spacious, although it’s eerily quiet too: there’s no traffic noise, no air conditioning, nothing is getting in from the outside.

‘Take a seat.’

Turtle drops into a lounge chair. Lisa sits in the one next to him and puts her hand on his knee. The room smells like the doctor, only stronger.

‘Now, Turtle.’ He grabs Turtle’s file from a pile on his desk, slurps more coffee and sits in the lounge opposite them. It looks too small to hold him, but he fits easily. ‘What’s the problem.’

Turtle sits up straighter and glances at Lisa. ‘I’m falling asleep in the day.’

‘I see.’ He sips his coffee and opens the file. ‘And the slurring?’

‘It happens sometimes.’

‘When did this start?’

‘A couple of weeks ago.’

‘A couple of weeks ago.’

‘More like four or five months,’ Lisa interrupts. ‘It’s getting worse.’ She didn’t want to answer for him, but…

He addresses Turtle. ‘Do you have trouble sleeping at night?’

‘Sometimes.’

The doctor nods. ‘How often?’

‘Three or four times a week maybe.’ Turtle shifts in his seat. Lisa wants to help him, he looks so uncomfortable. Maybe she shouldn’t have brought him here.

‘Is any of this connected to strong emotions?’

‘No.’

The doctor writes in the file. ‘How many alcoholic drinks would you have in a week?’

‘A wine or two with dinner, a couple of times a week.’

‘Ever been addicted to alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs?’

Turtle shakes his head.

‘How many coffees would you have in a day?’ He slurps from his cup again.
Lisa wants to say something about the slurping.

‘Two or three’ Turtle slurs.

He writes in the file. ‘Do you have any memory loss or paralysis after the episodes?’

‘Yes,’ Lisa interrupts. ‘He can’t walk sometimes and as you can hear he slurs.’

He ignores her and addresses Turtle again. ‘Any memory loss or paralysis?’

Turtle shifts in his seat. ‘Sometimes.’

The doctor nods. ‘Any night terrors or dreams?’

‘No.’

He answers before she can. She takes her hand from Turtle’s knee and frowns at him.

‘I see.’ The doctor slurps his coffee again and writes more notes, then closes the folder. ‘I’ll have to do some tests.’

‘What type of tests?’ Lisa asks.

He ignores her. ‘Your symptoms indicate Narcolepsy.’

Turtle is looking at Doctor Evans and won’t turn towards her.

‘What can we do?’ she asks, leaning forward in her seat.

‘But what’s concerning me.’ He takes a brochure from the holder on his desk behind him and hands it to Turtle. ‘Is that you’re showing signs of Cataplexy without the associated emotional triggers, nightmares or hallucinations.’

‘He has nightmares,’ she says. It feels like betrayal, but she had to do something.

Turtle glares at her.

‘I thought you said you didn’t have nightmares?’ The doctor opens the folder again.

Turtle responds slowly. ‘… Only…somet…’

‘They’re getting worse,’ Lisa adds. She started this, now she has to finish it.

‘Do you remember them?’

He shakes his head.

‘He has a recurring one he remembers.’ She puts her hand back on his knee — an attempted apology for the ambush.

‘Explain it to me.’
Turtle scowls at her. ‘I’m running and it’s raining.’ He moves his leg so her hand slides off. ‘That’s all.’

She wants to say more, but doctor Evans is too quick to ask him another question.

‘Are they visual or emotional?’

‘They’re not clear,’ Turtle says.

He won’t look at her. She wish he’d just answer properly.

‘Ok.’ No one speaks while the doctor writes up his notes. Lisa stares at both of them at different times.

Neither look at her. Doctor Evans closes the file.

‘Is there anything we can do?’ she asks.

‘I’m going to start you off taking one 50mg Concordin tablet before bed each night for two weeks, to get your sleeping back in order. Let me know if the dreams change.’

Lisa sighs loudly. ‘Is that all?’

‘I’ll book you into our sleep therapy unit for a week so we can measure your blood pressure, brain function eyes, take blood tests, urine tests — that sort of thing,’ He drinks more coffee. ‘And of course monitor your sleep.’

Lisa folds her arms across her chest. ‘I was hoping we could do something now.’

Turtle frowns. ‘The doctor knows what he’s doing.’

‘This’ll explain it.’ He takes a brochure, this time from the holder on the coffee table, and hands it to Turtle. ‘I’ll get the Concordin… Oh, and we have a weekly Dream Group where people discuss their dreams and sleep.’

‘We already tried that.’

‘If you have their number,’ Lisa says.

‘I’ll grab the prescription…’ He leaves the office, taking his coffee and Turtle’s file with him.

Lisa stands, crosses to the window and watches Turtle read the brochures. There’s nothing in there he doesn’t already know. ‘Why didn’t you say something?’ she asks after it becomes apparent he isn’t going to look at her. ‘We came here for help.’

He keeps reading.

‘Well?!’ She crosses her arms again.

He looks up at her. ‘They can’t help me.’
‘This is about us.’

‘They can’t help us then.’

‘We could tell them.’

‘What would we say?’

She stares at him — he is motionless — and realises she can’t remember his eye colour anymore.

‘We’d both end up in the psych ward.’ He rests his head in his hands. ‘I don’t know what you expected.’

‘Maybe we need to…’

The doctor ducks as he comes through the door. ‘I’ve made an appointment for two weeks.’ He hands Turtle the medicine bottle and an appointment card, then leads them back to the front door.

3.

When they get home, after a silent taxi ride, Turtle goes straight to the kitchen, takes Min’s herbs and four Concordin tablets, then goes to the study, closes the door, turns on the dream machine, and turns the lights off.

The machine looks like a normal lamp with a wooden base. It has a small motor, and what would be a lampshade is actually a cylinder with three rings of equally spaced holes. The motor hums as it spins the cylinder around the lit-up globe, which sends speckled light dancing around the room. He sits on the floor, puts his face close to the machine and closes his eyes so the light flashes onto his eyelids: like when he was a kid and he’d close his eyes and look out the car window so the sunlight would flicker through leaves or from behind buildings and leave shadows on his eyes.

At first he can’t feel anything and the lights bounce and dart. After a while patterns creep up on him; always do. Normally clear and fast, they’re hazy and slow this time, and the colours are discoloured: the yellows dull, the silvers washed out, the reds pale. He wants them to be how he remembers them: bright…exciting…hyper. Maybe this is the way they’ve always been? He searches for a bright full pattern, a colour that is warm, something he can catch hold of, but there is a silence and a chill in them; he never noticed that before. They’re This and they’re That, not committing to being Anything or Anywhere…until the rhythm, the rhythm, the rhythm. It’s ticklish at first, then smooth and fast, then warm. There it is, the way he remembers it. He’s feeling groggy, though. Everything’s slow, but it’s there, at least. He goes under
it and it’s deep and as it strengthens it flows from one point to another to another, then across him. Blood
pumping in out in out, breath breathing in out in out, shimmering: iridescent. Something bursts: replicates
itself, then melts…further…and further…and further…into one…into him. Glistening, Gleaming. It builds…

‘Turtle!’

He opens his eyes. He was almost gone. The room is too bright.

‘What are you doing?’

His face feels like ants with pins for legs are running just under his skin and he can’t see or hear her
properly. ‘I was…goingtosort…itout…’

She has the Concordin bottle in her hand. ‘How many?’

He shakes his head.

‘How many!?’

‘Four.’

‘For fuck’s sake Turtle!’ She throws the bottle to the floor.

He falls backwards, able to hear and see everything, but unable to feel his body, unable to move.

‘Turtle!’ She kneels down and grabs the front of his shirt and shakes him.

He feels limp.

‘Turtle!’ His two top buttons fall open. ‘Don’t do this.’

He can see she’s seen the bruises. He’s so sorry. She won’t take her eyes off them. He wants her to stop
looking at him like that.

‘Don’t!’ She shakes him again. ‘Get up!’

He can’t move.

She runs from the room, returning seconds later with the phone. ‘Ambulance,’ she says. The word is
soggy as it flops from her.

The night is overcast and cold, the street is foggy and the streetlights give little light. When he breathes
out his breath becomes white mist that hangs leaden in the air before dissipating. He tries to run, but his
eyes won’t open and his feet are heavy. The faster he tries to go the slower he gets. Rain falls, lands, swirls
and splashes, each droplet connecting with others, forming torrents of polluted water: plastic bags, urine,
cigarette butts, faeces, beer cans and blood.
He stumbles on.

He passes drunks sitting, trembling, in the rain on the side of the street. Their eyes half-shut and their mouths dropped open with dribble running down their chins. He passes addicts: track marks puncture their skin, syringes lie in their shaking hands, ready for the next shot. From the corners of his eyes all their faces look clear, he knows he knows who they are, but can’t put faces to names; when he tries to focus on them their faces smudge and don’t resemble anyone he knows.

He stumbles on.

He splashes through a deep puddle and the polluted water soothes the bottom of his pants.

He stumbles on, runs down an alley and hides. In a doorway. Nothing is clear. Crouching, he closes his eyes. He is scared. He has been found. His eyes won’t open, no matter how hard he tries.

A gun fires.

Twice.

He drags his eyelids open and squints against the glare. The alley is strewn with garbage, his shirt is ripped and dirty and he is soaked. Shivering, he steadies himself and stands. A swarm of flies buzz around an overflowing skip, and the smell of rotting garbage makes a prickly sick rise to his throat. He vomits and bits splatter his shoes. Stumbling towards a road, he has to stop when another wave of nausea makes him vomit again. He lurches onto the busy footpath towards a neatly dressed woman. ‘Help?’ He slurs. She veers from him and he falls.

‘What are you doing?’ A voice says from behind him. ‘Been for a swim.’

The shooter? Turtle turns his head. Two people, silhouettes — the sun behind them — are standing over him. They are both tall, but one is fatter than the other.

‘Bit pissed, hey,’ the Fatter One says.

‘Or on the nod,’ the Skinny One says.

‘He stinks,’ Fatter says. ‘Pissed yourself did you.’

‘I don’t know what’s...’ He tries to stand, but wobbles and falls into their legs.

‘See that,’ Skinny says as he jumps back, ‘that’s assaulting an officer.’
They drag him to the police car and throw him in the back, which is sticky and stinks of sweat. The officers get in the front. A metal grate separates them from him. Turtle looks at the busy street outside for help. People are walking past, so close he can almost touch them, but no one will look at him or the car. If they did, he could mouth the word ‘help’.

‘No one’ll miss him,’ Skinny says.

‘I need to call my girlfriend. She’s a lawyer.’

‘Yeah,’ Fatter says.

‘My girlfriend’s a lawyer. Let me call her!’

‘Yeah, right,’ Skinny says.

Fatter starts the car, turns the police radio off and drives.

They take so many back roads that Turtle can’t figure out how far they’ve travelled or where they are. At the headland, Fatter drives beyond the end of the bitumen and along a dirt track to a small clearing near the cliff. Turtle hears waves crashing against the rocks below.

‘I need to…’

‘Shut the fuck up,’ Fatter says.

‘Know where we are?’ Skinny asks.

Turtle looks around outside the car, but doesn’t recognise this place.

‘The Bluff,’ Fatter says.

This means nothing to him.

‘A known sui-spot,’ Skinny says.

They wouldn’t. He’s too scared to say anything more. They’d have to handcuff him to get him out of the car, but they’d have to take them off before they pushed him, so there’d be a chance. If he did get away, it’d be his word against theirs. There’s no one around, though, so there wouldn’t be any witnesses. People are surfing out beyond the point, but they wouldn’t see anything. He tries the door. Sweat is sliding down his back and his shirt is sticking to the seat. Maybe if he keeps quiet they’ll get bored and let him go.

The officers smoke cigarettes.

Time passes…
They smoke more cigarettes.

Time passes…

Fatter starts the engine and drives.

It is well after midday when they get to the station. As they lock him in a holding cell Fatter leans in close.

‘Listen you cocksucker. We could have done you today. Don’t let me ever see you again you fucking dero.’

He leaves.

The cell is small, with one harsh, bright light, a broken toilet and a falling-apart bed, and the whitewashed walls are filthy. The bed squeaks when he sits on it. The toilet stinks. He needs to call Lisa.

Time passes…

A door creaks open and a young officer walks past Turtle’s cell.

‘CanIcallmygirlfriend.She’smylawyer!’

Time passes…

The officer walks back.

‘Ineedtocallmylawyer!’

‘Sobering up?’

‘Mylawyer.’

Time passes…
He is so tired that he can’t keep his eyes open, so he lies down, his wet shoes at the toilet end of the bed. To try and stay warm he hugs himself, even though his feet are the coldest part of him. The bedsprings dig into his aching body; the bruises are getting worse, he can feel it.

Time passes…

The door opens again and he hears more footsteps. ‘You can go,’ the officer says as he opens the cell and takes Turtle to a back door. ‘Don’t come back.’ He pushes Turtle out into the night, then slams the door shut.

‘Hey!’ Turtle hits the door. ‘Arseholes!’ Clients at work have told him about this. The cops release people late at night so it’s difficult to get home. They’re not supposed to. He kicks the door, but he knows it’s useless.

The streets are dark and empty and he soon becomes lost; turning left, then right; this way and that. One minute he’s going one way; the next, turning back the way he came. Down a side street, then another. There should be a public phone here somewhere. Right, then left. Right, right, left. Then down a road. Then under a rail bridge.

The underpass is poorly lit; the grimy fluorescent lights, caged behind wire mesh, cast elongated shadows that distort the path. It’s chilly under here. He shivers. Something moves in the shadows in front of him. At first there is just an outline in the washed-out half-light, but eventually he sees it’s a man, who is taller than Turtle and makes no sound as he passes. This unnerves him, so he walks faster still, watching the man, feeling like anything could happen. He probably couldn’t defend himself, because the man is so much bigger than him, but he has to be prepared. He is calmed when the man gets to the other end of the underpass. The man, the man, the man. What is it about him?

The man stops, turns and yells. ‘Are you here!? ’

Turtle faces the man.

The man runs out from under the bridge, along the road and into the train station.
For no reason he can understand, Turtle follows the man into the urine smelling station — a peeling sign with a blue arrow points towards a kiosk and reads ‘chips, hotdogs, pies’. They run through to a back street; then along alleys, down paths, and through more streets. Rain falls and soon everything smells summer-wet.

The night is overcast and cold; the street wet and shiny. His breath becomes white mist in the dim light. The rain is falling horizontal in the wind and lashes his face. Water cascades down the sides of buildings as it overflows from guttering; downpipes groan under its weight; and streets flood as garbage blocks storm water drains and sewage backs up and is flushed out. When he recognises where he is he stops running.

He is running again, and gaining on the man.

He doesn’t want to do this so stops running.

He is running again.

He passes those drunks again, sitting, trembling, in the same spots in the rain on the side of the street. Their eyes are almost closed and their mouths have dropped open. The lines on their faces tell stories of loss and pain and dependence. He stops running.

He is running after the man again.

He passes addicts: the red, scaly skin on their arms has been scratched at until it bleeds; the syringes they hold are full, ready; the spoons have been discarded. They stretch towards him and beg. He searches for somewhere to run to: the police station, the rail bridge, anywhere. He can’t make out direction, loses balance, half falls; he can’t put faces to names; he doesn’t know where he is.

Ahead of him, the man almost loses his footing.

Turtle stumbles through a deep puddle. Pollution soaks his pants. He runs on.

Something is behind him. He is behind him. He is yelling ‘Run!’ He is chasing the man. Whatever this is, it’s inside him, using his own body to infect himself. The rain falls hard now. He runs down an alley and hides. Cowering in a doorway he closes his eyes and covers his face with his hands. At times everything is so clear, but at other times nothing is, because there is a distance between him and the alley, him and his(?) pursuer, him and his(?) body, him and his(?) pain. And the distance obscures. Even though his eyes are
closed he sees the (his?) bruising, the (his?) blood and the (his?) trauma. A heavy shadow falls across him.

He has been found.

A gun fires.

Twice.

His eyes jolt open and he hears himself scream.

He is in an alley...somewhere.

4.

There are no lights on when he gets home. ‘Lisa!’ He can’t get through the front door quick enough. ‘Lisa, we’ve got to go!’ He wants to know she’s ok and tell her everything will be fine — even though he doesn’t believe it himself. ‘Lisa?’ He can’t stop himself from yawning as he runs to their bedroom and turns the light on. The house doesn’t look like his home any more and makes him feel unwelcome; the quiet descends; he yawns and has to fight hard against sleep. ‘Lisa!’ She would have called out if she were here, but partly out of hope and partly out of not knowing what else to do he searches over and over again. ‘Lisa!’ He yawns. He can’t stop. He goes to all the rooms and turns the light on. He yawns. Then he goes through all the rooms again searching for Lisa, and when he can’t find her he turns the light off. He can’t stop himself from doing it again and again.

In the study, this is the last room and all the other lights are now off, he calls her mobile. It rings from the hall, and when he sees her bag there on the phone table his shoulders slump. She never leaves without her bag or phone. He hangs up.

Flopping on the lounge he yawns as he stares at the phone, putting off calling the police or hospitals, or the Sleep Disorders Centre; he doesn’t know which is worse, either way she’ll have been arrested, or injured or...he doesn’t want to think about it. Another yawn. He wishes he’d stop yawning. The wine bottle and glasses are still on the coffee table, he hadn’t noticed before. He stares at the phone again hoping it’ll dial itself, but has to resign himself and call the police. Just then the front door opens; his relief is immediate. He rushes to the door.

He is not in the hall; he hasn’t moved and he feels like he’s in a familiar place that he’s never been before. ‘Lisa!’ He can’t hide the worry in his voice as he runs to the front door (again?). When she’s not there he
closes the door and is so desperate to sleep now that he lies down in the hall. He knows he shouldn’t, but the morning’s quiet wraps around him and makes him feel safe somehow. He yawns. When he hears the front door opening (for a second or third time?) he tries to get up, but his eyes are heavy and won’t open. He yawns, stands shakily, puts one hand on the wall to orient himself, holds his other arm out in front and goes towards the noise, where he fumbles for the handle, finally managing to open the door.

His eyes open with the door, but he’s on the couch — the room is askew. The wine bottle and glasses are still on the table. ‘Lisa!’ He jumps up (again?) and runs to the front door (again?). When she’s not there he closes the door (again?).

He is peering into the darkness outside (again?). He closes the door and almost steps on the handset on his way back up the hall. He stares at it for a long time because he doesn’t want to pick it up, but he has to because she might be hurt. When he hears the front door (again?) he rushes to it. There’s no one there.

He is lying on the hallway floor. He gets up and phones the hospitals (again?).

He is on the lounge, exhausted, when the front door opens. Has he moved at all tonight? He gets up and walks to the top of the hall and leans against the wall. He can’t keep doing this. When the door does open and Lisa does walk in there’s a sense of inevitability about it; it had to happen at some point. Even from this distance and in the bad light he can see she looks ill. He races down and almost knocks her over in his rush to help. Her eyes are puffy and bloodshot. This is all his fault and he never wants to let her go again. She pushes him away and sways past him up the hall.

Her rejection hurts. ‘What happened?’ He tries not to, but can’t help yawning. ‘Are you ok?’

‘No.’ She lifts her shirt without turning around and shows him the bruises. ‘I dreamt too.’ She yawns and almost falls over.

He wants to tell her it’s all his fault, and to protect her. He tries to help.

She pushes him away again. ‘I’ve had it.’ She makes her way to the couch, sits and yawns.

Now she’s slurring too. He yawns.

‘I thought you were overdosing.’ She crosses her arms across her chest, yawns, then, staring even harder, speaks clearly and evenly, so she doesn’t slur. ‘Don’t Ever Do That To Me Again.’

He sits next to her and looks down. ‘I needed to get to the Dreaming.’

‘No you didn’t.’
He yawns and his eyes drop shut. Everything sounds peaceful: his breath... Lisa’s breath... a car whooshing past outside... the dawn chorus.

‘I feel like something’s slipping,’ she slurs.

When her voice glides to him across the top of a sleepy fog: near and far at the same time, he is almost asleep it takes some time to assemble the meaning of the words. ‘We have to get to the Dreaming,’ he says and opens his eyes drowsily.

‘No.’

‘But...’ Weariness crashes down on him. Again, he can’t stop from yawning, but this time his mouth stays open for a long time. Are you alright?’ he asks slowly. His jaw is aching now.

Lisa shakes her head. ‘What’s wrong?’

It takes minutes for her to finish speaking. He breathes deep, it takes a long time for his lungs to fill, and with a lot of effort stands, but another wave of fatigue washes over him: it starts at his head, then flows down, buckling his knees. He falls onto the couch and almost passes out. Their faces are only millimetres apart — it feels like years since they’ve been this close. She has fallen asleep and looks so peaceful, so serene — too serene. He scares himself with the thought and holds his breath as he listens for hers. To his relief, her breathing is there, so slow it takes minutes for her to inhale and exhale, but it’s there. ‘Wake up. I... We have to go, now.’ He gently taps her face.

She stirs.

‘We need to get to the Dreaming.’ He grabs Lisa’s hand and pulls her up. His muscles and joints seize as he feels the full heaviness of his body.

‘I said no!’ Lisa falls back, dead weight, eyes closed, dragging him down with her, and disappears.

Turtle does nothing for a long time, not breathing, not blinking, not moving — he doesn’t want to move. The slow time thickens his breath and slows his mind. He has to find her. What’s he doing staring at an empty couch? There is a long time between his thought and his decision to move. There is a long time between his decision and his action. The slowness is painful, his body screaming to move, but not being able to.

He struggles up, yawns long, then crawls across the floor. Every movement, every thought feels like it’s being dragged through mud and pulls against his needing to act fast. He yawns. The spaces between his
movements grow deeper in this slow time and he can hear all the thoughts that occur between thoughts. It takes a lot for him to keep himself going (he wants to sleep), and get to the study door. Across the room the dream machine is right where he left it, and although it’s only metres away, he doesn’t know if he can make it.

A long time slips down the wall and lodges between the cracks in the floorboards, and just like that long time, a wrongness also slipped into the room, sneaking in under the cover of darkness or maybe brashly walking in the full light of day. There is something wrong here, something he can’t understand. But it’s more than that. He’s affected, the whole room’s affected; they’re somehow injured by this, erased. Minutes pass as he glances across the room — and those minutes grow longer as the slow time protracts. Even his hands, when he looks at them, are somehow incomplete.

Left is gone, itself disappeared and he is overtaken by the fear: the fear of something old, of something forever growing, of something swallowing him. The fear of disappearance without a trace, of nothingness nowhere, and as the disappearances continue he falls into doubt, doubt about what was here before, because everything that’s not here is still here, somehow, but is too far gone to be thought of as still being here. So there is a trace, that trace is the disconcertion, and that is what saddens and scares him.

He has to get to the dream machine — if it’s still there, he can’t be sure of that, even though he saw it only minutes (hours?) ago. He yawns long again, using his right arm to drag himself along, that other arm isn’t there, but still is in some way, the way it has always been(?). The machine is there, he can see it through his right eye, and he focuses everything he’s got on it. Beads of sweat roll down his face and are almost stationary through the air as they fall to the floor. This slow time, from wherever it came, must not win. Keep going, he tells himself, keep going, nearly there, don’t sleep. It takes him hours to crawl to the machine, closer and closer, inching his way, slowly, slowly, bit by bit, and he can hardly stay awake. Only minutes pass. Once there he turns it on…faces the machine…everything takes so long and is so tiring he almost falls asleep and has to stop his head from nodding forward…he moves in closer to the machine. It should still work…

Closing his eyes brings a release; it was taking such effort to keep them open. He is floating through a mist towards lights, their archetypes following close behind in the slow time; their languid colours smudging; warmth and brightness sneaking upon him, catching his attention without being attention
seeking; pulling telescopic: far away, then closer, then nearer, then next to, then occupying; his collected focus magnifies so all awareness moves from heaviness to weightless rhythm, rhythm, rhythm…attracting him into slow slow slow…

…From the beginning again looks like someone I don’t know the foundations dull at the edge, obtuse and fractured they still find me and create no time, play time, under time so I know I am going under, finding under, being under; being near the things I take for granted, near the things I have known to feel over the years: I know to take deep time because of its reclamation the confession begins the answer me the statement. I start forgetting myself. My Father’s Father’s Father’s Father’s Father’s Father bought night wings and a long time ago everything changed and I was low and people wouldn’t speak to me but I have a heavy load; night spores spring the things and thoughts live underneath the river bed near the things we take for granted and all we learn to feel and know in the years are the lights are the clouds are the pulse laden with colours and feelings and secrets and low lying silhouette houses flowing into all the forgotten places, they are expensive, I wish I could stay until the time when light breaks and there is something in the way it moves uneven, in the way it moves concerned, in the way it moves confident, in the way it moves blatant. I take cool skin watch me my time new visions come to me and they are buried deep beneath the covers of hands and thinkers and makers and fourteen-day-long words that cry silky snow-sheets along the wind-blasted sides of a white beach-cliff; then clouds become rivers of lights bend like ribbons and flow like tributaries and inundate in a common rhythm that saturates movements and gestures so they speak in geometry and their transparencies emerge next to anew surfaces that appear sophisticated, but are crude and jagged and they merge and they fuse and they invert and they blur length and breadth and meaning, and the surfaces decelerate, relationships cease and take another turn and another and another and there is no direct, just inference and gaps and surge and overflow and the lights separate and drift towards me and motion over me and I let them so I can go under deep river, deep pleasure: call me under, hear me under, make me under, take me under and there was a problem when my Father’s Father’s Father’s Father’s Father’s Father found ways to talk around others, around the things that aren’t there and don’t let it out don’t let it walk away don’t let it fall. I forget myself and cross that threshold into the half-space between waking and dreaming.
The Hypnagogic is thick and grainy, it irritates his skin and is cold. He’s never felt anything here before and it takes some time to adjust. Then what he estimates seeing to be, happens: a dream ruptures from the Dreaming’s flesh — it looks like flesh — screams and explodes into fragments that add to the Hypnagogic’s viscosity. The scream is torturous and he covers his ears, but noise flows differently here and he hears the scream as it brushes against him; he is crying, but before he knows he is crying, the lesion fills with thick, dark blue blood, and he wants to go to it, he could rip his clothes up and use them as bandages or something — if he’s wearing clothes. Normally he doesn’t think about anything like this because, normally, there isn’t anything to think about; there is no in, or on, or out, or under; time is not a time, place is not a place; there is an understanding, though, always an understanding, a uniformity that renders the Dreaming and the Hypnagogic sense-less, seamless, littoral: separate and united. Normally there is no beginning or end.

He’s falling now and looks in the direction he thinks is down because there is no proof he is falling, just a feeling: he wakes, sleeps and dreams, and his instinct is to grab hold of something and to grope for air, even though he isn’t suffocating. There is nothing to hold onto and there is no air.

People all around are falling too; all falling at the same rate he is; they could be stationary. They try to communicate, but there is no atmosphere, it’s not an environment for communication. There are clouds below and as he gets closer to them their songs rise and make the sky tranquil, and he understands they are all floating on the clouds’ songs.

Inside the clouds the songs are instantly recognisable and carry him along, this concert of songs, which he danced to as a child in another time in another place; somewhere they hide their identity, these songs, like an ocean of sound, being typical of a time but timeless. They are his songs, their songs, reminding him of Lisa. He calls to her, sings, his voice pitches low, but the songs change to accommodate him, develop with complexity and synchrony.

When he drops from the clouds the songs cease and the hollow this leaves is unmistakable. He can’t recall them now and his dejection is only matched by the euphoria he felt before. He looks in the clouds’ direction, to find a way back to them, but his vision is blocked by falling people and dreams. He is scared by a new scared. They fall like rain. They are rain. He is rain. He searches the rain’s feelings, their feelings, and in doing so exposes himself, ceases to be aware of only himself; his mind absorbs where the rain’s falling from, where it’s falling to, and becomes diffuse. The idea that he is an individual, alone, unravels; they are...
one whole, briefly broken into droplets only so their consciousnesses can re-merge on the ground as puddles and streams and rivers and seas. Stopping to breathe a moment — he didn’t know rain could breathe — he takes in the tender air, at least to him it’s tender, and he lets his feelings branch out and hears understanding that is not his. Inferences, reservations, messages not spoken, ideas not acted upon make themselves, for the first time, known to him — they lay out before him like wood-grains, each grain a different meaning. He understands there are many who are as confused and as scared as he is. There are other dreamriders, but aren’t as many as he would have hoped. He does everything he can to attract Lisa’s attention, but there are too many reservations between them. He has to believe she’s out there. The dreamriders understand where they are but don’t understand what’s going on. They are also, all of them, awake: they can’t be.

The ground may not have the shape of ground, may not look like any ground he has seen before, but it has the feeling of ground. (He didn’t know rain could see.) It’s there, then it’s not, then it is again: barren, though, non-physical, and its substance, or lack of, is undeniable; it disorients any sense of self and is vast, in the way oceans and deserts are: little contrast, few subtleties. His landscape fills his mind and this makes him insecure. When the rain gets close to the ground that isn’t ground and changes back into people the isolation weakens him, weakens them all.

Turtle pulls up and hovers, dodging falling people and dreams. The horizon looks so close and so far, and nothing breaks the flat. He’s cold. Some of the dreams can fly, with most tumbling and spinning, eventually crashing into the ground that isn’t ground, but others aren’t as able as him. The people fall like they’re falling asleep, some on their stomachs, some on their sides, others on their backs (some still snoring).

A dream knocks his shoulder as it falls, pushing him so he tumbles in the air. For the instant they touch he lives it: the elation lures him so completely that when he can’t catch it he flies after it, but is too slow and can only watch as it collides with the ground that isn’t ground. It screams and thrashes about like a fish gulping for air. It hurts so much to see this that he forgets himself, only just managing to stop from colliding himself.

The irregular screams of those dreams still living drags something from inside him. He is about to dive and pick the dream up when blue starts oozing from it. It soon stops moving. It didn’t last long. He hovers for some time because he doesn’t know what to do, because there is little comfort in death, least of all for
those who survive, and because his earlier elation is dulled by pain and fear. The only comfort he can take — and he knows it’s a cliché — is that it didn’t suffer long.

He lands far from that dead dream only to be surrounded by hundreds, thousands, if not millions more. So concentrated are they in the sky that their sheer numbers opaque the light. Such a threatening light, blackout, so shattered and fractured that it feels like it’s going to sleep itself. There are no clouds, not any more, he lost them a long long time ago, no stars, no sun, no moon, but there is a fury in some quarters, a fear in others, confusion in yet others. Mostly confusion, even he can sense that. A dream falls nearby, then another and another. Some disintegrate on impact and turn into blue mush; others shatter, crunching and cracking, their bones — do they have bones? — snapping. No wonder they all scream. The build-up of dead and dying dreams forms hills that look like a junk yard piled on top of a garbage dump, all dreck and scattered oddments. It’s unstable underfoot as he dodges the falling: some flash across the grubby sky; others flutter directionless… meaningless; others drop straight down, dead weight. The sky isn’t smooth, either, there are obvious flaws, smudges and marks, distortions, like old photographs with grit on a lens or hair on a negative; as if it’s been scrunched up and smoothed out but the wrinkles remain. The more people and dreams that fall, the more things are created as the dreams become part of the landscape’s contrasts and subtleties. Heat shimmers in the distance; mist, as blue as the blood itself, rolls up from the ground that isn’t ground.

He wants the screaming out of his head, so picks up a newly-fallen dream and cradles it, convincing himself this is for the dream, not him, but his motivations are convoluted and he knows he’ll never forget this sound. Despite it being cold, the dream makes him feel so good that he encourages it to snuggle: it is perfect and for a fleeting moment he is dream again. Soon after, the dream starts oozing blue-black blood and no matter how close he cradles it, he can’t stop it from falling apart. He is crying, and as the bits of it slip to the ground that isn’t ground his resolve slips too: all he can do is suffer the fragility of this, knowing that all other thoughts have left him; that this place shouldn’t be; that there’s nowhere for him to go and nothing exists after this, nothing will be rebuilt. He is tired without being worn out, and his feelings and thoughts aren’t his any more.

A clap of thunder cracks the air. A storm sits low on the horizon and makes the air, sky and ground that isn’t ground bristle: that in-between moment when distances compact. The dark clouds backdrop the falling
dreams and people, and when he looks up at it, shielding his eyes from the fracturing light, the hidden
places that have been dragged up from inside him grow heavy. A gust of wind heaves past, so saturated
with the blood and the screams and the pain and all this death that it moves slow, but belying all this
heaviness is the storm. It moves quickly, its rumbling drowning out all other noise as it follows the valleys
towards him. He searches for some landmark to orient himself, but the contours of this place look the same,
so to give himself some understanding of where he is he decides that the storm is to his west. (It’s dark in his
west, but clear in his east.) That’s where all the thunderstorms came from when he was a kid. They would
follow the valley from the west — he could hear them before he could see them, sometimes the thunder, not
always, but always the rain and hail banging and rattling on the roofs — and dump their load on his home
before continuing down the coast. This storm reminds him of those, but it has a different lustre: it is a dark
metallic grey-green, and large thunderheads roll at its top.

The rain is small at first, ball bearing-rain, but as they fall each grows to fist-sized chunks. Running now,
he can hear it behind him thumping into the ground that isn’t ground. The terrain transforms under him
and he learns the hard way to avoid pools of the blue, it’s deeper than it looks. As the landscape alters, it
pitches and rolls and he imagines that this is what it is like for polar bears to hunt on melting ice. The storm
catches him as he clambers over a pile of dreams and loses his footing as the dreams slip out from under
him. A hunk of rain-metal hits him on the shoulder and pain shoots across his back. Unbalanced, he
stumbles. Expecting to be hit again, he braces for impact, but when it doesn’t come…he runs faster towards
his east.

Above he can hear the storm ticking and popping like a cooling motor. When the rain stops the storm stalls,
groaning under its own weight. The breeze cedes to stillness and the blood-smell thickens as fractures
appear in the storm, its metal body rips, it lurches like a sinking ship. When it slams into the ground that
isn’t ground it sends out a tremor that scatters dead and dying dreams and throws fallen metal rain back up
into the air. Turtle falls and is winded, his hands and arms suffer cuts from metal and dreams. The storm
hisses loudly behind him and steam plumes from it. When its side fissures, ball bearing rain flies out
horizontal and swarms. Each has a little mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. He jumps to his feet and runs even
faster towards his east.
Lisa is surrounded by uninterrupted black and this falling feels like falling asleep, but she isn’t scared. Time slips and the minutes grow shorter as time is itself disappeared. The darkness overtakes as she falls into doubt about how those things that aren’t here are still here, somehow. Insatiable, the darkness eats time. There are no contrasts. She is falling silent and peaceful; at once disquieting and restful. Her movements are free and the spaces between her thoughts acute.

Now there is a mountain range below. She is still falling, but isn’t scared. Speckled sunlight carpets valleys and summits; white snow covers peaks; the sea laps at the mountain’s base. She isn’t scared. A track comes into sight, small at first, just footprints in the snow, then a muddy smudge where the snowline ends. People look like ants as they lug food and clothes and ammunition and medical supplies along the skeletal track that winds its way across the landscape. She isn’t scared.

Now there is a tributary below. She isn’t scared. Its clear waters start in alpine marshes to become a stream that becomes a river that swells with the snow melt in the spring and withers to a trickle in the summer; she sees this. She still isn’t scared. The river chisels valleys, rushes over rapids and down waterfalls, and flows around deep bends until it reaches the sea. At times it seems tranquil to her and at others angry. She isn’t scared.

Now there is a city below, its ugliness and beauty laid out before her. A seaside city, mountains to one side, the ocean on the other, a river running through. Buildings stand silent and confident, timid and unsure. Cars, trucks and busses belch exhaust, trains hustle, factories pump out dense clouds of pollution that turn sunsets blood-orange and obscure the tops of buildings so the city looks as if it is one with the sky. She’s not scared though. There are freeways, toll ways, shopping malls, parks and museums, art galleries and universities, police, anonymous sex, dancing, restaurant dinners, lovers, parents, children. She sees this. She’s still not scared. From these distractions the city’s aspects assert themselves and as she falls, a footpath comes into sight — small at first, a pristine porcelain indicator of order on the cluttered cityscape — and rushes towards her. But as she falls closer and closer — she’s still not scared — its flaws become apparent.
Tree roots push up from below, its surface uneven, its edges crumbling. There are oil stains, sap stains and paint stains, and graffiti. Cracks cross it like tributaries. She plummets...she’s still not scared...and its scent, the fragrance of summer warm cement, gets inside her right before she hits.

She’s lying face down and it feels like she’s got a bad hangover. She rolls over and the glare is too much — the sky is bright blue and cloudless — and she has to shield her eyes as she struggles to her feet, taking a minute or two to gather herself. The footpath is crowded with people; how she didn’t land on anyone, she doesn’t know. No one stops to help, either, they dash past, eyes cast down.

Heat shimmers rise from the bitumen and all around her the air is still, in the way that only city air can be, and there is an edge here she doesn’t like. She should find Turtle, but before doing anything else checks herself for injuries. Apart from her headache, she feels fine. She stands with her back against a light pole and looks out onto the congested intersection. Even though she’s a visitor, this city is familiar, or parts of it feel like they are, and she is confident she knows all she needs to about its streets and lanes, its desires, its people and trade routes, shops and food stalls, signs and layers and its memories.

She knows exactly where Turtle should be and how to get there, so heads uptown. But then, a little way on, there among the people and the buildings and the traffic is a kind of colourless, transparent flash — then another and another — disappearing then re-appearing farther on, in places that are neither where she thought they would be, nor the direction they were heading, but nonetheless the place where they should re-appear — they’re there, not there, then there again. It feels like the city is expanding and contracting around her, like it’s a modern city with sharp edges and an old city, fuzzy and lost in memory. She backtracks, but it’s no longer the same street, it’s an alley down which a weariness attaches itself to her and the people sleepwalk, so she ducks into another alley. Debt and hardship are here, she can feel their fatigue, and these people work 16-hour days, so she takes another alley. This one is from a long time ago and the people here, including Lisa, remember the old city for what they wish it was like, and long for the new to be like the old of their imaginations, but the old can’t live up to such expectations. She ducks into another lane. This one makes her sad, and she passes a weeping woman pacing the footpath, searching...Lisa wants to help, but the woman keeps to herself. The next lane she finds herself in holds desire, the next is forgotten, the next is infested by rats, the next is colourless, the next perfect, the next not so.
In the next street Lisa is taken by the peoples’ designer clothes, sublime hairstyles and the quiet, confident flow of their movements. Every step in time. Nothing out of place. She joins the end of an orderly queue snaking its way inside a tall, modern building.

Inside, the queue breaks into twelve smaller lines, each in front of one of twelve tellers, each teller is sitting behind a perspex window.

‘Next please,’ the tellers say in unison, their sing song voices muted somewhat by the perspex, but are nonetheless clear and Lisa has no problem hearing their beautiful harmonies.

Each person at the front of each line steps up to the counter and passes their documents through the gap at the bottom of the window. Each looks like they know where they are, what they’re doing and why they’re here. There is a stuffed animal set in the middle of the floor. Lisa has no idea what she’s doing here and she doesn’t have any papers, and can’t help feeling that there’s something not quite right, but that it all feels so normal. She’s not sure. She isn’t scared.

‘Next please,’ the tellers say in unison again.

As she walks forward, trying to stay in time with everyone else — the flow and unity here doesn’t include her — and she can’t help feeling that Turtle might be around somewhere. She searches the room, is the only one to look around, and bumps into the back of the person in front of her. Her apology is ignored. She imagines thousands of things about everyone else here, they could be strangers — they are to her — or they could all know each other and come here every day.

‘Next please,’ the tellers say again.

She’s nearing the front of the line and doesn’t know what to do without her own set of papers. The transparent things are inside the building as well, most are disappearing and re-appearing near the stuffed animal set. She’s surprised they’re inside, but probably shouldn’t be. Physical things don’t seem to mean much to them. She tries to look at the papers of those behind her, to try and get some idea about what’s going on, but they’re holding them close to their chests. When she asks the person next in line what this is all about he stares straight ahead at the tellers as if she’s not here. She looks at her hand to make sure she’s not disappearing as well.

‘Next please,’ the tellers say.
Lisa is at the front of the line now. She got here too soon to sort out a plan... Where did that year go...?
She looks to the rest of the customers, all are moving forward. She doesn’t have any documents. She can
explain. They’ll help her out, the tellers, that’s their job. She’ll ask for directions to the post office or a
bank... They’ll tell her.

She holds her breath as she steps forward. ‘Hi, I’m lost. I was…’

‘Please pass over your application, then state your name, your place of residence and your desired
destination,’ the tellers say in unison.

Still in time, everyone, except Lisa, passes their papers over.

Lisa tries again. ‘I wanted to know where…’ Everything stops... and the skin on the back of Lisa’s neck
prickles when the tellers begin twitching... out of time. First their mouths twitch, as if they’re trying to say
something but can’t, then their bodies fit, as if they’re stuck in one movement and can’t get out... then the
customers start fitting too. The man behind her drops his papers. She picks them up. It is a visa application
to the Cheyne-Stokes Passport Processing Centre asking for permission to travel from Atonia to Divurnal.
She’s never heard of these places before.

From behind her the tellers begin speaking again, but now their sing song voices are distorted, the
vowels and consonants elongated, drawn out. They are even more out of time.

‘Neext p-lah-eese.’

‘Neextt p-a-lleese.’

‘Nneeextt pplleeesse.’

The first three customers in all the lines jerk forward, including the man whose application she is
holding. Then, before serving anyone, the tellers speak again:

‘Nneeextt pplleeesse.’

‘Nneeextt pplleeesse.’

‘Nneeextt pplleeesse.’

More people converge and the crowd packs together. She tries to push through it, but they’re spasming.
An arm hits her in the chest, a foot kicks her in the shin, another hand punches her in the ear. She protects
herself, but the attacks are coming from all directions.

‘Nneeextt pplleeesse.’
’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Valued Customer.’ This is a new voice, it is smooth-toned, that sounds like a teller, but none of them are speaking. ’If you are having trouble with our personal service providers, dial 1800 210 081 on your mobile and press one. Normal charges apply. We understand your time is valuable. Your business is important to us.’ The voice sounds like it’s coming from above. Lisa looks up. On the ceiling there are speakers and CCTV cameras.

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’We will do everything possible to make your experience a pleasant one. Our next available Officer will be with you shortly. Thank you for your patience.’ The voice is coming from the speakers. A recorded announcement.

She needs to get away from the suits and arms and dresses and legs and mobile phones and diaries and ties and purses and lunchtimes and group certificates and annual leave and Friday afternoon drinks and office romances. Their breathing is heavy, sweat scrabes out pores, fluid sloshes in stomachs, skin flakes off.

She trembles, she’s hot and cold, as she tries to push them away.

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Your feedback is important to us. Please take some time to do our ten minute survey.’ The recorded message says.

People are pulling at her and pushing her down. ’Help!’ Her voice is choked. Panicked. Foreign. She feels like she’s going to die. ’Help!’ she squawks again, its weakness really scares her. ’Turtle! Help!’ Her voice is swamped by the pack’s breathing and growling. They leave their smells on her; they’re biting, scratching, clawing. She can smell blood and can hear the injured whimpering.

’Nneext ppleesse.’

’Nneext ppleesse.’
‘Nneext pplesse.’

‘Your custom is important to us,’ another, similar recorded message says. ‘Estimated waiting time for a Police Officer is twenty minutes. Your arrest may be monitored for Customer quality assurance. To speak to a lawyer, dial 1800 210 081 on your mobile and press two. Normal charges apply.’

A hand grabs her. She fights it off, at first thinking it’s one of them, but when she sees his face (for a second she thinks it’s… T … she’s not sure who… … she can’t remember…) his kindness and strength are so obvious. She needs help, the pack is attacking the weak or injured now, those who haven’t turned yet. Saliva drools from the corners of mouths, blood stains faces, fur is matted. They rip at her clothes. When he takes hold of her hand something significant passes between them — she’s sure he feels it too — and he pulls her from the pack. Nearby, a blue healer bitch, her snarl smudged with blood, launches herself at a border collie.

‘You ok?’ he asks.

She nods and straightens her ripped and torn clothes.

‘Come on.’ The man holds her hand tight and leads her towards the door. Again, something significant passes between them when they touch, and she feels safe with him.

They are half way to the door when a deep growl shreds from behind them. At first Lisa can’t understand, but then fragments of words start to take form, then whole words, then sentences. She and the man stop fleeing and turn to listen.

Ten German shepherds have fought their way out of the pack and are now standing in front of the other dogs, ears up, teeth bared. The largest of the ten, the one with the darkest face, is speaking:

‘…Brothers and sisters, believe me, this city is rife with the gun-ja and the goey and the sex. I am here — a hard-core rev-ol-ution-ary — to take it upon my very self…my very self, to ask you to help me save this city…Your city…Our city.’ Some in the pack are still growling and fighting among themselves, so the speaker nods to the nine others, it is subtle, and they fan out around the pack biting those who still aren’t paying attention. Lisa backs away. She doesn’t want them coming anywhere near her.

‘And who am I to ask this of you?’ he continues, ‘well, let me tell you, brothers and sisters, let me tell you.’ He starts pacing. ‘This old dog came to me this night. He came to me from across the sea. I was scared and I was hiding. I was hiding in the night, and I was on the gun-ja, in a bar drinkin’ the whisky with some
bad-assed muthafuckas — muthafuckas like this old sea dog — and we did sit and we did drink and we did drink and we did drink, brothers and sisters, we did drink. And this old sea dog, he did drink the whiskey and he did light up the gun-ja and he did shoot up the goey and he did gamble his money away, right there in front of me and those bad-assed muthafuckas, so we could follow. And he did take us under his wing, brothers and sisters… under his wing, and this old sea dog, he spoke to us, and he did say “We must clean up this place for the young, for the invalid, the elderly, the righteous, the fallen”. He stops in front of an old bitch and nuzzles her gently. She sits. Lisa doesn’t want to listen to this crap.

‘And right then, brothers and sisters, right then the birds they did sing and the government it did govern and my head was a-swimming in the clarity of it all, brothers and sisters, the cla-rit-y. And I did know my calling. We found the devil this night, me ‘n’ those bad-assed muthafuckas, we found the devil. We found homelessness in the streets, corruption in the boardrooms, destitution in the bars, pay-offs in politicians’ pockets, and we found fleas in the blankets.’ He pauses again and Lisa knows he’s allowing what he just said to sink in. He paces up and down in front of the now-silent pack, most of whom are sitting. She can discern the different breeds of dogs and the subtly of their markings. All the other dogs are staring at him. She wants to leave. She is scared, now.

He continues: ‘That’s right, brothers and sisters, fleas in the blankets. Me ‘n’ those bad-assed muthafuckas found dogs preying. With no herds to follow we found dogs preying on each other. We found no leaders. We found no kin. We found the family weakened. So we adopted strangers, we did, me ‘n’ those bad-assed muthafuckas, we adopted strangers like you brothers, and like you sisters.

‘And the devil was everywhere this night, everywhere we turned. And we did smite this muthafuckin devil, me ‘n’ those bad-assed muthafuckas. We followed it. Yes, we followed it. It did make us hull-uc-inate, it did give us the sick-ness, it did pick us off one by one. The drunk. The gambler. The violent. The addict. We did see shadows of the morning light. We did see shadows of the evening sun. We did walk ‘til the shadows and the lights were one. But I never wondered, brothers…never questioned, sisters. I followed…’ He comes into the pack and they sniff each other. Lisa can’t think of anything worse. He places his paw on the heads of those near him, in a tender gesture, but Lisa can find nothing tender in his words.

‘And this is where we did end up this night, here in this city. Where that old sea dog gave me ‘n’ what was left of those bad-assed muthafuckas the strength to vanquish the devil many times over. This old sea
dog, he did teach us, he did teach us to fight and to scrap and to win, brothers and sisters, to win. And we threw this devil in the ocean and I bumped my head. But I god damn took the pain. I cut myself, but I muthafuckin’ took the pain. And we did murder this devil this night, if you could call it murder. And we did disembowel it. And we did kill it good. And this old sea dog did thank us. And I said, “Muthafucka, I would for you, muthafuckin’ take the pain.” And this old sea dog did say to me, “‘Aint no wrong now, ’aint no right”. And I am a proud dog…As you should be too, brothers and sisters, as you should be too.’

He surveys the pack again and Lisa knows, just by looking at them all, that he doesn’t have to say one more word. Every dog in the room can feel it. She can feel it. Every eye is on him. He has them.

‘He’s building an army,’ Lisa whispers, ‘let’s go.’ The man is still close to her, so close she can smell his aftershave. ‘We don’t want to get caught up in that.’

She stumbles from the building — all four of her legs get in each other’s way and she feels like she’s all bunched up in the middle. As she rounds a corner she almost runs into someone. The person jumps out of her way, yelling words that at another time she would have understood. She doesn’t stop.

The city feels full, so full, as if there are many cities; cities of sound, of vision, of odour. Her hearing and sight are clear, they build. Everything is from everywhere: clouds glide overhead; a baby’s light breathing, laughter, conversations, eyelashes, voices, languages and accents; cars and busses, jackhammers, sirens drills faxes car horns screeching brakes photocopiers televisions the beep beep beep of millions of items being swiped through thousands of check-outs. She knows what they are and where they are, even though she can’t recognise everything. She wants to cover her ears.

The air changes density as it passes from sunlight to shade. There are dozens of colours…each distinct and distinguishable…where before she could only see single hues. Surfaces, smooth and rough alike, have so many faults and flaws, and she sees the beauty in both those things. In-between it all those transparent things run and dart. They’re so noisy, now she knows what to listen for: they’re here; then not here; then here again, and now, for her, it’s more about them being an aesthetic. She passes two lovers: their fragrances — beautiful loving sex caring affection — jump from their bodies and curl around them, blushing in the air, lingering, snuggling in under their clothes, next to their skin. They want ever-present desire. The new sharpness of her smell opens parts of her mind that only moments ago were forgotten…half remembered…half recalled, and while her sight and hearing are enhanced, they now pale when compared
to her smell. Her feelings are immediate, and she knows people’s intentions. She passes an old man: mothballs and old clothes and threadbare bones... calcium, grey. So long since he’s been touched intimate. Incomplete. Desperate. There is a fragility to the smell of death she could never have imagined. Somewhere there is the niggle of absence and loss. Is whatever she’s lost worth the understanding she’s gained by being able to smell emotions? She passes a young man: illness. He doesn’t know. She can taste his ignorance, his cancer, bitter and gritty, the smells stay in her nose and throat, alkaline... lurid, spiteful... what if she never finds... him again?

The metallic smell of urine jumps at her as she passes a pole. Part of her is disgusted, but another part of her, the part that feels like it’s only now waking up, understands the nuances of the smells — as she bends down to sniff. Lots of urines, lots of dogs. She can tell their breed, age and gender, and how long ago they pissed here. She has flopped her ears shut, she must be a lop-eared breed, and is glad for the quiet. One of those somethings darts close by. So noisy. And their odour is so pungent. It smells blue. It smells cold. She can smell colours now. She can smell the sadness of those somethings. Some of them are crying, like that woman in the alley. She doesn’t remember smelling the woman’s sadness at the time, but now she thinks about it, she did smell something vague and faint but was unaware of it and couldn’t recognise it for what it was. She pisses on the pole.

‘Where are you!?‘ the man barks.

She was so wrapped up in the smells.

‘Where are you!?‘ he barks again.

‘Yep,‘ she answers and runs, she’s getting better at coordinating her legs.

As she follows him she can smell his anxiety change to relief when he hears her voice. She can smell his curiosity. He sniffed around a bin, a dead bird, the bottom of a downpipe and a dumpster. She wants to sniff everything he did, and then some.

After a time she realises he is following a specific smell trail and is soon able to anticipate his direction. Every shop she passes has such a distinct mood that she wants to stop and play with the smells, but the man is running as if he has somewhere to be. She catches up with him sniffing around the tables and chairs outside a small café, pads up behind him, her heart beats loud in her ears, and she sniffs and licks his bum. It smells like his smell trail and tastes salty... He barks playfully, his slight shock reflected in the change in
his odour. She didn’t mean to startle him and barks an apology. His beautiful eyes make all four of her legs go weak. She can smell his desire. Her tails wags fast. She tries to stop it, but can’t, and smells her own embarrassment, but relaxes when she smells his calm. They go inside and he takes her hand. ‘This is my favourite café.’

It takes time for her eyes to adjust to the dull light struggling through the café’s tinted windows — one type of light, no aspects, no changes, subdued. His touch is so gentle, his hand soft and his smile reassuring, but that can’t replace what she has just lost. That awareness is gone…so quickly…just like that the loss…the world, her world, is so pale now, everything so faint, abstract…empty…she’s almost crying. She bumps her legs on table corners…frustrated by her clumsiness, and feels crowded by the furniture. To be given all that and then to lose it…she feels colour blind. She tries to tell herself the beauty is still there, only hidden, and she’ll see it again, but colours are singular and flat, meaning is unreal…

Clutches of people sit and talk; the corner tables providing quiet intimacy. They look like they’re speaking of conspiracies, scared of getting caught, but she can no longer hear such conversations, read body language or smell emotions. Nothing jumps out at her, she’s no longer hungry or thirsty, and the cakes on display and coffee and food from the kitchen smell bland.

The man leads her to a window booth, burgundy leather seats, and sits facing the door. ‘My name is Henry,’ he says smiling.

She smiles back and imagines they too look like they’re talking of conspiracies, but talking feels so inadequate without the rest of her understanding. Around them things still dart. They slip through walls, dash through legs, fly to the ceiling, disappear under the floor, but this doesn’t explain what they are or what they want. She felt an intimacy with them before, when she could hear and smell them, but now they’re like everything else: in the background…

A waitress comes over and places two coffees, a piece of chocolate cake and a piece of carrot cake down in front of them and her presence startles Lisa, without her smell it’s like she’s living in half a world and she can’t tell what the waitress really wants. She’s sure she wants Henry, the way she looks at him and places his coffee down so close.

Henry waits until the waitress is gone before taking the coffee cup in both hands. Speaking in hushed tones he talks of conspiracies. At times it feels like he’s speaking to her from afar, but at others he speaks
with such a passion that she becomes passionate about the same outrages and injustices. Many times she asks him to repeat himself, and he does this with patience and optimism. This is his favourite café, he tells her; she answers by telling him she’s never been here before. She is still reeling from her loss, trying to get used to having speech alone. She knows he is speaking of conspiracies that run deep, go all the way to the top, conspiracies of the every day, questions unanswered. The conspiracies themselves jump from his mouth. He creates them as he speaks, discredits them, starts a rumour, quashes it, introduces certain claims, establishes counterpoints. Her head spins with the speed of his words, the pace of his thoughts, the depth of the conspiratorial connections. As she grows more aligned to this half-world she asks more and more questions of him, brings in legal frameworks, and adds her own points of view and knowledge to his convoluted conspiracies. Together, and there is surely something passing between them now, they create an opaque cloud of conversation that surrounds them and obscures them from others in the café.

It is late in the night, it is tomorrow, it is the next morning and the morning after that. She leans over the table, talking and mumbling, sure he knows what she means. He finishes her sentences for her; she for him. The café never closes and the waitress always anticipates their needs. The air around them is made with a crisp winter morning, the rustle of fabric, singing a song, feeding animals, ten years from here, born of the desert, falling, cold water, a perfect day, spring, an ocean breeze. They sit opposite each other; he paces; she stands and stretches; he sits close to her; they share cakes and pasta and focaccia. His hand follows the line of her clothes and pushes past the material. She is naked. He massages her. He is naked. She is beautiful in her skin. He glides his hand up her thigh, then kisses her as he slides his hand down and snuggles his fingers inside her. She moves in time with him, allows him to play and play and play so she builds…and builds…and builds…flow…release…When they kiss, he tastes beautiful, he slides his hand down her hard metal leg and she sighs, the lightness of his touch tingles her French polish, and when she tries to move she is all metal and wood. Nothing in her body responds. As much as she tries, she can’t breathe, but that’s alright, she doesn’t need to breathe in that way any more.

The waitress places two meals down on Lisa. One in front of Henry and the other opposite. Lisa doesn’t want this, but she can’t move or speak, and doesn’t feel like she has any right say anything anyway, she only just met Henry, but…she tries to imagine she’s somewhere else…but they’re next to her, on top of her (all her senses come through her wooden top). They are simple meals, but exactly what Lisa wants on top of her
(but doesn’t want): pumpkin soup with coriander, warm crunchy bread with butter, black coffee. She can smell the butter and imagines it’s been spread thick and is melting in. The waitress sits and gently places her soft, warm palms on Lisa and massages the wood. Henry does the same, and their four hands work together, running over her, such delicate touch. Now she knows the waitress wants Henry. She’s staring straight at him, right in front of Lisa. Ignoring her. She tries to move…

When the waitress pours coffee on her it burns, Henry does the same. There’s nothing but pleasure in the way it pools, hot, and trickles across her, over her edges onto the floor. Henry licks the coffee first, then the waitress. Lisa’s top tingles, but she still has reservations about the waitress.

They climb on to her and lie so their heads are in the middle, their feet at either end, the soup bowls next to each other. Henry is hard and Lisa can smell the waitress from under her uniform. They rest on their elbows and she likes the way the points of contact dig into her. They drop the spoons on her so the dull pain takes her beyond her wooden top and metal frame. She craves more of the spoon’s coldness; craves its actuality, the way the pain is pointed at the exact spot where it fell and nowhere else. They spoon soup onto her, dribble it, pour it. Lisa forgets to breath for a moment: the hot, the warm, the wonder. Then they pour the soup straight from the bowl and spread it with their hands using long strokes. She is ready to pop. Henry and the waitress lick the soup off Lisa and she sways under the beautiful pleasure. The soup spreads on her, thick and hot, and smears around their mouths. The waitress finds a small, sensitive knot on Lisa’s surface and licks it, following its contours with her tongue, circling it. Lisa shudders, the quiver resonates to her edges and then down her legs, and she has goosebumps on her French polish. The three of them share that deep heartfelt breath that comes from way inside, that builds…and builds…and builds…and floods and rushes…and again…and again…and again. Lisa can’t hold her legs steady.

The waitress pulls a cloth from her apron — a warm beautiful-smelling cleaning liquid falls from it — and cleans Henry. Lisa tries to ignore the way the waitress moans and the things Henry whispers in her ear. He should be whispering them in her ear. The soup on her top made her forget her reservations, but now that she’s watching them she knows she doesn’t want this (she is intrigued, though) and tries to break from her form. The waitress gets on her hands and knees. Henry kneels next to her and cleans her with the self-lubricating cloth. The waitress bends over and licks that same knot while he cleans. Cleaning liquid falls onto Lisa (she enjoys its warmth and the way it trickles down over her. She shudders out to her four corners...
again and can smell each of their smells mingle in the air.) Their cleaning movements are gentle at first and they moan and sway together...until it builds...and builds...and builds...and floods...and rushes...Henry grabs and gropes at the waitress, unable to control himself. She grabs at him, kissing...touching...moaning (her sex smells so beautiful to Lisa right now) and pushes one of the soup bowls off Lisa’s edge so it falls to the floor and smashes. ‘Yes,’ she says, ‘I’ll have to clean that.’ Henry does the same to the other bowl. ‘Yes,’ the waitress moans, takes a brush and pan from her apron, bends over and sweeps the pieces up. Henry lies on Lisa, stroking her edge and playing with her knot while watching the waitress. When the bowl is swept up the waitress wipes Lisa’s top clean in long, tender strokes. Henry kisses the waitress’s neck and shoulders. After Lisa is clean, the waitress runs a tender finger across Lisa’s edge, then kisses Henry. They kiss for a long time.

Lisa wants them to stop and resents the waitress. She’s sure they know each other, and even if they didn’t, she’s sure a similar something that passed between Henry and her before has passed between him and the waitress. When they finish kissing he stares at the waitress until she’s behind the counter again. Lisa doesn’t want him watching her. Then when he goes under her and licks the underside of her top she wants him to stop, but loves what he’s doing, as well. She can’t get that kiss out of her mind. She doesn’t want him touching her underside, but does...but doesn’t and wishes she could communicate with him. She tries to move again. There is a part of her that’s excited and another part that’s scared of him being down there because it’s chipped and unpolished. The wood is rough-cut and the white undercoat of her legs is showing through the black paint. She wilts when he finds the underside of the knot and licks it.

He comes up from between her legs and she can smell her on his face and hands. She wants to ask him about the waitress, but wilts again, when he kisses her all over. She takes him in her arms, her body is stiff, and they sit on the floor and hug and kiss for days, kiss every part of each other, spending hours exploring, coveting each spot. They touch, tickling skin; the opaque cloud of sex that surrounds them obscures them from others in the café, like they’re talking conspiracies again. She loves him, but there’s someone else...

He bites her stomach, then they both nip each other, getting harder with each bite. He finds her nipple with his mouth and lovingly separates it from the rest of her breast. She moans. He traces the rim then delves his fingers inside her. Just before climax he takes his finger away and bites down hard on the hole; her body trembles and when he brings his mouth away from her, her insides dribble down his chin.
She licks his face clean, then opens a hole in his stomach so she can see organs. She licks two of her fingers and slides them inside the hole — it accommodates her easily — then three, then her hand. Henry lies back, his eyes closed, his mouth ajar, the deep breaths flowing heavily across his lips, and lets her enter him. She loves the look on his face as she plays with his insides. Blood lubricates her. She pulls his diaphragm down and he inhales deeply, then gently pushes it up so he exhales. She dives her hand into his intestines — he giggles — and she kisses him and bites his bottom lip, gently peeling it from his face and licking the sweet flesh underneath. Then she massages him until his body builds…and builds…and builds…and floods…and rushes.

They move inside themselves, lose distinction; it’s confusing at first… They thrust: slight, hard, fast, slow, flood, rush. They need to go deeper. They are each other. He swims in her stomach, floats in her lungs. She slides down his intestines, bounces on his liver, is ejaculated into the air like a geyser. They engorge and there are surges of warmths and releases, surges of floods and rushes.

They separate — this is as confusing as their combining was — and she knows their separation leaves him stretched, that he must hurt from being stretched that far for the first time, and he must feel vulnerable, like he’s been left open for the breeze to whistle through. She remembers her first time: she felt hurt and happy and stretched and exposed. They sit on the floor and hold each other close.

Lisa has decided to leave. She can’t do this, not with the waitress around. He did say this was his favourite café…

Henry stands and helps her up and they sit in a window booth, burgundy leather seats. He faces the door. ‘My usual spot,’ he smiles. Clutches of people sit at tables and booths and talk, hidden behind opaque clouds of meaning and implications and connotations. The corner tables provide the most intimacy. He stops speaking while the waitress places two coffees, a piece of chocolate cake and a piece of carrot cake down in front of them. Lisa can’t look at the waitress, but catches him looking at her.

She sips her coffee.

Silence.

She watches him play with the chocolate cake, studying it with too much concentration.

Silence.

She shifts in her seat. She wants to ask him about the waitress.
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Silence.

She sips again. ‘Thank you.’

He looks up.

‘For helping me before.’ She sips her coffee. ‘You didn’t have to.’ The coffee tastes weak. She looks at the wood grains on the table and the way the varnish brings out the detail.

‘I lo…’ he falls off his seat.

She leans over the table. ‘Are you al…?’

‘I’m ok,’ he scrambles back on the seat. ‘I’m fine.’ He stirs his coffee, sips, then stuffs chocolate cake in his mouth.

‘I’m looking for someone,’ she says.

Silence.

‘A friend, or…?’ He looks at the table.

‘I can’t remember.’

He looks out the window. ‘You’re beauti…’ he says and falls off the seat and hits his forehead on the table’s edge. He scrambles up. ‘I lo…’ He falls off the seat again. Lisa stands to help, but he sits again before she can. She sits back down. ‘Whenever I see a beautiful wo…’ He falls off the seat again — she tries to help again, but he climbs back onto the chair himself, ‘I fall in lov…’ He falls again. She tries to help, he gets up on his own. ‘And every time I say the word beauti…’ He falls over, ‘or lov…’ He drags the chair down on top of his head. Righting himself on the chair again he finishes. ‘I fall over a lot.’

‘A lot?’ She swallows, her mouth dry, then takes a sip of coffee. She doesn’t know where to look.

‘A bit.’ He looks down. ‘At least twice a day.’

‘Twice?’ She crosses her arms.

‘But…It’s not…’ He reaches out across the table and grabs the sugar jar that’s sitting on the table between them. ‘It’s different with you.’

‘Have you fallen over before, today?’ She stares at his eyes, but that’s too affecting.

He shakes his head.

‘So I’m the first today, then?’ She looks out the window, but she doesn’t want anyone else to see her crying. She still wants to ask him about the waitress.
He nods. ‘I lo…’ He falls off the chair.

‘So there are more?’ She fights back the tears.

He sits up. ‘It’s not like that.’

‘How can you say that? You don’t know.’ She looks past him.

‘I know you’re the one.’

‘Don’t.’ She wipes her eyes. ‘I’m not sure about…’ There are tears in his eyes as well. ‘…your falling all the time…I have to leave.’ She stands.

Henry takes her hand. ‘Don’t.’

She lets him hold her. ‘I’m looking for someone.’

‘Not this again.’ He lets go. ‘I lo…’ He falls sideways off the chair and it falls down on top of him.

Lisa moves to help him, but stops herself.

He gets up on his knees and looks up over the edge of the table. ‘I do.’

‘I have to go,’ she whispers, like she doesn’t want to hear the words herself.

‘I lov…’ He falls off his knees and finishes the sentence from the floor. ‘… you. You’re the most beau…’ He falls backward. He gets back up onto his knees and holds onto the edge of the table. ‘That’s why I stopped to help. I lov…’ He falls onto the floor again. ‘I do.’

She closes her eyes.

‘I do.’

She sits down next to him and hugs him tight. ‘I have to.’

‘Don’t.’ He kisses her cheek. ‘I lov…’

She holds him so he doesn’t fall over, kisses him (one last time) and stands.

‘I can help,’ he says.

‘I have to go.’ She walks from the café, half hoping that he will follow her and grab her and tell her he loves her again and take all this responsibility from her. She wants to turn around, but doesn’t. And she’d love to submit, to kiss him, to be melodramatic, and fall into him forever; he’s kind and honest — and sexy — but there’s still something else there; not just the waitress. She tells herself this is the right thing to do as she steps out into the overcast, muggy day and onto the near-empty street.
Apnoea wakes: her eyes spring open and she sits up with a breath. A breath!? More a wheeze, cluttered, but still a breath. She holds her chest: heavy…full, like it expanded during her sleep. Sleep? She hacks up a cough, ‘Heh,’ her throat tender and dry from the air flowing through it for the first time. The room is still dark, even though a warm breeze blows the curtains — a weighty material — and lets sunlight in here and there. Each time the light looks like filling the room the curtains swing back and cut it off before it can make the room part of the day. She keeps the window open all year round. In summer for the cooling night breezes that tickle her naked skin; in winter for the contrast between the cold room and her warm bed, her body all snuggled in under the blankets, only her face exposed. She swings her legs around and drops her feet to the polished wooden floor — it’s cold despite the warmth of the morning outside; she puts her dressing gown on and supports herself using her walking frame. ‘The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog,’ she says. Raspy, a whisper, old. Should it be old? She’s never spoken before, so maybe it should be new, or young, or unused? She doesn’t know what to say. ‘Red leather, yellow leather.’ Her voice isn’t loud. ‘The rain in Spain falls in the drain!’ Her yell is soft. It should get stronger the more she uses it.

Her walking frame catches on the edge of the cream and blue rug in the hall and she almost trips. She is walking so fast… Her legs can’t keep up with her mind… And thinking of what to do and what to say and where to go first and who to speak to first… She almost trips, again, on her own feet… And she’s mumbling to herself, enjoying the feeling of her voice tickling the back of her throat, despite her dry mouth; and she wants to go to the lounge room and the backyard and the bakery down the road, and she wants to play her instruments… She stops just outside the kitchen and takes a deep breath to calm her mind — too much too fast for her body. She can feel her diaphragm drop and rise. ‘Calm down,’ she says to herself, ‘calm down’. It comes out as a whisper. Her chest looks strange and she feels front heavy, still not having come to terms with all this breath.

In the kitchen — she has calmed herself — dried chillies, spices, garlic and preserved meats — kept specifically for this very day — hang around the large open window. The smell of freshly mowed grass wafts inside and it feels like specks of dust are inside her nose, irritating it. Then something forces her to inhale deep, her lungs expand further than they ever have before, and she doesn’t quite know what to do. Everything feels big and bloated. Then she sneezes… once, twice, three times…and each time her stomach
contracts as the air is propelled from her. She never knew sneezes were so surprising, building so quickly then disappearing in a flash. After it’s gone there is still a tingle in her nose and throat, and now the muscles in her stomach, muscles she’s never used before, are stiff, but she feels much better for having sneezed. Relieved, in fact. She likes sneezes — she thinks.

She totters through the back door and it bangs closed as she takes herself down the ramp to the lawn. Leaving her frame on the path she shuffles over to her most prized garden, where she bends and sniffs the flowers. The pollen tickles her nose and makes her sneeze again, and again she’s not ready for it, and again she feels a sense of all-over relief when it’s done. The insects scatter. She smells the flowers until the ache in her back becomes too much.

Straightening, she stretches. The garden is bathed in sunlight, but a storm is rumbling in, unusually, from the east. She leans stiffly on her frame and walks back inside.

In the lounge room she props her frame against the wall and takes a flute off one of the shelves. Her house has become cluttered over the years; in the beginning the two of them, hand in hand, would go to garage sales and local markets — he enjoyed the rummaging and searching, she the smile on his face when he saw she was excited by a find — but for years now it’s been only her. She has surrounded herself with artefacts of smell: flowers, essential oils, coffee and coffee machines, spices, incense, pickled foods, smoked meats, pepper. With artefacts of voice: records of all the classics, all the greats from generations, their voices so beautiful to hear but painful to listen to. With artefacts of breath: trumpet, clarinet, pipes of all sorts, saxophone, megaphone, tobaccoes. And artefacts of taste: wines (both red and white), salt, cheeses (hard and soft), fudge, beef jerky. She plays the flute. A strangled note chokes out. Dropping the instrument on the couch, she picks up a whistle and blows: shrill, piercing. She yells again — still soft; blows into the clarinet, then grabs a pipe, one of his old pipes, and sucks in the tobacco taste. It probably tastes like he did. He was a good man, but she never mentioned her friends to him.

She left years ago, with no idea of where she was headed, while her friends were sleeping. Even back then she didn’t sleep, and until today never had. She gathered her clothes, she didn’t own many, put them into a waterproof bag, sealed it, dived into the lagoon, swam across to the waterfall and climbed up alongside it. The day had been hot and the night retained that heat. The few plants that grew on the cliff-face...
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were only just holding on themselves, so when she grabbed at them, many came away in her hand. It was hard going, not least of all because the heat made her sweaty and her hands kept slipping. She almost fell about half way up and had to rely on a small, dead-looking plant to hold onto.

The river at the top was graceful as it surged over rapids, water-polished rocks, and then gurgled down the waterfall. This was the first time she’d ventured from the lagoon since the three of them moved there. She turned and looked at her friends sleeping on the bank and almost didn’t leave.

In places the river was deep and wide and she could hardly see the other bank; in other places it was thin and shallow and the rocks dominated the water. The beginning of her journey was easy, she followed the river as it eked out its path, her path, and she travelled far in a short time. But soon the bank grew steeper and the bushes thicker, and in trying to push through them she scratched and cut her arms.

When she couldn’t go any further she scaled the bank and came upon a dirt road. White stones soon appeared on the shoulder at what seemed regular intervals. After passing roughly thirty stones, a deep valley opened up to her left, ripping the landscape open like a wound. As the valley grew, dumped car bodies appeared at the bottom, leaching poisons and toxins. Soon there were more cars than trees and it didn’t matter how much the valley deepened and widened, the cars still filled it. In front of her the road stopped suddenly, the valley had ripped across in front of her. Without thinking, without missing a step she walked off the cliff. At first she had little control of her flight, she flapped her arms, genuinely thinking that would help her fly; it didn’t, and she spluttered up and down narrowly avoiding being entangled in the tops of the few tall trees still able to live among the car bodies. Eventually she settled into a pattern and relaxed into the flight.

When relaxation came to her and proper flight took hold (at first she trod on the leaves, as gently as her incompetence would allow, and used them to spring into the air), its gentle, weightless affect was not what she expected at all. There was stillness and foresight and knowing and remembering — eyes of the old, eyes of the young; and the stillness reached into her, submerging itself and submerging her so it transgressed. She held her head still — eyes of the old, eyes of the new — and saw things she had never seen before; and it is in these things that she saw herself; these things set her on her way.

What was she thinking all those years ago, to do such a thing? She shakes her head, part in awe and part in disbelief at what she did so wholeheartedly as a young girl. She wasn’t scared, would she be so brave,
could she call it bravery, now? When she left — leaving as she did with a stealth and quietness only those who live without breath have the capacity to generate — she didn’t know where she was going, but she ended here in this house, with him and his smile and his baritone laugh.

Her lack of breath hadn’t mattered to either of them, but she still fantasised about the day she could breathe and do all those things that go along with breath: smell, speak, blow, puff. It feels like more than a lifetime now, through the early days of their marriage, when he couldn’t keep his hands off her, when he touched her adoringly, more than adoring, and she would anticipate his hands; to those lonely nights when he wouldn’t come home. Nights awake can be so long.

She remembers searching for him once, clothed in the dress he loved so much: a simple cut, red, it hugged her hips and the thin straps across her shoulders left her back, toned from years of swimming, exposed. He loved kissing and stroking her back. And even though she couldn’t be sure at the time; she thought she heard him laughing and singing in a house, his voice — both painful and beautiful, the words so absorbed and rich — cut her deep. She hadn’t heard him laugh like that for so long. When they were first married, he would tell her how much he loved her silence, the way her brow furrowed whenever she signed, the way she could move without sound. They found the same things humorous, his laughter made up for her silence, complemented it. In the end that same silence became the thing he hated most. (Maybe, once, she hated it too, but she eventually grew accustomed to it. Accepted it. Ignored it. They both did, or at least tried to.) She turned away from the house, wanting to be strong, but she couldn’t stop the tears.

Her frame, sometimes more of a hindrance than a help, bumps the telephone table as she heads down the hall from the lounge to the kitchen. The old phone teeters and almost falls. Not that it would matter, she hasn’t bothered connecting it for years. That’s something she has to do. At the kitchen sink she takes one of the preserved meats down, chops it and cooks it in the frypan: its smells change as it heats up and the spices, preservatives, fats and meats saturate each other. She chops an onion, some chillies, an eggplant and two capsicums (red and green). The smells and tastes are so defined; she cries over the onion, coughs from the chillies and eats both capsicums raw. She opens a bottle of red wine, pours some into a glass, closes her eyes and waves her hand over the glass to direct the aromas better. She smells berries and chocolate and tannins and oak. She can taste it without drinking a drop. She places the bottle and glass on the sink; through the window, the curtains tied back, she can see the storm moving closer.
Before she knows it she is coughing, uncomfortable, and her coughs hurt her chest and lungs and stomach. It’s not like the sneezes. The room is hazy with a blue-grey smoke that she can taste on her lips and in her throat. Course. Fanning the air, which doesn’t make much difference to the smoke, she turns the hotplate off, picks up the pan and, holding her breath, which she finds difficult, runs the pan and meat under cold water. They sizzle. She steps away from the sink, coughing, fanning the air again. To mask the smell she lights the oil burner (sandalwood oil) sitting on the bench across from the sink. She leaves the kitchen.

He stopped talking to her — the house became so quiet — and that’s when she knew for sure it was him laughing. He stopped listening to the radio while sitting down to dinner or smoking a quiet pipe after work. She enjoyed the gentle mumble of the radio in the background as she cooked or while she patched his pants. He stopped playing the music she liked. She knew it was his laugh, nobody else laughed like that, but she tried to tell herself it wasn’t him, ignore what she heard, ignore what she knew. Maybe he knew she heard him — maybe he saw her walking down the street through the drapeless window or he came out the front door at that precise moment? — maybe she changed towards him first, or maybe he just didn’t care any more. They never spoke of it. If she were honest, she hadn’t much energy left for their marriage either. When he left her for an opera singer she wasn’t surprised. There wasn’t anything she could have done. Even though there were so many things she wanted to say, like ‘I’ve never stopped loving you’, or ‘You’ll always be special to me’, or, simply, ‘I love you’; in the end she didn’t say any of those things, the words wouldn’t come, couldn’t.

He’d distanced himself from her, small things at first, but as he got further away she cut herself off too. She let him go. It was a decision. It wasn’t about control, she just didn’t ask anything of him, or at least not anything he couldn’t give — which was very little by then — so she asked nothing of him and she let what was happening happen, in the understanding that he needed to go, that she too, at the time, needed it to end because it wasn’t the way they began; she loved him and didn’t want it to be more difficult or painful than it already was, than it had to be. She felt nothing afterwards. And it wasn’t until some 18 months later that the enormity of what happened hit her; one day she was tending her flowers when she started crying: no noise, just tears.
The noise of her walking frame on the floorboards echoes loudly in the empty house. The air is so still. In the lounge room again, the rug threadbare between the couch and coffee table — both pieces of furniture are moderately different shades of brown and have never quite worked together — she, an old woman listening to her own breath for the first time, starts crying: long, loud sobs — plenty of noise and plenty of tears. The sobs coming from her throat don’t sound like her. Why would they? She’s never cried out loud before.

Doubtless, back then, confident in her decision, she left her friends knowing she was right, knowing it as defiantly as only a young woman can. Upon coming here, to this city, she met him and fell in love and knew that that was right as well. He wasn’t a bad man, but his love was conditional. And now she understands that as she left her friends, a hint of doubt had crept in and she ignored it. What a long time to carry a doubt.

She gets a Chandan stick from the packet and lights it, blowing gently on the end so it glows red and begins smoking, then puts it in the incense holder on the coffee table. In the hall she lights a cinnamon incense stick and puts it in a holder on a small table; then goes back to her bedroom — the frame on the floorboards echoing and, as always, catching on the hall rug — where she lights another oil burner, this time full of lavender oil. She stops and looks around — her chest heaving gently — and sighs. She can still smell the smoke in the air from the kitchen. She had never known how long it lingered. Now she understands why he used to get annoyed when he burnt toast. The breeze still pulls on the heavy curtains, the light and heat of the day yet to penetrate here, and her bedroom feels larger and emptier than ever before.

After he left she kept collecting; there was remorse, and she hoped — should she still hope? — he would return, but she hasn’t been waiting for the day or ‘holding her breath’. She smiles at her joke and sees how long she can hold her breath for — just in case she burns some toast herself. She holds on until her lungs feel like they’re going to burst and she gets dizzy and has to hold tight to her walking frame. Once she is stable again she shuffles to the window, wipes her eyes and pulls the curtains back. The sun has disappeared behind clouds, the breeze has cooled, and her skin goose pimples, so she pulls her dressing gown tighter around her. The storm rumbles and eats up the sky and the ground, until all three look like they condense.

As it comes closer she realises it’s not a storm. She gasps — for the first time — and her hand covers her mouth. It’s hard to see because the light is an unfamiliar one and threatens to crack…There’s a tightness in her chest like she’s never felt before…Where did they come from? She can hardly watch as they plummet and smash; some fly; others float feather-like; some hit the ground and struggle with their own weight, they
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scream, none lasts long; others turn into blue mush. This isn’t good. She drops the curtains and grabs her frame, her breath heaving. She has to leave, again, and part of her wishes she couldn’t breathe, because now she has breath, she feels like she’s short of it.

7.

The pursuit continues, and without proper sleep the hours, days and weeks spiral into one another as Turtle trudges, the land morphing as it builds and drops with few or no landmarks, save for another hill, another mountain, another gully, then another…another…another…They’re there, then they’re not, then they are again.

When he’s too tired to continue, when he’s stumbling too often or trips one too many times or when he thinks he sees something out of the corner of his eye, but when he looks it isn’t there, he stops and builds a small cave in the side of a dream-hill, crawls inside and sleeps for as long as he can. He hides among the dead dreams for who knows how long, and most times he feels more comfortable here than anywhere else. After waking he lies still and listens for the swarm — it’s come so close to finding so many times — until he’s satisfied it’s nowhere nearby.

One time he almost surrenders when he pokes his head out to see it right above him. It moves like summer insects jazzing about, left then right, coming together and moving apart, up then down, none straying too far, as if riding invisible waves. The noise it makes at first is a simple buzzing, but the more he listens, the more its elegance is revealed, as individual resonances form a timbre of such quality that he can no longer not hear their song. And so they sing…And so he closes his eyes…And so he harmonises, using the differences between it and him to wind his way through his dark moments, himself a gentle bright light. He wants to be with it and thinks about letting it find him, thinks about letting it hold his hand, thinks about fading into its strange breath, a strange that comes on slowly, but in a moment it’s gone and all he has is the residue of that first song, thick like honey.

Fear gives way to wonder and then obsession and he begins searching it out rather than running from it. Each time he gets close he loses his nerve and hides somewhere nearby watching the way it floats and jets on the hidden waves in the air, and he grabs chance harmonies with it alone in his caves. He knows this is wrong and knows he can’t let it rule him like this, so starts taking his own path, but is always, somehow,
without quite realising it until after the event, drawn to it, until, one day he decides enough’s enough and he has to break this pattern. It’s true that he’s his own man; that’s right, he steps away: How does it stay together? How does it move so beautifully — No. How Does It Move (full stop)? What’s its plan? It’s not so beautiful, really, when he thinks about it.

The more he listens and learns, the more he’s able to identify each individual’s quality and tone: a sound signature. It’s beautiful and at times he has to fight against its song and attraction and remind himself this is an important job he has. The sound signatures, he decides, are musical patterns and after an intense analysis, the patterns — their pitch, frequency and key — become visible to him. By grouping similar tones together and allocating each a different colour he’s able to visualise the swarm as colours that bend and flow in a common rhythm and to distinguish each individual by the colour he’s given it. Then, each time the swarm passes he’s able to re-map it and compare maps.

Soon, he identifies that one of them is keeping time. That’s how they stay together. He names it metronome-drop — metro-drop for short — and imagines finding it and killing it, because without a time keeper the swarm would disperse. Soon it’s all he can do to think about anything else while trudging along (he could be walking in circles for all he knows). The thought that he might be able to take back some control brings a lightness to the hidden places inside him.

As a cartographer would, he builds the information he gathers into images, layers, topography. His plan changes many times during the days and weeks, maybe months, it takes for him to get organised, but it has to take that long because he only has one chance — there can’t be any mistakes. He builds an understanding of its methods, habits, likes and dislikes; the way it moves; the way it flies at a 37º angle when flying against the wind; the way its song changes depending on whether it’s attacking or fleeing. This is more than a simple plan to eradicate his pursuer, it’s about who he is. After this he won’t have to hide any more; he won’t be under its watchful eye; he’ll have himself back.

The final preparations are made in a cave. All the maps are completed, committed to memory, overlayed on one another. He’s isolated the exact location of the metro-drop down to the millimetre and it’s all he can do not to jump out and yell for the swarm to come and get him right now. No, he must wait. This has to be a surprise.
Days pass where he doesn’t see the swarm. Where it’s gone he can’t say. Concern begins to cloud his memory and judgement. If this continues for too long the maps will become hazy, where before they were crisp and clean and all he could see. To stay mentally alert he goes through each map, reorganising the colour scheme, going over the plan again and again, walking himself through it, exploring if there’s a better way or a better place to do it. He practises on the side of dream-hills. Nerves build. He checks everything, double checks, checks everything against everything else. He reorganises it again, reorganises the colour scheme, visualises himself succeeding, not wanting to think about failure, but the thought keeps popping into his mind at moments.

The day it happens is like every other day: he hears its song before he actually sees it in the air. Its song floats through the air and touches everything between it and him. The maps flash into his mind. (So much for worrying about them becoming hazy, or him forgetting.) With a mixture of nervous and excited energy — this is the first time he can remember being excited for so long — he digs out a small cave, making sure the entrance faces away from the sun, so when he comes out the swarm will be looking directly into the setting sun. This might give him an extra second or so of surprise. He waits long enough for it to see him, but not long enough for the song to fully seduce him, then bundles into his hiding place. The blue of the blood seems less overbearing and less blue. He closes his eyes, listening for it. It’s coming closer. When he knows it’s definitely coming his way he plugs his ears with a couple of bits of dream he found and puts his hand on the roof, feeling for it. It’s all about timing. It’s closer…closer…closer…he’s about to make his move, the maps are in place in his mind, he’s ready.

The swarm changes.

There are two metro-drops, each keeping time on the half-beat. It’s as if they knew. The cave is so small all of a sudden. He suffers the cave for as long as he can bear, then, discarding his maps and abandoning his plan, ignoring his own safety rule about waiting half an hour for the swarm to leave he climbs out and starts walking away from the swarm…somewhere.

One day after staying in a cave and listening for that bloody swarm again — there are three metro-drops now, it’s like it’s taunting him — Turtle crawls from his hiding place to find a woman, about his age, but she seems older, clambering on the small dream-hill. While she isn’t beautiful, there is a generosity to her face
and the lines around her eyes suggest a lifetime of laughter. She is attempting to stalk a small dream that’s
crawling across the grass, flowers and dirt that have manifested — still tinged with blue, nothing can get
ride of the blue — from the dead dreams. Her hunt is made difficult by her walking being more a series of
epileptic-like seizures than a walk. Her eyes don’t blink, wild, staring, and her arms and legs habitually
spasm and she splays. She stays downwind of the dream, keeping low in its blind spot, reaches and grabs at
the air in front of her, sniffs, her face and body ticing and twitching.

The dream is between him and her and is quivering, moving slow, and although he is drawn to it, he
doesn’t want to spend too much time exposed on top of the hill.

‘Don’ be thinkin’ nothin’,’ the woman says and quickens towards the dream, involuntarily jerking her
right leg out behind her.

He could still get to it before she does, and knows he’d look after it better than she would, she can’t even
walk properly, so steps nearer the dream.

‘Don’ be comin’ closer.’ She points at him with a long, bony finger. Her hand twitches as if being
electrocuted.

‘I saw it first,’ he says, even though he knows she saw it before him.

‘Why you think I don climb tha hill, ya Narco.’ Her face tics. ‘Narco.’

She’s the Narco. ‘It’s closest to me,’ he says, moves towards the dream but stays alert, still wary of the
swarm.

She quickens her pace again, stretching out her neck and raising her head to sniff the air. ‘I don saw tha
hole there.’ She points straight at the mouth of his cave with her shaky hand.

He thought he was always so careful to camouflage the entrances. ‘It’s mine.’ He closes in on the dream.

‘You don’ have no claim.’ Her limbs spasm and she sprawls.

He feels he should help her up or something. ‘I’ve done this before.’

She lifts up, steadying herself, unsettled, on shaky arms and moves in on the dream too. ‘You don’ don
nothin’ before this, Awake.’

She attacks him with that last word, speaking quickly, as if its very existence offends her. ‘I have maps. I
know the area,’ he says and moves towards the dream.

‘You stay there. Don’ move. This one don mine.’ She is on top of the dream now.
‘I know what to do.’

‘You don hide like a crab, Sleeper.’ She gently picks the dream up and in that moment her eyes quieten and her breath stills; she speaks softly, talking to it as if it were a baby; her body stills too.

He grabs the dream and runs; knowing it shouldn’t be like this and feels guilty, but he can’t help himself, and he is doing this for the dream — not him. It flinches at first, having been severed from her, but when it feels his empathy — he has to concentrate hard to hide his grief and confusion — it relaxes. It’s not like before, though, not the way he thought it’d be: he isn’t living existence with the dream because the connection is weak.

‘Dirty Narco Sleeper piece of Awake!’ she yells.

He doesn’t turn around. She’ll attract the swarm and he doesn’t want to be around when that happens.

The run exhausts him and he almost falls asleep while digging. The cave is rushed and smaller than most, but he takes care to hide the entrance better this time. After some initial squirming to get comfortable the dream snuggles into him and lets him dream with it, but afterwards Turtle can’t remember his (their) dream(s). In the fitful hours they have together they connect, but the connection is inconsistent, it surges, sometimes pleasant, sometimes painful.

By their seventh hour together he understands: its name is Nebo. (He didn’t know dreams had names. Neither did Nebo.) Together they recognise that Nebo may or may not be a name, but that doesn’t matter because in this circumstance they each have to call each other by a word that acts as a name. Turtle knows Nebo’s in pain, but doesn’t know what he can do about it. As Nebo becomes more and more inconsistent it falls in and out of sleep (or consciousness). He didn’t think dreams could sleep. It can’t be asleep. He sings to it, but there is little response; it is too far gone and slips further away. Again, he tells himself he’s doing all this for Nebo.

He’s so tired…Nebo screams. Turtle’s eyes jolt open; his neck and jaw are stiff: he was grinding his teeth. He’s so sorry. He should never have…The scream, so close, penetrates deep. Right now he hates Nebo because of that scream. It sets him on edge. Nebo writhes. Turtle forgets Nebo’s name, then remembers the swarm and tries to quieten the dream. It tries to wriggle away, but hasn’t the energy — and it couldn’t get very far, the cave is so small. Turtle grabs Nebo, he remembers, and then, just like the dream before, Nebo
disintegrates. Turtle feels such compassion that he forgets his hate and tries to save it by holding it tight, but Nebo oozes through his fingers and into the cracks between the dead dreams.

It’s quick, and this death leaves him heavy — much heavier than before — and he lies there, trying to figure out where to go from here, and in that time his clarity is extraordinary: he should have listened to Lisa. Her voice is fading now because he hasn’t heard it for so long and this scares him. What if she’s not here…? Everything is wrong…the more he sees of this world, the more his first overwhelming desire to help dissipates. And that swarm is out there somewhere…The cave encloses him…Somehow he convinces himself that by leaving Nebo’s remains in the cave he will have given what’s left of Nebo a decent burial. He falls asleep. When he wakes, he has forgotten everything — except that he had clarity — and feels like he’s in a dark jar, all blue, all confining, his breath…Hard to breathe…strained lungs…thin air, stained lungs…blue…The smell of the dead dreams, itchy, won’t come off…Nebo is…sickening…the smell of it…won’t come off…his hands, arms, legs, neck, face…won’t come off…Things live in the dark…He lives at the bottom, and on his skin scars and imperfections are exaggerated blue …lines on a map…mixed with dirty dirt…won’t come off…Why don’t I do something?…A wine bottle cave where dirt leaches…hardens…I pick at my fingers, under my finger nails, won’t come off…I scratch at…the blue spreads…won’t come off…Have I lost something?…Sunshine means we’re gone…Lisa came loose…What would she say?…It’s inside me…I get up and go out…

8.

Lisa takes main streets, not bothering with alleys or side streets, that’s where she got in trouble last time, and follows her direction, and her direction alone. The streets, alleys and lanes — all signposted — are arranged in a grid; traffic lights direct vehicles; groups wait at bus stops, tram stops and taxi ranks — all the taxis have radio antennas sticking out from them…are they listening; and people climb the stairs to the train station. She uses these streets to travel. She knows them well, in the familiar-unfamiliar city she finds herself in. The buildings stand tall and silent, confident, timid and unsure, and look like they’re leaning in on her — and mobile phone towers spike from roof tops like periscopes searching, looking…listening. She knows, even before she gets there, that the first corner will be the hardest to take and she has to tell herself to keep going, don’t look back, don’t turn around, because whatever or whoever she’s searching for is this way, not
back there, not with Henry. This is her decision, and her responsibility, and even though she’s sure this is
the right thing to do, she’s still not sure why she left Henry like that... he could have helped
her...maybe...She holds her breath as she rounds the corner, only allowing herself to breathe again on the
other side. She does look back, but only as far as the sharp corner of the building. There is nothing for her
that way.

The CBD is bronze in the afternoon, silver at other times, golden when the sun is low — the way the light
bounces off the hard-edged buildings creates shadows where there should be none — and the strange light
stretches the days long. She passes shops, pubs, art galleries, museums and restaurants. Flashing signs
advertise everything from adult shops to family bookstores. She distracts herself on these streets. She jumps
in behind a group of teenagers as she passes a three-storey television mounted on the side of a building. It
broadcasts news updates, weather reports and sporting scores...it could be recording as well as
broadcasting. She keeps to the half light and the shadows. People bump her, it’s hot, her clothes stick to her,
and it feels like she’s the only one walking against the crowd. So many people...she feels alone. She feels
closed in and constricted. She wants to scream, ‘Fuck off! Get out of the way. I have somewhere to be!’ but
doesn’t...and anyway, she has no idea where she has to be, only that she has to be there.

When the streets narrow their nature changes: the temperature drops; they wind in all directions, at times
circling in on themselves; they congest with people and carts and animals and cars and rickshaws and
motorbikes; and the hard edges of the CBD give way. No one bumps or jostles, because there’s an
understanding here, this time she’s part of the flow, and she allows herself to get lost in that flow, to follow
it and to assimilate. Hiding in crowds is better than hiding in shadows. Wind kicks the blue dust into the air
and it makes her sneeze. It gets into everything. Small graffiti-covered houses with corrugated iron roofs,
stand with their mouth-like doors and window-eyes at awkward angles, as if they’re scrunched in pain. The
blue piles up at the bottom of the walls. She works and lives on these winding streets.

When she finds herself at a canal — solid cement embankments angle down to a drain where the water
trickles thin and shallow through dark green slime — she knows this is where she should be... It cuts
through the city and feels like it was a river that’s been changed; in it she traces all the city’s memories and
desires... and some regrets. She’s drawn to it, or what’s left of it, and prefers to think of the river as asleep.
She leaves the streets behind, imagining the river’s beauty, imagining what it might have looked like without the surgery that erased its natural rhythms, and walks along the top of the right-side embankment. The canal is straight and ekes out her path for her; she travels far in a short time. She doesn’t have to hide here.

The sun is low when the cement embankments give way to the softer contours of the river’s banks. She rounds a bend and there are people everywhere, all around her. She turns to make sure this is where she came from, and yes, behind her, the canal is still there, but now she’s at the water’s edge and it’s so noisy, almost as loud as being in the city, and that same fear of getting caught comes back — she doesn’t want to be like this. She walks quicker. Down in the gully the river looks agitated. There isn’t anywhere to hide...no shadows or buildings or corners...they can’t see her like this...it’s like she’s naked. This...this everyday won’t go away easily, so she has to get out of here...The people are in her way...She heads one way, then has to go another, then has to dart around someone else. These people don’t understand. She thought she knew this place. She’s crying under her breath.

Around the next bend is a market: a long, undercover, wall-less shed and all she can smell is fish. More people. There’s no way around, it’s built up against the bank, so she’s going to have to go through. She doesn’t want to go inside. It’s so loud in under the shed, but at least it’s cool. The touts, large-bellied men, all of them, call out prices. They’re so loud. She doesn’t want to be here.

‘For you. For you,’ a tout says as he picks out a live crab from a glass aquarium. He’s wearing a thick apron, like the others, and has large rough hands that are nicked and cut. ‘Good price.’ He shoves the crab out towards her, near her face. Its claws sway in the air. It’s too close to her, and he laughs as she backs away, behind an old woman carrying a woven basket full of fish, their tails poking out the gaps. She follows the woman through the market, until she can see the river again.

Long boats, like kayaks, and wide flat-bottomed rafts lie on the bank under some trees out the back of the market. They must be fishing boats. She has to dodge chickens scratching around under the trees and children with blue-stained hands and feet playing around the boats. Flies buzz around heaped piles of rotting fruits and vegetables. She wonders how far from the sea she is.
Around the next bend the river packs with people again: they wash, shit and fish; children jump and splash; women wash clothes by slapping them on rocks; men piss and spit and let their livestock drink. A skinny black dog runs past her and jumps into the water with a splash. If this is where the fish come from…

Around the next bend shrines and statues line both sides of the bank. She’s sure the river’s waking now. Near the largest shrine, lines of people wade into the river and wash their feet and legs before entering. She’d like to go into the water as well, it looks so cool, but the people all move so slow.

Around the next bend she startles one of those colourless somethings as it drinks from the river. When it sees her it flickers away, reappearing further on at the water’s edge. She stands still. It is so quiet, as if nothing else exists anywhere. It looks back at her and sniffs the air, almost like an animal, but not quite. She is excited at being so close to it. Every other time they’ve been moving so fast. Then others appear, across the river from her, on the opposite bank, as if they’re lights being turned on. There are lots of them, as far as she can see, in front of her and behind, flicking in and out of view, lapping at the water. She hadn’t noticed them until now. Their presence is almost comforting. The something near her is flicking here and there now. One second it’s on this side of the river, then, within a breath, it’s on the other side, then it comes back again, each time reappearing at the water’s edge, drinking. They are all around her now and when they finish drinking, she can see it in the eyes of those close to her, they have the same slowness as the river. She takes a step, a slow step, but even so those near her disappear, then reappear on the other side of the river.

She shouldn’t have moved. ‘Where are you going!?’ she says and steps forward.

Those somethings scatter.

‘Where are you from!?’

They disappear then reappear further up the bank.

‘Don’t…’ There’s no point in yelling; they’re gone. She should have stayed still when she had the chance. She looks behind just in case there’s still a something nearby. There’s nothing. The only sound here is the river, it narrows into rapids at the end of this corner bend, but the rapids are slow, and they look beautiful, cool and clean. The river colours dark blue where most of the somethings were drinking. It’s the river’s slowness, at times a distinct stillness, that causes her to hurry her steps even more.

Around the next bend she slips and falls in. The water is freezing; the bank blisters with weeping sores; the water skins with a yellow-brown scum; and the river becomes loud from underneath… The river’s fully
awake now and is full of memories forgotten — she knows this because she’s part of it. Forgotten memories are silent. The river is so loud. The memories crowd around. She looks for help. There is no one around. She tries to climb out, but slips on blood, and falls further into the water, swallowing some. It gets into her and she has to contend with the city’s forgotten desires and memories and regrets. They’re persistent. The cold rises up her and all the city’s excuses, lies and deceptions wear her out. She can hardly keep her head above water, let alone climb. The blisters ooze a thin, clear fluid that runs into the river and makes it stink. Now she stinks. She can’t hear herself above the river. She tries to clamber out again, but slips on the pus and falls back in. The water is even colder and slower. She steels herself, it takes a lot of effort, and scrambles up the bank — over sores and boils, dirt and plants, past large cuts and through metre-wide pustules — and is covered in mud and scum and the blue. She runs… She runs and doesn’t stop until she is well away from the water — if it is water. She runs into the congested streets near the river…

She is clean and dry, but still cold, and her legs are covered with a film of blue that feels like it’s growing on her and she has to get ride of it, so she sits in the gutter and rubs and rubs and rubs. People step over her. Her legs feel hollow and cold and her rubbing just smudges the blue and makes it spread. Her shoes are still soaked, so she takes them off. Her feet are blue — even her toenails. They’re ugly. They look like chicken feet, like they have scales. She throws the shoes away, they’re ruined.

Barefoot now, she follows the intricacies of the surrounding streets — these streets feel old to her, are gravel and dirt, dusty, narrow — and they themselves follow the contours of the river. Her feet are tender and she is careful to pick her way along the streets so she doesn’t step on anything too hard. She leaves blue footprints, puddles, a legacy of her journey, and with each step the blue drains from her. She never wants to feel that river’s touch again and is glad when the blue has fully drained from her and her legs are the right colour again…but there is something about the river…and that blue dust is all around and gets up her nose and makes her sneeze. She just can’t get away from it.

The crowd thickens, is thicker than in the city, and those somethings dart and play and flash, appearing and reappearing. They seem playful now, not timid, as before, and she wants to try speaking to them again, but no one else seems to see them. Lisa can’t understand it, they’re everywhere. Maybe they’re not here. They’re so quick. The people around her speak many languages at once — the words are beautiful, each in their own way: clear and sharp, but unintelligible — and those same people bump and knock her, their
Dreamriders

touch prickles, and it feels like there’s not enough room for everyone, feels like everything is coated with blue, like their words are floating over her, like she is here but nobody sees her. This is too much. Blue dust flies in the air and the blue liquid puddles in potholes. She wants to go somewhere quiet. There are people she knows. A crowd of familiar faces. She tries to get their attention. This place is full of unfamiliar noises. Nothing looks familiar. She has no direction.

A group forms, right next to her, then another and another and Lisa joins many groups over many weeks. She has direction. The first group only makes right-hand turns…the second only travels to the west…the third only takes 3377 steps in a day…she wants to blend in…

Lisa joins another group as it turns onto a bridge, where the temperature drops. As soon as she joins it she knows this is where she should be. She walks past another group standing on the bridge, shoulder to shoulder, fishing, their lines dangling into the river; it’s so thick with the blue that it looks like it’s ceased flowing, but she knows different, it’s agitated underneath. The blue looks dirty. By the time the group is half way across the bridge she is accepted. A fish flops around in a bucket at the feet of one of the fishermen — his forehead tapping against the rail — and has blue oozing out of its gills. The river stinks.

Lisa has no concerns in following their leader, who interprets the street directory. In the beginning her feet ache from all the walking, the dust gets up her nose and in her clothes, and her back aches from carrying everything she owns on her back, but she doesn’t complain, this is the way she has to go. There is order here. When she walks, she follows the same person she did yesterday, and always erects her tent on the southern edge of camp. She befriends a teacher who carries his blackboard with him in a shopping trolley and his chalk stumps in his pockets, the tips of his fingers dusted white. He teaches the children what the names of each of the streets they pass mean. She is so taken by what he does that she becomes a teacher too. She talks with an artist and a writer who both proclaim their love for each other to her, but not loud enough so the other can hear. To help them she becomes a marriage counsellor.

When their leader asks her to sit on the governing council it’s a warm summer’s night and they are at dinner. She doesn’t accept straight away, but was never going to refuse. This position allows her to walk around the group while they’re travelling. Only councillors can do this. At first this lack of order makes her uncomfortable, but after harvesting with the farmers who carry their crops in wheelbarrows, speaking with
the economists who manage the group’s finances and fermenting wine with the winemakers she feels an even stronger sense of belonging than before.

Soon after becoming a councillor the group sets up camp at a crossroads to trade with another group. During the Official Negotiation Period, as it is called, all meals are cooked jointly. Lisa is so used to being on the move that she is always uneasy when they stop. Her feet ache for the road and she paces around camp. She hates the joint meals, too, sitting around listening to stories of the road; mostly told by men full of bravado, trying to impress the men from the other group (who are busy thinking up their own exaggerations) or trying to impress the women (who see through the bullshit). She does speak to people — the quiet men, other women, teenagers, children — always keeping an ear out for anyone who may speak of He , always listening for something…for someone who knows.

The crossroads are days behind when the artist and writer marry. She weeps at their wedding.

It’s when a scout she knows doesn’t come back from a mission that she becomes distraught, and has her first real thoughts about leaving. The search lasts for three days, and when they don’t find her, Lisa stays in her tent without speaking to anyone, not even the teacher. She can’t speak at the funeral because this shouldn’t have happened. There was no reason for this. She takes it upon herself to make sure this doesn’t happen again, so becomes a scout herself.

Lisa and Sarah, another scout, are sent ahead to figure out how far away the sea is. Since the group’s loss, scouts always travel in pairs and always carry SatNav–mobile phones. Lisa only ever turns hers on when she feels it’s absolutely necessary. There are enough ways for her to be tracked and monitored without her adding another. She’s started making plans.

Soon after Lisa and Sarah leave the group, the street stops at the edge of a series of large sand dunes. Lisa thought as much. They climb one — the blue-grey sand is warm and gets between her toes — and on the other side is a long wide beach where waves crash on the shore, loud, and a shanty town protected by a large chain-link fence with razor wire atop. This is not good. This can’t happen. Their leader has been taking them in circles on purpose, or, just as bad, he’s lost his way…There are hundreds if not thousands of people on the beach camping between here and the shanty town. Tracks snake their way through the campsites the people have set up. Guards, holding large black dogs on leads, patrol along the inside of the fence line.
She sits. ‘I knew we were close.’ Sarah sits next to her as Lisa closes her eyes so she can smell the fresh sea air. After the heat of the city, the stinking river and the rotting blue the breeze is welcome. She breathes deep. There is a sadness, though…she was right about their leader, she didn’t want to be. Their leader has been travelling in circles. There’s one building, an old service station — its roof is in disrepair, graffiti covers its walls, and the blue corrodes the brickwork — that they’ve passed some six times in the last month — on the third time they passed it she graffitied her mark on a wall. Since then, they’ve passed it three more times. She has proof. She took photos and gave them to friends in other groups, just in case something happens to her. She sends the photos by carrier pigeon. She drinks from her water bottle. ‘We should go down.’

‘I’ll report our location,’ Sarah says.

‘No,’ Lisa says, ‘we didn’t go the way they asked. Let’s look around first.’ She follows one of the many tracks down the dune to the beach and almost immediately the temperature drops.

A man bumps into her. His eyes are closed. His skin, cold, flaky and coarse, feels dead. He pushes past her without acknowledging her and winds his way along a track that goes back up into the dunes, as if he can see, but not very well. She shouldn’t have come down here. This isn’t what she expected. The stink of rotting food, shit and piss, and smoke gives the place a decaying smell, and there is garbage lying all over the sand.

She looks behind her at Sarah, who doesn’t look comfortable at all. ‘We’ll be quick,’ she says.

The beach is as congested as the streets are; there are people lying everywhere; and the toilets are just holes. She has to be careful where she steps: a man dragging himself through the sand with his arms crawls past; she is having second thoughts about coming here. Sarah is close behind her.

‘I just want to see…’ she trails off. A man is lying on his side near a fire dug into a shallow hole — and has ground his teeth down to the gums and bleeds over his chin. She doesn’t look as she steps over him. Sarah moves closer than before. Lisa can tell Sarah isn’t coping with this. When she passes a woman tapping her chest like she’s mimicking the thump thump of her heartbeat and counting each tap, she hears her own heartbeat in her ears. It’s louder than she remembers. She swallows hard and tries not to think about what she just stepped in. They pass a woman who twitches and tics as she tries to walk, her arms and legs spasm, her eyes don’t blink. She can’t look into those eyes.
At the fence groups huddle, shivering and hiding their eyes. She doesn’t know where to look. The shanty town stretches far along the beach and the houses look permanent — or at least more permanent than the tent she’s living in. Their walls are sheets of metal; some have thatched roofs, some metal ones; brick chimneys release thin grey smoke. There are small vegetable gardens and piles of compost. There’s a gate at the south end, heavily fortified with guards and barricades. The only tarred road in and out goes through that gate. The river mouth is at the north end where there are wharfs and fishing boats.

‘Move away!’ a guard yells.

Lisa backs away, Sarah follows.

‘Move away, move right away!’ The guards, four of them and two dogs, take up a position in front of them on the other side of the fence.

Lisa steps back further and looks down at the sand. The blue is only on this side of the fence. The guard dogs growl and bark and pull at their leads. She steps back again, glad there’s a fence between her and them. Sarah stays behind her. Drool flicks from their mouths, and she thinks she understands what they’re barking, but not in terms of words or anything as clumsy as that. It’s more of a feeling. She is reminded of Henry. She still resents the waitress; who she blames for them not being able to…whatever…it doesn’t matter now.

‘Get back further, or we’ll come out.’

Lisa puts up her hands. ‘Ok. We’re going.’ She walks from the fence and stops to try and get a better look at all of the shanty town. If she can’t get a close up view she may as well get an understanding of its layout.

Sarah’s phone rings.

Lisa looks at her. ‘Don’t answer.’ No one has ever called her on a mission before.

Sarah checks the display. ‘It’s our leader.’

‘We need more time.’ She didn’t follow their leader’s directions, but took a route she’s memorised. She knows the streets as well as anyone now. ‘Don’t.’ She has doubts about their leader’s integrity, but doesn’t say anything — she can’t be sure whose side Sarah’s on.

Sarah answers.

Lisa walks away from the conversation and stares past the shanty town to the sea. She thought this was where she was supposed to be…but now she’s not sure…
'They want us back ASAP,' Sarah says, 'I had to lie about our position.'

'Five minutes.' She wants to see if there are any weaknesses in the fence, places they might be able to sneak in — holes in it, or a blind spot the guards can't see. To be locked out now; she's so close.

Sarah shakes her head. 'I'm going back.'

The look in Sarah's eyes...

On the way back Lisa can't believe it when they pass that same service station again. They didn't pass it on the way. As much as she wants to tell Sarah she thinks their leader is taking them in circles, she still doesn't say anything.

'Where are they?' Lisa asks. Sarah is following the coordinates on her SatNav phone.

Sarah shakes her head. 'It says to keep going.'

'They've gone away from the beach.'

When they get back to camp Lisa strides into the council's meeting room, which is like a walled in marquee, and interrupts. 'What are we doing here? We were so close.'

'Excuse me,' Councillor Spandrel says, 'I was speaking on garbage collection…'

'We've gone away from the sea,' Lisa says, staring at their leader.

'We are where we need to be,' their leader says without looking at her. He smiles.

'They've built a town on the beach,' Lisa says.

'And barricades and fences,' Sarah adds.

'This is important!' Councillor Spandrel says. 'Leader.' He turns towards their leader and pleads, 'I won't tolerate this interruption.'

Their leader stands and waves his hand, as if he's patting a child's head, to calm Councillor Spandrel. 'It is alright, Councillor. This is an unprecedented moment.'

Councillor Spandrel sits back down and folds his arms across his chest.

'We're so close.' Lisa continues to stare at their leader. 'We should move out.'

'This is far more good news than bad.' Their leader won’t meet her eye. 'I am sure they will trade with us.' He stands and moves in-between the councillors, placing his hand on their shoulders as he passes. 'We can not go empty handed.' He puts the other councillors between him and Lisa.
Lisa moves towards him. ‘We were only minutes away, ten or fifteen at most, before. You took us away from the sea. We should pack up camp now.’

‘Are you telling our leader what to do,’ Councillor Spandrel says.

‘It’d only take half an hour, or forty-five minutes.’ She moves past some of the other councillors and closer to their leader. ‘And we’d be there.’

‘We must prepare,’ their leader says as he steps back a few paces. He still won’t look at her, but addresses the other councillors in the tent.

‘We need to leave.’ Lisa steps forward again.

‘We will wait here,’ their leader says, ‘and prepare properly so we can negotiate on our terms.’ He looks at everybody in the room, except Lisa. ‘Please, tell your constituents to prepare, but don’t tell them how close we are, I don’t want to get their hopes up.’

The other councillors stand.

‘Stop. Sit down. We should vote,’ Lisa says.

‘This is an unprecedented moment,’ their leader says, ‘I declare the meeting closed early. Please record that in the official minutes.’

The other councillors start to leave.

‘We should go now, as a group,’ Lisa says.

Their leader waves her away. ‘I will need two days to ponder how to best approach the ensuing negotiations. Please go.’

‘This is wrong.’ She weighs up accusing their leader of deliberately misdirecting the group.

‘Two days.’ He turns his back on Lisa and the council.

Lisa looks around at the other councillors, who are all leaving, and very quickly Lisa and Sarah are the only people apart from their leader left inside. She has no respect for the council anymore. ‘Why won’t you listen?’

Their leader ignores her.

‘Come on.’ Sarah takes her arm. ‘We tried.’

‘This won’t end well.’
‘What will not end well.’ He spins around. ‘If you wish to leave the group, leave. If you wish to challenge me, do so in the proper forum. Otherwise, let me be.’

‘It’s not about that. You’ve…’

‘What.’

She doesn’t know what to say…or how to say it…or if she wants to say it now…She does have proof.

‘Leave me be.’ He turns his back on her again.

Unless she wants to challenge him for the leadership, he’s right, she has nothing. She leaves without another word. Outside, the rest of the governing council members are standing, listening. No one looks at her as she walks past.

Sarah puts her hand on Lisa’s shoulder. ‘Why do they send us out if they don’t want to listen?’

Lisa nods. ‘Get some food. I have to spread the word about the decision of the meeting.’

‘I can come…if you need.’

‘Get something to eat.’

As her role on council demands, she first informs the specialists of what their leader needs for the negotiations. His needs have not changed since she joined the group: the singers and musicians are to compose a forty-five minute concert; the chefs are to prepare a five-course banquet; the artists are to paint three large and six small canvasses; the writers are to record this historic occasion in the groups’ official diaries; and the farmers are to harvest their best produce.

It’s a long night, explaining the council’s decision and repeating that their leader knows what he’s doing, even though she doesn’t agree. Parents tell her their children are scared because they don’t know what’s going on. She can tell from their voices that the parents are scared too. She finds it hard not to tell them of her worries, especially when she hears so many similar concerns: ‘We have been travelling for so long. This is what we want. Why wait?’ ‘The elderly are finding it difficult to keep up.’ ‘Why don’t we just stay here?’ ‘I think we should find somewhere else.’ ‘Our leader hasn’t been himself since he was hit by that car. He has limped since.’ ‘He has been far more cautious.’ ‘Too cautious, say some.’ ‘I have faith in him, he can negotiate with anyone. Remember the time there were road works and the detour was too far, so he negotiated our passing during their lunch break.’ ‘That was some time ago, he may be too old.’
Lisa knows that the next two days are going to be difficult. She can’t stand being stationary, so she finds the
artists and writers and economists, down near the river, always near the river, near the blue, drawn to it.
She’s drawn to it, drawn to them, manages to stay away most times, she hates it and loves it, she wants it;
those artists, writers and economist, they walk where they want, when they want. She can always tell when
they’re affected by the blue — it makes them slow and purposeless. She’s slow and purposeless now. She
drinks the blue, she snorts the dust — doesn’t want to, but has time to kill…days…She can stay with them
in their tents as long as she wants…not just for two days. She can hide with them…She sees those
somethings again, they’re drinking, the writers and artists and economists look like those somethings, they
flicker after they drink the blue, after she drinks the blue; she looks at her arm to make sure she’s not the
one disappearing. She is slow like the river. She talks about needing to escape, about conspiracies that go all
the way to the top, that happen every day. Those somethings flit about. She’s only going to stay two days.

The blue always leaves her with energy, but she feels guilty and sad afterwards. A bit empty, she enjoys it
when she’s there, but hates to think what she must look like to others. The blue also leaves her hungry. She
doesn’t eat, doesn’t even think about eating, when she takes it. She’s eating dinner in the mess tent — the
place seats about 2000 people and every table is full — when their leader enters. It goes quiet.

He stands out the front and speaks quietly. ‘We will leave for the shanty town in five days. Make all
your arrangements.’ He leaves.

Lisa doesn’t know what to feel. This is what she wants, but in five days’ time the shanty town could be
full or overrun…or gone. Staying with the group means waiting, but she can’t see any benefit in going it
alone, either. The room is filled with natural light from the setting sun and one of the sides has been left up
to let the evening breeze in. There is a lightness to the meal: salads and cold meats for mains, and fruit salad
for dessert. She promises herself that staying is a strategic decision, not a duplicitous one. Their leader is
still an excellent negotiator, no matter what, and she has a better chance of getting in with him negotiating
on her behalf than if she tried to do it on her own. She stands and walks over to one of the long food tables
at the front and fills a cup with black coffee from one of the urns. She passes the teacher on the way back to
her place. He’s sitting with his wife and children.
'Exciting, isn’t it,’ he says.

She stops and sits next to him. ‘Yeah.’

The teacher’s wife won’t look at her. ‘What are you going to be doing?’

She knows she’ll spend the best part of the next five days strengthening her personal networks, just in case something happens; and that she’ll have to be careful who she speaks with. ‘Council business, I expect.’

The teacher nods and smiles.

There’s no way she’s going to find the artists, writers and economists again, even though she’s sure these will be some of the longest days of her life. The road is for travelling on, not sitting on. She loves the feel of the streets and roads, gravel, dirt and bitumen under her feet. They’re so hard now, she can walk on almost any surface, but they’re sensitive. She can feel an incline before it’s visible, can tell how old the road is, and knows when a road is suffering under the feet of many, or suffering from under use; either way it’s not healthy.

She’s climbing the walls by the time they pack up camp and leave, and is the first to get ready. She does this so she can get close to their leader for the trip. All order is gone now. She has no confidence in him anymore and knows he’s going to try and take them in circles. She knows he’s good at manipulating events for his own gain, she’ll give him that. He even exaggerates or hides his limp to his own advantage. She’s been watching him.

The group walks and walks and walks.

Lisa suspects he’s taking them in circles, kissing the coast, then taking them inland again, but has no proof.

The group walks.

They pass that service station again. Friends from other groups have graffitied their mark near hers. They received the photos.
The group walks.

It’s difficult for her to know whether he’s going in circles on purpose, to show her he still holds power over the group, and over her, or if he’s truly lost and can no longer navigate, can no longer read the street directory. If that’s the case this could go on for weeks or months.

The group walks.

She wonders how long he’s been manipulating them like this and if anyone else notices. If they do, why haven’t they said anything. She can’t be the only one.

The group walks.

When they get to the dunes the group runs. Lisa is one of the first there, but their leader is the first down the other side and first to the fence line. She knows he makes a point of always being first.

It stinks worse now than it did before and there are far more people than she remembers. They might have left it too late. She knew it. She’s glad she’s made other plans. Their leader waited too long. She should contact the others...she hopes they’re nearby.

‘We will erect camp here, where I will negotiate our entry!’ Their leader has to yell above the rest of the group just to be heard by those close by.

‘Could all council members move through the group and disseminate this message,’ he yells again.

Lisa doesn’t want to go too far away from him, so only tells a few people of their leader’s orders. She sticks close to him as they set up camp — she erects her tent near his. His limp is far more pronounced now.

The next morning before breakfast Lisa and their leader pass each other while walking through camp.
‘These will be most difficult negotiations. I need all the council’s public support,’ he says.

He didn’t have to ask for it. He knows the governing council is bound, by convention, to back him and to refrain from any public comment. His limp is even more pronounced today.

‘I will invite the closest guards to a formal meal. Inform the farmers and chefs.’

Their leader always commences negotiations with a formal meal and wine, and Lisa believes this is the right course to take in this instance as well — protocol is all they have left now. ‘I already have.’

He nods and walks back through the camp towards the fence and his tent. She looks past the fence to the sea.

When the guards refuse their leader’s offer — no one has ever refused before — Lisa gets scared. None of this has been managed in the best way. This could undermine all their efforts to get in. He is misreading the mood of the shanty town. When their leader overlooks this offence, Lisa believes this is wrong because it undermines his standing. Then, when they refuse his second invite, citing their responsibility to their posts, Lisa begins to enact her plans. She can’t let this stop her. When their leader withdraws his offer and retires to his tent for the night, saying he will not negotiate with these servile followers and will arrange a meeting with their leader in the morning Lisa thinks this shows weakness.

Her dissatisfaction with their leader grows, along with the group’s. He stays in his tent all day and sends her to ask the proper title of the shanty town’s leader, and she’s sure he does this to keep her away from the other councillors. She is as quick as she can be, the internal bureaucracy of the shanty town moves at a snail’s pace, and eventually, finds out the official title is ‘Mayor’. Once back in camp she walks among the group, hoping to run into the teacher, and overhears many conversations: ‘We will forego our chance.’ ‘We need to take direct action.’ ‘We will lose our position in the line.’ ‘We must act now.’ ‘The guards look dangerous.’ ‘Our leader is being too cautious. I have said this before.’ ‘We need to set up an embassy.’ ‘I think we should find another beach.’ ‘We need a new direction.’ ‘Our leader isn’t himself.’ ‘He is letting these people treat him with disrespect.’ ‘He is too cautious.’ ‘Let us send an alternative attaché to speak with them at once.’
She considers volunteering to be their alternative representative and is going through all considerations, analysing what the political fallout might be, and speaking with a select few people during dinner when their leader enters the mess tent again. Every table is full and there is a buzz around the room.

He stands out the front and speaks quietly again… Lisa can’t hear what he says.

‘Speak up!’ someone yells.

‘Shh, our leader is speaking,’ a man at Lisa’s table says. ‘Show some respect.’

‘You’ll have to yell!’ someone at the back of the room says.

As their leader clears his throat she thinks — it might just be her imagination, or maybe she wishes this were the case — but she thinks she sees something… it’s subtle, a small thing, but it’s something she’s not seen in him before. He starts to speak, and then there’s the look, then he stops. Did others see it? Has he forgotten his speech? He never stops. He clears his throat again and walks between the tables, comforting people with his smile, his manner, and his confidence: ‘We must be nonviolent, unlike the others. There is no line, so we can not “lose our position”. We are acting. This is our embassy. I am your representative.’

She’s glad she didn’t volunteer. He has spies everywhere and they obviously told him he had to quell the disquiet. Despite his limp, which benefits him during negotiations because people’s attention is on his perceived disability, his movements are easy. They have to be. Right now he has to inspire confidence, not invoke sympathy. He is so good at what he does, so good at this sort of thing, and he’s probably the only person able to negotiate their safe entry, but he’s also so manipulative. This is what she wants, though, and she did decide to stay. He answers every question posed, unlike a politician who would avoid such questions.

She doesn’t think his strategies will work, so continues making her own plans. She demands to be on the negotiation delegation, arguing that she is the best placed, as a council member and one of the scouts who first found the beach.

The next morning Lisa, along with their leader and Councillor Spandrel — their leader chose the third delegate — present at the south gate, where the road enters the shanty town. Thin wisps of grey smoke float from chimneys and settle thick over the beach, not rising in the cool early morning. Outside, people crowd...
the gate, some sit with their backs against the fence gently rocking and banging the backs of their heads against it; others hug their knees to their chests and rock; others bang their foreheads against the sand.

Inside, the guards’ wooden hut has bars on the window and a set of four wooden stairs leading to its only door. It is near a group of demountable buildings, each with radio antennas sticking out of their roofs. Their leader has to step between some of those banging their foreheads against the sand to get to the fence. They don’t notice him. Lisa waits a little way behind their leader, Councillor Spandrel is close by.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ he asks.

‘Don’t know.’

‘Were they like this when you came before?’

‘They’re worse.’

‘We are to wait here,’ their leader says after speaking with the guards, ‘for the Mayor’s reply.’

‘For how long?’ Councillor Spandrel asks.

‘As long as we need.’

Behind their leader, the guard winds his way up the beach past the corrugated iron humpies. Lisa thinks this is a waste of time. She takes a walk along the fence to the water. She passes people talking quickly, detailing the dangers of walking; people standing still and starring into nothing; people tossing and turning on the ground, their skin filmed in sweat, the sand is sticking to them, their eyes wide open as they punch the air as if they’re trying to punch someone in their sleep — if they are asleep. She can’t remember the last time she slept. The fence continues out past the breakers and the water is rough and rocky. She couldn’t swim past the rocks and the rip to get around the fence. She can’t see how far it goes under the sea, either. The sand is wet and hard here. She leans against the fence — she almost cries — and just wants to be inside.

She is sitting next to their leader and Councillor Spandrel, leaning against the fence when the guard returns. He has been gone all day and Lisa is trying to block out the screaming and yelling of the people around her. No one in the delegation has spoken for hours. Their leader is meditating. He sits in a particular position when he meditates. Councillor Spandrel looks like he is humming or singing to himself.

‘Hey,’ the guard says.

Lisa stands up.
The guard passes the mayor’s response through the fence. She takes it to their leader. She really wants to open it. Their leader opens his eyes and gently takes the envelope from her. The letter inside is written on thin paper, in a scratchy hand. Lisa can’t read what it says, but she can see where mistakes have been crossed out. Such disrespect to their leader. The mayor should have re-drafted the letter, as their leader did, until it was perfect.

After reading it their leader nods as if someone just said something he agrees with, folds the letter up, puts it in his pocket and walks in the direction of their camp.

‘What does it say?’ Lisa asks.

He ignores her and keeps walking.

‘What’s happening.’

He continues walking.

‘Leader,’ Councillor Spandrel says.

‘We will discuss it at camp,’ their leader answers without turning around.

Both Lisa and Councillor Spandrel look at each other, confused. The delegation returns to camp in silence. Once in the council tent their leader explains.

‘These were the hardest negotiations I’ve ever done.’

‘You didn’t even mount a counter claim.’ Lisa stands opposite him, arms crossed.

‘They have accepted our offer,’ he says.

‘What does that mean?’ She asks.

‘We must give over our finances, crops and fabrics…’ He looks down. ‘And leave behind anyone who is affected.’

‘What else?’ she asks, looking between Councillor Spandrel and their leader. Neither will look at her.

‘We will be given access to clean water, building materials and fresh food.’

‘This won’t sit well with the others,’ she says. ‘Are you ok with this?’ she asks Councillor Spandrel.

The two men look at one another.

‘We can only take in what we can carry,’ their leader says.

‘We’ll be helpless.’
‘Their mayor does not want other groups to know about this. It could set a precedent. We meet at the intersection of Beach and Bayview roads at midnight. A semi-trailer will take us through.’

‘So we get in at the expense of others.’

‘The offer is only valid for tonight. No one has to come who does not want to. I will be the one to tell those we are leaving behind.’

Lisa is the last to leave camp. They sneak out in shifts to make it look like they’re still there.

‘Help… me.’ A man has crawled up from behind her and is banging his head on the sand. His words come out stilted.

‘What?’ she jumps.

He stands up near her tent and bangs his head on the canvass. ‘Where…are…you…going…?’

His forehead is flat where he hits it and the blue is so dark around his mouth and nose. She looks away from him and through the fence. ‘In there.’

‘That’s…why…I…came.’ Sand is stuck to his face. He’s shaking.

‘I can’t…’ she says. He’s an economist she worked with on trade contracts. She didn’t know…

‘You…can.’ He’s crying.

She looks around. ‘I have to go.’ She knew there’d be people left behind and she didn’t agree with this, but… ‘I have to go.’

He grabs her arm. ‘I’m too scared to walk.’

She pulls away from him and runs.

‘You…fucking…Narco…You’re…no…better…than…a…Sleeper.’

She runs to the intersection, scared she might be late, but slows before getting to the group, as a council member she can’t look scared, and walks along the narrow shoulder of the road. Each person she passes looks at her for confirmation that they’ve done the right thing. She can’t give it. They’re huddled. Not much makes sense here and she feels like she’s both part of the group, but separate to it at the same time. She can’t see their faces in the darkness and keeps imagining their mouths and noses are dyed blue. People tell her a semi has already come past without stopping. Rumours have already started: ‘Our leader didn’t negotiate a
good enough deal.’ ‘He has sold us out.’ ‘The mayor has had a better offer.’ There is nothing she can say or do. Maybe there was a better offer. She doesn’t care anymore. She’s got a plan if this fails.

She finds the teacher and his wife sitting near their children, holding each other. He looks at her over his wife’s shoulder, and Lisa can’t hold his gaze.

‘What did our leader say about the semi?’ The teacher’s wife asks. ‘It went past.’

She answers without looking at them, without knowing what the correct answer should be, without caring. ‘We wait.’

‘For how long?’ the teacher’s wife asks.

‘Dawn.’ Again, she doesn’t know if this his the right answer.

The teacher hugs his wife tighter, but keeps looking at Lisa. ‘What then? If they haven’t…’

‘I don’t know.’ She looks beyond them. She can’t do this. ‘I’ll be over there.’ She needs to be alone, to think through her options; she thinks their leader’s been fooled.

It’s three-thirty in the morning when she sees the lights of a second semi a long way off. Lisa stands, so does the rest of the group; it’s the first thing they’ve done as one for a long time. Gravel crunches under her feet. She hopes it stops. It’s even darker now, no moon and a fog has descended.

It takes an age for the semi to get to her and when it does it speeds up. She can see, in its headlights that some in the group are throwing rocks and gravel and bottles. Part of her agrees with their anger…she’s angry too, but another part wants to know what they expected from their leader? What did they think he could deliver…She doesn’t know what she wants, either. She’s running out of time.

When the semi’s lights disappear into the shanty town the group loses the focus of its anger.

‘Why did you bring us here?’ A man grabs their leader by the shirt front. ‘What’s going on?’

‘It is alright. The Mayor said this would happen. We must be calm.’

‘How many semis are there?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Didn’t their Mayor tell you.’

‘It is not important. If we stay calm this will work itself out.’

The man punches their leader in the face.
The look on their leader’s face is one of dismay. Blood starts leaking from his nose. ‘How dare…’

The man punches him again. A second man punches him from the side.

His face wrenches to the side and he recoils. He looks so small. ‘Don’t…’

A third man kicks their leader in his injured leg.

Their leader falls to the ground and covers his head with his arms. ‘Don’t…hurt me.’

Lisa knows this is over, so steps from the crowd, back into the darkness on the side of the road. She doesn’t want to get involved in anything that might stop her from getting inside, or be anywhere near if they start blaming the council for this as well. This plan might still work, if the group doesn’t fuck it up, and if their leader wasn’t lying about this. She doesn’t want to miss her chance.

Dawn is close. It’s cold now. She stares into space, thinking slow, muddy thoughts, making her own contingencies for the morning. When the semi pulls up down the road and the driver flashes its lights she is ripped from her thoughts. She didn’t see it coming.

She’s running before she knows it. She catches up to the teacher and his family, he and his wife are carrying their two youngest, and picks up their eldest, who is finding it difficult to keep up with her parents, and follows the crowd to the back of the semi; the bottleneck means friends don’t recognise friends — it’s in their eyes. A cloud of black smoke belches from the exhaust, and the smell of diesel is thick in the air.

Lisa follows the teacher and his wife — he’s strong and single minded when he wants to be — straight into the crowd. It packs together. She tries to push through it, but an arm hits her in the chest, and a hand punches her in the ear. Their breathing is heavy, it’s sweaty. She trembles, and is hot and cold, as she pushes through to the back of the semi and helps the teacher’s eldest up.

‘Go,’ she says as she pushes the child into the truck. Her voice is swamped by the pack’s breathing. She doesn’t want to be a part of another pack — they can’t turn, not again — so she scrambles up as well. Her leg is grabbed, so she kicks out and connects. She looks back and sees their leader. The look on his face… She scrambles into the semi and huddles at the back with those already inside.

Lisa tries to stay still and quiet and control her breathing; if she’s too loud they’ll hear her and pull her from the truck. The man in front of her is panting and sweating, and bleeding from his right eye. There is
little room. The crowd outside becomes less and less familiar the more it yells and scrambles to get in.

Nobody gives their leader sway, but Lisa understands that he has to wrestle with all of them for a place, not just those closest to him, as well as fighting everybody’s reasons for not being somewhere else. She loses him in the crush a couple of times and just when she thinks he’s not coming back there he is; each time his face a little bloodier.

They are thrown around like toys when the semi finally drives off. Those still not inside run after it, jump at it and try to hold on. Some make it, most don’t. Many don’t get up after they fall. Lisa is glad when the shouts grow distant and then aren’t there.

9.

Weeds and grasses grow along the track Turtle’s following. He can’t remember when the track appeared, can’t remember leaving the cave, can’t remember the last time he slept, can’t remember how he found this track, but he knows all these things happened. It probably appeared when the hills expanded into mountains, the shrubs sprouted and the valleys deepened. Other colours — greens, browns, reds and yellows — are trying to break through the blue, but every colour, no matter how distinct, looks temporary, the grass green but not lush, the flowers small, the weeds thin, the trees tentative, as if they’re waiting to be washed away.

All over, the blue blood weeps from where the dreams have fallen, piled up and died. Streams of it flow from the bases of dream-hills as the dreams decompose, and creatures he can’t describe drink from them. In a way the creatures aren’t seen: they’re there, lapping the blood with their tongues; then they’re not there; then they’re there again. Nearly all of them, when they finish drinking have the same stillness as the woman that he saw. He thinks about drinking too but isn’t thirsty. Come to think of it, he isn’t hungry either.

It’s when he climbs a small ridge that he sees the people in the sky, circling a particular valley, and unlike the others who fell, they are in control of their flight. Keeping low, he watches them. He thought all the people had died in those days and nights, weeks and months when the sky broke, over and over and over again; but he didn’t take much notice, did he? Of course people survived, they fell and fell and fell.

It takes him some hours to get there, sleeping often, but only for short times, keeping to the low lands and taking care to hide the cave entrances. As he gets closer there are indications that people are around:
trampled weeds, discarded campsites (food scraps, old fires, dog shit), footsteps left in mud near river banks, stumps of chopped down trees. He’s excited about possibly speaking with people again after so long, but he’s also reticent. What if they’re like that woman? Instinctively — he’s not sure why — he hides in a clump of tall, tinged-blue trees when he hears voices ahead. A man and child walk by, but don’t see him. Both are wearing face masks over their nose and mouth with tubes running to small machines that look like vacuum cleaners on their backs. The child is inquisitive: playing with dirt, pulling at plants, picking flowers. The man looks wary and is carrying a small firearm. This unnerves Turtle. A breeze that cools his skin picks up and rustles the leaves. He watches them and feels like anything could happen.

He climbs another small ridge and looks down onto the compound. It is protected by mountains on three sides and has a large perimeter fence. The mountains must be old because there is no sign of any blue on them. The trees, plants, flowers, grasses and shrubs have a living, breathing colour to them. The blood still seeps from near the foot, though, and forms a small creek that runs along one side of the fence. There is only one road in and out, through the bottom end of the valley; there’s a checkpoint; and there is one heavily guarded gate. Even though people are moving about freely inside, it looks like a prison, and there are darkened silhouettes on the surrounding mountain ridges. Coming here might have been a bad idea. A shadow passes over him; too big to be a bird.

‘Stop!’ A face-masked man yells from above and aims a hand gun at Turtle. ‘Hands up!’ He lands close by. Turtle feels so fatigued all of a sudden. How could he have been so stupid? The face mask is like those of the man and child, and he has a similar machine on his back, but his clothes are camouflaged fatigues and he is wearing a radio headset: ear piece and small microphone. It looks like he’s wearing goggles too, but when the man blinks Turtle realises they are his eyes. The man undoes the chin strap of his mask. ‘Hands up.’ Then re-clips it.

Those eyes, hunting eyes, that are all pupil and take up most of the man’s face, stare at him. He was going to try and negotiate an arrangement until the man caught him with those eyes, but instead does what he’s told.

The man unclips his chinstrap and grunts at him: ‘Turn around.’

He’ll wait and negotiate with someone higher up the chain. The man, who is much taller than Turtle, ties his hands behind his back, then walks around him, sizing him up.
He unclips and speaks into his headset microphone. ‘Zero Alpha, this is Alpha Tango, over.’ He re-clips, nods as if listening to someone, then unclips his chinstrap and speaks again. ‘Zero Alpha, have apprehended lone male, Awake, at bearing 069 grid ref 494 827. ETA 20 Mike, over.’ He re-clips. More silence while the man listens. He unclips his chinstrap. ‘Zero Alpha, read and understood, out.’ He re-clips, grabs Turtle under his arms with one hand and flies towards the compound. It feels like his shoulders are about to pop out they’re at such an awkward angle. He wriggles to find some comfort. The man unclips his strap. ‘Stop moving or I’ll drop you.’ He re-clips. Turtle wriggles some more. The man unclips. ‘I told you to stop.’ He re-clips. Turtle keeps wriggling. The man drops him and he tumbles backwards. He has to control this quick, but without his arms it’s hard to redistribute his weight or change direction, and it takes some effort to slow his fall. When he stops tumbling he checks for the man and, to his relief, can’t see him anywhere. The sky is clear and there is a lake or a sea on the horizon, he can see it glinting, which is nowhere near the compound, so he heads that way. He arcs wide in his turn, hampered by not having his arms. Leaning forward, into the air itself, towards where he wants to go, he becomes one continuous breath, part of the air current as it lightens every cell; he’s remembering how to fly. He forgot somewhere along the way. The man tackles him from underneath and winds him. They wrestle. All Turtle can do is kick out with his legs, but the man has too much manoeuvrability and strength. He holds Turtle tight this time and doesn’t let him wriggle around at all. They land outside the front gate. Turtle’s arms and shoulders are stiff and his hands are all pins and needles. The sign above the gate reads ‘Cheyne-Stokes Central Anti-Apnous Centre’. Next to the gate is a small office from which three guards come. Two take up positions on either side of him and the third speaks to his captor. They are all much taller than him. The man unclips. ‘Alpha Tango, Sir. I apprehended lone male at Arrhythmia Ridge. Earlier I reported he is an Awake. This has proven untrue. He can fly. I’m not sure what he is.’ Turtle doesn’t like being spoken about as if he were invisible. ‘Where am I? I want to negotiate.’
The senior officer looks at him, also with big hunting eyes, then unclips his chin strap. ‘Looks Awake, doesn’t he.’ He turns back to Turtle’s captor. ‘We’ll take it from here.’ He re-clips, then salutes.

Turtle’s captor salutes and unclips his chin strap, ‘Sir.’ He re-clips then flies off.

The officer unclips his chin strap. ‘Take him in. I’ll radio through you’re coming.’ He re-clips.

‘Let me speak with your commanding officer,’ Turtle says, ‘I’m like you.’ He has to think of something.

The two guards salute, none of the three acknowledge he’s said anything, then lead Turtle through the gate, and despite his protests are able to hold him easily with one hand on each arm.

‘Where are you taking me? I have to speak with your commanding officer.’

They lead him down the dusty main street. He tries to pull away. People walk past so close he can almost touch them, but they don’t look at him. If they did, he could mouth the word ‘help’. Most look either military or medical staff. They all have face masks on too, but only the guards, from what he has seen, have headsets; and they all have machines on their backs, but on some the machines and masks look more parts of their bodies than something added on. There are more guards around the perimeter fence, guns slung across shoulders, and he can just make out the silhouettes of sentries on the ridges. Periodically a shadow crosses over as an airborne guard flies overhead; they must see so far with those owl-like eyes. They were probably watching him all day; he feels even more stupid now, for being caught so easily. Turtle wriggles against their grip. ‘Where are you taking me?’

They lead him up a gravel driveway towards a weatherboard cottage and as they approach, even though it’s daylight, an automatic sensor light turns on. The man unclips his chin strap and presses the intercom button. ‘This is Officer Pavor, with prisoner, over.’ He re-clips it.

‘Ok, out,’ the voice from the intercom crackles. Next, the door’s security system buzzes, and the guard opens the door.

Inside, as soon as the door shuts the hallway falls cold. It feels like he’s been here before: not déjá vu, but of having been here some time in the past. He gets that a bit, with riding other people’s dreams, but this is different again, this place has a realness, a quality he can’t shake. There are no windows, no skylight — no escape; only one automatically locking door. The walls crowd him and the guards’ grip constricts the blood flow in his arms. Despite the guards’ size, they move down the hall easily. When they pass a ‘QUIET PLEASE’ sign mounted on the ceiling, Turtle becomes acutely aware of the unnatural lack of noise in here,
almost no noise at all, apart from the buzzing of their machines, his breathing and squeaky floorboards. When they get to wherever it is they’re taking him he’s going to demand to be heard. The smell of coffee rises above the smell of damp as they pass office after office, and this should make him hungry, but it doesn’t.

The guards usher him into a small brightly-lit office that looks into an adjoining operating theatre where there are four surgeons. They wouldn’t operate on him? What would they do? As soon as the second guard is in the operating theatre speaking with the surgeons Turtle tries the door — overpowering one guard would be easier than fighting both. The remaining guard blocks his way, then shoves him hard against the off-white wall. There is a small table and a plastic chair against the wall. He unclips. ‘Sit.’ He re-clips and points his weapon at Turtle. Turtle is defeated so easily again and feels even more tired than when he was caught before, so sits.

When the briefing in the operating theatre is finished the guard and one of the surgeons come back out into the office. The surgeon is carrying a clipboard. Turtle sits up. ‘Where am I?’ he asks, ‘and what are you going to do?’ The surgeon unclips. ‘Legally I must identify myself. I’m Major Evans and I’m a special unit medial officer in the Somnambul Army. You are in Cheyne-Stokes Processing Centre.’ The surgeon re-clips. This means nothing to Turtle. ‘I want to speak with the commanding officer.’

The surgeon unclips. ‘There are three things we need. Your name, rank and home territory.’ He re-clips opens the clipboard and takes out a pen. ‘Where am I?’

He unclips. ‘Name, rank and territory.’ He re-clips. ‘I demand to speak to your commanding officer.’

He unclips. ‘Appreciated, but I’ll tell you now, that’s not going to happen. You’ll be fine, as long as you’re cooperative. Name, rank and territory.’ He re-clips. ‘I want to speak to your commanding officer.’

He unclips. ‘I will say here, every person I’ve had so far has told me the truth. Name, rank and territory. That’s all.’ He re-clips. ‘I don’t have a territory.’
He unclips. ‘We deal with people who lie to us every day.’ He re-clips.

‘I don’t know.’

He unclips. ‘Ok, so what I’m telling you, I don’t like to be lied to.’ He re-clips.

‘I don’t know.’

He unclips. ‘Ok, so we’ll start over. You’ll get to speak to my CO once you’ve given us your name, rank and territory, ok.’ He re-clips.

‘I’m not sure.’

He unclips. ‘We deal with a lot of very bad people. You’re not a bad person, I can tell that. Give me your name, rank and territory. For your own good.’ He re-clips.

‘Was that a threat?’

He unclips. ‘Not a threat. I just need your name, rank and territory to give to my CO.’ He re-clips.

‘I don’t have a territory or a rank.’

He unclips and sighs. ‘Alright, let’s start from the beginning: your name, then.’ He re-clips.

‘I want to speak to someone.’

He unclips. ‘You were found on Arrhythmia Ridge surveilling this facility and from what they tell me, there is every indication that you are not Awake. So, again: name, rank, territory.’ He re-clips.

‘I want to speak to someone.’

He unclips. ‘That isn’t helpful.’ He re-clips, writes something in the file, then nods to the guards. Before Turtle has time to react he is slammed down against the desk and they use pressure point holds to immobilise him. The pain is excruciating — the veins in his neck stretch and he’s scared one will burst. He writhes as the guards’ sweaty hands push harder into him.

The surgeon injects him with something, probably a truth serum, and he expects to start telling them everything within minutes, but the medication is so cold that he can feel it going along his arm, into his shoulder and across into his chest. When it hits his heart the chill hurts and he flinches and gasps as it spreads to the rest of his body. Everything goes cold. Soon after, he is released, but can’t move.

The surgeon unclips. ‘You can wait outside now.’ He re-clips.

The guards leave.
Nothing in his body is responding. The surgeons — they’re all here now — move quickly: they stand him up, his joints creaking, put him on a trolley and wheel him into the surgery. They’ve been preparing a small vacuum cleaner machine — a mottled yellow and brown colour, and the same model as they’re all wearing — with a mounting bracket, a large pop rivet gun and a bunch of tubes and wires. He tries to break from this immobility, but he stops blinking, his joints seize and his throat compresses until his breath strangles to a stop. His instinct is to gasp, just as he did when he was falling in the hypnagogic, but his mouth won’t move. As much as he tries, he can’t breathe!

They throw him face down onto the operating table and rip off his shirt. What are they doing, he’ll die if he doesn’t breathe. His heart is pounding hard, fighting hard to stay alive, but is also grinding slower and slower. His neck stiffens, his eyes dry up. Then they put something metal on his back — the machine, and he can feel its weight and a chill at the four points where the bracket is touching his skin: below both shoulders and just above both kidneys. His efforts to get off the table or move away from them are useless. When his heart stops, everything else inside him stops too and he goes quiet: no more heart beat, no breathing, no gurgling stomach; blood congeals, oxygen stops transferring, skin stops breathing. He never knew there was such a noise in him. This quiet is not still, though, it screams, but with nowhere for the pain, fear and anger to go the scream cannibalises itself. Every noise outside him booms and echoes. A force rams into his left shoulder, where the metal bracket is touching him, and it feels and sounds like he’s been shot! If he could breathe he’d be winded. He winces, but knows he hasn’t moved, and waits for the internal pain, but it doesn’t come. Then a second force punches into him: right shoulder, a third: above his right kidney, a fourth: above his left kidney. His ears are ringing now. His chest feels like stone. He still can’t breathe.

They stand him up on the trolley, attach a mask to his face and connect it and the machine with tubes. It should be working, he should be breathing now. Now! He doesn’t care anymore, just let him breathe again! They attach wires to the machine and his body. This is taking too long. When they finally turn it on air is forced through the mask, down into the back of his throat into his lungs and he is so relieved. One of the surgeons spray paints a large purple ‘F’ on his machine, while another attaches a metal ring to his left ankle. It’s tight, but doesn’t cut off his circulation, or at least he thinks it wouldn’t cut off his circulation if he had any.
Major Evans unclips. ‘Done,’ he says, ‘your anti-apnous machine breathes for you now.’ He re-clips, takes off his gloves, throws them into a bin and wheels Turtle back into the adjoining office. The others begin sterilising the equipment and preparing the operating room again.

Turtle attempts to speak. Not even his eyes move. Major Evans calls the guards back into the room via the intercom, then turns his attention to Turtle and unclips. ‘You’ll have to unclip your chinstrap to speak,’ he says, ‘and re-clip it, otherwise your mouth will drop open. What else…’ he pauses to think as he takes off his scrubs, ‘you’ll be able to move again when we deactivate the hardening agent.’ He nods to the guards, who are standing at attention near the door.

They wheel Turtle to a loading bay at the back of the building where he is put in a ute with others like him. He wants them to let him move again. His body is so constricted that no amount of effort on his part can make him move. The hum of the machine vibrates his back and there is an irritating dryness in his throat where the air is being pumped in. He tries flying again, they did say this would wear off, so if he could get in the air again…but the only movement he feels is when they go over a bump. They are driven to a hanger and Turtle is placed in a row somewhere in the middle of hundreds if not thousands of other statues and is reminded of those Chinese terracotta soldiers archaeologists found hidden underground…

They stand for days, weeks maybe, he can’t swallow or blink. The woman in front of him has dyed hair, but not recently, the ends are a darker chestnut brown than the rest, and it’s tied back in a pony tail. On the left side of her neck, exposed by the pony tail, are three freckles. Each day, or night, or evening — he can’t sleep and can’t see outside and the place is always lit in grey half light — he counts those freckles; not for any reason and not with any expectations that there will be more or less of them when he counts them the next time, but because they’re there…

Not moving hurts, every muscle and joint aches and every pain he’s ever had comes back, plus a few new ones. Initially he tries to move an arm; his right arm because he’s right handed. Having never had to think about moving before he assumes moving his right arm would be as simple as moving it, but it’s like his body isn’t his anymore, so he concentrates hard — and is sure he has inadvertently frowned or squinted because of his concentration. If he has, he needs to be careful they don’t catch him and give him another
injection. He tries again. Nothing. Maybe an arm is too big to start with, maybe he has to start with a hand. This time he thinks about moving his hand as if of its own accord, then his thoughts get away from him and he fantasises about forming a fist and punching these things, these fucking freaks in their big eyes and then injecting them with this stuff...there is no movement, no fist, no revenge. Next he tries a finger. The little one; he was going to try for his middle finger so he could give them the finger, but given his lack of success so far decides that's probably too big an ask. The little finger it is. Start small, that's the way. All it's got to do is bend, or straighten, he's not exactly sure what position it's in. He needs to move, and move now. Now. Now! All he's asking of himself is a little finger on his right hand, that's it! Come on. It's all he needs, just for his body to respond, to be his again. Come on. A little finger. He's done this so many times before it should be easy, something natural and instinctive. Come on! Fuck! A finger. Any finger. Or even a blink of an eye — at this point he'd settle for that...

That's it! It moved! Yes. No. Did it? Did he feel it or imagine it? It's been hours...days...

The place is always the same colour and temperature (always grey always cold). Lisa might be here too...

His attention is taken with a fly. Its movements echo around his head. And it's right there on her neck, her beautiful neck that he's is so familiar with now. Her alabaster skin is for the most part flawless: there is a little scar at the base of her hairline, under the small cow lick, which could be from the chicken pox he imagines she had as a child, or a wart he imagines she had burnt off in her mid-twenties so as not to contract skin cancer. He hates them for attaching that machine — which is actually a small orange and black electrolux — to her beautiful skin. The pop rivet gun pounding into her and all the pain she would have felt, and the fear when she stopped breathing. He wishes he could have met her before all this and saved her from going through it. The light hairs on her neck sway in some slight draft. He imagines leaving with her...

The only thing that keeps him going is the idea that Lisa is here somewhere...
He thinks he sees things out of the corner of his eyes. He hears things too. And he feels things. It started when the fly landed on her, the thought of those legs irritating her skin, forcing her to want to scratch but being unable to. Then he feels them crawling up his leg, under his clothes, along his torso; running up and down, everywhere they touch itches. He tries to stamp his legs but can’t, so the itching won’t go away. His neck’s itchy. Something’s there. Have they done this, put ants and flies in the hanger to make them suffer? Or is it an illusion, a side effect of the hardening agent in his blood? All his veins are hard tubes criss-crossing his body, the blood hard as rock too. The itch stings and he can’t think of anything else. If he had a fork he’d scratch until he bled…

He’d die if his machine breaks because nobody would know…

The itch is still there, but he has had time to develop a coping strategy, and may not have been able to distract himself had it not been for a couple of guards, those things, they’re not people, who came around attaching vials to the machines. For the minute they’re in front of him, touching her machine, his anger grows. Only now does he understand that his anger had lost focus and started playing tricks on his mind and body. He refocusses on what he’s going to do to them when he escapes, and that weakens the itching. If he could only bend or straighten an arm or a leg he’d hit and punch them right now. The guards move to the next person and are out of his vision…

They’re turning him, all the prisoners, into one of them, with the machines and tubes. He wants it all off: the mask, the machine, everything…

He imagines the freckles on her neck, on her entire body, speak to each other and control her, when she’s not paralysed. The freckles on her left shoulder, whom he imagines exist even though he’s never seen them, are in league with the freckles on her left elbow and are trying to depose the neck freckles from their seat of power (near the brain). The neck freckle closest to her left shoulder is ready to vote with the shoulder–elbow block and give them the balance of power. The right elbow freckles have been frozen out of negotiations and are attempting to create a right–knee–chest–right elbow alliance. The left elbow freckles are not in a
strategically important position and lack the negotiating power to make this situation work for them. The right-knee-chest-elbow alliance looks like it will soon have enough economic power to start negotiating with the left shoulder freckles itself. He wants to warn everyone that the left shoulder freckles will not share power.

When the guards come and pack him into a moving van his ears hurt from all the loud noises. He is separated from the woman (and just before the big vote: the neck freckles were making their move. He doesn’t think they have the numbers). They’re taken and unloaded in the middle of a paddock, cordoned off by a 12 ft outer fence — razor and barbed wire set on top, that surrounds an equally tall inner fence, also with barbed wire on top. In the space between the two fences lie rolls of razor wire. Outside the fence is a flat expanse that gives no cover or protection — he’s already thinking about an escape. The paddock is ringed by hills and mountains. The sunlight, so bright after so long standing in greyness, hurts, but he can’t close his eyes or blink against the sun. The ground that isn’t ground is a dust bowl and all around the paddock, trucks, vans, jeeps and cars drive around kicking up the blue dust; in fact the slightest aggravation — a breeze, the shifting of feet — throws dust into the air. It gets into Turtle’s machine, so is pumped up his nose and down the back of his throat.

Guards move through and activate the vials. Turtle is one of the first. The medication is fed through their masks and leaves a metallic aftertaste at the back of his throat that’s worse than the feeling of the blue dust. For a time nothing happens, but slowly he regains feeling and movement. As the hardening agent wears off he blinks and blinks and blinks and his limbs feel painfully numb. When he tries to stand his legs give way. He hopes his legs work again. He hadn’t thought about his body being irrevocably broken. He is tender where the pop rivets were driven into him and he imagines the skin has already begun swelling around the metal. The first thing he’s going to do is kick one of those freaks for doing this to him. No, he should find the neck woman first. No, Lisa first — if she’s here — then the neck woman. When his mouth and throat get their feeling and movement back he starts swallowing and swallowing and swallowing. His heart starts just before his breathing does, and his chest and ribs crack with their first movement. The wounds on his back start to throb as the blood starts to pump again, a not so subtle reminder of what they’ve done to him. He bends and straightens his little finger first, then makes a fist and punches the air. His elbow is stiff. His
stomach growls and the noises inside him are so loud now that everything else, all those outside noises that only minutes ago were almost deafening themselves, now sound dull. He stretches and it’s painful, but worth it to feel human again.

It hits him without warning… The same thing is happening to others: people scuttle — that’s the only word for it — some for trees, others for shrubs, others for the block of portaloos at the far end of the paddock. He runs as fast as he can, which isn’t all that fast because he’s trying not to piss and shit his pants, and he still hasn’t regained full feeling in his legs. Some don’t make it and Turtle has to dodge puddles of piss or sloppy splatters of shit, or people squatting, just letting go. Some can’t get their pants off in time.

The portaloos stink and he desperately tries to hold on, but the looseness is winning. The floor is covered by an inch of shit and piss, some of it dribbles out onto his shoes when he opens the door. He can’t wait for it to drain, so steps in, drops his pants, holding them off the floor, and sits. He almost falls off because the anti-apnous machine bangs against the cistern. There are shitting and farting noises all around, coming from the other portaloos.

Letting go is such a relief to start with, but soon the diarrhoea is gushing out of him and the stench makes him gasp and wretch. He tries to hold his breath, but that’s impossible because of the machine. He doesn’t want to throw up into the mask, he’d drown. It gushes out and out and out. More and more and more.

The diarrhoea stops as quickly as it started… he is exhausted, he is shaking; a film of cold sweat covers his body and it feels like what just happened didn’t happen to him. He flushes three times, pulls his pants up, but
realises that he dropped them at some point and they are now soaked. This is disgusting. First he kicks his pants off, leaving his boxer shorts and shoes and socks on; then, while trying to stay as far away from himself as he can: arms out, legs spread, every movement slow, he looks for toilet paper to clean himself. There is none.

‘Hurry!’ Someone else yells and tries to open the door.

Turtle flushes the toilet and uses the water to clean his himself. The blue and the shit feel like they smear together.

‘Hurry up!’ Someone else bangs hard on the door.

Finally he sits on the toilet and wipes his anus. It feels strange. Small and puckered: he expected it to be wider or bigger or something, considering the amount of shit he expelled. He wipes it until it feels clean, but, then again, he doesn’t think any part of him will ever be clean again. He flushes the toilet one last time and washes his hands, and once they are as hygienic as they can be under the circumstances he opens the door, pushes past the crowd, dodges puddles of piss and shit. Still shaking, he stumbles, all he wants to do is sit down, so he flops to the ground that isn’t ground.

A guard kicks his machine from behind, stands over him and unclips: ‘Get up,’ it says, re-clips and pulls him up by the arm — a glimmer of enjoyment, if that’s what you could call it, on its face. So much for recovering.

It shoves him in the back, then unclips: ‘Get moving, Sleeper.’ It re-clips.

Those who have stopped shitting are herded towards a group of buildings, near the gate, each with a mess of antler-like radio antennas on their rooves. The pop rivets burn in Turtle’s back, but he doesn’t show any pain; instead he concentrates on his surrounds: how many guards on the ground, how many in the air, where are the lookouts in the mountains positioned? There has to be a weakness; these things aren’t going to win; he will get out of here. There is a sense of permanency to the complex, the metal is weathered and weeds have grown, but they look like they could be dismantled quickly if needed. Airborne guards land, enter the buildings, emerge and are airborne again within minutes. The ground-based guards are ant-like as they run between the buildings and their vehicles (tractors, jeeps, vans, drilling equipment, cranes, troop carriers and four semi-trailers converted into mobile cages).

They’re made to stand in lines facing the nearest building.
The guard hounding him shoves him again, hard, then unclips: ‘Stand there and shut up.’ It re-clips. It
didn’t have to do that, he was almost in the line anyway. Turtle, a foot shorter than it, faces it, his whole
back burns, as his right hand forms a fist as if of its own accord. Its large hands swallow the rifle and he
imagines stealing it, pointing it at its face; imagines how that’d make it feel; imagines shooting it. These
thoughts come from nowhere he understands, but they are his. It stares at him and in other circumstances
he’d say its large eyes are those of someone who’s stupid, but knows that’s not true. It’s only when three
more guards come along the line allocating each prisoner search equipment (bright fluorescent clothing,
thick-soled boots, and a hessian bag and gardening gloves) that the tension is broken and Turtle has a way
to pull back without looking like he backed down.

It unclips: ‘I’m watching you.’ It re-clips and stays close.

He unclips: ‘I’m watching you too.’ He re-clips.

The guard shoves him again and unclips: ‘Don’t fuck with me, Awake.’ It re-clips and steps back into
formation with the other guards.

The shirt has a hole in the back for the anti-apnous machine; both shirt and pants are too big, but the
boots fit. The bag smells a little like the ones he and his dad used to use to take the fish home in that they’d
caught at the wharf when he was a child, but this one is crusted with blue and smells bitterly of dream. The
clothes are soft and smell new, something he didn’t expect, but they can’t fully subdue the aroma of shit,
blue and sweat that’s hanging around, like getting whiffs of dog shit for days after cleaning it off. He wishes
he could hold his breath.

Another soldier marches from the nearest building, stands in front of them and unclips its chin strap:
‘You are Search Unit 122!’ its voice is raspy (a lit cigarette sits in its machine’s in-vent). ‘Remember that
number.’ Smoke flows from its mouth in a steady stream and little puffs punctuate the ends of sentences.
‘We can call on you 24/7. You will collect dreams from that hillside.’ It points to its left (Turtle’s right), but
the hill looks more like a mountain. The officer continues, ‘A designated corps of Military Police recaptures
runaways. Don’t even try. Put those clothes on, for better visual contact when you’re in the search area.’
Turtle doesn’t believe they’d have any trouble seeing anything with those eyes. It looks at its watch, then
addresses the other guards: ‘Move this lot out.’ It re-clips.
They are marched through the gate and out across the flatlands. There are no roads, just a series of dusty criss-crossing tyre tracks etched into the ground that isn’t ground. The dust gets into his machine and down his throat.

Half way to the mountain they pass a group of prisoners, all covered in the blue, all shivering, coming back from their own search; he slows his pace to look for Lisa or the neck woman. To a person, their heads are bowed and their movements stiff, and all are labouring under the weight of their blue-soaked bags, which are, he can see, full of dreams. And he can feel them too, their pain hurts almost as much as it did when he first got here, but it’s their powerlessness, confusion and grief which is most telling, so he decides not to participate in this — no matter what. He doesn’t get much of a chance to search for the women before that guard shoves him again. Turtle’s right hand forms a fist.

It unclips: ‘Go on.’ It re-clips.

He takes a deep breath, unclenches his fist and quickens his pace.

It unclips: ‘That’s right, Narco, don’t fuck with me.’ It re-clips.

These failures, these back downs are mounting and he wants revenge, but the guards outnumber him, they know this place better than he does and they have weapons. None of the other prisoners have even looked like fighting back and without some sort of support he doesn’t see what he can do.

Search Units march all across the flatlands and mountains, and the closer they get to the mountain the stronger the stench of rotting dreams.

Head Guard stops them near a stream of the blue and unclips: ‘Search this side of the ridge!’ It re-clips.

It’s the streams that smell rotten. Turtle’s machine forces the rank air into him and the smell brings tiredness, paranoia and hurt, and he knows this feeling will stay with him for days now, reminding him of death, not of any death but of Nebo’s death; his own? The lowlands used to be where he felt most comfortable, but now they’re so distant, so dirty.

‘Sir.’ That guard again, still close to Turtle, unclips. ‘This one’s a flyer.’ He re-clips.

Head Guard unclips. ‘Bring it.’ It re-clips.

The guard shoves Turtle hard in the back and the pop rivets throb. Turtle holds his ground, long enough for the guard to understand he can and will resist when the time comes.
Head Guard notes the leg ring and the ‘F’ painted on Turtle’s machine, then unclips. ‘If you fly, I’ll tether you like the Narco dog you are.’ It looks at the other guard. ‘Get it out of my sight.’

Turtle unclips: ‘I want to speak to the commanding officer.’ He re-clips.

It looks at him as if pondering whether to even bother speaking or not. It unclips: ‘This is not a conversation.’ It re-clips.

He unclips: ‘I want…’

The guard hits Turtle hard in the back with the butt of its rifle. Turtle stumbles forward, somehow re-clipping before losing his footing and floating for a second. Quickly, he regains weight, grabbing hold of the ground that isn’t ground, and starts climbing away from the two guards.

By the time the shift ends — and it couldn’t come quick enough for him — he can hardly feel his hands and feet anymore, his jaw and neck are aching from the constant shivering, and even though the dream in his bag is dead, he made sure he picked up one well dead, he still feels like a traitor; it feels like all this death is slithering up his body.

Head Guard leads them back across the flatlands. Turtle, keeping to the back of the line, holds his bag close to try and hide that his dream is dead, but the nauseating smell disturbs too many memories: not Nebo, or Lisa, or when the dreams fell and the sky broke, but all those times as a kid when his dreams, or what he thought were his dreams, were so real; how he assumed everyone could meet others in their dreams. It excited him — it seemed normal — but when he would speak about it the next day at school, some remembered but they never said anything, the others teased him — he hasn’t thought about this for years — so he stopped telling them about it. Soon after that they stopped teasing him and he stopped mentioning it. But he kept doing it and it became more and more important to him, riding dreams (he now knows that’s what he was doing), so he couldn’t just forget. Sometimes, most times, it was more real than being awake and he couldn’t wait for night so he could go to bed. But now, having to look at and smell the corpses of all these dreams, having to rummage through them he remembers what it’s like not to speak about such things. It became more and more difficult to slip into the dreaming as he got older, so each time he did was special. Insomnia took over, living in that half-time, not fully asleep at night and not fully awake during the day. Then he met Lisa. She helped him get back there. Taught him the skills. Showed him the
Dreamriders

dream machine. It was a chance meeting in a dream, they both dropped in; he didn’t realise, but she knew. Afterwards, in the Waking, she found him in his Dream Group, he was there for his insomnia; Dreamriders go to those types of groups to try and find others. It’d been so long since he’d been able to speak to someone about such things. He’d found other Dreamriders that way himself. That was years ago, now.

The semi-trailer motors are running when they get back, clouds of black smoke belch from the exhausts, and the smell of diesel is thick in the air. Head Guard unclips. ‘Put them in the cage furthest to your right.’ It re-clips.

Turtle unclips: ‘Where are you taking them?’ He re-clips.

Turtle watches as Head Guard watches each prisoner put their bag inside. Most of the dreams are barely alive: some wriggle around on the cage floor, disoriented; some try to fly, but only manage to fall; some lie motionless; some never leave the bag again; for others getting out of the bag is the last thing they do. It unclips: ‘Hurry, the trucks don’t have all night.’ It re-clips.

When Turtle gets to the cage he unclips: ‘Where are you taking them?’ He re-clips.

It unclips: ‘Put it in.’ It re-clips.

He unclips: ‘Where is this truck going?’ He re-clips.

Head Guard grabs the bag off Turtle, throws it in the cage and shoves him backwards. The bag lies motionless. He tries to get near the cage again, but two more guards block his way. He unclips: ‘Where are these dreams going?’ He re-clips.

Head Guard unclips: ‘Away.’ It re-clips.

Turtle unclips again: ‘Where?’ He re-clips.

Another prisoner unclips: ‘Leave it,’ he whispers, ‘you’ll make it worse for all of us.’ He re-clips. They all look the same to Turtle, he can’t tell them apart anymore, even the guards have more discerning features than the tired faces of the other prisoners.

Head Guard unclips: ‘Listen to your friend.’ It re-clips.

Turtle is alone in his demands. The others are standing in a line, their shoulders slumped, heads down, eyes half-closed.

Head Guard unclips: ‘Get back in line.’ It re-clips.
Another prisoner unclips: ‘Do what it says.’ He re-clips. The thing they all have in common, and maybe this is why he can’t tell them apart, is that all are marked with the blue, all are affected by it.

Turtle shuffles back in line, but this isn’t over.

Once all the dreams are deposited 122 is ushered back through the gate to the mess. Head Guard unclips: ‘You have 20 minutes before your next shift. Eat.’ It re-clips.

Keeping to the back of the line, Turtle rubs his hands together to get some feeling back. The two guards stick close to him. Twenty minutes won’t be long enough to get warm or eat a decent meal, let alone rest properly. The room is lit with harsh fluorescent light that exacerbates the bags under people’s eyes, their pale skin, their cracked lips, but there are oil heaters, so it’s warm. That’s some comfort.

Some twenty tables, bench seats, each probably seating about 100 people, fill the place, and they’re full. Any thought of conversation is drowned out by the droning of so many anti-apnous machines and the yelling. People are yelling. Lots of people are yelling. They stand, yell inaudible words then sit. The first time this happens Turtle is surprised the guards don’t stop it, but while in the line he realises not everyone is eating. Some stare into space; others mumble as they eat, dropping food over themselves; some bang their heads rhythmically against the table; loners stand and sway, eyes closed, each in time with one another; some sleep cat-like under the tables; while others walk absentmindedly.

The mush dumped onto the metal tray in front of him is unappetising. The woman serving, she is dressed in flannelette pyjamas, unclips as she slops it down: ‘Coffee’s over there.’ She re-clips and points to a trestle table with ten urns on it. He takes the tray, grabs cutlery and an enamel mug filled with black coffee and heads to the table where 122 is sitting, most of them already scoffing their food as if it’s their last meal. It might be. He’s not hungry, so holds the mug with both hands to warm them and drinks.

A man gets up from the other side of the table, comes around and sits to Turtle’s right, a little too close, unclips and leans in even closer, so close that Turtle can smell the stink of his sweat and the blue: ‘What are you?’ he asks, then re-clips. His head shakes from side to side, like he’s shivering, but more forceful, then he unclips again before Turtle can answer: ‘I’ll tell you what you are,’ he says loud enough for those nearby to hear too, ‘you’re a Flyer.’ He re-clips with his right hand and points at Turtle’s machine with his left. He unclips: ‘That’s right. A Flyer!’ He re-clips.

Turtle slides along the seat, away from the man and ignores him.
The man follows him, leans in closer and unclips: ‘What are you doing here, with us?’ He re-clips. The anxiety in his voice rises, and along with it, the force of his head-shakes.

Turtle puts his head down and tries to get on with drinking his coffee.

The man pokes his shoulder this time, then unclips: ‘At this time, you shouldn’t be here with us.’ He re-clips. His voice is raised and his whole body shivers.

Turtle unclips: ‘I’m a prisoner, like you.’ He re-clips.

The man unclips: ‘Feeling like we do!’ he yells then re-clips.

Turtle unclips: ‘I don’t…’ He re-clips.

He unclips: ‘Feeling like you want to! You don’t sleep, do you…’

Turtle unclips: ‘No one do…’ He re-clips.

‘… We won’t miss you when you’re gone!’ Turtle can feel that everyone around the table is looking at them now. ‘These machines keep us awake longer than we should!’ He re-clips. He twitches.

Turtle unclips: ‘I’m like you.’ He re-clips. He’s not sure he is.

The man stands, unclips then gestures around the room: ‘This is your doing, all of it! Your type can’t be trusted!’ Now people from other tables are looking at them as well. Some of the guards are taking an interest. ‘You don’t care about night and day, it’s all the same to you!’ He re-clips.

Turtle unclips: ‘Not to me.’ He re-clips.

‘Bullshit,’ the man sitting directly across from Turtle has unclipped: ‘I don’t want you near me or mine.’ He re-clips.

‘The woman sitting next to him unclips as well: ‘We don’t want your type here.’ She re-clips and takes the man’s hand.

The man to his right is still standing, but is now swaying in time with the other swayers. Turtle moves his hand to his chin strap, ready to speak, but the man opposite unclips first: ‘Leave.’

It’s not just the look in his eye that persuades Turtle to stand without another word, but the looks in all their eyes. The whole table is staring. He stands, leaving his food there but taking his coffee and searches for somewhere else to sit. No one makes space for him. He tries three tables, all with the same result; no one will look him in the face; all heads are down, eating, ignoring him, ignoring what’s going on. He can see the guards watching, careful-like, ready, but as always they give nothing away. This isn’t what he wanted, he
was trying to keep low until he escaped. Another man with similar head twitches to the first man comes up
and stands too close to him, unclips and asks ‘What are you?’ Turtle edges into a corner and sits on the floor.

It doesn’t take long for a guard to come over. It kicks his leg, then unclips: ‘Get up.’ It re-clips.

Turtle stands, his leg throbbing, but he doesn’t rub it. He’s not going to show any weakness.

The guard shoves him over to a table and unclips. ‘You, sit there; everyone else, stop fucking about.’ He
re-clips.

Turtle sits on the end of the table, unclips and drinks. No one knows where to look. Turtle looks down,
himself. He doesn’t want to be at the table and he can feel that no one else wants him here either. The
discomfort is broken when everyone else stops eating, stands and leaves, taking their trays with them. Well,
it’s broken for them. It’s a difficult thing for him to sit in the middle of a crowded room, at a table that seats
100 and be alone, and know that this is because of his difference, and to know that the other tables are
overcrowded but people would rather be uncomfortable than associate with him. At least on the mountain
he’s really alone, rather than being made to feel alone through being ignored. Fuck them. He slurps his
coffee loud.

When 122 is called to move out, his feet are still cold. The others in 122 look tired and not the least bit
ready to be out there again, and he’s sure he looks the same, but they follow their orders. He keeps a little
way behind as 122 stands as a group, dumps their dirty trays in the wash bucket next to the door, then files
outside. As soon as he stands up the table fills.

A group of guards keeps them together until they get to the base of the mountain again where they are
told to fan out. He heads away from the rest. Not far away, as the rise gets steeper, he slips on a pile of
mushy dreams, misses the ground that isn’t ground, there is a lightness he hasn’t felt before, and he floats
again. He doesn’t want the guards to see him, so grabs at the mountain and the dreams to try and stay
down. In his efforts the blue smears on him. It’s no good and a guard sees and sounds the alarm. Three of
them descend and one kicks him so hard in the ribs that he spins back up in the air. Winded, he can’t even
cough because of the machine, nor can he catch his breath, he tries to get up but they use pressure point
holds to subdue him. Then one speaks into its headset. After receiving orders it tells the others to resume
their duties, then picks Turtle up and flies him to the top of a mountain.
Head Guard is already there waiting next to a solid metal pole, cable attached, that’s sticking out of the ground that isn’t ground. It pokes its gun into Turtle’s chest and unclips: ‘You piece of shit Narco. I told you not to fly.’ It looks at the other guard. ‘Look, now there’s shit on the end of my gun.’ It smiles as it re-clips. The other guard smiles too. With both of them, their eyes remain unaffected by the smile.

Turtle unclips. ‘Not on my end.’ He re-clips.

Head Guard grabs Turtle around the neck, back slams him into the ground that isn’t ground and squeezes the air tube (the machine squeals from the pressure): panic, fear and confusion, the feelings from the surgery, submerge him, but this time they’re laced with so much hate. His instinct is to gasp, just as it was when he was immobilised, but this time the chin strap stops his mouth opening. He pries at the fingers on the tube, but can’t move them; he rips at the hand around his neck, but that just makes Head Guard squeeze tighter; he gauges Head Guard’s eyes, but a transparent sheath drops down to protect them. Head Guard is too strong for him and those big big eyes show Turtle that it could kill him and think nothing of it.

He’s almost passed out by the time it lets go of the tube. He’s unsteady and can’t focus. Head Guard looks down at him and Turtle can see that it’s not angry or embarrassed; these are petty things it doesn’t have to worry about. This is simply what happens when it decides. It fastens Turtle’s leg ring to the cable, then unclips: ‘You’ve got a 500 metre radius. Stay here all year for all I care.’ It gives nothing away as it re-clips and nods to the other guard. They fly off. Turtle grabs some dirt that isn’t dirt and throws it at them, but it falls short.

It takes a little time to get his breath back, despite the machine pushing air into his lungs, in fact this makes it harder to breathe, but once he’s recovered enough to stand he checks the tube for any cracks or leaks; when he’s satisfied it’s all ok he turns his attention to his leg ring. It looks straightforward: no key, no padlock, no code, just a simple clip, but somehow it’s fixed tight. He tries hitting it with a rock, then levering it open with sticks, all stained blue, but they break. Typical, the blue weakens everything, infects everything. After making no headway with the ring he tries pulling on the cable, just in case it’s loose, then tries pulling the pole out of the ground that isn’t ground. When neither works he decides to fly straight up and wrench it out — if he can get enough speed up.

He starts off by copying the guards’ take off; there is symmetry and poetry in their take offs and landings, which contradicts their violence. To take off, a bended knee, push off and up they go, and even the
Dreamriders

push off is so slight as to be almost nonexistent. Their landings are similar in the slightness of their movements, the ease of their touch, the way they approach the ground that isn’t ground and without thinking, without missing a beat or missing a step, so natural, so honest, they touch down and shift from flying to walking, sometimes running, as if it were nothing. When he tries to take off in the same way nothing happens. He tries again, a slight bend of knee, thinking ‘light thoughts’. Nothing. Next he tries jumping, nothing; running and jumping, nothing; thinking really ‘light thoughts’, nothing; he even pretends to trip, to trick himself into floating again, but it’s not until he stops and really thinks about how he flew before that he understands. It’s about continuity. It takes him a day and a night and another day to find the right combination of feelings and thoughts. There are false starts, stutters, jutters and falls (he scrapes his knees and knocks his elbows). Then the continuity comes: he closes his eyes, eyes of the old and eyes of the new, and with care and discrimination allows there to be no distinction between breathing in and breathing out, so he inhabits absorption, point to point, heavy to light; his decision, his memory, his weight.

Unworried and unconcerned, everything, including himself, changes shape and mood for the second preceding the lightness, then he tracks point to point, zooms, that’s the only word for it, heavy to light.

Just like before he’s not ready to fly, even though he caused this, and he splutters up, erratic, zigzagging, flying to the end of the cable and being jerked back when it runs out. He plummets and it takes some time to regain some control — he flaps his arms and splays his legs in a movement that is anything but slight, or symmetrical, or gentle or fluid — then shifts right, lurches left and probably looks like a kite caught in a windy day. He gains more control by calming his fear, feelings, thoughts and memories, and through that controlling his flight. To fly in one direction, and not another, he leans into the air currents themselves. To hover, he leans back, sitting in the air like he’s on a chair.

The sky is clear and he’s hoping to see the glint of the lake (or sea) again. Just knowing it’s still there would give him something. He can’t see it, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there any more, does it? It just means he can’t see it. That thought goes around in his mind while he looks across the horizon. Seeing for the first time all sorts of new terrains and the like. There are indicators of growth everywhere, like the rings of a tree: hills have turned into mountains, mountains into ranges, forests have evolved, creaks into streams into rivers — a deceptive beauty. Of course he can’t see the lake, everything’s changed. It might not even be where it was.
From this height the scale of what those things, the guards, are getting the prisoners to do becomes apparent. There are large scars across the mountains where dreams have been cleared, and when he looks closer at what he thought was an adjacent valley he realises it’s an open cut mine that’s exposing the different layers of dreams, all sediment and accretion, and different coloured blues — he hadn’t realised there were different hues — ring the walls and the veins twist. A network of dusty roads snakes down into it, scarring the scar itself; and a fleet of trucks — five, ten, fifteen — drive in empty, drive out full. The bottom is submerged under the thick, dark blue blood, like a lake itself, or a lesion, and those creatures he saw before are drinking from the blue: they’re there, then they’re not there, then they are again. So the blue doesn’t weaken everything, it looks like these things live off it; they even like the dust. And there’s drilling equipment. Bastards, they’re tunnelling into the mountain too. He wants to go to the dreams and help them, in some way, at least it’d be better than doing nothing; or he could shut the mine down, chain himself to one of the machines. If he wasn’t tied up.

He flies out across the mountain, keeping low and taking note of the ground that isn’t ground, until the cable runs out. After landing he scratches out a line with his foot to mark the circumference; the pole in the middle; him in the middle. It takes him some time, but when he finishes the circle this becomes His Area which is a safe zone that he won’t abandon, even when they let him go he’ll come back and protect any dream that comes here. They won’t take any dreams from here, they won’t mine it, they won’t tunnel under him.

Every evening, as the sun sets and twilight makes way for evening, ten large lights mounted on the backs of trucks are turned on so the prisoners can be made to work through the night. The harsh light hurts his eyes.

Every night, keeping to the synthetic shadows cast by the artificial light he traverses His Area, unseen by the guards, in an attempt to make contact with the dreams already here and those refugees coming in.

Every morning he flies straight up, just in case the pole has come loose in the night, and each morning the pole is as solid as it was the day before. The first couple of times his flight transpires unnoticed, but soon his
morning ritual involves a guard flying over and ordering him to get down. It’s a game they play. He
challenges it, it threatens him, he defies it, it waves its rifle at him and he backs down, reluctantly.

‘Get down,’ the guard yells, then re- clips.

Turtle, far more confident in his own flying ability now, angles away.

The guard fires a shot over Turtle’s head, then unclips: ‘You won’t get another warning!’ It re-clips.

With his attention on the bullet and not on his flying he loses control and drops sharply. The guard flies
at him, but he regains enough control to dodge it. Turtle unclips: ‘I see better from the air. I can collect them
quicker.’ He re-clips.

It unclips: ‘I won’t tell you again.’ It re-clips and aims its gun at him.

Turtle takes this seriously. It’s a new guard who hasn’t done this before, so doesn’t understand the rules.
He puts his hands above his head and eases himself to the ground that isn’t ground next to the pole.

The guard hovers and unclips: ‘I’m watching you.’ It re-clips.

He picks up the bag and gloves, but knows he won’t be collecting any dreams, he just has to make it
think he is.

The guard stays above him for an hour before leaving, during which time Turtle makes sure he makes
lots of noise, so any dream nearby can hear him coming and flee. He’s not hunting them but really checking
that the dreams under his care, he’s thinking of himself as a shepherd now, are still alive. Some hide in
cracks and crevices, and he makes sure they disappear before he can get near them; some run like animals,
but he pretends to be slow and clumsy (after his first stumble he starts limping, so the guard thinks he rolled
an ankle; this gives him an excuse to run even slower); some swim in the air just above the ground that isn’t
ground, but he makes it look like they are much too fast for him; and others cloud the air like summer
insects, then disperse in all directions, and being prohibited from flying means he doesn’t even bother trying
to catch them.

Every day he sees more and more dreams that have come into His Area.

He is walking when his attention is taken by something orderly and precise, not spoken or seen, over on
another mountain. There is a feeling in the back of his mind somewhere, though, of an irregularity that is
simultaneously accessible and inaccessible. Time and distance telescope and he’s next to it. He didn’t fly here, did he? It didn’t feel so much like flying as much as time stopping. He’s speaking with it.

‘You should run,’ it says from close and afar, its voice in harmony with all his thoughts and all the feelings and emotions that surround and support them.

The thing he’s speaking to may or may not be a dream. Could he be in a dream? ‘How did I get here? Did I fly?’ He is tired.

‘No, but you should, if you can.’

A fresh ocean scent travels in on the breeze, although he can’t feel any breeze. ‘Why?’

‘Those with the big eyes.’

‘What about them?’ It seems to know something.

‘You should run.’

‘I’m tied up?’ Does it know something he doesn’t?

It sighs, or something like the same, and now he’s not so sure they’re talking in any way he understands talking to be. ‘Look where you are.’

The pole he is tethered to is miles away on another mountain. He had forgotten. As soon as his attention is taken by it the time and distance between them telescopes and he is back there. The transfers are painless, but not benign. Each time he finds himself in another place a slight nausea makes him woozy. His attention is taken by that same something and he’s next to it again.

‘See what I mean,’ it says, ‘you can run. Just go.’

‘I’m making it safe.’

‘Just go.’

‘You could come too. There are others like you who are coming. I can make it safe.’

‘No you can’t.’

The thing speaks with an anger he never imagined it could keep. Its voice rings, the words spin, his attention is broken and he is where he was before, knowing that only half a breath, maybe less, has elapsed. The words, not just what was said, but how they were said, make him feel out of kilter. Things are further or closer than they appear, he stumbles more often, everything is askew, and these feelings stay with him for the rest of the day, the next night, and another day and night as he tends to His Area. On the edges, where
the circumference is marked, a wall is being built by the dreams and those who migrate are giving form to this landscape. Some emerge from the ground that isn’t ground; others come from other places, using the cover of darkness, even considering the lights used to illuminate the night; and others are just there when he looks. A cohesiveness evolves and the dreams take stock.

Turtle continues with his morning routine of flying, so no one gets suspicious, but telescopes everywhere else. At times during both day and night he can sense their big eyes on him, so he’s careful. Airborne guards pass over at regular intervals now, clearly monitoring what’s happening, and Turtle is confused as to why they don’t try and stop this. Maybe they can’t. The word has spread to dreams all over that there is a safe place protected by a dream-built wall. Hourly, more and more dreams arrive; all taking care of each other. There is the feeling that something important is happening and that important something is solid and strong and what is building will last.

The more he telescopes the easier it becomes. At first his attention is pulled by every feature of the landscape, by every creature and by every dream; he had little control about where he ended up and when he would go, but over time, as with his flying, he learns the art of adjusting and controlling his impulses. Now, the second he attends discreetly to something he’s there next to it, and the hit and miss of telescoping to whatever took his attention, no matter how focussed or unfocussed, no longer happens. Even the initial wooziness he felt after each trip has since disappeared.

He starts by telescoping to large objects close by, then smaller objects, then to objects further and further away. Finally he turns to imagining places. Telescoping to rocks or a dream or a building is easy as long as he can see them, it’s when he imagines places or remembers them, like the inside of a building, that difficulties arise. To get inside a building he’s never been in is impossible. When he tries to get back to his house the memory is so dull that he can’t get there.

The only building he’s been able to telescope into is the mess, with its high roof and harsh lighting. Getting in is easy, but staying there is hard because there is too much going on. Once, he telescopied in and saw the neck woman sitting on the other side of the room, her back to him — that’s how he recognised her — eating, and he was taken by her beautiful neck once again. He wanted to bring her back with him to tell her what was happening and to try and get her to help him, either by looking after the dreams as well, or if she wanted to, she could start a resistance movement within her Search Unit, but as soon as he took her
hand his attention scattered — he remembered the fly on her skin and the freckles and the scar on her neck
and those guards touching her, and the pain of not being able to save her the indignity of being attached to
the machine — and he was back in His Area again, exactly where he left, with only half a breath having
passed. Even though he has tried to find her again, he hasn’t been able to. He still hasn’t seen her face.

Telescoping is almost too easy by the time he realises things are missing. It was so faint in the beginning,
like forgetting but not forgetting, and was easy to ignore, which is why he didn’t think it important, but the
more things begin slipping between the cracks, the more that irregular feeling takes hold and gnaws away at
the back of his mind, the more he understands he’s gone in a direction he can’t turn from. It isn’t until a
quiet time one night when his attention is taken by that same something over on the other mountain that the
full extent of his forgetting becomes apparent.

‘This can not end well,’ it says, ‘you’ve been travelling too often.’

‘I’ve been practising.’

‘You’ve spent too much of your attention out of time. You should have left long ago.’

‘I’m connected to this place.’

‘A dream can be the highest point of life.’

‘Why did you call me here?’

‘There are many voices.’

‘What do you want?’

‘It’s too late, now. Look at the pole.’

It directs his attention to the pole at the centre of His Area. It is lit up and the light blinds him. He can
hear them out beyond the wall, but can’t see them. They don’t bother being quiet because the light hides
them. He’s only been gone a matter of seconds, at most, but now a ring of guards surrounds them. How’d he
miss something like that? It’s not long before reinforcements arrive by air and by land: airborne guards criss-
cross above; troop carriers move in; and black four wheel drives, tinted windows, speed up and down a
newly made track that runs from the compound straight up the mountain to His Area. A semi, empty cage
on the back, drives up, black diesel belching. There is a threat, more than a threat. There is a clean efficiency
in the way they breach the perimeter. Those things are in control now.
Turtle unclips and screams: ‘Get in a circle! Face out! Stay close! Stay together! Don’t get taken!’ Every word sounds hollow. What’s he done?

Those that disappear into the cracks in the ground that isn’t ground are sucked out by guards using vacuum cleaners with tentacle-like tubes than can bend and turn with the contours of the crevices. Those that run are followed by airborne guards with hand-held spotlights and picked up by ground-based guards at the perimeter. Those that swim just above the ground that isn’t ground are caught in nets. Those that cloud the air like insects, dispersing in many directions are sprayed with a coating of plaster of Paris and when it dries they fall.

The guards force those dreams that are left into a group around the pole. Confused, there is panic. The dreams fight for space, there’s nowhere to go, and fall in on each other, which only feeds the tension, anger and fear. Turtle is screaming, but it doesn’t sound like him. The guards pull those on the edges away. The dreams fight back and try to keep others from being taken, but the guards swarm, they have batons and shields and equipment. The dreams’ screams pierce — like when they were falling, but this time it’s worse because he’s the cause of it. He told them he’d protect them.

His Area isn’t his any more. He made it easy for them. How did he not see it coming upon him? He is on the other mountain, but the something is gone. If it was so smart, he’s still not sure if the thing was a dream or not, why didn’t it tell him this was happening? It could have been a spy, working for the guards. He looks back across at His Area, and the lights, so harsh, show the flaws and cracks in the wall. When did it become so dilapidated?

He has to choose, and with the blink of his eyes he focuses his attention somewhere else.
Section Two: Exegesis

A Wonderland of Possible Worlds:
How Writers Create Possible Worlds,
or
Where is Alice, Anyway?
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Introduction

This exegesis investigates the world-building rules and narrative strategies available to novelists for creating possible worlds within fiction. Using *Alice in Wonderland* as a primary case study/example, and drawing on arguments by Brian McHale and Umberto Eco I investigate how Lewis Carroll created the possible world of Wonderland. After establishing the foundations upon which Wonderland is built I broaden my scope in order to understand more broadly how other authors create different types of possible worlds and the ways fictional possible worlds enable writers (and readers) to analyse, explore and reinterpret the ‘actual’ world. From this analysis I distil the key world-building rules and narrative strategies applicable to my own creative practice in my novel *Dreamriders*.

Possible worlds theory, taken from a Leibnizian concept, was developed by philosophers of the Anglo-American school to solve problems in formal semantics. Possible worlds theory was adapted to literary criticism in the late-1970s by scholars including Umberto Eco and Lubomír Doležel. The basis of the theory is the set-theoretical idea that reality — the sum of the imaginable — is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct elements. This universe is hierarchically structured by the opposition of one well-designated element, which functions as the centre of the system (the actual world), for all the other members of the set (possible worlds).

Discussing fictional texts in terms of possible worlds allows us to talk about ‘truths’ asserted in those texts (be they possible, impossible, actual, alternate, non-actual or counterfactual) without reducing the text to a mere representation of the world we live in. This establishes a new textual actual world with its own laws, norms and knowledge — at once complicating and, to a degree, strengthening fiction’s ontological structure because impossibilities become important world-building devices. Therefore, fictional possible

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4 Leibniz’s idea of possible worlds derives from the belief that God has perfect knowledge and only does the best, most perfect and most rational thing. The perfection of God’s Purposes leads to what may well be the most famous proposition in Leibniz’s thought: if God does everything for the best, then in creating the world, he can only have created the best of all possible worlds. So when things appear evil, they do so only because we are ignorant of God’s Purpose. 21 June 2006. <www.friesian.com/leibniz.htm>.
6 See Ryan.
worlds can describe impossible states of affairs with a set of modal restrictions (world-building rules) that makes the non-actual possible world ‘true’ in and of itself.

Definitions

‘Possible Worlds’ presuppose a difference between actual and possible existence (or states of affairs).

‘Fictional Possible Worlds’ refers to ensembles of nonactualised possible states of affairs.6 ‘World’ refers to a closed state of affairs that can be defined in relation to other closed states of affairs. ‘Actual World’ refers to a realised possible world that is perceived by human senses.7 ‘Textual Actual World’ refers to a possible world that represents the actual world within fiction, but is not a simple model or imitation. ‘Modal Logic’ (Modal System) defines the universe as ‘a network of competing possible-world domains and refers to a hierarchical system of restrictions that is the main factor in structuring fictional (possible) worlds’.8 ‘Possibility’ refers to a state of affairs obtaining in at least one possible world and concerns the likelihood of occurrence, not the question of whether this state actually occurs. ‘Impossibility’ refers to a convention that can be applied to concrete (possible) worlds — as long as the internal logic of the possible world holds true, nonexistent and impossible entities can be said to be true for that possible world. ‘Actuality’ refers to the way in which all possible worlds are defined, either in relation to one central reference world or to other possible worlds.

Literature review

My searches have not revealed any book, dissertation, paper or online reference referring to Alice in terms of possible worlds literary theory.9 I searched international academic databases and I searched Lewis Carroll

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7 Doležel 279.
8 (1) While modal logic may be a key term from philosophy I have used it here to discuss the creation of possible worlds in literature. This exegesis is not a philosophical discussion.
(2) A hierarchical system of restrictions includes: Alethic (truths) — denoting modalities of truth, such as necessity, contingency or impossibility; Deontic (ethics) — of or relating to duty and obligation as ethical concepts; Epistemic (theory of knowledge); Axiological (the truth or logic of a system) — an accepted statement or proposition on which an abstractly defined structure is based.
9 (1) There are numerous books that concentrate on Carroll and his life (too many to list them all here): The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, 1898; Lewis Carroll, Langford Reed, 1932; Victoria Through the Looking-Glass, Florence Becker Lennon, 1945; Lewis Carroll, a Biography, Derek Hudson, 1954; Lewis Carroll, a Biography, Anne Clark, 1979; The Letters of Lewis Carroll, edited by Morton Cohen and Roger Green, 1979; and Lewis Carroll a Biography, Morton Cohen, 1995.
(2) For further lists of selected references see the Lewis Carroll society websites <www.lewiscarroll.org>, <www.lewiscarrollsoociety.org.uk> and <www.lcsnz.org>; and Martin Gardner 321 (includes: ‘Carroll Criticism’,
Note continued next page
On May 3, 2007 I emailed the Lewis Carroll Society of North America (www.lewiscarroll.org); the Lewis Carroll Society (www.lewiscarroll.org.uk); and the Lewis Carroll Society of New Zealand (www.lcsnz.org) — the Australian Lewis Carroll Society had the same email address as the North American society. I asked if they could tell me the important academic texts published on Alice in the past five years. Dr John Tufail and Kate Lyon (both NZ), Mark Richards and Alan White (both UK), and Joel Baum (US) replied.

Of my theorists, McHale and Eco make no mention of Alice. Doležel does, but he speaks of Alice in terms of ‘the time-honoured tradition that gives supernatural beings the capacity to act in the natural world’ via what he calls ‘cross-world journeys’. None analyse Alice in terms of possible worlds.

Neither Gardner’s Lewis Carroll The Annotated Alice: the definitive edition nor Phillips’s Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll’s Dreamchild as seen through the Critics’ Looking-Glasses 1865–1971 refer to possible worlds. (Aspects of Alice was published in 1971, before possible worlds theory was adapted to literary criticism.)

Many references define Alice as a world, but not as a possible world. For example, firstly, in New Words for New Worlds: The Neologising Revolutions of Lewis Carroll and James Joyce, Fielding ‘traces the linguist innovations of [the “Alice” books]…and James Joyce’s Finnegan’s Wake as they contribute to a

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10 searched databases such as Proquest, projecteuclid.org and Project Muse with help from Grazyna Rosinska (RMIT School of Creative Media librarian).

11 See Appendix A for a copy of my original letter (email).

12 Umberto Eco was also central to John Tufail’s approach to Carroll in his paper, The Illuminated Snark (www.lcsnz.org). John’s specialisation is Carroll’s philosophy and the implications of Carroll’s works in terms of the philosophy of language — the relationship between language and reality. After sending John an extract of my exegesis he responded on 25 May 2007: ‘I acknowledge your bow to Leibniz, I found him important…however, I suggest you look at Vico and Bruno, via Coleridge. Carroll was influenced by Coleridge’s philosophical writings. His diaries give evidence of this. You need to look at Bioghraphia Literaria and Aids to Reflections, both of which Carroll read assiduously. Carroll was also influenced by FD Maurice and the whole Christian Socialist and neo-Platonist movement. Again, diaries support this. His friendship with McDonald, the Rossetis etc…are well documented.

I understand these books and people were important to Lewis Carroll, and while I thank John Tufail for his suggestions such investigations fall outside the bounds of this exegesis.

13 Cross-world journeys exist in two variants: in the first, the visitor is a an observer (e.g. Odysseus’s visit to Hades); in the second, the visitor interacts with the ‘other’ world. Doležel 131–132.


15 I did find a paper, Journey to the Centre (Kate Lyon, 2002) that focuses on Lewis Carroll’s interest in the dream state. While not directly linked to this exegesis, it does link to my novel, Dreamriders. Carroll called the dream state ‘that eerie state where one is aware of fairies’ (from Sylvie and Bruno, cited Lyon, 2002). As Lyon further explains, ‘In mythology this state is known as the threshold…the Celts described it as “the time that is not a time, the place which is not a place, on a day that is not a day”. It is a liminal world where intuition and intellect meet, resulting in perfect balance at best — or at worst an abyss into which one could fall and become a no-thing or a no-man.’
reconfiguration of the novel’s subject and means of representation in the late nineteenth century…’.

Secondly, in *A Critical Reading of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, MacBeth argues that ‘the Wonderland and Looking-Glass worlds pose a serious threat to Alice’s personal identity because the conventions of space, time and language governing the beliefs the inhabitants of Wonderland and Looking-Glass hold about the world differ from Alice’s world’. MacBeth examines identity, dreams and reality via egocentric constructs. Finally, in *Wanderlad Beyond the Looking-Glass: The Dream Worlds of Lewis Carroll and James Joyce* Shafer attempts, using psychoanalysis, to reveal that both ‘Lewis Carroll and James Joyce use their characters as voices through which they could express themselves unhindered, in the format of a dream novel, free from the restrictions…[of] their respective societies’.

I also found dissertations that interpret *Alice* through a feminist framework. For example: ‘The Seduction of the Surface: From Alice to Crash’ and *Through the Looking-Glass: Mirroring the Evolution of Feminist Theory in the Criticism on Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice’ Books*. In ‘The Seduction of the Surface…’ Springer analyses Alice’s confusion about her identity via post modern criticism. She looks at how the ‘Alice’ books ‘explore a world defined precisely by…the collapse of authenticity into inauthenticity, inside into outside, essence into appearance, latent into manifest, and the signified into the signifier’. In *Through the Looking-Glass: Mirroring the Evolution of Feminist Theory in the Criticism on Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice’ Books* Schmidt-Rosemann uses the ‘Alice’ books as ‘allegory for the…journey of feminist theory. Just as Alice…matures from her encounter with fantasy worlds…feminist theory also matures through a dialectic between realistic and utopian feminist impulses’.

A more recent text that takes a new approach is *In the Shadow of the Dream Child: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll*. In this book Leach ‘launched the concept of the “Carroll Myth”; the idea that many of the most famous aspects of Lewis Carroll’s biography, including his infamous supposed adoration of Alice Liddell,
are more legend than fact’. Some critics, such as John Tufail and the *Lewis Carroll Review* contend that the book adds valuable insight to our knowledge about Lewis Carroll, while others, such as Donald Rackin, dismiss it.

*Alice* has been analysed through language theory, nonsense theory, feminist frameworks, semantics, logic, psychoanalysis, fantasy, psychology, mathematics, comparative analyses, even religion. I acknowledge that these paradigms, to varying degrees, could be considered to fall within the bounds of a possible worlds analysis of *Alice*, but nowhere can I find a specific possible worlds reference or analysis.

**Context review**

I chose *Alice* for the following reasons: (1) because it deals with a re-centring of a possible world, similar to the structures used in my own novel *Dreamriders*; (2) because it is considered a ‘classic’, so provides a strong reference point; (3) because of the story’s many re-interpretations (animations, films, exhibitions, artworks); (4) because there is an abundance of academic information about *Alice* and Lewis Carroll; and (5) because I can’t find a possible worlds analysis of the text. I chose McHale and Eco as my theorists because they disagree about the extent to which possibility, impossibility, and actuality can be employed to build non-actual possible worlds (and, in fact argue whether or not such creations should even be called ‘worlds’). Further, there is a large international body of work that explores themes common to *Alice* and *Dreamriders*, including comics, short stories, films and novels; and uses specific types of possible worlds to investigate current ideas, fears and trends.

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23 There are far too many reviews and too many critic responses to list here. For more information and lists of reviews see *Victorian Studies*, Vol 43 (2006), 7 July 2007 <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/victorian_studies/v043/43.4rackin.html> and my list of Lewis Carroll society websites: note 9, 3.

24 While these analyses are interesting, such investigations fall outside the bounds of this exegesis. I also understand that any analysis of *Alice* and indeed any discussion of possible worlds will include discussions of fantasy and the fantastic. For further reading on fantasy see Tzvetan Todorov (*Introduction à la littérature fantastique* and *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*); and Rosemary Jackson (*Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*).

25 *Dreamriders* is new wave fabulist fiction. This is literary work that merges fantasy, science fiction, cyberpunk, horror, literature, fabulist, magic realism and cyber fiction; is mostly being published in the US and UK; and uses alternative methods for structuring the representation of the actual world in an effort to challenge, deconstruct, rebuild and critique notions of the actual world. In 2002 Bard College’s literary journal *Conjunctions*, spotlighted new wave fabulist writers <www.conjunctions.com/>.

26 See earlier section ‘Definitions’ 1.
In Alice the possible world of Wonderland is a nonactualised, marginal and complete world containing many dissimilar realms (possible state of affairs), that moves from the margin to the centre of the text when Alice and the reader fall into it.27

In Dreamriders a peripheral (though important) part of our existence — the Dreaming — is foregrounded.28 In the beginning the Waking and the Dreaming are separate, although connected, states of being/states of affairs (much as we understand them to exist and behave in our daily lives), with the Waking acting as the central world and the Dreaming as a possible world. When the Waking and the Dreaming leak together, both characters and readers are confronted by a New Reality where previously known and understood norms and assumptions no longer hold ‘true’.

In order to answer the more theoretical or esoteric questions I posed at the beginning of this introduction I also had two ‘problems’ to address within my own creative practice: (1) how could I write a novel that explored specific ideas, be engaging, seem ‘logical’ to the reader, but be completely unreal and illogical at the same time; and (2) how was I going to ‘realistically’ let the impossible take place in Dreamriders?29

While my exegesis and novel are separate, both relate directly to the key research question: What are the world-building rules and narrative strategies available for creating possible worlds?

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27 The term dissimilar realms from McHale 50.
28 I am not referring to the Aboriginal Dream Time nor Aboriginal Dreaming, but referring to dreaming in terms of sleep. For the purposes of Dreamriders the Dreaming is at once the unconscious/subconscious place we go to when we are asleep and a physical space, where dreams exist, that is independent of and interdependent on the Waking.
29 Questions posed earlier: What are the world-building rules and narrative strategies available for creating possible worlds? How do writers (including Lewis Carroll) create possible worlds? How do non-actual possible worlds allow authors to foreground marginal ideas, thoughts, norms and ontologies? How are mutually exclusive world-views and multiple realities accommodated within the one text? How does the creation of such literary possibilities enable writers (and readers) to analyse, explore and reinterpret the ‘actual’ world?
CHAPTER 1

Three types of possible worlds and their world-building rules (as seen through the looking-glass of Alice in Wonderland)

Alice juxtaposes two worlds of incompatible structures (the textual actual world of England and the possible world of Wonderland), violates the law of the excluded middle (in Wonderland some things are true and false at the same time) and confronts Alice and the reader with norms, constraints and assumptions that were ‘true’ (or ‘false’) as being no longer such.

Given a commonsense understanding of how the actual world works Wonderland can not and does not exist under England as an underground space, but this commonsense view only holds true if fiction is identified as a simple model of the actual world. Such a view becomes problematic when fiction introduces a set of complex possibilities that fall outside of such an understanding, while still seemingly acting as a model of the actual world. Possible worlds can be either very close to the actual world or very far from it. What we see in Alice is an example of how the text moves from an anti-realist modality, to a moderate realist modality, then to a modal realist modality. As a simple anti-realist modality the novel is a model of the actual world (thus existing close to it). When the novel moves to a moderate realist modality, it, as fiction, exerts a new level of autonomy from the actual world (thus moving away from the actual world). When it moves to a modal realist modality, it is ontologically autonomous from the actual world (thus exists very far from the actual world). This occurs through a combination of misattribution and interpolation that re-arranges the ontologies in the text.

1.1 Anti-realist

At first Alice is a simple model:

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30 The law of the excluded middle states that either a statement is true or it is false; it can’t be anything else. Therefore, any states of affairs that are self-contradictory or that transcend this true/false range are said to be impossible. Also known as the Reality Principle and the Principle of Mutual Belief. McHale 33.

31 Carroll wanted Tenniel to use a model for drawing Alice, so he sent Tenniel a photograph of Mary Hilton Badcock, another child friend, recommending that he use her for a model, and not a picture of Alice Liddell. [Even Carroll’s model wasn’t a factual representation.] Whether Tenniel accepted this advice is a matter for dispute. That he did not is strongly suggested by lines from a letter Carroll wrote some time after both Alice books had been published. ‘Mr. Tenniel is the only artist, who has resolutely refused to use a model, and declared he no more needed one than I should need a multiplication table to work a mathematical problem! I venture to think that he was mistaken and that for want of a model, he has drawn several pictures out of proportion — head decidedly too large and feet too small.’ Gardner note 1, 11.

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank…She was considering…whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up…when…a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by.\textsuperscript{33}

As readers we can determine that this scene (the textual actual world) is ‘real’ — we know the representative value of rivers, sisters and girls in fiction; we know what they are and what they look like in the actual world; and we know what it feels like to be sleepy on a summer’s day.

In this anti-realist modality the actual world is considered to be the central and only world (autonomous) and fictional texts as merely representative satellites. This view argues that the possible is defined and constrained by the world-building rules and modal restrictions of the actual world. Such a commonsense understanding of the world excludes possible (but not actualised) and impossible states of affairs because they lie beyond the boundaries of the world. Thus, at this point Alice is adhering to anti-realist world-building rules because the textual actual world has done nothing to dissuade a ‘real-world’ analysis.\textsuperscript{34} Eco is closest to an anti-realist school of modal logic. Some of Eco’s world-building rules (not a comprehensive list):

- Worlds are rational constructs and must adhere to the actual world encyclopaedia.
- Worlds do not violate the law of the excluded middle. Any worlds that transcend this true/false range are said to be impossible.
- Worlds are cultural constructs.
- Worlds rely on the world of reference’s own encyclopaedia (the actual world encyclopaedia).\textsuperscript{35}

From this we can conclude that Eco’s world-building rules are concerned with questions of epistemology and that, in the words of McHale, worlds foreground questions such as: ‘How can I interpret this world of which I am part and what am I to do in it? What is there to be known? Who knows it?’\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Carroll 9.
\textsuperscript{34} This is the principle of minimal departure which states that when readers construct fictional worlds they fill gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own reality. The author doesn’t have to refer to the real world because the gaps left for the reader are filled based on actual-world experience. See Ryan.
\textsuperscript{35} Eco 219–222.
\textsuperscript{36} McHale 9.
Three types of possible worlds and their world-building rules

1.2 Moderate realist

Similar to the anti-realist school, moderate realism privileges the actual world with an autonomous existence and insists that possible worlds exist as concepts that are part of the closed ontology of the actual world. In contrast to the anti-realist view this view acknowledges fiction’s intrinsic ontological complexity: fiction exists autonomously, depends on the constitutive acts of consciousness of a reader (imagination and intuitive experience), and includes many ontological strata that serve different functions in the make-up of the whole.

Misattribution occurs in *Alice* when the automatic associations readers may have about the place Alice inhabits are destabilised by a speaking White Rabbit, thus undermining what the reader thought was a simple, rational representation of the actual world and adding another ontological stratum to the text.\(^{37}\) Therefore, the author extends an ‘invitation to believe’, which the reader either accepts or rejects, and the text encourages the reader to question the anti-realist world-building rules:

> There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself ‘Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!’ (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural).\(^ {38}\)

Here McHale and Eco begin to diverge, precipitated by the fact that it is unclear what type of fictional possible world Alice is in. Eco assumes ‘a possible world...is an *ens rationis* or a rational construct’, that it must be free from contradiction, and that fictional propositions need the real world encyclopaedia to exist.\(^ {39}\) In this view Alice can only be in the actual world, so, for example, Wonderland has to be a dream and part of Alice’s ‘real world’ experience. McHale, on the other hand, argues that fictional possible worlds can describe possible states of affairs without having to assume the possibilities literally exist. Alice could be anywhere, so, for example, Alice really goes to Wonderland: a non-actual possible world that exists outside her ‘real world’ experience. The distinction between the actual and possible is blurred and it is not clear where Alice is because *Alice* ceases to adhere to the world-building rules of Eco.

\(^{37}\) Traditional catalogues of places and their attributes...in effect transcribe the unwritten encyclopaedia of conventional wisdom and common knowledge...The strategy of misattribution involves striving to displace and rupture these automatic associations. McHale 47–48.

\(^{38}\) Carroll 9.

\(^{39}\) Eco 220.
Three types of possible worlds and their world-building rules

1.3 Modal realist

Interpolation occurs when Alice and the reader fall into Wonderland — a possible world that moments before was unrealised — somewhere between England and the centre of the Earth.\footnote{Interpolation involves introducing an alien space within a familiar space, or between two adjacent areas of space where no such ‘between’ exists. [Italics in original.] It has a long history prior to its adaptation to post modern uses. For example, it underlies the ‘Ruritanian’ topos of the imaginary country (a staple of swashbuckling adventure stories) in the tradition of Anthony Hope’s \textit{The Prisoner of Zenda} (1894), or in Joseph Conrad’s \textit{Nostrono} (1904), or Borges’ \textit{Uqbar} (an invented Near Eastern country) in ‘Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Terririus’ (1941). McHale 46.}

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.\footnote{Carroll 10.}

Falling, here, delineates the textual actual world of our beginning from the possible world of where we end up. Falling is an important element, and is used in other forms of literature as a metaphor for a shift or change — it is often used to indicate a transportation from one world to another. Frank Baum’s \textit{The Wizard of Oz} (1900) is a good example of this. Known as ‘border fiction’, this term (from a North American tradition) was initially used to describe fiction that had a physical and geographical basis, and which was set in the ‘neutral territory between civilisation and the wilderness’ (e.g. cowboys vs. Indians).\footnote{McHale 49.} As that physical space was ‘civilised’ the in-between space disappeared and another type of frontier took its place: the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle.\footnote{McHale 49–51.}

Even though Alice isn’t of a North American tradition it does, nonetheless, exhibit traits of border fiction. For instance, like Oz, Wonderland is a marginal, little-known possible world that is complete in and of itself and contains many dissimilar realms; just as Oz is somehow located within Kansas, and Dorothy gets there by falling (from a tornado), Wonderland is located somehow underneath England, and Alice gets there by falling (down a rabbit hole); and like Oz, Wonderland moves from the margin to the centre when (Dorothy) Alice enters the possible world:

Alice opened the door…but she could not even get her head through…; ‘Oh how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if only I knew how to begin’.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[40] Interpolation involves introducing an alien space within a familiar space, or between two adjacent areas of space where no such ‘between’ exists. [Italics in original.] It has a long history prior to its adaptation to post modern uses. For example, it underlies the ‘Ruritanian’ topos of the imaginary country (a staple of swashbuckling adventure stories) in the tradition of Anthony Hope’s \textit{The Prisoner of Zenda} (1894), or in Joseph Conrad’s \textit{Nostrono} (1904), or Borges’ \textit{Uqbar} (an invented Near Eastern country) in ‘Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Terririus’ (1941). McHale 46.
\item[41] Carroll 10.
\item[42] McHale 49.
\item[43] McHale 49–51.
\end{footnotes}
Three types of possible worlds and their world-building rules

For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.44

Two things, then, indicate the shift in worlds: Alice’s fall and the last sentence of this quote. Alice (and the reader) deconstruct/construct the space of fiction to include the notion (world-building rule) that ‘very few things indeed were really impossible’. Alice has shifted from a moderate realist modality, to a modal realist one. Eco’s and McHale’s arguments diverge.

Modal realism sees a world or universe (not the world or universe) functioning as the centre (the text has moved from a representation of the world, to an ontological inquiry into a world).45 This allows literary texts to question what is a world and to question the very notion of truth (or truths).

While authors may draw on the actual world and borrow from it when creating fictional possible worlds, that actual-world material has to ‘undergo a substantial transformation at the world boundary’ because fictional texts are ‘ensembles of nonactualised states of affairs, with a definite ontological status, that of nonactualised possibles’ that are not confined to imitating the actual world because their ontological differentiation from the actual world creates separate possible worlds with their own encyclopaedias, laws and world-building rules that are ‘wider than the actual’.46

Further, David Lewis stipulates that possible worlds are the same sort of thing as our actual world: the actual world is ‘the world where I am located’, meaning that any world can become the centre of the system for all the other members of the set because each is actual ‘from the point of view of their inhabitants’.47 In other words ‘actual’ is indexical. Such ontological differentiations (between what is actualised and what could hypothetically be actualised), explain how fiction exists autonomously from the actual world, how the worlds in fiction are not merely models of the actual world and how fiction is ontologically complete.48

Here are McHale’s modal-realist world-building rules (not a comprehensive list):

- Worlds (possible/fictional) confront the ‘given’ of the actual world with something not given.
- World describes possible states of affairs without having to assume the possibilities literally exist.
- Worlds don’t have to be rational constructs so can include logical impossibilities.

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44 Carroll 13–14.
45 Dr. Peter King, ‘David Lewis: Modal Realism’ 7 July, 2005 <users.ox.ac.uk/~worco337/modal.realism.html>.
46 Doležel 16, 18–21.
47 Lewis, cited King.
48 Lewis, cited King.
Three types of possible worlds and their world-building rules

- Worlds are distinguishable from the actual world.
- Worlds can violate the law of the excluded middle.
- Worlds are organised systems.
- Worlds foreground questions, such as: Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? What is a world?\(^{49}\)

McHale’s world building rules are concerned with questions of ontology. The distinction between the actual and possible (England and Wonderland) is blurred even further by something *not* given, just yet. Even though Alice’s textual actual world knowledge says she can’t have fallen into a world under England, she focuses on a new ontology that says she has. This is an important step in the re-centring process. We’re getting closer to Wonderland.

Finally, we have the last step in misattribution, where Wonderland’s possible-world ontology is completely substituted (re-centred) for the knowledge we thought we knew:

> She ate a little bit, and said anxiously…’Which way? Which way?’; holding her hand on the top of her head…; and she was quite surprised to find she was the same size…this is what generally happens when one eats cakes; but Alice had got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way.\(^{50}\)

We’re in Wonderland; the collusion between author and reader is completed as they relocate themselves around a new textual actual world; the parameters of Wonderland have been set up and Wonderland now exists in its own ontological space. This is reflected in Wonderland’s own world-building rules:

- Few things indeed are really impossible.
  
  Soon after saying this Alice goes to the table ‘half hoping she might find another key…or at any rate a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes’.\(^{51}\) So far we’ve only been shown a possible world, but now we are being told explicitly that new rules apply.

- Expect nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen.
  
  ‘Well I’ll eat it,’ said Alice, ‘and if it makes me grow larger I can reach the key; and if it makes me

\(^{49}\) McHale 10, 27, 33–37.  
\(^{50}\) Carroll 17.  
\(^{51}\) Carroll 14.
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grow smaller... Food is able to change Alice's size because 'out-of-the-way things' do not violate the internal logic of Wonderland. This strengthens Wonderland's internal ontological structure by putting forward non-actual possibilities as a specific possible state of affairs. Therefore, Wonderland has the ontological status of a nonactualised possible world which is not confined to imitating the actual world (i.e. being judged by the rules/expectations of England) because the rule 'expect nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen' creates a possible world wider than the actual.

- Wonderland is built on an organised system of logic and mathematics.

Wonderland may seem like the scrambled logic of dreaming, but it actually adheres to a structural framework that gives it a solid foundation from which to explore ontological propositions and to address epistemological issues such as appearance vs. reality, the distortions of desire and memory, and the validity and scope of what Alice (and the reader) knows as 'true'.

The beauty of Alice is that in reading it we 'scarcely notice, however consistent and admirable [or maybe because of the consistency] their [the world building rules'] ingenious design; each of

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52 Carroll 17.
53 (1) Lewis Carroll had a great fondness for playing with mathematics, logic and words, and for writing nonsense. Garden
xxv.
(2) He accepted every convention; he was prudish, pernickety, pious and jocose. Virgina Woolf, 'Lewis Carroll' Aspects of Alice 48 (1939): 47–49.
(3) He was not bound to any special course of academic study, but he held from 1855 to 1881 the position of mathematical
lecturer. He was a laborious worker...apt to forget his meals...He was firmly convinced that the ordinary logical methods were inadequate to the performance of much work fairly to be expected of the mind...He tried to give words a sharply defined meaning, as if they were mathematical symbols and strove to systematise the various inferences that could be drawn from them...A word to him not only had its direct positive meaning, but also conveyed negative information in various directions. And all this had to be drawn out and taken into account in his systems...He was ruled by a great belief in formulae in which letters (as in algebra) took the place of words. This lead him to think of sentences as mere forms, of which the concrete meaning was insignificant. T.B. Strong, 'Lewis Carroll' Aspects of Alice 41 (1898): 39–46.
54 (1) Ontological propositions include questions of the nature of being and knowing, and the laws of nature. As Alice falls she takes down jars from one of the shelves she passes. In a normal state of free fall she could not do this, nor could she drop the jar — it would remain suspended in front of her — and nor could she replace it on the shelf: she does all of these things. To some extent this anticipates Einstein's 'thought experiment' in which he used an imaginary falling elevator to explain certain aspects of relativity theory. (Gardner note 2, 13.)
(2) Epistemological issues include questioning what is 'true'. When Alice says, 'Let me see: four times five is 12, and four times six is 13, and four times seven is — oh dear, I shall never get to 20 at that rate!' it looks like she doesn't know her multiplication tables, but is that the case?
Gardner cites two possible logical explanations for this piece of 'illogical logic'.
One is that the multiplication tables traditionally stop at 12, so if you continue this nonsense progression — 4 times 5 is 12, 4 times 6 is 13, 4 times 7 is 14, and so on — you end with 4 times 12 (the highest you can go) is 19.
The second is a more complicated theory advanced by A.L. Taylor (in The White Knight). Four times 5 is 12 in a number system using a base of 18. Four times 6 is 13 with a base of 21. If we continue this progression, always increasing the base by 3, our products keep increasing by one until we reach 20, where for the first time the scheme breaks down. Four times 13 is not 20 (in a number system with a base of 42), but is 'I' followed by whatever symbol is adopted for 'IO'. Gardner note 4, 23.
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the characters are in keeping with one another (none acts out of place or personality in relation to other characters); and although Alice was written for children ‘the only child in them, apart from the occasional infant, is Alice’. Further, while the world-building rules in Alice are ‘in the realm of Nonsense, its subjects obey them unaware of any restrictions (anything may happen there, except only what can’t happen there).’

- Wonderland foregrounds questions, such as ‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? And which of my selves is to do it?’

Interpretations of fiction dominated by epistemological questions deploy strategies which answer: ‘How can I interpret the world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?; What is there to be known? And who knows it?’ The underlying assumption is that the world needs to be understood. Interpretations of fiction dominated by ontological questions deploy strategies which answer: Which world is this? What is to be done in it? And which of my selves is to do it?; ‘What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there? and What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?’ The assumption here is that there are many worlds to be understood. Alice asks the second set of questions: Which world is Alice in? As Alice falls she thinks, ‘How funny it’ll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards!…Is this New Zealand or Australia?’ We know it’s neither of those places, but at this time Wonderland is still unrealised, so we’re not sure where she is, even if we are sure where she’s not.

What is Alice to do in it? When Alice drops into Wonderland she is in a hall with numerous locked doors. If we accept, as T.S. Eliot suggests, that the doors are metaphors for possible events then we can argue that Alice is searching for her way into Wonderland and her role in it.

Which of her selves is to do it? ‘Dear dear, how queer everything is today…I wonder if I’ve been

56 McHale 9.
57 McHale 10.
58 Carroll 11.
59 T.S. Eliot revealed to the critic Louis L. Martz that he was thinking of this episode when he wrote part of his poem ‘Burnt Norton’. The little door also appears in Eliot’s The Family Reunion. For him it was a metaphor for events that might have been. Gardner note 7, 16
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changed in the night?...was I the same when I got up this morning?...if I’m not...who in the world am I? Alice theorises about who she might be: either of her friends Mable or Ada?

How do we know that the possible world-building rules of Wonderland have replaced the textual actual world-building rules as the centre of the set? The answer is with Alice herself. When she thinks ‘out-of-the-way things’ are more ‘normal’ than the ‘common way’ of the world she fell from, Wonderland’s ontology has begun functioning as the centre of the system. Thus ‘the actual world’ — being indexical in terms of modal realism — is ‘the world where I am located’ (‘I’ refers to Alice and reader).

At this point Eco limits his assessment of the re-centring and would explain Wonderland as a subworld of the actual world. He calls them subworlds because they form a subjective world-view from within the text’s projected world (assuming the text can only be a model of the actual world). This relies on the idea that only the actual-world encyclopaedia can exist so fictional possible worlds are limited by that encyclopaedia. Given, though, that ‘the possible is wider than the actual’, and that fiction can create possible worlds by describing them, the act of re-centring Wonderland’s ontology, in fact, provides the foundation for an expansion (assuming the text is more than a model). As McHale suggests:

The division of the fictional universe into two opposing [world views] is not the end of the process, but only the first step...the duality of the fictional world gives rise...to a plurality of worlds...[and] Space here is less constructed than deconstructed by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time.

Literature in general constructs and deconstructs simultaneously — this is apparent to a greater or lesser degree depending on the style of the text. So, it is at the point where fiction stops representing the actual that it is freed from the limitations of the actual, or ‘real’. This fits with Pavel’s idea of narrative domains — ‘a single work may be apportioned among several different ontologies...[and] such ontologically complex multiple-world texts undertake the exploration of certain ontological positions’ — and Doležel’s argument

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60 Carroll 20–21.
61 Also known as ‘subuniverses of meaning’, subworlds are not fully-formed worlds, but are defined by the tension between a paramount reality (or world) and the jostling, peripheral realities and views within the one fictional text. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), cited McHale 19–20.
62 McHale 45, 52–53
that ‘fictional encyclopaedias are many and diverse and are able to incorporate overlapping encyclopaedias’.\footnote{Pavel, cited McHale 34.}

\footnotetext{1}{Pavel, cited McHale 34.} \footnotetext{2}{Doležel 177–179.}
CHAPTER 2

Narrative strategies for creating possible worlds (as seen through the looking-glass of Alice in Wonderland)

I will now outline the narrative strategies used to engage modal realism and employ different world building rules in Alice.

2.1 Blurring the distinction between actuality and possibility

Initially the possible world of Wonderland invades the textual actual world of England — in the form of the White Rabbit. This expands the range of encyclopaedia knowledge by showing that the actual-world encyclopaedia is just one among numerous encyclopaedias (rupturing the illusion of an all-encompassing encyclopaedia); suggests that the way things are is not an inevitable end point; and suggests something ‘other’ exists. The talking, clothes wearing, watch carrying White Rabbit ruptures Alice’s textual actual world assumptions and the reader’s actual world assumptions:

When the Rabbit actually took a watch out of his waistcoat-pocket…Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it...

The existence of this other possible world means the reader’s encyclopaedia has to be modified so as to ‘learn the encyclopaedia of the possible world’. This modification travels three ways (if only temporarily):

1. The reader learns the possible-world encyclopaedia.
2. The reader unlearns the actual-world encyclopaedia.
3. When the reader re-enters (re-centres) the actual world of experience, the possible-world encyclopaedia will inform each interaction the reader has with the actual-world encyclopaedia. From this point on nothing will be the same again.

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64 Alice also dissolves the borders between genre fiction, literary fiction, children’s literature and adult literature because it doesn’t adhere to one set of textual conventions. Is it fantasy, literature, a children’s book or an adult book; or is it a nongenre text that conveys a particular feel, rather than being set specifically within the frame of a specific genre?

65 Carroll 9.

66 Doležel 179.

67 This has occurred to me while writing this exegesis. I find it difficult to not see instances of Wonderland-esque nonsense in my actual-world experience. For example, rarely do politicians say what they mean, and in many cases their speeches could be taken straight out of chapters 11 & 12 (‘Who Stole the Tarts?’ & ‘Alice’s Evidence’) of Alice. Politicians’ power lies in citizens forgetting what has been done and said previously. It’s very much like when the Queen in Alice calls for peoples’ heads to be...
When a reader reads a novel she or he brings his or her own encyclopaedia to it, which is different again from the encyclopaedia of the author and the encyclopaedia of the novel. The novel does not reflect the ‘actual world’ of the author, nor can it reflect the ‘actual world’ of the reader because reader, author and novel are different possible worlds that interact and confront one another, each set of encyclopaedic knowledge competing for ontological centre. They may share elements of encyclopaedic knowledge at different points, but that shared knowledge is limited, temporary and volatile and only lasts for the time that the possible world of the reader and the possible world of the novel interact. The beautiful thing about fiction, though, is that the effects of this interaction (between the reader’s encyclopaedia and the authors’ and the novel’s) may last longer than the interaction itself: does fiction have a monopoly on reverberating collisions between the world-knowledges of author, reader and text? (While ‘non-fictional worlds’ declare themselves to be the same as the author’s and reader’s worlds, perhaps this is just a convenient posture).

2.2 Blocking the principle of minimal departure

As stated previously, the principle of minimal departure argues that readers construct fictional worlds by filling gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own reality. This argument relies on the idea that readers construct the fictional world guided only by epistemological concerns, thus reducing the fictional world to a model of the actual world. The reader, therefore, either ‘refers the text to real, verifiable factors’, or reduces the text ‘to the level of her/his own experience’. Authors challenge these activities (both of which ignore ontological concerns) by creating impossible objects, inconsistent geographies and radically incomplete states of affairs.

For example, in chapter two of Alice (‘The Pool of Tears’), when Alice sees a mouse splashing in a pool, readers initially imagine an animal that resembles their idea of a mouse. So, here the statement ‘mice have tails’ will be true of this fictional world — because of the assumed similarity to the actual world — but the statement ‘mice can speak’ will be, at this point, false, unless specified by the text.

chopped off. Her power lies in her subjects forgetting that no one ever actually gets their heads chopped off. Her subjects remain scared, even though there’s no evidence that she is willing to go through with her threats. Further, more often than not the so-called actual world looks fractured, more like a conglomerate of competing possible worlds than a consistent whole. This so-called actual world is not stable, nor is it constant and nor is it ‘naturally’ inevitable. It is volatile, temporary and constructed. Doležel 267.
Impossible objects such as a speaking mouse, therefore, block readers’ intuitive reflexes to fill perceived gaps in the text with objects, characters or events from their own experiential actual-world reality. Impossible objects also foreground ontological concerns. In doing this they confront ontological boundaries and world norms by counter-balancing so called ‘facts’; fulfilling the stylistic aims of the narrative; serving as springboards to access the other world; and, finally, forcing readers to imagine possible outcomes and differences separate from the actual world. In this sense, any perceived gaps or inconsistencies in the text created by such impossibilities are a matter of missing information within the text (just as in the actual world we don’t always have all the information we need) and not ontological deficiencies of the text.

So, ‘mice can speak’ becomes true for Wonderland when the text specifies it:

Would it be of any use to speak to this mouse? Everything is so out-of-the-way down here, that I should think very likely it can talk…So she began: ‘O Mouse, do you know the way out of this pool?’…The mouse…said nothing. Perhaps… it’s a French mouse…She began again: ‘Où est ma chatte?’…The mouse gave a sudden leap out of the water…‘Oh I beg your pardon!’ cried Alice…‘I quite forgot you didn’t like cats.

Not like cats!’ cried the Mouse in a shrill, passionate voice. ‘Would you like cats, if you were me?’

There is no mention in Alice of ‘a world where mice can speak’. Alice doesn’t explicitly state that ‘we have now left the world you understand and are entering one you don’t’, or anything of that nature. The text implies this by describing the impossible object. As McHale suggests:

The face-to-face confrontation between the possible, the ‘real’ [actual], and the impossible…precipitates a confrontation between ‘real’ [actual]-world norms and the other-world norms.

As readers we can understand the speaking mouse on two levels: explicitly, speaking mice exist in Wonderland (as do other speaking animals); implicitly, this is not the world we first thought it was. The confrontation of actual-world and possible-world norms occurs because we can believe in both the actual-

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69 Doležel 169–177.
70 Eco 220-221. (The original example was from Little Red Riding Hood.)
71 Carroll 24–25.
72 McHale 76.
world and the possible-world norms; there would be no confrontation — no ontological complexity — if we could simply dismiss the possible-world norms as different, irrelevant, impossible, non-existent and then move on. Therefore, ontological boundaries are confronted, as are actual-world norms, because the perceived possible-worlds (and their differences) can’t be reduced to conform to the uniform structure of the actual world, or be reduced to a mere part of it, but must be experienced as something distinct in, and of, themselves.

2.3 Talking about the truth of propositions asserted in fictional texts

Fictional possible worlds, such as Wonderland, are able to put forward possible, impossible, actual, alternate, non-actual or counterfactual states of affairs without being reduced to a mere representation or imitation of the world we live in. They have an autonomy from the actual world and from other possible worlds and there is a degree of authentication independent from any other world. Possible worlds may take their form as either very close to the actual world, very far from it or any number of other positions in between. From the point of view of the reader, immersed in the text, the textual actual world (at first a world that looked like England and now Wonderland) is imaginatively real and the truths stated in the text exist autonomously from any other world.

Pavel argues that the reason fictional propositions are automatically true of their own fictional world (their own text) is because readers afford fictional texts the power to give imaginative existence and logical space to worlds, objects and possible states of affairs by describing them.

[R]eaders do not evaluate the logical possibility of propositions they find in literary texts in the light of the actual world — as logicians would require them to do — but rather abandon the actual world and adopt (temporarily) the ontological perspective of the literary work [the textual actual world].

Fictional worlds don’t have to conform to the structures of the actual world; therefore truth (or truths) is true as long as it conforms to the structures of their own world. Similarly, characters within a fictional possible world are able to be right or wrong about something, and they are able to speak truth or speak of

73 McHale 76.
74 Doležel 145.
75 Ryan.
76 Thomas Pavel, “‘Possible Worlds’ in Literary Semantics”, cited McHale 33.
truths, but only in relation to their world, not the actual world; regardless of whether their world is very close to the actual world or very far from it. Fiction can carry out the act of authentication precisely because it exists outside the actual-world truth-construct and actual-world norms.

2.4 Describing the universe as a constellation of situations

Alice works on two levels in relation to describing a constellation of situations. This is important because this reading argues there are many worlds and encyclopaedias to be understood. Firstly the text houses two contradictory worlds simultaneously (England and Wonderland). Secondly, the possible world of Wonderland is a constellation of possible worlds itself that creates its own horizon of possibilities. It’s a textual actual world (when Wonderland is recast as the new centre of the system) and it’s a non-actual possible world (Wonderland is an impossible state of affairs).

For example, as Alice looks through the small door in the hallway out at the rest of Wonderland it is as if she is looking at another country. But as Alice and the reader travel further into Wonderland the distance with which she (we) view the possible world diminishes so that all the possible and impossible situations we encounter become ‘normal’ and it has become the ‘paramount reality’. Wonderland becomes the world where Alice and the reader interact and the world where Alice interacts with other inhabitants of Wonderland. Each of these interactions (speaking to a talking mouse, growing larger and smaller, speaking with a hookah-smoking caterpillar) is normal, not because our actual-world (of experience) encyclopaedia says so, but because the text’s encyclopaedia says so.

This is no different to travelling to a new country where, in the beginning, we suffer culture shock, where everything — smells, language and customs — are ‘strange’ or ‘new’. But then, upon returning home, we realise how ‘strange’ our own culture is. There is a sense of disquiet at how everything’s the same — but somehow not the same. There is not one determinate set of facts. There isn’t one absolute truth that states ‘This is the best way to…(construct culture, dance, treat women, organise an economy, teach children, define time, work, etc…) because there are many truths, many ways. Truth doesn’t reside

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77 I acknowledge here that Alice works on so many other levels than just two, but I have limited my analysis due to space constraints and the word limit of this exegesis.
78 See page 12.
79 Also known as ‘collective representation’ (Durkheim), cultural codes (Bathes), symbolic universes (Berger and Luckmann — again), and ontological systems (Pavel — again). Doležel 101.
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specifically in any one place. Once we are open to this idea we begin to view the actual world as a
collection of possible worlds, rather than viewing it as one single, determinate and determined set of
facts. We begin to accept the constellation of situations.
CHAPTER 3

Further narrative strategies used by authors to create possible worlds\(^80\)

The previous four examples are not the only illustrations of possible-world narrative strategies. Six more follow, and are taken from texts other than Alice: Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*, Phillip K Dick’s *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldridge*, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, and the films *The Matrix* and *eXistenZ*.\(^81\) Many of these strategies overlap, and in some cases more than one strategy is evident within the same text. For the exercise of analysing each strategy I will keep to a simple single-strategy analysis of the following approaches (even though that strategy may only be one of a number of possible-world creation tools the author uses).

3.1 Challenging of the classical ontological model

The classical ontological model is a hierarchy: one world in the system assumes the role of centre and the other worlds are peripheral. One way authors challenge this model is to use branching plots (multi-path narrative) to create equal-status worlds within the one text, thus subverting any notion of hierarchy and challenging the idea of a central ontology. Alice does not challenge this model. There are two instances where we can see that the text alludes to a multi-path narrative, but each time the hierarchal wins through. Firstly, there is a brief confusion when the White Rabbit invades the textual actual world and the reader is unsure about which ontology is central, but this hesitation to commit is soon rectified when the possible and central ontologies are re-ordered (even if readers aren’t sure which world Alice is in, they’re sure, at least, that she’s in a distinct world). Secondly, if we go back to the doors Alice sees in the hallway and, as T.S. Eliot suggests, allow for these doors to act as metaphors for events that might have been, Alice searches possible ways to enter Wonderland, finds a key to one door, so is forced into following one central plot (one possibility, a

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\(^80\) I understand that the issues discussed in the following section could each be the focus of an exegesis in their own right. I wish merely to illustrate that there are more strategies than the above mentioned available to writers when creating possible worlds. The following list is a set of examples and is not an exhaustive list nor a detailed analysis.

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single-path narrative, one fork in the road), marginalising all other possibilities (including the possibility of her textual actual world).\(^{82}\)

There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked; and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out…\(^{83}\)

By choosing one door, the Wonderland Alice enters assumes the role of centre, becoming the foregrounded ontology of the text.

In Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, however, there is no central foregrounded ontology. Marco Polo visits a number of cities on his expeditions and describes them to Kublai Khan upon his return. These cities, as the reader discovers, are continuous and are said to have ‘absorbed the entire space of the Empire’.\(^{84}\) The cities put different possible worlds in confrontation with one another: the world of the living and the world of the dead, the sacred with the profane, and the real-world city with its model or double.\(^{85}\) How could all these cities (branching plots, multi-path narratives and plural worlds) exist in the same time and space? Because they occur at the point of construction/deconstruction, where fictional propositions can be both true and false.

In *Alice* we have a simple exchange of central for peripheral, but in *Invisible Cities* there is no central and there is no peripheral. It isn’t a matter of a simple exchange because no exchange takes place. For example, in teaching and learning about history we speak about the (eventual) path taken, but we rarely speak about the ideas of the time, the options people had and the choices people had to make. Here (in the moment) the ideas and choices were both actualised and not actualised, were in-between, were both true and false because they hadn’t been defined yet. There was more than one choice (there always is) but history only ever teaches us about the one path that was taken — as if it were inevitable — and not what could have been taken. The type of fictional deliberations in *Invisible Cities* challenge the idea of the hierarchical ontological model: that the way things are right now is the logical conclusion of ‘the inevitable’ and the way the actual world is, is the way the world was always supposed to be. Authors do this to challenge the idea that there is one primary ontology.

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\(^{82}\) This ties loosely into Aldus Huxley’s premise underpinning his *Doors of Perception*.

\(^{83}\) Carroll 13.

\(^{84}\) McHale 43.

\(^{85}\) McHale 43.
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3.2 Questioning of the creator/creature relation

The creator/creature relation is the idea that there are clear boundaries between fictionality, actuality and possibility, and between author, reader and character. Alice doesn’t directly question the creator-creature relation. However, Denis Crutch and R.B. Shaberman contend that Carroll did inject himself into the story via the fictional Alice. So while the author Lewis Carroll never meets the fictional Alice, is there a meeting, in the form of a merger between author and character, of some sort?86

When an author actually meets a character the distinction between the modals of ‘fictionality, actuality and possibility’ blurs.87 For example, in Breakfast of Champions Vonnegut’s character Kilgore Trout meets his author, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.:

‘Mr. Trout,’ I said, in the unlighted interior of the car, ‘you have nothing to fear. I bring you tidings of great joy.’

‘Are — are you — from the — the Arts Festival?’ he said...

‘I am from the Everything Festival,’ I replied. ‘Mr. Trout,’ I said, ‘I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books.’

‘Pardon me?’ he said.

‘I’m your creator,’ I said, ‘You’re in the middle of a book right now — close to the end of it, actually.’

‘Um,’ he said.88

These texts challenge, rip and weaken the external ontological boundaries between fictionality and actuality by creating a fictional space where character and author develop a self-consciousness outside the parameters of fictionality and actuality. Eco argues that: ‘this “author” is as fictional as any other character,

86 According to Gardner (note 12, 18), there is another connection between the two, with respect to word lengths, the positions of vowels, and double letters in the last names: Alice Liddell
Lewis Carroll.

87 (1) McHale 122.
(2) Creator/creature relation is not autobiography: an account of a person’s life written by that person (Oxford English Dictionary), nor is it the type of New Journalism strategies practiced by the likes of Norman Mailer and Hunter S Thompson. ‘Any time a non-fiction writer uses an autobiographical approach, he is turning himself into a character in the story. This has a better chance of working if the writer was, in fact, a leading character in the events he is describing. If he was not a leading character, the autobiographical approach often fails. In Norman Mailer’s “The Armies of the Night”... Mailer was one of the major participants in the demonstration [the march on the Pentagon in 1967], and not just a reporter... His autobiographical view is a view from the inside and his emotions and reactions help suggest the emotional reality of the event itself.’ (Tom Wolfe, The New Journalism, [London: Picador, 1975] 212.) This is a meeting between writer and author.

88 Vonnegut 266.
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and therefore the ontological barrier between an author and the interior of his fictional world is absolute, impenetrable. However, by making those very parameters visible to the reader, McHale argues, authors outline unactualised possibilities, thus foregrounding the hypothesis that other possibilities (within the actual world) could have occurred. The boundaries between what is, what was and what could have been can no longer be seen as rigid.

When the distinction between fictionality, actuality and possibility is blurred the relation between author and character is laid bare. It is not, therefore, a simple process of asking where one world begins and where the other ends (which is central and which marginal), but is a more complex argument about how the possible and actual worlds relate and interact via fiction’s intervention. The distance between the possible world and actual world is diminished.

3.3 Entangling diegetic levels, trompe-l’oeil effects and world boundaries

One possible reading of Alice is: girl falls down a rabbit hole into another world that is similar yet different from her textual actual world (and similar yet different from the reader’s world of experience). Another possible reading is not so straight forward: girl may or may not drop into another world that is similar yet different from her textual actual world; the textual actual world may or may not be an imitation of the actual world; (if girl doesn’t drop into another world) girl may be dreaming; girl’s sister may be dreaming about girl in (an)other world; girl’s sister may be dreaming about girl dreaming about (an)other world.

In these readings, no matter how complicated a reading may seem, we have distinct diegetic levels (called ‘recursive structures’). Readers keep track of each level because they are clearly separate from each other; at all points during Alice one ontology is ‘more central than other ontologies’. Readers are left with

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89 Eco, cited McHale 215.
90 McHale 121.
91 (1) Diegetic: narrative or plot.
(2) Trompe-l’oeil effects: formally a visual illusion in art, especially as used to trick the eye into perceiving a painted detail as a three-dimensional object. In the context of literature a strategy designed to make readers believe in the illusion being presented as ‘real’.
(3) World boundaries: these are repeated shifts into higher or lower narrative levels which (may or may not) eventually lead back to the original level. Also known as ‘Strange loops’ and ‘Irreal worlds’, these allow nested paradoxes (alternate realities) to exist together, including time loops, or time moving backwards; private and shared hallucinations, hallucinations within hallucinations [or the dream within a dream which occurs at the end of Alice]; and alternate, dual and fake realities. George Melrod, ‘Dreaming of Electric Sheep’, Transit Lounge 11 (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1997) 9–16.
92 Recursive structures are nesting worlds within worlds at any particular level of embedding. They create a hierarchy of levels.
93 Douglas Hofstadter, cited McHale 115.
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a sense that Alice started in one place, moved to another and then came back. The text demystifies what is going on by revealing the primary ontology.

There are texts, however, that go out of their way to suppress the differences between the distinct narrative levels and ontologies. They deliberately mislead the reader as to which is the primary ontology and which is/are the embedded ones. Their sole point is to question the idea of ‘context’. Phillip K Dick’s *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* is such a text.\(^94\)

When Palmer Eldritch returned from a distant galaxy he claimed to have brought a gift…Chew-Z was a drug capable of transporting people into an illusionary world…without losing a second of Earth time.

But in return, Palmer Eldritch exacted a terrible price. He would enter, control and be a god in everyone’s private universe — from which there was no escape, not even death…\(^95\)

*Three Stigmata* is set in the future and plays with world boundaries and includes repeated shifts into higher narrative levels: private and shared hallucinations, hallucinations within hallucinations, and alternate, dual and fake realities.

*Three Stigmata’s* narrative is so unreliable and the idea of ‘context’ is so undermined that by the end the reader has no clear picture of what is real; is not sure in which ontology the novel begins and in which it ends; and, furthermore, the reader can not even begin to argue that the world the novel started in was a solid reality because there is nothing in the text to use as a foundation or a marker to determine how many recursive structures there are, or if there even is a hierarchy of levels. Within the context of the novel we’re not sure which experience is really real (for the characters) and which is an hallucination.

### 3.4 Subverting the hierarchy of accessibility relations

In the beginning of *Alice* the White Rabbit invades the encyclopaedia of England, and then Alice invades the encyclopaedia of Wonderland. There has been a violation of ontological boundaries and we can see that the White Rabbit (and Alice) migrate from one narrative world to another.

\(^94\) Henceforth to be referred to as *Three Stigmata*.  
\(^95\) Dick, Back Cover.
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Magical realism does away with the need for characters to invade different encyclopaedias and migrate between worlds because the hybrid worlds of magic realism are situated at the same time very close and very far from experiential reality. They are distinguishable from the actual world, but not. Doležel explains these hybrid worlds thus:

The hybrid world is a coexistence, in one unified fictional space, of the physically possible and the physically impossible fictional entities (persons, events). Physically impossible events can not be interpreted as miraculous interventions from [another possible world] domain, since no such domain exists…The alethic conditions require us to abandon the natural/supernatural opposition.96

Magical realist worlds simultaneously adhere to both Eco’s and McHale’s world-building rules. Magical realist worlds are rational; they are set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of characters and societies; they confront issues of culture, spirituality, ritual and lore; they discuss technological, philosophical, political and cultural change; they were born out of a need to voice things officials didn’t want to hear; and they suggest other ways of being.97

In Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* Azaro is a spirit child, caught between the spirit world and the world of the living; destined to die soon after birth so he can travel back to the spirit world, he decides to live. Azaro sees things others can not. He doesn’t question these things, and nor does anybody else question the strange, magical or bizarre things that happen (to him or when he’s around):

It was a perfectly straightforward path from Madam Koto’s bar to our house but…all the paths had fractured. I followed one path…and arrived in a place I had never seen in my life before…

I tried to get out…I took the path back into the forest but it led me deeper into that land…Then I noticed nothing in that strange land cast a shadow. When I began walking again I didn’t hear my own footsteps…In a way everything became familiar to me…

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96 Doležel 187.
Further narrative strategies used by authors to create possible worlds

I took a path and to my shock I saw myself approaching…

In the above example the paths serve a similar role to the doors in the hallway in Alice and the numerous cities in Invisible Cities. The supposed ‘one’ path Azaro could take, or could have taken (the one choice that presents itself to him) is actually many possibilities and is constructed of many choices that he could be taking, could have taken, or is still to take.

The possible world in The Famished Road exists somewhere in the textual actual world of Nigeria (like Wonderland is under England — but can’t be; and Oz is somewhere in Kansas — but can’t be), but unlike Alice and The Wizard of Oz this possible-world place is part of the textual actual world ontology from the beginning. (Both Alice and Dorothy question where they are when they first arrive, but Azaro doesn’t question the non-actual world in The Famished Road.) Any explanation of the non-actual would eradicate the impossible’s position of equality because it would then be subordinate to a separate textual actual world and would fill the role of a possible world, when in fact the point of magical realism is that the impossible is part of the textual actual world from the beginning. It is the paradox of the rational and irrational existing together within the text without ontological conflict that gives magical realism its power.

3.5 Creating ‘counterfactual history’ and fictional universes

The history in Alice is not a counterfactual one. As Roger W. Holmes states in his essay ‘The Philosopher’s Alice in Wonderland’, ‘Most often Carroll uses the absurd hilarity of Wonderland to bring difficult technical concepts into sharp focus.’ As parody, many of the institutions of Wonderland (monarchy, law courts, schools) overlap with the actual world, but in Wonderland the institutions behave absurdly. Alice scrutinises these institutions.

Similar to parodies, counterfactual texts also call into question history and scrutinise social institutions, but they do this, as McHale says, by speculating on states of affairs that place possibility and actuality in direct conflict:

98 Okri 65.
99 For example, in such worlds characters may ask, ‘What would have happened if Germany hadn’t won WWII?’
100 Phillips 160.
101 I believe the text of Alice includes the construct of a separate ontological possible world, which makes it a far more complex construct than simple parody, but I do acknowledge there are elements of parody in Alice.
Further narrative strategies used by authors to create possible worlds

This type of speculation...inevitably, invites the reader to compare the actual world state of affairs with the possible world state of affairs projected in the fictional world; implicitly it places the actual world [history] and the possible world in confrontation.\footnote{McHale 96.}

This speculation overtly questions how history is created, and in doing so questions ‘history’ as the version of events. It questions how we got here and how we understand our present. \textit{The Matrix} is a good example of such a text.\footnote{I understand there are three Matrix films, but for my purposes I only refer to the original film.}

In \textit{The Matrix} machines have (re?)written a history for the human race, in which 1999 is a virtual reality where millions of people are held unconscious and unknowing, connected to one large program. There are, however, some people who know that 1999 is fake because they’ve been disconnected. These people contact Neo, our hero, and separate him from the Matrix too. Once the characters are physically disconnected they continue to be psychologically, intellectually and emotionally connected. Their entire frame of reference (although that frame has been proven to be fake) is still the Matrix’s 1999 history. For example, when Morpheus explains the Matrix to Neo he uses their shared Matrix encyclopaedia, even though he knows it’s fake, and refers to Alice:\footnote{Neo, like Alice, falls from the world which he knows and belongs in and in which he feels comfortable and safe, into a strange, nonsensical world; however, to extend the Alice metaphor, Neo falls up the rabbit-hole; his ‘Wonderland’ is the film’s textual actual world because he’s been living in Wonderland without knowing.}

\begin{quote}
I imagine right now you’re feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit-hole?
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.\footnote{\textit{Hollywood Theatre}, 2 March 2007 <www.geocities.com/hollywood/theater/9175>.}
\end{quote}

In terms of history, whose history are they using? \textit{The Matrix} asks, where does ‘real’ history begin and end? For example, in the Matrix’s 1999 we don’t know whether \textit{Alice in Wonderland} was written in the ‘real’ year 1865. That is, this year occurred before the Matrix was constructed and so claims an autonomous birth in a non-fictional history (which gives it an authenticity the Matrix’s counterfactual history can’t claim). Or is that year a fabrication too, made up by the machines as part of the fictionalised possible-world history of the machine-invented 1999? — in which case the novel is a fabrication.
If history is the ‘real’ record of all human action and suffering, can we really be sure that the dominant historical record (in the case of The Matrix, written by the Machines) reliably captures the experience of the people who suffered and enacted history?
Further narrative strategies used by authors to create possible worlds

3.6 Creating multi-stranded or parallel plots

Jean Ricardo called this ‘variable reality’: that is, a supposedly ‘real’ representation is revealed to have been merely virtual (an illusion, secondary representation or dream) — or vice versa. Alice alludes to multi-stranded or parallel plots in the dream-within-a-dream motif and in relation to the many-doored hallway, but comes back to the primary diegesis at the end. The Matrix also uses clear diegetic levels, whereas Three Stigmata completely befuddles by suppressing differences between distinct narrative levels. An example of variable reality is the 1998 film eXistenZ, which begins with a focus group getting ready to play a prototype virtual reality game with the game’s designer, Allegra Geller. The consoles are part biological, part mechanical, so they could be said to be ‘unreal’, but the film establishes its textual actual world a little way in our future, so readers aren’t driven to question the validity of this ‘reality’.

Before the focus group can begin playing, an attempt is made on Allegra’s life, so she and Ted Pikul, a company representative, flee. Her console is injured, so she must connect with it to check its diagnostics. People connect to the consoles through a port at the base of their spine. As Allegra and Ted’s journey unfolds they have to play more and more games to fulfil the challenges they face. At some points they disengage from the game(s) to continue fleeing their pursuers.

Its narrative spirals (up and down) through the diegetic levels numerous times. In this way the diegetic levels (game-within-a-game-within-a-game) get confused; the representation of ‘reality’ becomes too unstable for the reader to respond to ‘appropriately’ (each diegetic level looks like each other level); and readers are encouraged into mistaking nested representations for the ‘primary’ diegesis (‘reality’). Different assumptions lead to different conclusions about the ending (and beginning). For example:

Scenario 1: If we assume that the initial diegetic level is ‘reality’ then at the end, the film uses the device of a missing end frame. We have simply dropped down to an embedded narrative level without returning to the primary diegesis.

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106 Multi-stranded or parallel plots play simultaneously in separate ontological domains, including ‘reality’ and computer-generated ‘virtual worlds’. See Ryan.
108 There is a semi-erotic tone to these ports. They are very sensitive and connecting to the console involves penetrating the port/hole with a long phallic extension of the console. According to McHale, The use of erotic, luridly melodramatic or horrifically violent materials is an often-used strategy with these types of texts (e.g. Les Corps conducteurs, 1971; Tryptique; Double or Nothing; Mantissa, 1982; and throughout William S. Burroughs’ fiction). The function of such materials in recursive structures is to intensify ontological instability, titillating or horrifying readers so they will resist having to ‘surrender’ the reality of these materials when they are, in the case of recursive structures, dropped down one narrative level. McHale 116.
109 McHale 117.
Further narrative strategies used by authors to create possible worlds

Scenario 2: If we assume that the diegetic level where the film ends is reality, then, retrospectively, we entered the film somewhere in the middle of the diegetic hierarchy.

Scenarios 3… onwards: We can then go on to make four or five assumptions about which diegetic level we entered the film at, so for each possible beginning (reality, or level 1, or level 2, or level 3, or level 4) there is a different possible end point. No matter how hard readers look for the primary diegesis none can be found because each different beginning point reveals a different end point and vice versa. The film is a multi-level structure that spirals in on itself, so it is impossible to figure out which narrative level (ontology) is hierarchically superior and which is subordinate.\textsuperscript{110}

The power of this strategy comes from its hesitation to commit to one narrative hierarchy. This challenges the ‘ontological landscape’ of a culture. Such an analysis is useful, according to Thomas Pavel, in understanding the actual world as a construct of many realities (‘paramount’, ‘peripheral’, ‘marginal’) because actual world culture ‘involves different domains’ which contains competing meanings.\textsuperscript{111} These domains or meanings (or possible worlds) may occupy a single plane; may occupy double spaces simultaneously (e.g. sacred and profane levels of reality); or may be plural planes, organised into a central ontology and several peripheral (competing) ontologies (e.g. work, leisure, faith).\textsuperscript{112} By foregrounding seemingly marginal ideas, thoughts, non-actual possibilities, norms and ontologies authors re-order these domains and realities. They may place them in conflict with one another or foreground one more than another. By doing this authors displace and rupture the automatic associations of actual world experience, reconfigure mental landscapes and encourage speculation.

\textsuperscript{110} McHale 120.
\textsuperscript{111} Pavel, cited McHale 36.
\textsuperscript{112} McHale 36–38.
CHAPTER 4

Key world-building rules and narrative strategies applicable to *Dreamriders*

Dreamrider n. a person unable to dream, so to experience dreams he/she must physically enter the Dreaming and attack or hitch-hike onto others’ dreams. To dreamriders, dreams are indistinguishable from Waking Reality.

– DERIVATIVES –dreamriding v. the act of riding another’s dream.

– The Anglo-American Cyclopedia (New York, 1917)\(^{113}\)

*Dreamriders* delves into the dark places, the happy places, the beautiful places and the funny places that dreams inhabit and that inhabit dreams. It imagines what would happen if dreams became real, if they leapt out from our sleep and danced and sang and cried with us. It is a novel of ideas; it goes to great lengths to articulate those ideas; it holds a mirror up to our dreams, our desires, our passions, our fears, our myths, our realities; and it searches for meanings in the places where there often seems to be no meaning at all. As Ben Okri states in his essay ‘The Human Race is Not Yet Free’: ‘We live inside the dreams of others. We might be imprisoned in them.’\(^{114}\) *Dreamriders* sets out to test those claims.

*Dreamriders* explores marginalisation, identity, the search for place and meaning and displacement. In the beginning the Waking and Dreaming are separate, although connected, states of affairs. When the Waking and the Dreaming leak together, a New Reality (possible world) with both Waking and Dreaming elements is created where norms and assumptions previously logically ‘true’ or ‘false’ are no longer such. No one from the Awake can sleep and the Awake become irrational, paranoid, nervous and neurotic. There is tension between the Awake themselves, and there is fear and mistrust between the Awake and the Dreamers. The two main characters — Lisa and Turtle (both dreamriders) — are separated when the New Reality is created, and must attempt to find one another and to put things ‘back to normal’. Through their journeys they realise that when the Waking and Dreaming are separate states of affairs dreamriders are marginal, but in the New Reality dreamriders have a role to play because what made them marginal before actually makes them the best equipped to deal with the New Reality. It’s more logical for them to exist in the New Reality rather than trying to straddle an existence where the Waking and Dreaming are separate.


4.1 My creative practice for *Dreamriders*

This novel has gone through three drafts so far. In the first draft I made three types of mistakes:

1. I made all the common mistakes every first-time writer makes: poor dialogue, explaining everything too much, not trusting the reader, too much repetition. (These were the first things rectified in the second draft.)

2. The difference between my textual actual world and my possible world was weak. They were both too fantastic.

3. I believed I could write ‘anything’ because most of the novel takes place in the New Reality, which is all about dreams (and anything can happen in dreams, right?). That first draft read like I’d written the first thing that came to mind. Which is exactly what I did. It was terrible.

Upon starting the second draft I realised that my initial idea of writing about dreams was still a solid premise, so I began searching for ways to ensure the fantastic elements of *Dreamriders* would still be able to connect with readers without losing the thing that interested me most: the idea that anything could happen.

I was still thinking of worlds as rational constructs, and my problem was I didn’t want to be rational, but when I tried not to be (when I wrote whatever I wanted) it didn’t work. The question became the following:

How could I write a novel that explored the ideas I wanted to investigate, be engaging, seem ‘real’ to the reader, but be completely unreal at the same time?

It was only by shifting to an ontological exploration of my text that I found my answers. I started asking the following questions:

- What type of world am I trying to create?
- What is to be done in it?
- What is a world?

I had begun to analyse the construction of my fiction in terms of modal realist world-building rules. (Of course the terms ‘anti-realist’, ‘moderate realist’, ‘modal realist’ and ‘world-building rules’ are being applied to my creative practice in hindsight. I did not consciously define these at the time.)

The New Reality in *Dreamriders* confronts the ‘given’ of the actual world with something not given, it violates the law of the excluded middle and it is an organised system. The questions I had to answer were:

- How could I construct this system?
• Did my world-building rules have to be overt (obvious to the reader) or obvious only to me?

• What could I use as the world-building rules?

I knew that while dreams may not have ‘plots’, they do contain an inner-logic. I needed to find a way to convey this without compromising the independence of the world I was building. I turned to Alice.

One of the main lessons I learnt from Alice is that the world-building rules of Wonderland are nonsensical if analysed in terms of the actual world we live in, but make perfect sense if analysed in terms of Wonderland being a closed state of affairs within which the rules ‘Few things are really impossible’ and ‘Expect nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen’ hold true. This lets the impossible take place. This is all well and good, but I still hadn’t answered the question of how I was going to ‘realistically’ let the impossible take place in Dreamriders. I needed something that could encompass my themes of marginalisation, identity, the search for place and meaning, and displacement, as well as encompassing aspects of memory, history and belonging.

I needed rules that could act as a frame, so I could create a closed possible world that held true in and of itself and was consistent. It’s this consistency that was lacking in my first draft. There are two interdependent elements to be considered here: world-building rules and narrative strategies for creating possible worlds.

4.2 World-building rules

The primary world-building rules that form the foundation for my novel in my second and third drafts are derived from sleep disorders. These are overt at times and covert at others. While writing my first two drafts I avoided all other texts (including fiction) that looked at, related to or addressed dreaming in some way (this often included texts about sleep as well). As I became more confident in what I was doing, where I was going and the form I wanted my novel to take I began to seek out these texts to give me ideas about the world-building rules I could use and the ways I could employ them. I began to seek them out because I now knew how I could incorporate those ideas into my own work without having to worry about them ‘corrupting’ or overly influencing my novel in some way. I also have two secondary sets of rules that relate to neurological function and dysfunction (predominantly migraines) and mental illness. The secondary sets are very much covert and are adjuncts to the sleep disorders sets of rules.
I use all of these world-building rules in a purely creative way. I did not investigate them with any medical, philosophical or academic rigor; I’m not writing a medical text; I’m not an expert in these issues and I’m not claiming to be. My interest is in how I can use them in my creative practice.

4.2.1 Sleep disorders

Using sleep disorders as my primary set of world-building rules addressed both my major issues. Firstly, they reinforced the inner-logic of the possible world I was creating so the impossible could happen in a ‘realistic’ way (sleep disorders are at once very close and very far from experienced ‘everyday’ reality; we’ve all heard of them, we all know someone who’s had insomnia or something similar). Secondly, they could be as overt or covert as I wanted them to be (I could have a character obviously suffering from a specific sleep disorder, or I could have characters react to situations in ways based on the reaction someone suffering from such a disorder may have). Finally, the very nature of sleep disorders raises questions of marginalisation, displacement, place, meaning and belonging (people unable to function in day-to-day society, e.g. sufferers of cataplexy); identity (severe sleep disorders can impinge on people’s ability to engage socially, may make people anxious and/or angry, can invoke panic attacks and can inflict chronic pain); and memory (the impacts of many sleep disorders on brain function can affect memory creation, storage and recall).

4.2.2 Neurological function and dysfunction (including migraines and epilepsy)\(^\text{115}\)

Far from being a separate issue from sleep disorders, neurological function/dysfunction is very much connected. In the process of researching sleep disorders I stepped over into this area of medical science because so much knowledge from the areas is shared. Using neurological function/dysfunction as a secondary set of world-building rules addressed issues of perception, hallucination and memory. My characters don’t necessarily hallucinate, nor do they have neurological dysfunctions, but they do see things in the New Reality that are weird. By basing the hallucinatory-like events in my novel on skewed vision as a symptom of migraine aura, Oliver Sacks suggests ‘one of the most famous descriptions of such perceptual changes have, of course, been provided by Lewis Carroll, who was himself subject to dramatic classical migraines of this type’. See Oliver Sacks, *Migraine* (London: Picador, 1993) 723–74.

\(^{115}\) I personally suffer from migraines, and both migraines and epilepsy are connected through medication, treatment and brain function. Medical scientists believe that both pathologies arise from the same part of the brain. Further, regarding zooming vision as a symptom of migraine aura, Oliver Sacks suggests ‘one of the most famous descriptions of such perceptual changes have, of course, been provided by Lewis Carroll, who was himself subject to dramatic classical migraines of this type’. See Oliver Sacks, *Migraine* (London: Picador, 1993) 723–74.
perceptions and archetypal hallucinations I am basing the ‘fantastic’ in my novel on something real that readers can anchor to.

4.2.3 Mental illness

My research here includes schizophrenia, panic attacks, paranoia and depression. Depression is closely linked with a number of sleep disorders in terms of the effects it has on the mind and body (e.g. there is a large amount of research discussing whether or not depression causes insomnia or if insomnia causes depression). Depression is also connected to sleep disorders by treatment. A lot of medication is the same for both pathologies. Benzodiazepine (sedative medications) and antidepressants are often used to treat depression, paranoia, and in some cases panic attacks. Using these mental illnesses as a secondary covert set of world-building rules addressed issues of perception, hallucination, paranoia and seemingly ‘irrational’ responses my characters have to particular situations.

With my world-building rules safely tucked away in my novel-writing toolkit I now had to apply them. This is where the narrative strategies for creative possible worlds became important in writing Dreamriders. This occurs through a combination of interpolation, misattribution, as in Alice, as well as a third step: superimposition.

4.3 Narrative strategies taken from Alice

4.3.1 Blurring the distinction between actuality and possibility

Misattribution occurs in Alice when the White Rabbit ruptures the textual actual world assumptions. So too, misattribution is my first step in building the possible world of the New Reality. The textual actual world in Dreamriders is interrupted or disrupted when Turtle (a dreamrider), who shouldn’t be able to sleep or dream, is suffering from what looks like the sleep disorder cataplexy and each time a cataplectic episode occurs he falls into a recurring dream. If we take Turtle’s recurring dream as an alien invader from a possible world,
then this dream plays a similar narrative role to the White Rabbit in *Alice*, that of a disruptive influence from another ontological possible-world domain, but plays a distinctively different philosophical role.\(^\text{116}\)

The tension in *Dreamriders* is further heightened by the fact that Turtle seems to be ‘living’ this recurring dream. He ‘falls asleep’ in one place and ‘wakes up’ in another (normally one of many alleys somewhere in the city) after having had an interaction with people or events in the dream that affect him in his waking life.

I have challenged the textual actual world assumptions of the characters (and the actual world assumptions of the reader) by confronting the ‘given’ with something *not* given, thus extending an invitation to the reader to believe (in the possibility that something else is out there).

### 4.3.2 Blocking the principle of minimal departure

The principle of minimal departure states that readers construct fictional worlds by filling gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own reality. I block this reflex by creating a possible world (the New Reality) full of inconsistent geographies and impossible objects.

Inconsistent geographies: There is no sense of up or down; even the ground feels like it’s not the ground (Turtle calls it the ground that isn’t ground). As my characters traverse this landscape it makes and re-makes itself in front of them, because of them and in spite of them — they can affect it and it affects them.

Impossible objects: Carroll called the dream state ‘that eerie state where one is aware of fairies’.\(^\text{117}\) Dreams come alive in *Dreamriders* and fly and make noises and can be touched. They communicate through touch. Their blood is blue. They can die. They fall to the ground that isn’t ground and pile up. They create the contours of the New Reality. They decompose and rot. Many survive their awakening (their fall), but they are hunted down. Another character, Apnoea, wakes. She is an old woman who has never breathed before because she lives in the dreaming and apnoea means ‘without breath’. What is it like to breathe for the first time? As babies we do it, but don’t remember.

\(^{116}\) While the White Rabbit, and Turtle’s cataplectic episodes do play similar roles in each individual text, it must be remembered that the texts are inherently different in their construction. Therefore, initially *Alice* aligns exactly with the reader’s understanding of the actual world (i.e. rabbits can’t talk), whereas *Dreamriders* begins at a different point, in a reality further away from the actual world. They play similar narrative roles, but are philosophically different.

World-building rules and narrative strategies applicable to *Dreamriders*

4.4 Narrative strategies taken from other texts

4.4.1 Subversion of the hierarchy of accessibility relations

*Dreamriders* takes a little bit from *Alice* and a little bit from magical realism. Like *Alice* the textual actual world and the possible world are separate in the beginning and the possible-world domain invades the textual actual world domain. Then, like magical realism, *Dreamriders* does away with the need for characters to invade different ontologies and migrate between universes because a New Reality is created when the Waking and Dreaming leak together. The strategy I use here is superimposition. McHale explains this as a space where:

> Two familiar spaces are placed on top of one another, as in a photographic double exposure, creating through their tense and paradoxical coexistence a third space identifiable with neither of the original two.\(^\text{118}\)

The New Reality in *Dreamriders* is a hybrid world whose form is very close to and very far from the actual world. Rather than there being two separate ontologies competing for a central position the hybrid world enables contradictory worlds to exist together in the one fictional reality.\(^\text{119}\) I have attempted to construct and deconstruct space at the same time by allowing the New Reality to include elements of both the Dreaming and the Waking within a third ontology. Initially Turtle understands this New Reality to be the Dreaming and attempts to interact with it in those terms, but he soon learns that it is not the Dreaming. He has come armed with a particular set of ‘knowns’, but has to change that knowledge in order to exist and survive in the New Reality. He has to unlearn his Waking encyclopaedia, unlearn his Dreaming encyclopaedia and then learn the encyclopaedia of the hybrid world where the Waking and Dreaming have become one.\(^\text{120}\)

4.4.2 Entangling of diegetic levels, trompe-l’oeil effects and world boundaries

Like the other texts cited above that suppress or confound the differences between narrative levels (*Three Stigmata* and *eXistenZ*), *Dreamriders* also traverses narrative levels and world boundaries in order to suppress

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\(^{118}\) McHale 46.  
\(^{119}\) This also ties in with Freud’s concept of ‘condensation’, which is an important part of his theory of dreaming. ‘Condensation occurs when two or more unconscious thoughts merge together into a single image or event... Freud talked about the elements of a dream being over-determined as a result of condensation. That is, a single symbol in a dream may convey several meanings, with each meaning having had a role in its determination. Michael Carskadon, *Encyclopaedia of Sleep and Dreaming* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1993) 133–4.  
\(^{120}\) Regarding the idea of learning, unlearning and re-learning encyclopaedias see Doležel 178–9.
different diegetic levels. The narrative drive of *Dreamriders* comes from Lisa and Turtle navigating the New Reality as they search for one another, and from their attempts to ‘put things back to normal’. Their journeys make them realise that when the Waking and Dreaming are separate they don’t belong in either the Waking or in Dreaming, but in the New Reality dreamriders have a sense of place and identity because they no longer straddle Waking and Dreaming states of being.

In this sense, the idea that Turtle and Lisa (1) start in one place (the Waking), (2) are forced by circumstances — against their will — to move to another (the New Reality) and (3) then come back (to the Waking) is further complicated by their gaining a sense of place and identity in this New Reality. At the end of their journeys they are confronted with the choice between ‘putting things back to normal’ (i.e. the way they were), or leaving them the way they are now because for them as dreamriders the New Reality is a more ‘normal’ state of affairs than when the Waking and Dreaming are separate. (In the end they decide to leave the New Reality as it is and not go back to the way things were.) The characters in *Dreamriders* don’t come back, so it’s not like *Alice* in that way. The diegetic levels in Dreamriders are clear: (1) Turtle and Lisa start somewhere, and (2) they are forced by circumstances to move somewhere else, but (3) stay in the ‘somewhere else’. I’m not suppressing the differences between the distinct narrative levels and ontologies like *Three Stigmata*; I’m not employing ‘variable reality’, where a supposedly ‘real’ representation is revealed to be virtual, like *eXistenZ*; nor am I hesitant to commit to one narrative hierarchy. I’m deliberately leaving my characters in the New Reality. I draw on the possible, actual, impossible and fictional narrative strategies in order to create a new possible world.
Conclusions

Initially I was to ‘examine how writers create “possible worlds” in order to explore contemporary issues’ via a case study of *Alice.*\(^{121}\) This was born from the idea that modality is a simple construct where one ontology is central and all others marginal. The central world is defined as the actual world — in the case of fiction this central world is the textual actual world — and the marginal as possible worlds. If the marginal challenges the central and they change places, as exemplified in *Alice,* I thought that exchange was enough to allow authors to explore contemporary issues. While on one level this is the case, it’s actually more complicated than that.

When I came upon the idea — presented by theorists such as Doležel, Pavel, Lewis, and Berger and Luckmann — that the actual world is in fact a complex network of competing possible-world domains (encyclopaedias), rather than being an all-encompassing and consistent encyclopaedia, the focus of my research had to shift. (Pavel uses the term ‘ontological landscape’, Foucault, ‘heterotopia’ and Berger and Luckmann, ‘socially constructed reality’ to describe such networks.)\(^{122}\) The idea of worlds as temporary creations born from the intersection of competing possible-world domains in constant conflict is far more interesting to me (and more relevant to my creative practice for *Dreamriders*) than my initial notion.

Instead of England and Wonderland simply exchanging places in *Alice* I found a more sophisticated interaction. Both worlds remain in the text, competing for the central position, and simultaneously both allude to many possible-world domains (regardless of whether those possibilities are actualised or not).\(^{123}\) The text of *Alice* holds two mutually exclusive world views and multiple realities (possible worlds) that compete for the ontological centre of the text, and within those views/realities/possible worlds are embedded a number of possible-world domains, which are also competing for an ontological centre, evidenced in Wonderland by the metaphoric doors in the hallway and in England by the dream-within-a-

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\(^{121}\) Original primary question from my research proposal. Submitted to RMIT in 2005.

\(^{122}\)(1) Ontological landscape: see page 35 for an explanation of this term.

(2) Heterotopia: Foucault suggests that contradictory worlds, or worlds within worlds, are able to exist together in the same fictional reality. He explains such texts as Heterotopias, where ‘… [F]ragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension without law or geometry… in such a state things are “laid”, “placed”, “arranged” in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus beneath them all.’ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2006 — first published in 1966) xix.

(3) Socially constructed reality: ‘Regard[ing] reality as a kind of collective fiction, constructed and sustained by the processes of socialisation, institutionalisation, and everyday social interaction… These fictions are relatively permanent…and opaque, that is accepted as the reality, except under the probing of sociological reflection.’ Berger and Luckmann, cited McHale 37.

\(^{123}\) While Lewis Carroll chose to limit the narratives available to Alice and the reader, those unrealised possibilities still exist.

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dream (these are only two examples). Alice, therefore, holds a far more complex ontological landscape than I had initially thought.

Basically, my opening set of assumptions and research question didn’t address the important issues for my own creative practice and couldn’t sufficiently reflect my research findings, so I refined my primary research question from ‘How do writers create “possible worlds” in order to explore contemporary issues?’, to: ‘What are the world-building rules and narrative strategies available for creating possible worlds within fiction?’

How Lewis Carroll creates the possible world of Wonderland

At first Alice can be read as a simple model of the actual world. The textual actual world looks a lot like the actual world of England, so the assumptions, values and world-building rules are easily and quickly established early on, are overt and make the world very ‘real’. This is an important step in creating the possible world of Wonderland. In first setting up a strong textual actual world Carroll defines what Wonderland isn’t and even though we haven’t encountered Wonderland yet, the ‘realness’ of the textual actual world will distinguish the two. When the White Rabbit ruptures the textual actual world the distinction between actuality and possibility is blurred and the reader is jolted from any automatic associations she or he may have about the textual actual world.

Alice then moves from a simple model to a text that asks: ‘What world this is?’ Once Alice and the reader fall into Wonderland (in the fall Wonderland shifts from margin to centre), Carroll defines what Wonderland is by establishing the possible world world-building rules in the same way he establishes the textual actual world world-building rules. They are outlined early on, are overt and make the possible world very ‘real’. Wonderland’s world-building rules:

- Few things indeed are really impossible.
- We should expect nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen.

I think Walter de la Mare says it best. (I cited this earlier, but it’s worth repeating):

We scarcely notice, however consistent and admirable it may be, their [the ‘Alice’ books] ingenious design…It is on this that their translucent beads of fantasy are strung, and it is the more effective for being so consistent and artfully
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concealed…each of the characters, in all their rich diversity, are in keeping with one another [none acts out of place or personality in relation to other characters]…For though laws there certainly are in the realm of Nonsense…its subjects obey them unaware of any restrictions. Anything may happen there, except only what can’t happen there.124

The world-building rules in Alice:

- Create an organised system that affords Wonderland a definite ontological status with its own encyclopaedia and laws, separate from the textual actual world and the actual world.
- Block the principle of minimal departure through the creation of impossible objects and inconsistent geographies.
- Set the possible world up as a counter to the textual actual world (and the actual world).
- Indicate this possible world isn’t going to be rational in any way the reader expects.
- Open the way for Wonderland to be an ensemble of nonactualised states of affairs.

How other authors create possible worlds

I found six narrative strategies that other authors use in creating possible worlds that could be relevant to my creative practice (due to space limitations in this exegesis the following is not an exhaustive list).125

Challenging of the classical ontological model

The classical ontological model is a hierarchy: one world in the system assumes the role of centre and the other worlds are marginal. Authors, such as Italo Calvino in Invisible Cities, challenge this model by using branching plots, multi-path narratives and plural worlds to create equal-status worlds that subvert the hierarchy and challenge the idea of a central ontology. In such texts contradictory possible worlds exist in direct and overt confrontation with one another in the same space and time.

Questioning of the creator/creature relation

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124 de la Mare 60–61.
125 Italo Calvino, Kurt Vonnegut, Phillip K Dick, Ben Okri, David Cronenberg, and Andy and Larry Wachowski.
The creator/creature relation assumes that clear boundaries between fictionality, actuality and possibility (author, reader and character) exist. When an author actually meets a character, as in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Breakfast of Champions*, the boundaries between these modalities are blurred and weakened, thus weakening the ontological boundaries between what is, what was and what could have been. The distance between the possible and the actual is diminished.

*Entangling diegetic levels, trompe-l’oeil effects and world boundaries*

These texts — as in Phillip K Dick’s *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* — suppress the differences between distinct narrative levels, and deliberately mislead the reader as to which is the primary ontology and which is/are embedded; their sole point is to question ‘context’. There is no clear picture of which ontology is which; there is no marker indicating in which ontology these texts begin and in which they end; and there is no way for the reader to determine how many narrative levels/ontologies there are.

*Subverting the hierarchy of accessibility relations*

Hybrid worlds, such as Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, are a paradox, simultaneously situated very close to and very far from experiential reality. They are rational; set in a world with authentic descriptions of characters and societies; confront issues of culture, spirituality, ritual and lore; discuss technological, philosophical, political and cultural change; were born out of political need; and suggest other ways of being (including magical elements). The power of this narrative strategy comes from the worlds’ inherent paradox and the union of opposites.

*Creating counterfactual history and fictional universes*

Counterfactual texts like the film *The Matrix* call into question history, scrutinise social institutions and overtly question how history is created. They question how we got here, how we understand our present and they ask where does ‘real’ history begin and end?

*Creating multi-stranded or parallel plots*
This is when a supposedly ‘real’ representation is revealed to have been merely virtual — or vice versa. In David Cronenberg’s 1998 film eXistenZ the narrative spirals (up and down) through the diegetic levels, and the representation of reality becomes too unstable for the reader to respond to appropriately (each diegetic level looks like each other level). The power of this narrative strategy comes from its hesitation to commit to a hierarchy.

**Key world-building rules and narrative strategies applicable to my creative practice**

*(as seen through the looking-glass of Dreamriders)*

Just as there are many possible worlds, there are many ways to create and use them. My research indicates:

1. There are numerous world-building rules that can be used to create particular fictional possible worlds across the spectrum of possible worlds: from realist fiction (close to the actual world) to non-realist fiction (far away from the actual world).

2. Writers employ a number of narrative strategies to define the role a particular fictional possible world plays within the text.

**Key world-building rules**

From my research I’ve distilled the key world-building rules applicable to my own creative practice in *Dreamriders*.

- The primary world-building rules that relate to sleep disorders:
  - Create an organised system with a definite ontological status separate from the textual actual world and the actual world.
  - Reinforce the inner-logic of the possible world.
  - Indicate this possible world isn’t going to be rational in any way the reader expects.
  - Act overtly and covertly within the novel (depending on the role I have an individual sleep disorder play).
  - Raise questions of marginalisation, displacement, place, meaning, belonging, identity and memory.

- The secondary world-building rules that relate to neurological function/dysfunction:
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- Reinforce the inner-logic of the possible world.
- Act covertly within the novel.
- Address issues of perception, hallucinations and memory.

- The secondary world-building rules that relate to mental illness:
  - Further reinforce the inner-logic of the possible world.
  - Act covertly within the novel.
  - Address issues of panic, paranoia, depression and the seemingly irrational responses characters have to particular situations.

Key narrative strategies

I draw on narrative strategies from both Alice and other authors in order to define the role the particular fictional possible world plays within Dreamriders because my world-building rules play different roles across different ontological strata within the text. So the novel itself is a collective of world-building rules and narrative strategies, just as the New Reality in Dreamriders is an ontological landscape of competing possible-world domains that are mutually exclusive, but come together in that particular realm.

- Narrative strategies taken from Alice:
  - Blurring the distinction between actuality and possibility.
    This challenges the textual actual world assumptions of the characters (and the actual world assumptions of the reader) by confronting the given with something not given, thus extending an invitation to the reader to believe in the possibility that something else is out there.
  - Blocking the principle of minimal departure.
    The reader’s reflex to construct fictional worlds by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own reality is blocked in Dreamriders by the creation of a possible world (the New Reality) that is full of inconsistent geographies and impossible objects.

- Narrative strategies taken from other texts (The Famished Road and The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch):
Conclusions

• Subversion of the hierarchy of accessibility relations.

The tension here is created by the paradox. When two worlds (the Waking and Dreaming) are placed on top of one another a third space (or world) that is both familiar and disquieting is created. The form of this hybrid world is very close to and very far from the actual world.

• Entangling of diegetic levels, trompe-l’œil effects and world boundaries.

Dreamriders traverses world boundaries and diegetic levels and uses possible, actual and impossible modalities to create a new possible world with a particular narrative hierarchy.

Both my novel and exegesis respond to the idea of ‘A Wonderland of Possible Worlds’. Dreamriders re-presents the actual world, reconfigures mental landscapes, and highlights a constellation of possible and impossible situations while my exegesis, ultimately, outlines the strategies and techniques available to me when creating the fictional possible world in Dreamriders.

How fictional possible worlds enable authors to analyse and explore the actual world

Literature re-presents the world, reconfigures our mental landscape and allows us to talk about ‘truths’ asserted in texts (be they possible, impossible, actual, alternate, non-actual or counterfactual) without reducing the text to a mere representation of the world we live in. Further, if the actual world is in fact a complex network of competing possible-world domains (ontological landscape, heterotopia, socially constructed reality), rather than being a solid, all-encompassing and consistent encyclopaedia, then fictional possible worlds challenge the dominant ontology of a culture by highlighting a constellation of possible and impossible situations in a way that, at once, distinguishes between the actual and the possible and draws parallels between the two.

Relating the concept of ontological landscapes more broadly to fiction means that (1) any specific fictional possible world is just one of many possibilities; (2) within that fictional possible world there are competing possible-world domains; (3) any specific textual actual world is itself comprised of competing possible-world domains; (4) therefore, that textual actual world is just one of many possibilities. Such an analysis is useful, according to Thomas Pavel, because actual world culture contains different domains and competing
meanings (possible worlds) which may occupy a single plane, double spaces simultaneously or plural planes.

Possible worlds let us step outside the jigsaw of competing meanings inherent in our everyday life and allow us to view the actual world from another perspective, to view it anew and to interrogate the here and now in a different light. By describing and examining relationships between the possible and actual; by talking about ‘truths’; and by presenting alternative states of affairs, possible worlds replace the actual world encyclopaedia (if only temporarily) with a non-actual encyclopaedia that serves to highlight the internal complexity of our everyday world by letting us step out of the constructs that surround us, in order to reflect on our own worlds and lives.
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Appendices

Appendix A

1. Original Letter (email)

To whom it may concern,

My name is Craig Garrett and I’m currently completing a Masters in Creative Writing at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Melbourne Australia. My project includes a 45,000-word creative element and a 15,000-word exegetical (theoretical) element. For my exegesis I looked at Possible Worlds literary theory in relation to Alice in Wonderland (using Alice as a case study). The idea of taking a theory that’s only been used in literary circles for the past 30 years and applying that theory to a novel that is 150 years old - and to see that Alice stands up when critiqued in relation to that theory - is exciting.

I have used Gardner’s Annotated Alice and Robert S Phillips Aspects of Alice in my analysis, along with my core theorists of Brian McHale, Umberto Eco and Lubomír Doležel, but I still think I need more scholarly references that relate directly to Alice in Wonderland.

I was hoping that you’d be able to help me.

1. Could tell me the five most recent and influential scholarly works published on Alice in Wonderland in the past 10 years.
2. Do you know of any books, theses, articles or dissertations that refer to Alice in Wonderland and the literary theory of Possible Worlds.
3. Do you know of any scholarly work that deals with Alice in Wonderland as a world in and of itself. This can occur in two ways:
   a. Looking at the actual novel as a world of fiction in and of itself.
   b. Looking at Wonderland as a complete world, rather than as a dream or as a fantasy of Alice’s.

Thank you for you help and time with this.

Regards,

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