Some Uncertain Facts

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In my net I have caught
A little bird,
A very little bird,
And my heart is caught
In the net with the little bird

—Pregnancy song of the Efê People
For Norma, Sonya and Ava

time for a new journey...
SPRING
One

The seat belt is tight across my body. I can't seem to find a position where it doesn't dig into my skin. Every time we turn a corner I have to slacken it with one hand and plant the palm of the other on the seat next to me. The car's open windows blow hot air at me like hair dryers. I feel my clothes dampen and I pull the front of my white silk shirt forwards and then push it backwards to try to cool my skin. There's a Perspex panel separating me from the driver and I can just make out the back of his balding, sweaty head. The few remaining dark strands of hair stick to his head like a wet feather. It's already been a long drive and I'm not about to be late for this job interview.

'Look.' My voice cracks in the back of my throat. Damn dry air. I bang on the plastic. 'I'm late,' I yell, too loud and the driver's hands jump then bounce back on the steering wheel as if they're rubber. 'Any way you can shave...?'

The man's eyebrows rise up at me in the mirror then look at my clothes as he says, 'You know evrythin stains out here.'

I slide back against the seat and brush white cotton off my skirt. I have to grind my front teeth together to stop myself from getting out and driving the bloody car myself. 'Please, please just get me there quick.' I say this more to myself than to the man who's turning up the radio.

Outside an iron plant spans as far as I can see. The conveyer belts weave like highways and the reactor's body shades the car until the view of steel is replaced with iron ore. Miners have brought this arid corner of Western Australia back to life. In every direction there is expansion. I reach my arm out the car window and squint, and it's as if I have the power to simply sweep the sand away and see what's beneath.

Water's still a problem; water and isolation. A sign next to a mass of rusting machinery says, *don't spit, you might need it.* In this part of Australia any living thing represents a triumph of adaptation. It's an area fraught with fight; blasting away river mouths to create access to the world's sea lanes, building dams and pumping water into dry land for agriculture, constructing
vast networks of roads and railways and now us, in this car, travelling across this red, unsealed scar of dust and discomfort. The plant ends and the land opens up. Vacant streaks of road appear, meet and run toward nothing visible. In amongst this timeworn landscape I feel separated from my life in Melbourne by a continent's dead heart.

I jiggle my leg up and down and twirl my hair. I hate being late. Never mind being late, I'm probably going to miss the entire interview. The moment I've rehearsed in my head for the past three months. I have over fifteen years' experience. Can I say 'over fifteen' or is it more like 'nearly fifteen'? I can't use the word 'nearly', it sounds too weak, and anyway it doesn't really matter. Over fifteen years' experience, but surely they know all this? Why did I specialise? They're addictive, these historic patterns. But I can't say that. Makes me sound too romantic. Truth is I'm bloody good at it. Should I go into the new studies? No, I don't want to rock the boat too early. I know how these things work. Stick to what they're comfortable with. Lull them. After all there is a relaxed determination out here, what my husband calls the western way of life.

It's tombstone country out here. We pass a gorge of dead trees. Patches of ground are covered with the skeletal remains of small trees that grew thousands of years ago before being engulfed and choked to death by invading sand. But this can't be right. I haven't been to the dig site before but I know it's not anywhere near here. I look at my watch. The drive has taken us two hours already, but it's not until I see the briquetted iron plant again that I realise we've been driving around in circles. I bang on the Perspex. The driver turns to look at me and it's only then that I see something on the road, only for a moment, before the cab smashes into it and my face slams into the plastic barrier. There's a moment of stillness. I look out the window and all I can see is pale brown smoke stirred up by the tyres. I feel my face and pull my hand away to look for blood but it seems fine. The driver scrambles out of the car. My door is stuck so I have to slide over to the other side of the cab to get out.

The driver's crazy. We've stopped for no reason in the middle of the road. But then I see the mess. The body of a kangaroo, legs bent in awkward directions, head detached as if it's part of a fancy dress costume. Jesus. There is blood smeared along the road and splattered across the sand either side of us. Its colour is so similar to the red earth that it looks more like flecks of water than blood.

The driver turns to look at me. His face constricts. Then he looks down my body and up again. 'Holy shit. Are you ok? He goes to speak again but his eyes blink and his lips pucker as if he's tightening and loosening a fist for a fight.
‘Yeah, yeah.’ But I’m not. Now I’ll never make the interview. How am I going to explain what happened without sounding melodramatic? Plane delay. That’s simple enough. Predictable. Uncomplicated. I’ll have to reschedule.

‘No, no, what about…’ He points to my stomach and it takes me a moment. ‘C’mon. We’ll have to get you checked out.’

I realise he’s talking about the baby. The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind.
I always thought that if I left motherhood alone it would work itself out. Like a splinter in my finger. Don't get me wrong, it would niggle at me now and then, when a baby's head was shoved under my nose or people made ticking sounds at my birthday party. But for the most part I let it stay stuck somewhere beneath my skin while I focused on more important things. Any woman could be a mum. But I didn't want to be just any woman.

Even now, as I sit on a hospital bed eight months pregnant, I’m worried about the job interview. The hospital is busy and squeaky. Trolleys roll past and leather-soled white shoes shuffle across the floor. I watch the chaos from a gap in the curtain that creates my makeshift room. The doctors have prodded me and poked me; they have scanned me and bled me. And now, they have left me. For what seems like hours. I reach down to pull my phone out of my briefcase. I call the university and tell them my connecting flight’s been delayed and I won’t be able to make the interview. Surely being at the mercy of airlines is better than being a possible liability. They’re happy to reschedule till next week, but I convince them to see me tomorrow. At least the interview will now be at the University and not at a dig site in the middle of nowhere. I’ll check myself out if I have to; I don’t want to give them any more reasons to hire someone else. I call Gabe, but he’s in surgery.

We initially moved here for my husband, so he could head up part of a new hospital. It hadn’t exactly been my idea of the ideal next move, but Gabe is the type of man who needs a carrot on a stick. Career options are limited in the bottom end of the world, he would say, you have to go where the work is. The slip up always makes me smile so I don’t bother correcting him – arse end of the world. But then maybe he knows and just can’t bring himself to say the word arse. He’s that kind of man.

I feel the creature roll around inside me. I pick my phone back up and search for car accident effects on foetus, and read the lines separate placenta from uterus. A nurse peeks her
head in, ‘You can’t use that in here.’ I nod and put it down for a moment before picking it up again, *several hours of observation*. Internet research, the twenty-first century woman’s snuff. The same nurse walks in and puts her hand on my shoulder, ‘How about I get you a cup of tea to occupy those hands?’ She smiles but takes the phone off me and puts it on a table outside the curtain. It’s small town kindness. I feel myself growl.

*Several hours of observation?* And when the hell are they going to tell me if there’s anything wrong? I pull my body up higher in the bed that rustles with plastic sheets. The waffle blanket falls off my legs and as I catch it I notice a ladder in the knee of my stockings. God knows why I put them back on after the examination. A tiny rebellion against further inspection, maybe. My fingers pick at the ladder and I lift my knee until the nylon stretches and pulls and can’t slide anymore. But now I can’t sit here with ripped stockings so I try to take them off which is fine initially until I get to about my knees and can’t bend forward. I lean back and use my foot to take off one leg and then I dangle my right leg down the side of the bed so I can bend sideways and pull the rest off.

The only way I can get comfortable is to sit up with my legs crossed. I reach down and pull a pen out of my bag. Surely there can’t be a ban on pens. But I have no paper. I search around me and look out the gap but decide against asking the simpleton nurse. My hospital gown sits tight across my stomach and I use my hand to smooth any snowy peaks.

The pressure of the pen tickles my skin as I begin to draw on the cotton. I smile as I create the lines and spirals that bring me back home and slow my quickened heart. Blue ink creates the trails of crawling jellyfish, the holes bored by shipworms, the faint marks made by the fronds of waving seaweed. I trace ferns, club-mosses and horsetails, the transient footprints and burrows left by organisms – traces of things which once had life. Fossils have always made sense to me. The hard resistant material that’s strong enough to stick around, the soft parts that are eaten or decay.

My belly becomes a canvas for fossils, a Petri dish under an imaginary microscope. Dinosaur seekers make fun of my love for the minuscule, but the miniature is more real to me than any preserved giant. Large, clumsy bones have never excited me. There seems to be more fight in the impressions left by little lives.

In the seventeenth century fossils were thought of as tricks planted by God to test people’s faith. I would’ve probably been agnostic, even back then. I think of the career I’ve made in the space between belief and knowledge; the faith I have in what I find. Faith in a process that favours what’s tough and forgets what’s frail.

‘Anna, are you ok?’ Before I can say anything Gabe lifts my chart off the table and flips and scans. A doctor pokes his head in but before the short bald man can say anything
my husband takes charge. Usually Gabe likes rules. He is in essence a practical man. Except when rules get in his way. 'I want to see everything.' It's not his hospital and I'm not sure they even know he's a doctor. But yes, of course, they know who he is. They wouldn't let anyone else but Gabe behave this way. The two men walk away from me and I'm left with the blue pen in my hand.

We met at university. I snuck into a medical lecture given by a famous anaesthetist because I was intrigued by someone who makes a living out of numbing people. When I first laid eyes on Gabe he was mid-sentence explaining, \textit{it is the anaesthetist's responsibility to ensure the patient is starved}. Gabe was and still is all corners and angles. In the lecture I watched him stand straight but tilt his head forty-five degrees to the side, bend his knee forwards to emphasise words and instead of just pointing his index finger when making an argument, he raised his thumb to create a right angle in the air. The certainty in his stance made me travel as straight a line as I could towards him.

'C'mon, you're all clear. We can monitor things from home.' Gabe puts his hands either side of my face and squeezes my cheeks together as he kisses my lips. I get dressed and give the small-town nurse a thin smile as we walk out of the emergency ward. Gabe has already taken my other bags to the car. Taken care of it. Without a word.

I decide to take the hospital gown with me and Gabe puts my scans and printed results into a large white envelope. He takes my hand and we almost run down the hospital corridor and out into the open air, the gown and envelope flapping, our faith flying behind us.
In bed that night I can't sleep. Gabe's hand is cast over his face like he's shielding the sun from his eyes. I've always coveted his ability to just fall asleep. Like it's nothing. It's an ability to surrender that seems beyond me. I'm worried about tomorrow's interview, whether my delay will cost me the job and what I'm going to say about working after the baby comes. It's a story men never have to tell. Even though we moved here for Gabe, the interview tomorrow is for a job I've been wanting for twenty years – the chance to manage a dig that could change history.

I move Gabe's hand and my fingertips trace his inner ear, move down the lobe and up to the curled-over top that looks like a burning corner of paper, then down the side to his neck and over his beard. It surprised me at first, as if a doctor with facial hair was a little less clean, maybe even a little less trustworthy. Then I grew to prefer the rough to the smooth, the biology that separates boy from man. Gabe grins. He has a crooked smile, but only because he never has time to finish it. There is always something more important to do.

The first time we had sex he left on his woollen socks and jumper. We came in from the rain and I remember the smell, like the musty heaviness of our school jumpers when they got wet. I took comfort in this covering. There's already too much exposure in the world: everyone raging and weeping and rejoicing.

I knew from the beginning that Gabe wouldn't be subject to the ups and downs that jolted other people. It's as if at some stage in his life he decided to become an observer. Maybe at eight when his father died of a heart attack. He'd been forced to become the man of the house. And it hardened him. That's how I knew he would survive the test of time. Each year, on the anniversary of his father's death, Gabe cleans the grave. There are no flowers. Just a small brush and broom.

Gabe wraps his arm across me and I curl it round and through my arm as I would a cardigan. Bed, blankets, feet intertwined, I hum a satisfied mantra. I press my toes against
his thick legs as if I’m trying to perch. Lying on his chest is like swimming, my ears muffle so it sounds as if I’m underwater.

Having sex when pregnant is like having sex for the first time. I’m clumsy, awkward. Pleasure takes on new meaning and requires a different script. My body is unable to move in the same way, as quickly, as responsively. I roll onto my side so my back, rather than my growing belly, is facing Gabe’s naked body. He wets his finger and runs it down the centre of my spine, then leans forward and blows a cool breeze along the invisible trail. Gently, my hair is brushed away from the nape of my neck and Gabe rests his cheek against my back and breathes me in. And it’s exactly what I need, as if he knows that the parts of me I used to like being kissed and touched and rubbed are now too sensitive, too connected with the life growing inside me. Since I’ve been pregnant I’ve discovered subtlety. Thankfully, so has Gabe. When I met him I was dating someone else. But Gabe’s the type of man who instantly changes your feelings for someone else from present to past. And this is how he does it. With a mixture of aloofness and confidence, the power to make you feel all at once satisfied but lacking.

I roll him on his back and wrap my mouth around his cock. I feel his head tilt back and hear him sigh. He tastes different. He has ever since we conceived. I move up and down with my tongue but all I can hear is the ticking of his watch next to my ear. I move my head in time with it and it becomes louder and louder until it swallows me with its sound. He pulls me away, then guides me back down.

My legs get tangled in the sheets so I turn around to peel the cover off the mattress and drape it onto the ground. Gabe sits behind me and I cross my legs and rest my head back onto his shoulder. He cups my head between his two large hands and strokes my hair back into a ponytail before he kisses the inside of my ear. I feel his hardness in the small of my back and now I want him inside me. Sometimes I ache to be filled in a dark space I never knew about. I manoeuvre myself onto all fours and arch my back. But the baby kicks and jolts my body so hard I can’t stay up on my knees and I laugh and roll onto my back. I take Gabe’s hand and put his palm against my belly, fingers splayed, as if he’s a quarterback holding a football before throwing it into the air.

We lie back down alongside each other. Gabe brings my hand up to his chest and places it there like a medallion, like a necklace of belonging, and then he begins to quietly hum, the sound of home. I feel the baby billow. It’s a cold, still night. A transient moment through which a word or gesture might explode like a star, then disappear, unremembered.
In the geology department’s reception area, glass cabinets line the walls. Small stone artefacts sit in squares and I wonder if people know they’re fake. The receptionist sitting behind the oak desk wouldn’t have a clue. Her hair reminds me of Neapolitan ice cream and she’s examining her nails as she texts people with one hand and flips through a magazine with the other. I walk over to the desk and stand tall between the room’s light and her body. I cast a long shadow over her magazine, her phone, her hands, her face.

‘Is Professor Madden going to be much longer? I’ve been waiting for a while now.’ She fumbles the desk phone as it rings. ‘No, no shouldn’t be much longer.’ Then she turns to the phone. ‘Good morning, I mean good afternoon…’

I smile and sit down again. My reflection in one of the glass cases distracts me. Out of the corner of my eye I try to check my appearance without anyone noticing. It’s hard to make out my long brown hair in the dark glass but it looks neat enough. I run my fingers through the ends and brush a stray strand from my forehead. I have learned that the two greatest obstacles to feeling confident about the way you look are pregnancy and heat. At least in this air conditioning my thighs remain relatively sweat free and I can pull off a long-sleeved shirt. I wore high heels right up to about a month ago but now the swollen slabs at the end of my legs fight to be contained in anything other than a flat, boring sandal. I can’t cross my legs so I try and sit as lady-like as possible, even though I would like to spread my legs apart to make way for my belly.

I’m still looking at myself out of the corner of my eye as Professor Madden waves me into his office, sits on the edge of the desk in front of me and flips through what must be my resume. He towers over me in a disconcerting kind of way and all I want him to do is go behind his desk, sit down, lean back, and insert some space between us.

Universities contain egos and evangelists – people are either wrapping their arms around themselves and their ‘patch’ and their projects just in case anyone should eye off their turf;
or they’re reaching their arms out trying to embrace everyone and everything within what they believe is the most important field of research. I’m not sure what I am. Maybe both. Problem is that science is still a boy’s club – always has been. And the more ego the higher they rise; like hot air.

Professor Madden has a peppered face, as if no matter how many times he shaves he can’t quite get down to the base of the hair and so there is always a little left, stuck there, like tree stumps. He unbuttons his cuffs as if to roll up his sleeves, but he doesn’t, they just flap there at the end of his arm as he gestures and talks. There is a photograph of a woman on his desk, right next to a ball of rubber bands. I imagine him winding and winding them around each other until they form a sphere. Behind his head, rows of framed degrees create bricks of believability.

I have collected my own bricks but hope to, over time, throw them through the university’s glass ceilings and glass windows and glass walls, rather than hang them, lifeless on a wall.

Then something wells inside me and I feel my skin begin to sweat. I purse my lips and try to breathe out and away the nausea but it remains. My body is upright and tense, ready to pounce at any moment. I try to relax my eyes that I know are squinting. I can’t excuse myself. Haven’t I excused myself enough already? Bloody hell. I wiggle my toes in an attempt to distract my body.

‘You’re a few weeks away still?’ Why can’t he ask me about my qualifications first, my experience? I nod. I see him doing the math. ‘If you were successful, when do you intend to start work?’

‘Um, theoretically right away. There’s no reason I can’t do desk research. But to the actual university and any dig sites three months.’ It’s a quick fire response. And I’m going to vomit. Any second my body is going to take over and I’m going to throw up on the floor of one of the most eminent professors in the world. Jesus Anna, wouldn’t it be better just to go to the bathroom, compose yourself and come back. But that’s just it; I know it won’t go away, no matter how long I bend over the toilet sink.

‘You could research. Or not. You could not research.’ I’m not sure if he is disagreeing or agreeing with what I just said. ‘So that would make it March?’ He nods before I get a chance to answer. ‘Just so you know we don’t abide part time. I’m sure you understand these roles require more. We’ve had people in the,’ he coughs, ‘same position as you who change their priorities. We believe you’re either all in or all out. There’s a long line of scientists champing at the bit to get in here. We need our most dedicated scientists working flat chat on our biggest questions.’
All I can manage is a nod. I’m worried if I open my mouth I will give my body permission to betray me.

‘You have a reputation for romanticism, Dr Mason, how do you think that applies to your work here?’ I’ve never been accused of that before. ‘You will, after all, be working on a mining project.’

‘Reputation for romanticism,’ I repeat slowly as a way of holding the conversation still while I try to push down the nausea and until I figure out what to say. ‘Sorry, I’m not sure what you mean.’

‘Ah apologies’ He stands and sits behind his desk writing as he talks. He hasn't looked at me properly this whole time, but now he points his eyes directly at me. ‘Let me put it this way. We house non-believers. We have the top climate change deniers, geologists whose fall-back position is that what is clear about any record is that the record is unclear, people who make a career out of looking for red flags and deep holes. But yours, your research has a certain,’ he scratches his dotted cheek, ‘emotion behind it.’ I balk.

‘Professor Madden, I think you’ll find that my…’

‘Oh yes your record is immaculate, your references glowing, your awards unquestionable.’ We look at each other and I wait for him to clarify his point. I’m beginning to sweat through my clothes. It’s taking everything I have to fend off the nausea.

‘Well then…’ I take a second to swallow, but he isn’t finished.

‘In 2002 you worked at the Geological Survey of New South Wales on an Indigenous communities project; in 2004 you worked in New Zealand in conservation; and from 2006 to 2010 you were in Wales researching Cartref Gwaelod’s sunken kingdom. Your mother was Welsh wasn’t she Dr Mason?’ I look at him waiting for the question I now know is coming. ‘It’s all very idealistic work.’ As he says the words he shuffles his head back and forth like he's trying to shake off cobwebs. And I finally realise what he’s getting at, and I also understand that he doesn't understand. His lack of comprehension makes me feel sicker and less in control of the waves washing over me. I breathe out, louder than I intended.

‘It’s not the projects. I wasn’t drawn to the community work.’ The professor raises his eyebrows as if to say oh really? ‘A geologist’s first priority is to observe. You were the one who said that weren't you Professor? Well, I follow the people I want to watch. Most of the time I didn't even know what project I would be working on.’ I wait for this compliment to sink in. Quote a scientist's work and you’ll have a friend for life. Professor Madden leans back in his chair and smiles. My body relaxes and I feel the nausea leaving.
Then he leans forward grips his hands together and spits, ‘I believe in the economic contribution of science Ms Madden. Observation, yes, that would have been a lovely quote someone took out of context in an academic journal article, probably for their PhD. Exploitation of raw materials for modern industry rests upon the partnerships of geology with mining and oil technology. Do we need palaeontologists? Sure. But what we don’t need is anyone with too much baggage. We’ll let applicants know after Christmas.’

He stands and points to the door. I run to the bathroom, bang the cubicle door behind me and leave it slowly drumming as I vomit into the toilet bowl.
There is a slow pinching under my belly button. I rub my palm hard into my stomach. It is nothing, nothing that says you’re in labour, shout it through the house. So I wait a little longer. I don’t want to be a fool. I put the kettle on and pace around the house in bare feet counting my steps. I take a hot water bottle out of the cupboard. Keep distracted, it’s just a normal night. Gabe’s in bed asleep. I can’t sleep, it’s just a normal night. For some reason I start humming. Then I feel it. Someone reaching inside my stomach gripping my insides, tightening and then slowly loosening. It isn’t unbearable, but it’s a contraction. I don’t know whether to wake Gabe. I decide to wait until I really need someone. After all I’m probably going to have enough people surrounding my vagina soon enough, so I decide to savour the alone time while I have it. I fill the hot water bottle and bend it in half to let the steam out the top. It’s warm against my arm and I screw on the lid. Then I reach for a tea towel and wrap it around the bottle so it’s not too hot against my skin. I put it on my lower back and walk into the lounge room.

I take a pillow off the couch and put it on the floor. Then I kneel down on the pillow and put my head on the couch, twisting my head to the right as I use both my hands to keep warmth on my back. How long will this go for? How much worse does it get? I can’t tell myself this is only ten percent of what the pain will be or tell myself not to worry because it will only get a little worse. Do I need to save my energy? And the thing is no one else could really tell me because they don’t know exactly what I’m feeling and you can’t put it into words. I rock back and forth. The hot water bottle starts to cool, or maybe I’m just getting used to it, so I take the tea towel off, lift my top and put it directly onto my skin. I start to want it hotter and hotter. It’s cooling too quickly. My body is rumbling, and it needs heat. I feel cold in my bones, like I want someone to inject me with liquid fire. I stay kneeling down on the couch for what seems like hours and probably is because the next time I lift my head there is
a faint light outside. The rumblings start again. It feels as though my organs are being slowly
tightened in a flower press.

‘Anna, are you ok?’ Gabe shuffles into the kitchen.
‘I think I’m in labour. I think it’s time.’
‘You should have come…’
‘I just needed to see if it was really coming.’
‘Do I need to do anything?’ It sounds as if he’s asking if I want him to do the dishes
after a large dinner party with the expectation or maybe the hope that I will say no.

‘Can you please heat this up for me?’ I lift up my arm with the hot water bottle without
raising my body or head from the couch. Then my hips feel as though an invisible force is
pulling them back and my chest arches up. I make a sound that I’ve never heard uttered before.
It’s from my gut. It vibrates through my body. It’s as if I’m singing a long vibrato.

‘Aahhh. Aahhh. Aahhh.’ Long and loud. The sound seems to swim around the room,
over the furniture around my body and out to Gabe in the kitchen filling the hot water bottle.
My head gets sweaty. My mouth is dry. The rumblings in my stomach turn into nausea. My
body heaves. But there is nothing for it to expel. I heave again and again as I swivel my body
like a woman possessed. Where the hell is Gabe? Does it really take that fucking long to fill a
fucking hot water bottle? I push my knees into the edge of the couch to distract myself from
the pain. I dig them in so hard I can feel the wood make indents in my skin. I move myself
over to all fours on the floor because I need hardness. I need stability. I bend my knees, lean
forward and reach my arms out in front of me. It is a child’s pose of sorts, though I’ve never
been one for yoga. I push my hands into the ground. I curl my toes underneath me until it
feels like they’ll break. I can feel the gaps between the floorboards on my shins. I rub them
along the lines until that pain is all I can feel.

‘Here you go.’
‘I don’t want it anymore.’
‘This is all normal Anna.’

‘Actually hand me that.’ Gabe gives me the hot water bottle and without looking up
properly I throw it at his head.

‘You need to get to the hospital. I’m calling…’ and his voice trails away.
‘Please. Please.’ I bleat like a goat. Gabe comes back with the phone in one hand and
the hot water bottle in the other.

‘They want to speak with you.’
‘What?’
‘They’ll listen to your voice to tell if you need to come in,’ he says, as if he’s done this before.

‘Hello.’

‘Hello Anna. How are you feeling?’

‘How am I feeling?’

‘When was your last contraction?’

‘A few minutes ago.’

‘Alright and on a scale of one to…’ It starts again. Stronger. So much stronger. I flip on my back to see if that helps but it’s worse so I turn back on my stomach.

‘Aaarrrhhggg.’ The guttural scream seems to come out of my hips and not my mouth. The flower press disappears and four horses ride towards me. They have ropes attached to their saddles. Someone ties my heart to one horse, my stomach to another, my womb to the third and my intestines to the last. I hear a slap on horse skin and galloping feet. They run to the corners of the room. I am drawn and quartered. I drop the phone. The tension builds until it’s a high-pitched pain, stays there for a few moments, and then it decreases like it’s rolling up and down a hill. We seem to wait in silence for just moments before it happens again. This time when the pain reaches the top of the hill I have to say to myself, it’s not going to get any worse than this. You just need to get through this bit. And it rolls back down.

Gabe is somewhere, speaking words to me. ‘Hello. I think we need to come in.’ My water hasn’t broken yet and I haven’t had any blood. I start to believe something is wrong. I try to will my water to break. I try and imagine it bursting like a balloon. Something trickles down my leg. I feel wet. I’m relieved.

‘I think my waters just burst.’ I pant the words out. Gabe goes to speak into the phone but I take it from him. ‘I think my waters just burst.’ The words are hard to spit out from my mouth.

‘Take your underwear off.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Take it off.’ The voice is strict. The voice has heard this a million times before. I’m a number. I’m an imposition. I slowly take off my underwear.

‘Ok.’

‘Smell it.’

‘What?’

‘Smell it.’ This is getting ridiculous, but I bend.

‘Ok.’
‘What does it smell like?’
‘What?’
‘Does it smell like pee or sex?’ I smell it again.
‘Um, pee.’
‘Then your waters didn’t just burst. You need to come into the hospital.’

Gabe pulls me up and I look at what I’m wearing. Pyjama pants. Large shirt. *I can’t wear pants. How will the baby get out? Should I take my pants off now, should I take them off later, should I wear a dress?* Then I’m hit by another contraction and I double over. There’s the horses again, I can hear them snorting and scraping their feet and I feel the build up as they ride away, I feel the ropes tightening and my body stretching and my organs are drawn and quartered. I’m slumped next to a wall and I manage to reach up and push my palms against the plaster. Pushing until my arms throb and my mind is momentarily distracted. Then the horses reach the end of their ride, the rope is tight and I am yelling. There is nothing else. Only the image of the horses, only the quickening pain. *This is as bad as it’s going to get. I just have to get through these seconds. One contraction at a time. One contraction at a time.* Then the ropes snap and the tension slowly decreases. We hobble to the car. The four-wheel drive is tall and Gabe has to lift me up into the seat. I reach for the lever that lowers the back of the chair. I can’t find it and I start to panic.

‘Where’s the lever? Where’s the bloody lever?’ I’m shouting. I finally find it and the back of the chair falls in an instant. I turn over on my hands and knees and grip the leather. I think the car is moving, but I have no idea where we are. I’m inside myself. It feels as though my head is in my stomach. It’s churning and churning.

‘Pull over. Pull over.’
‘What? Why? We need to get to the hospital.’

‘I need you to rub my back. Quick.’ Gabe stops the car but I don’t know where. My head’s still in my stomach and he reaches over to me. I feel his hand on my back.

‘Press into my bones.’ He presses. ‘Harder. Harder.’ I feel him lift his weight up and push it into me. ‘Aaarrhhggg. Aaarrhhggg.’ It’s like a low loud hum but with my mouth open. The horses have come with us. They’ve followed. Even though I have my eyes closed I can see their black eyes looking at me. I can see the steam coming out of their noses. Their hooves picking up the wet dirt before they start to gallop in four directions. I feel my body and the car rock. My organs are separating and it takes everything I have to keep them together. *One contraction at a time. One contraction at a time.* Then the horses let go and the organs slowly move back into place.
'Ok.' But I still have my head down and am on all fours and I’m trying so hard to just breathe. Just breathe. Breathe from my belly. But as soon as I feel the horses coming that breath gets knocked out of me. It feels as though we drive for hours. I focus on the sound of the indicators and align my breath with their sound. *In and out...In and out.* Click click...click click.

'Pull over. Pull over.'

'What? No. We’ll never get there.'

'Please.' I bleat. 'Please.' Gabe stops the car but again I don’t know where. I feel his hand on my back. ‘Ooohhhhhhh. Ooohhhhhhh.’ It’s like a low loud hum but this time I stutter. But there are no horses this time. I don’t know why. My organs twist slightly, pull up, down and then sideways, but then it dissipates and my body slumps.

'Ok.' Gabe shifts into gear and this time I can tell he’s speeding. I feel him wanting to get there; to not stop again. There are no thoughts in my head. I’m inside my body, buried deep down somewhere I’ve never been before. Then before I know it I hear the car door beside me open. Hands are on me and they move me into lights. Lots of lights. I look up and we are in the middle of the hospital foyer. There is a large nativity scene next to the reception desk. I look at it whilst Gabe goes to the receptionist to check me in. All I can think is that Mary’s missing. I shuffle towards the nativity scene. It’s the size of my kitchen bench. Carved in wood. It sits in a stage so that the porcelain characters are at my eye level. There is straw on the ground. A baby in a crib. Wise men. Presents. At the top there is a large four-point star. *What the hell, where’s Mary?* Then without warning the horses start running. I don’t even feel their eyes. I fall forward and rest my head on the straw. I grip it and knock two of the wise men over. I drop my head onto the straw and grip the baby’s blankets. ‘Aaarrrhhggg. Aaarrrhhggg.’ I’m yelling from every fibre in my skin. It’s as if every cell has a little mouth and they’re yelling for me. Yelling for the baby. This time the horses don’t pull me apart with rope, they have steel cords tied to their saddle and the steel weaves right through my insides and out again. This time they don’t run in a straight line. The lights have spooked them and they run around confused, but with speed. I lose my grip on the baby’s blanket and I fall to the carpeted floor. It smells like lavender and it makes my stomach wretch. I’m picked up and put in a wheel chair and taken into an elevator. The doors open and all at once we’re in the maternity ward we toured only weeks ago. I’m wheeled through two large doors. There’s my obstetrician and two midwives. I look around the room. I look at all the machines, machines for things that go wrong, for hearts that stop and babies that die and mothers who bleed too much after birth. I look at the bed and it doesn’t look like a bed, it has bars on the side and there are rails on the wall.
Then everything stops. The horses run away. The ropes have gone. I’m still. But still here. They sit me on a fit ball and wrap a heart rate monitor around my waist.

‘We have to monitor the baby’s heart when you have a contraction.’ The doctor looks at me. I nod. I sit. The ball beneath me rubs against the waxed floor and it squeaks like latex. We wait. People walk in and out of the room. The student nurse asks questions. ‘We might have to give you something.’ The doctor puts her hand on my shoulder.

‘What something?’

‘Just something to get things moving. They look like they’ve stopped.’

‘Isn’t there something else I can try?’

‘Like what?’

‘I thought you could tell me that.’

‘It’s just a drip.’

‘Just a drip.’ I look around the room. I feel like my brain is broken. There are blank faces everywhere. As blank as the white walls, the polished floors. They help me onto the hospital bed and roll me on my back.

‘We need to check how far along you are first.’ I hear more latex, gloves on skin and someone is reaching inside me. The room tells me to just relax, just relax. I pull my body away from the hand out of instinct but the room tells me not to move away from the hand, that it won’t help.

‘You’re about 6cm at best.’

‘At best?’

‘It’s taking longer than we’d like.’ The nurses wheel in an IV and I turn my head. I look away. I put one hand on my stomach and rub in a circle.

‘Now what?’

‘Now we wait.’ All I can hear is leather soles on waxed floor. Squeak. Squeak. Squeak. I hear the heart rate monitor, but I stopped hearing the separate beeps ages ago. Then the horses are already in the corners of the room and I don’t know how they got there. My body is drawn and quartered and I try to keep it all together but I’m on my back and I have tubes in my arm and all I want to do is be on the floor on my hands and knees but I try and flip over and everyone in the room rushes to me and stops me and keeps me on my back. I feel like I’m part of an exorcism and people think that there’s something terrible inside me but I’m trying to explain to them that it’s ok, but I can’t talk because I’m consumed, my brain is broken, my body is divided and my mouth is open and silent. Then everything stops again. People are looking at each other. Why are people looking at each other?
‘The heart rate is dropping too low during your contraction. We’re worried the foetus is distressed.’ Gabe is calling our child a foetus.

‘The foetus?’

‘Yes. We’ll wait for one more, but if the heart rate drops again we’re going to have to do an emergency C-section.’ My heart drops. Not my heart rate but my organ. Onto the floor. Onto the waxed floor under the squeaky fit ball under the leather soles of shoes that walk in and out, in and out.

‘Give me an hour with her. It’s not dropping too low yet. An hour and if we’re still in the same place, then we’ll go in. Gabe there’s still some paperwork at the desk can you finish it off for us?’ Shuffling; hands guide me onto my hands and knees. A whisper in my ear. ‘You can do this. But leave your mind outside. Follow my breathing. Follow my hands.’ This woman is in charge and I hand my body over to her. The lights in the room turn off. A blanket is wrapped around my body. Faye strokes my hair, ‘Shhh, Shhh,’ she whispers in my ear.

I don’t know why but I begin to sob. It’s the tenderness. I bark my tears. ‘I can’t do this. Please just get it out of me.’

‘You can. You can.’ She coos. ‘Let’s try something else.’ She unplugs me from the machines but puts her stethoscope to my belly. ‘I need you to stand. Rest your arms on me. Bend you knees.’

‘I can’t. I can’t.’ No matter how much I will my body I can’t move and the thought of standing paralyses me. Then it’s as if this midwife is my body and she moves me herself to stand and I’m bent over in half but leaning on her, like some sick dance partner. She rocks me in circles. Bends me down lower.

‘Ok,’ and she brushes my hair back.

Now I need to push. I grunt out. I have no control. If someone put a gun to my head right now and said don’t push, I’d get shot in the head. The nurses come in. They put me on my back and examine me. Gabe is there again. ‘Ok, we need you to push.’

I cannot feel my legs or arms or face and everything around me seems to be part of me and everything inside me seems to be outside. I look above me and it seems as though I’m looking down. It’s a movie. But I’m not an actor. I’m furniture. I’m a prop and there have been people employed to move me around and make sure that I’m in the right place at the right time, but somebody hasn’t done their job properly and I am here. I am here. I feel pressure between my legs.

‘Stop. Stop Anna. Put your energy into the push rather than the noise. Push down. Push down.’ I have no idea how to do this. I have to learn how to do this. She picks up my
Some Uncertain Facts

legs. ‘Push against me,’ then I figure it out. And I’m bearing down. They are the words the
room is using. ‘She’s bearing down, good, good, another big push.’ Now I’m able to push my
body is relieved and I force myself down with everything I am and everything I have. There
is fire between my legs but the pain is a relief. ‘Ok, the head’s out. You can rest for a while.’
But I can’t and another contraction comes and I push and I no longer hear anyone and then
something slips and slides and my whole body falls relaxed. I hear crying. A nurse lifts up
my top and puts the little shiny body on my chest. They’re rubbing it with towels and I’m
gulping for air. There is no room for tears, only disbelief. My body is shuddering, gulping.

Later that night in the hospital room I lie on a plastic sheet in an odd-shaped room
and stare at my baby. They’ve put a tag on her leg and a tag on her arm. The nurse says it’s
in case we lose one and they need to identify her as my daughter. Every hour they check if
they match. Having a baby instantly made me warm. Like I’ve lived life cold-blooded. Like
that feeling when your feet are ice cold and you put on thick socks and somehow your whole
body melts. It’s like I’ve been walking around bare foot for thirty-six years and somebody has
finally handed me a pair of socks.

It’s three in the morning and it feels as though a lifetime has been lived in the past few
hours. I begin to cry for the many reasons that are obvious – because I now love something
more than I’ve ever loved anything or anyone before; because, when I think of ever losing
this person I’ve created, that has come from my body, I understand the true nature of fear. I
cry for the perspective a mother’s love gives you, and the shame I feel about my previous self.
I think of the car accident and the hospital room, at my ability to put everything else besides
my baby first. I cry because I know I will never be the same, but mostly I weep because I
don’t want to be.
One night, when I was seven years old, I decided on a different life. My dad and I were sitting at the round, speckled kitchen table. It was where we ate dinner but it wasn't what you'd call a dining table. Dad was a Queenslander through and through. With leathery skin and gangly limbs he'd fitted in with the wildlife.

‘Ya know chicken…’ Dad rolled a piece of sticky tape he'd found on the side of the table and chewed it between his front teeth, it was a habit he perfected long ago, ‘I began my sea life when fishermen were made of steel and boats were made of wood. Now, the boats are made of steel and the men are made of wood.’

‘Or sometimes even paper,’ my mum said quietly as she laid chicken, still in the saucepan, on a round cork heat protector. My dad tilted his head back with a sigh and jiggled his leg under the table. ‘You can start.’ Mum started cleaning.

‘Ah sorry luv, I thought there was something else coming.’

‘Oh. Isn't that ok? What’s wrong with it?’ My mum was a fiery Welsh woman with a watery heart who read herself into all your words. It didn't matter what you said, she would interpret them as describing her as lacking. ‘I'll make some potatoes.’

‘Gwen, I didn't mean...ah c'mon Anna. We'll be back in a second,’ he'd yelled over his shoulder as he took me into the lounge room. ‘I wanna show ya somethin someone showed me today.’ He emptied out a tea bag onto the coffee table, pressed the paper into a cylindrical shape, and lit the edge with a match. We watched the miniature rocket fly up and gently hit the ceiling. I was awestruck. The experiment's remnants floated down to me and I held out my hand to catch the ashes. I kept them in one hand as we went back into the kitchen and Mum served potatoes. Then she stood stirring gravy on the stove as we ate. ‘I have to go away again tomorrow,’ Dad mumbled between mouthfuls. I looked at the ashes in my hand.

My mum didn’t turn around but spoke with her head down. ‘But you just came back?’
'Don’t have much choice, luv. Gotta follow the work when we get it.’ Dad spooned potato into his mouth with a knife and cut the chicken with his fork. My father’s ears curled at the top as if they were paper being burned. It always make me think of the maps we made at school – the ones we rubbed coffee grains into to make it look old.

That night I watched my mum cook dinner. Stirring and stirring the gravy and then pouring it through a silver sieve because she said there were too many lumps. Should’ve put a little water in first, she said, to make a paste. Stupid. And with that she shook her head, clicked her tongue, threw it in the bin and started again. My fate had been sealed in that instant. For some, science is the promise of a life less ordinary, but for me it was a chance at a life unlike my mum’s.
SUMMER
I’m breastfeeding when Elizabeth, Gabe’s mother, lets herself in. Sometimes I think that if I wasn’t breastfeeding I’d never see Lottie, a string of family members and sometimes even strangers coming and wanting to hold her. *Oh she needs a feed* has become my saving grace.

The first few months of motherhood have knocked me off my feet. I didn’t realise how different it would be when I am the mother. When the baby is mine. When she’s come from me. I didn’t expect her to be so conscious. Right from the beginning. Straight away there was a dialogue. Which is exciting and different all at once. Every single thing she does is meaningful. But then everything I do is also thick with meaning. Every word I say, every note I sing, everything she hears and smells is going inside her to make her a certain type of person.

Elizabeth asks me where the sugar is and her lipstick cracks. She blinks so often and for so long that I’m sure she spends most of her time in the dark. Her eyelids flutter as she talks and she purses her lips so that the creases on her eyes and the creases of her lips appear to curve towards each other. Then, when her eyes open momentarily, her mouth looks as if it wants to follow, to open when she talks, but it stays in a straight line across her face, fixed in place. She walks into the kitchen and wipes down benches. She is built from knots and starch. Her hair is always twirled and tied in a bun and she wears a scarf tied around her neck like an airhostess. The collar of her thick white shirt stands up behind her head like a frilled neck lizard. I wonder whether she uses the shirt when she’s frightened, to make herself appear larger to predators.

She takes my mug from the dining table and puts it in the kitchen sink. ’Not sure you should be drinking that while you’re breastfeeding.’ Ever since we had Lottie she is here, hovering. I’ve seen her more in the past few days than I have my entire life. As summer tightens her grip, so does my mother-in-law.
‘It’s the first cup I’ve had.’ I don’t know why I bother because Elizabeth is a guilty until proven innocent kind of person. She pokes holes into your words until the straight lines are dotted and the curves don’t close and everything falls apart and when it does you can see her nod to herself and say, *See? I knew you were lying.*

Our kitchen and dining room is so large I almost have to yell across the room so Elizabeth can hear me. We bought a large house in York; a small town that sounds like it should be in England instead of country Australia. It’s an easy commute to Gabe’s hospital in Perth, but mainly we bought in the area because it’s where Elizabeth lives. The house looks different than it did in the photographs Gabe sent me. The structure seems larger and the five acres of land it’s on seems smaller. Grassland flanks the east side and the south-facing veranda sweeps around the front. The grey tiled roof takes up half of the façade and supports three rectangular windows that jut out like large birdhouses. The remaining white seems too new for such an old building. Inside there are six bedrooms, three bathrooms, a large kitchen and two living spaces, one of which will be Lottie’s playroom. The only room I haven’t been in is the attic. It’s where I store the things I don’t need. The house, with all its rooms, is the manifestation of hard work, of escaping the past and of fighting for the future.

Someone knocks and Elizabeth leaves the room. I notice she’s left her handbag on the chair next to me. She usually zips it closed but this time she’s left it open. It smells of her perfume. In one of the corners is the most beautiful mirror I’ve ever seen. It’s a small, round silver compact. I look over my shoulder at the staircase and bend over, holding onto the tabletop so that I don’t topple over. I slowly take the compact out of her bag. It has a bird engraved on the front and a feather on the back. I pick it up out of the bag and put it in my short pocket. It’s small and heavy, a talisman, weighing down the material of my shirt.

‘Hello Anna, how are you?’ Elizabeth brings a large woman in a pale blue uniform into the kitchen. I smile and nod and gesture to a chair. ‘You look well.’ It was faint praise. Then there is silence for a while. The kettle boils. ‘Well, you did it didn’t you?’

‘Sorry?’

‘I was proud. You fought.’ I realise she is the midwife who came in towards the end of the birth. The woman laughs. ‘Ah, it’s a quirk of my profession. Often we will have seen between a woman’s legs before we even know your name. Faye.’ She reaches out a hand across the table. ‘I actually live down the road.’ Everything about Faye seems like a slow spring. Her gentle laugh, her bobbing walk and the way she pats her knee when she speaks. Though when she does speak her words tumble out of her like liquid. ‘Shall I make us a hot drink?’ She’s come for the post-birth examination. ‘Tea or coffee?’
I glance at Elizabeth. ‘Coffee please.’ And smile. Elizabeth opens her handbag and takes out three plastic containers and a zip-lock bag. _Will she notice the missing mirror?_ She hands Faye a tea bag without a word. As the kettle rings I watch Elizabeth arrange the gold bracelets on her wrist, up her arm and down her arm, then around in circles. Hot drinks made and Lottie sleeping, the room falls silent again.

‘You did well.’ Faye smiles at me and somehow she knows it’s exactly what I need to hear. In fact all I’ve wanted to talk about since Lottie was born is the birth. But while Elizabeth is here I stop myself. ‘Oh, while I remember, I have some info for you.’ Faye reaches down and grabs her worn brown handbag that’s so old in places it’s grey. As she rummages the bag falls sideways and spills on the floor. I see her hands shake a little as she pulls everything back in and I feel a pang of intimacy at witnessing this weakness. Elizabeth picks up some sheets of paper. They are children’s brightly coloured drawings, one of a house and rainbow and the other of a large green monster.

Elizabeth hands them back. ‘How old are your children?’ Faye finds the flyers and sorts through them. Elizabeth repeats herself.

Without looking up Faye mumbles, ‘Oh they’re long gone and have their own children now.’ Elizabeth’s eyes move quickly between Faye’s, a quick read, a radar scan. Those pursed lips again, the closed face. Faye looks at the pictures momentarily, folds them back up carefully, unzips an inside pocket and puts them inside.

‘I can’t keep those things. Gabe went through a stage. When he was about twelve. He folded lots of paper boats,’ I imagine little white triangles that look like hats. ‘He’d light candles. He knew he wasn’t supposed to do. Then drop wax on the boats so they’d float. In the bath. Then he’d give them to me. Like a cat who leaves dead mice at the doorstep as a gift. I mean how can you possibly keep everything?’ She gives a short, sharp laugh, looks at her watch, takes my half-drunk coffee and puts it in the sink. She’s a woman accustomed to conflict. Everything collides. She wipes down the bench, kisses my forehead and goes to walk out the door, but then turns, ‘Oh I forgot to mention a professor called when you were up changing Lottie and said you got the job at Murdoch University. They’re sending you a contract.’ Then she closes the door behind her.

And with that the picture of the mum I want to be starts to form in my head. I’m going to set an example for my daughter, teach her that you can do anything you want no matter what the circumstances. I won’t be one of those mums who sits at home with her hair amuck and a screaming baby on her hip. I’ve already set up full-time childcare, just in case I got the job, and I asked them a million questions. I was thorough, there was a process. I won’t
just leave her somewhere I haven't analysed from every angle. I finally have it all – a career, a baby, a husband, and this new world. I feel as though I've figured something out others aren't able to. Like some rare mathematical equation they give prizes away for solving. I feel as though some governing body has printed the problem in the papers with a cash reward and everyone, over all these years, has been trying to figure it out. What's this unknown and where do we substitute this and that. Then suddenly I put up my hand and say with a quiet confidence, 'No, No, I have it, you can all put your grubby little pens down, no need to work on it any more.' I have something more to offer the world; I have something more to show my daughter. It's my gift to her. This career, this life, is my legacy.

I've been staring at the wall and Faye has been sitting patiently, waiting for me to return. She reaches back into her handbag and hands me a crumpled business card, Country Women’s Association. 'They were set up to give rural communities a kick in the bum and I'm sure the group would love to have you if you ever feel like company.' The thought of being around a group of cooking, jam making, crafters makes me cringe, but I take it anyway.

How am I going to live amongst these people? I hate small talk. Small towns even more. Sometimes I wish I could throw my head back and laugh tra la la at Mr and Mrs so and so from down the road who are at whatever it is they usually do again. That I could tisk tisk with the best of them at the young girl in the bakery when she wears that low cut top again that isn't so much more than a handkerchief, and anyways we all know she's after Mr whatzit, a married man who teaches at the nearby school. Instead, I walk away from small talk with a smug sense of security, knowing that there's always going to be mediocrity – a scandalous couple down the road and a scantily clad girl in the bakery and that I am part of bigger conversations, separate from the local town cogs that whir around me.
Eight

I knew nothing before the birth of my child. I knew some things. I knew that the origin of my profession started in the ‘age of reason’, that bones and shells in recent sands need to be handled carefully, and that large caves actually breathe, inhaling and exhaling great quantities of air. But it was the type of knowledge that floated around me, hanging there until someone asked me for it. The chance affair of preservation doesn’t change your own history. It doesn’t pick you up, turn you inside out and pour everything that made you, out onto the ground. My once carefully laundered shirts and suits laugh at me from my cupboard. No matter how careful I was in the past, I am now reduced to something primitive.

Gabe has started sleeping downstairs because he says Lottie sounds like a moth. I used to be jealous of his ability to fall asleep, but now his inability to wake up irritates me. How can he sleep through her crying when my body bristles at the slightest noise? I can’t even sleep down the hall from Lottie, let alone downstairs. The one night I left Gabe with Lottie so I could get some rest, I heard her crying and came into the room only to find him snoring with his hand across his face. If that’d been me I would have felt terrible, but it’s as if he’s injected himself with some kind of guilt-free anaesthetic. It was the first time I’d ever looked at my husband with hatred.

My love for Lottie doesn’t make me love my husband less, but it makes me feel differently about love altogether. In some ways it feels like we do it all backwards. When I started dating in high school and then university, it was with a strange resignation. In between lab work and field work and every other type of work I could find to get ahead, I said yes to guys if they asked me out because I felt like that’s what I should be doing. Then when I met Gabe, I’d been so focussed on winning him that I went to the other extreme and convinced him to say yes. All along the way, any love that I developed was one-sided, for at least some of the time.
Now I’ve had a baby, love, that stupid word you hear all the time and write all the time and see in flashing lights at the end of movies, is, well, more than a word. It’s more than any date I went on in high school, more than the way I almost stalked Gabe. The word fills me up, right to the brim, so that sometimes I feel as if I’m overflowing with love. Every time I think that, I have to stop myself. How *cliché*. I used to balk at those types of thoughts and images and words in books and movies. *Can’t you think of something more original?* But that’s just it, when you feel it yourself it is original, it’s as if no one else in the world has ever felt this way. Maybe love for a child is like a rainbow – everyone can see it but no one sees the same one.

I remember once hearing a psychologist say that intimacy doesn’t happen immediately in a relationship; that it must be built up over time. Maybe in some ways, especially as we get older, it becomes harder to let our guard down, more terrifying to let someone else in when we have been hurt before, and less likely we will trust someone until they have proven to us that they can be trusted.

As adults we come to relationships dragging a heaving bag behind us; we bury experiences from our childhood and previous relationships, anxious they may scare people away. So we adapt; we wear masks and change masks; we overanalyse every word other people say; we think our way, even fake our way, even manipulate our way, into intimacy. And so over months, years, maybe even decades, an intimacy develops in our relationships that wobbles and stumbles until it rests in some safe place.

Over the past month with Lottie every wall I have ever built, every mask I have ever worn, every false sense of bravado I have ever displayed, has come tumbling, crashing, down. I’m just here. Just me. Lying next to a little person whose body came from mine. The simplicity is shocking and sensible all at the same time. Often I catch myself thinking *what if I had never allowed myself to feel this?*

There’s no time needed to develop intimacy with her. Because in that hospital room, when I felt her skin on my chest and smelled something on her head that made me ache inside more than the birth ever could, there was nothing else but love. There was no baggage, no agenda, no games. I knew, in that second, that I wanted to share every emotion, every fibre of my being, every thought I have ever had or will have with her. Honest, immediate, almost instinctual love. The physical presence of my little girl lying next to me, filled a hole inside me that nothing else had been able to fill. That *no one* else had been able to fill.

Last night Lottie was waking every half an hour or so. At four in the morning I sat in a rocking chair breastfeeding her back to sleep with my head resting on the back of the chair exhausted and frustrated. Then I looked down at her through bleary eyes and noticed she
had twirled my hair around her finger and was stroking it against her cheek. All these things I now know about love, I wish I’d known them earlier.

All these things. These immense things. Crowd my heart so that in the space of weeks I change from wanting to work full time to wanting to stay at home. Forever.
Nine

Gabe and I fought for eight weeks about whether to get a real Christmas tree or a fake one. He wanted a fake one that looked just like the real thing. The more expensive, the more life-like. I’d asked him why you don’t just get a real one then and he’d spent what seemed like a long time explaining the hassles. The mess was the main one, and having to dispose of it afterwards. I think because it was my first Christmas here and we’d just had a baby he gave in and we drove for two hours to the Christmas tree farm on a Sunday afternoon. Lottie fell asleep in the back seat.

I thought the trees would be planted in neat rows. But they are so dense it’s hard to make out any rhyme or reason to the way they’ve been planted except for the fact you can fit people between them.

‘I don’t understand.’ Gabe reads the flyer we’re been given by a lady in a fake fur coat as we enter the farm.

‘What?’

‘Why they don’t just let us cut the tree down. It’s not really an experience then is it?’ From the side Gabe’s face looks like a roast duck. Like a perfect shape you have seen since you were little that you think they only have on television. It peaks in all the right places and has just the right amount of shine.

‘Well…I’ve been looking forward to this and…’

‘Of driving for hours, watching a young boy dressed in a terrible elf costume do the only part that would be fun and then paying a fortune for something that is going to leave a mess around the house and die within days?’

‘Yes.’

Gabe’s phone rings. ‘Hon, sorry to do this but I have to run.’

‘What?’
‘There’s an emergency at the hospital. A bus ran off the road, lots of people are injured and they need all hands on deck.’

‘God, that’s awful.’ And it is, but it’s also the moment I always dread. I can’t win. How can my Christmas tree shopping possibly compete with dying people?

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Go, of course. You should go. But you’ll have to take the car and I’ll be here with Lottie.’

‘I’ll get Mum to come and pick you up.’

‘Ok.’ Gabe kisses me on the head. When I was six I found out Santa Claus wasn’t real. I was reading one of my mother’s magazines that said, *parents creeping around at night, trying to keep the lie of Christmas alive.*

I walk out to the field of trees. Lottie’s in a sling but has fallen asleep. I try to move her head up because I’m terrified she’s going to suffocate. Some trees are tall and slim with bare patches. They look like someone with alopecia. Others are short and fat and flat on one side. *I could always put that side up against a wall,* the last resort of the late tree shopper.

I walk around rows of trees till they all start to look the same, until I feel as if I’m walking on a piece of cheap supermarket-bought Christmas wrapping paper. There is just nothing here. All the pine needles on the ground are brown and as I walk over and over them I start to cry. I cry for the one thing I wanted to go to plan this year. I cry because I haven’t thought about how I’m going to get a tree home as well. My mother-in-law won’t be any help and I have a newborn baby. I gently prod Lottie so she wakes up, the last resort of a lonely mother.

‘You ok?’ A young boy who can’t be more than eighteen stands next to me wearing blue overalls, a bright red t-shirt with the farm logo on the back and boots that look about three sizes too big for him. I can’t talk. I’m embarrassed this child is worried about me.

‘Fine thanks. Pretty great job working on a Christmas tree farm.’

‘Yeah, me and me brothers have always dun it. Best part is that you get free trees and decorations which Mum loves.’

‘Wow that’s great.’ I notice my nose is running and try and sniff a few times but it doesn’t work. The boy reaches into his pocket.

‘Don’t worry it’s clean and everyfin.’ I take the tissue from this boy, this child. After having a baby I look at other children differently. They used to be shadows, barely there. Now, everything they feel, every good or bad thing that happens to them cuts me. This child’s naive concern sparks more tears. I see Gabe.
'Couldn't leave you like this. I drove a few metres and rang someone to cover for me.'

I lean forward and cup Gabe's cheek with my hand as I kiss his lips. He looks at the young boy. 'You know I've never seen any point to those.' Gabe gestures at the boy's hands.

'Point to what?' The boy asks. There's a chill in the air.

'Mittens.' The word spits out of his mouth.

'I'm sorry?'

'Mittens.' The boy holds his red gloves in front of his face as if he's noticing them for the first time.

'I spose it is a bit silly when it's so hot here.'

'No. I mean, all those fingers joined together. Doesn't make your hands very useful, does it?' Gabe takes the saw out of the boy's hand. The boy looks like he's going to say something, I mouth the words sorry but I don't think he saw me and he walks away.

'Gabe, you could have just…'

'It'll be much easier to stand when we get home if the trunk is cut properly at the bottom.' Gabe kneels down and brushes the pine needles away from the ground. He rolls up his sleeves, his need to control outweighing his usual dislike of getting dirty.

'What do you think of me staying home with Lottie?' Gabe begins to hack at the base of the tree.

'But you have…signed a contract.' Gabe beats the tree between words.

'I just don't know.'

'I thought you wanted to?' He becomes sweaty. And all I can see now are the soles of his shoes and a scratched arm flailing from beneath a skirt of needles.

'That was before.'

'Before what?' Gabe comes out from beneath the tree.

'Maybe we should…' Gabe kneels down again and continues to cut at the tree, this time developing a rhythm creating a tune of breaking wood and breath.

'Before what Anna?' He spits the words between grunts.

'Before I knew what it would be like.'

'Things change. You will change back.' The tune intensifies. It looks at though Gabe is stabbing the tree. On some murderous rampage.

'I don't want you…to give up this opportunity…and then in a few weeks regret it…because whatever it is you are feeling…has changed. You know what you can be like.' Every few hacks Gabe inserts more words.
It’s getting dark, and as we walk out of the Christmas tree farm I see a large spider crawling on a nearby log. It walks closer to me and I bend down to look at him. He’s light brown with small beady black eyes, and appears like he’s eating two small hairy caterpillars. In ballet class as a child my favourite dance had been the tarantella. We would wear black skirts with coloured ribbons sewn around the bottom so that when we spun around and around the skirt would fly out in a circle and we looked like a spinning top. The dance was about a young girl who was bitten by a spider and went crazy. The only way to cure her was to dance a frenzied dance to fast music, around and around and around. We would shake tambourines with long ribbons hanging from them: an innocent tribute to this hysterical stranger. The spider hides half of its body in a wooden knot and I look away.

At home Gabe has the tree clasped into a base and standing up straight before I even have time to change and get the decorations out of storage. From a faded red box that has been discoloured by water so it looks like it was painted with blue watercolour, I take twenty-odd-year-old silvered glass baubles, a tiny painted toy soldier, a blue glass bird with a feathered tail I bought for my Lottie’s first Christmas, and a small angel that had been my mothers. I put that one back in the box. I tie tartan ribbons into bows around branches of the tree. I start by wrapping fairy lights around the tree, standing on a chair and then spiralling them down, wrapping my arms around the tree as if I am giving it a big hug as I reach one end round and take the other. Then I turn them on so that I can see them flutter. I take the decorations and place them on the tree. Gabe leaves to let his mother in. I can just hear them talking through rustling plastic bags.

‘How did you go?’

‘Good. Got everything we need. I heard there was an accident. Did they call you in?’

‘Yeah, but then they redirected the casualties to another hospital so I didn’t have to go.’ I lift up my head. I grip a fist so tight that I can feel my nails making indents in the palm of my hand. Indents that mirror the concave pattern my teeth make in my lower lip. I slowly stand up. I lift a green glass bauble above my head and throw it against the floor so it smashes into lots of little pieces.

Gabe comes running into the lounge room. ‘What the fuck was that?’

‘I fumbled,’ I say and walk upstairs. Having a child has made me realise that equality in marriage is a fair weather friend.
Ten

That night I turn the lights out so Gabe can’t see the white scratches across my stomach from the stretching and pulling. I kiss his neck and run my tongue across the side of his body. It’s been weeks. I can feel him hard against my stomach and I grip him with my hand. I am terrified of him putting his cock in me. I feel as though my insides have been through war and I can’t fathom having something put in there. So I spend as much time as I can, licking, caressing, sucking. I run my tongue across the rim and circle it around my lips as if I’m putting on lipstick. Eventually he pulls me up.

‘Put me inside you.’

I’m scared, but after tonight I can’t bear the thought of talking anymore. I move up towards him and resting on my left knee slowly guide him so that it bushes my entrance. I lick my fingers and take them down there to try and make myself more slippery.

‘Maybe we should use some lubricant?’
‘I don’t have any. You’ll be ok.’

I try to slide him inside me but it prickles my skin. I eventually glide it in and I make a yelping face in the dark without making a sound. I’m going to have to do this eventually so I might as well get it over and done with. Gabe kisses my breasts. I soften and become more wet and relaxed. He sucks my nipples and they crackle like a cigarette. He pulls away and I can feel milk spurt out of my breasts.

‘Christ, is that milk?’
‘It’s just...’
‘I’m sorry, I just can’t.’ Gabe pulls me over to the side.

‘Come on,’ I kiss his chest, ‘just don’t suck on my breasts then.’ I don’t know why I’m encouraging the sex to continue because I want it to stop so badly. Gabe moves me on my
hands and knees and slides himself into me. It feels a little better and I have my mouth open and my eyes scrunch shut as he fucks me. I hear Lottie cry on the monitor.

‘She’ll be fine Anna, you can’t run to her every time she makes a sound. She’ll start to expect it.’

I submit but Lottie cries again and I turn on my back. Gabe kisses my body as I squirm. ‘I have to go to her. She’s hungry.’

‘Anna, you’ll spoil her.’ Gabe continues to kiss my body and I wriggle away. But he grips my arms.

‘Gabe let me go.’ Now my voice has become deeper and I’m starting to panic. Gabe continues to hold me. He’s rough. My arms are tearing at the air. I can’t get away. Lottie’s crying on the monitor sounds as if she is on the radio and in a far away land. Too far away. Gabe holds me and I struggle. I can’t understand why he isn’t letting me go and his hands are starting to hurt me. Lottie’s cries have changed from grizzlies to screams and all I can feel is Gabe’s arms next to my face and his hairs scratching my skin. I don’t know what to do and her cries are making milk pour out of me. I turn towards Gabe’s arm and bite him as hard as I can.

‘Aaaarrhhggg.’

I get up off the bed and run down the hall. I shuffle into Lottie’s room, pick her up and her face feels wet against my neck. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Mummy’s sorry sweetheart. Sshhh, sshhh,’ I coo, ‘Sshhh, sshhh.’ I sit in a rocking chair, under a woollen blanket and snuggle her into me.

That night I dream there is a bearded woman in my garden. She has two rats with her. I walk up to the woman and ask her what she’s doing but she doesn’t respond. I look up at the full moon and then down again at the lady. She says she has come out to sleep in the moon. You have to be careful, I say. Then I realise I’m staring at a reflection of myself. I look down in my arms and realise I am cradling the two rats the way I would a baby. All at once I become very afraid and drop the rats and run inside. I feel my face for hair but it’s no longer there. I look down and my clothes have changed. I’m wearing a red dress. On my dress is a stain. I’m not sure why it’s there but I have the impression it’s because I’ve been bad. Then I see Gabe’s broad shoulders down a hall. He stands with his back facing me, far away. I run up to him and place my hand on the back of his neck, but he doesn’t turn around. I place my hand gently on his shoulder, but he doesn’t notice me. I move so that I’m facing him but his eyes look above my head. I shove him in the chest and he stumbles backwards, but then he stands still again and breathes and breathes and breathes. I take all my clothes off, but still he does nothing.
Eleven

We left my father in the middle of the night when I was ten years old. I didn’t even have my belongings but my mother made a game out of it, smiling in some strange absent way and saying, ‘Won’t this be fun? Everything new’. She got it in her head that Dad was having an affair, had been having an affair for years with the woman who weighed and priced their fish. She cited his stumbles over explaining where he’d been and his losing their money as proof. But the thing was…I knew the truth. He’d let me in on it, Dad always did. Even showed me what he was doing. Sometimes late at night he would drive me round the corner to a shed behind a friend’s house and show me the wooden boat he was building. He poured all his love and money into that boat. Even when he was home I used to notice him drawing pictures of the hull and stern with a rectangular, flat pencil that was striped red and black.

But Mum hadn’t thought of asking me, what would a kid know anyway? My mother was an addict. Not of alcohol or pills or pokies but to myth and martyrdom. If she hadn’t had her fix she would draw you into conversation and then twist your words so that anything you said sounded like something that should make her feel sorry for herself.

To keep me occupied in the car Mum had hidden metal coins in small white envelopes and handed me a crayon. ‘Rub over that and guess the value, if you get it right you can keep it.’ I’d acquired fifteen dollars by the time we arrived at a small motel with a red flashing light.

Having an addict parent slowly kills hope. The ups and downs of it, the lefts and rights, but the times of stillness are when you let yourself believe that they’re better, that the parent that you long for and need is really going to materialise and the beast that has a hold of them has let go…but then down and up you go again, left and right. It happens again and again. You’re five, you’re eight, your fourteen, you’re twenty. Until one day you realise that it’s not your parent’s addiction that is killing you, it’s the times you let yourself hope. And then
nothing else remains. All that is there is the parent you have and the parent they will never be. One is lead and the other is as thin as air.

There are the excuses, the lies, the blame, _oh the blame_, when they will point their finger at a ten-year-old in the corner rather than at themselves. Or maybe it’s not as obvious as a finger, but pointed words that are just as bad. So that little girl grows up and just takes the job over, not the addiction, but the pointing, but if you can be perfect...if you can just do enough to make yourself feel alright, to win the wins and escape the losses, to make yourself appear better, more successful, more clever, than others, then maybe, just maybe, you can escape the pointed fingers and the pointed words that follow you long after your parents are gone...long enough to make yourself believe you don’t come from a home where a ten-year-old can’t breathe. The addiction fills up the whole family, the whole house until there is no room for petty things like childhood, like fears about first periods, or first dates, or the unkind things that other children do. Because addicts teach you that you can be abandoned without being left.

On my first day in a new school we made bowls in art class. I glazed mine blue like the water Dad sailed on. When I took it home I hid it from Mum. I wanted something for myself, something she couldn’t ruin. And I thought I’d done it, until she did my hair that night. We didn’t have enough money for curlers and Mum got it in her head that I looked prettier with curly hair, so she tore striped tea towels into strips and knotted my hair with rags. She said that’s what her mother had done. She said it was what made my father fall in love with her.

That night when she was tying my hair she saw something shimmer from under my pillow. She went over, pulled out the ceramic bowl and cried. Put it in the kitchen. _Pride of place_, she said. I never did anything in art class again.

When we found our own place, an old little apartment with one bedroom, I visited Dad sometimes on the weekend when he was on land. Once, I spent hours sifting through the sea’s sediment as Dad tied up the boat. I found a stone with an imprint of a starfish. I ran over to Dad and showed him. He was standing talking to a few other fishermen.

‘Look Dad I found a skeleton.’
‘Wow, my little digger.’
‘I’m not a digger Dad, I’m a scientist.’

‘Ah,’ he said laughing, ‘a scientist.’ Then he’d picked me up and lifted me high above his head. My arms were outstretched as I held on tight to my starfish stone. My first find. He was shouting, ‘My little scientist, my amazing scientist,’ as he spun me around and around laughing, as the other fishermen bellowed and clapped and their fish sparkled in the sun.
AUTUMN
Twelve

I sit in the car across the road from the child-care centre. There is a large clown painted on the side of its wall, tightrope walking along a black line that has been painted around the whole of the white brick building. His orange hair tufts around his ears, leaving a white bald spot on the top of his head. One of his big yellow clown shoes and the opposite white-gloved hand dangle up in the air as he strikes a balance pose. A red, white and blue umbrella in the other hand looks as though it is supposed to help, but it doesn’t. I stare at the clown’s mouth and it reminds me of a little girl who has put on lipstick for the first time. And the mouth is laughing at me.

I turn around to look at Lottie in the back seat. She’s fallen asleep on the ride over. Her cheek is pressed into the headrest so that her lips pucker like she is giving a kiss. I feel like I’m going to be sick. I used to love my career. Nothing, not sickness, not funerals, not anything could keep me away. Now the thought of leaving my baby in this centre and sitting in an office all day seems like a complete waste of my time.

Lottie stirs and opens her eyes slowly. I could just drive away. I could simply put the keys in the ignition, start the car and take off. I could run away. To somewhere nobody knows me and I can just stay with Lottie at home in a little bubble. I look at my hands wrapped around the steering wheel and they’re shaking. I feel like I’m going to be sick.

The thing is that I get it. I get it. In my head I get the importance of child care and completely support the ways in which it enables women to work. But here, right now, my head is somewhere else and my heart is controlling everything.

I watch a woman walk her child towards the centre. She is dressed in a navy blue skirt and an egg white shirt. Her hair is neatly coiffed and her shoes click along the concrete and up the steps. Her little girl pulls her along in front of her, eager to get into the building. Ok so it can’t be that terrible a place if children are pulling their parents towards the door. And
I understand the high-heeled woman; I can see her at her desk in a fancy office building with mirrored windows and open plan work spaces. I can see her loving her job and being respected by all her staff and colleagues. I understand the need for personal space and to contribute and to accomplish something.

But even as I say all this to myself, it means nothing. I don’t want it anymore, any of it, I would give up my entire career if it meant that I didn’t have to get out of my car right now, take my baby into this centre and give her to someone else for the day. And every day this week. And every week this year.

I open my car door and close it. I open the back door, look at Lottie and just stand there. What would Gabe think? What would Elizabeth think? I can visualise their rolled eyes in my head, feel their sighs. If I drove away right now I would be dependent upon everyone else. I would be staying at home and saying to them, Look after me, I refuse to contribute to our life, I need to be looked after, my child needs to be looked after, I am a weight upon this family and I refuse to do anything else. What would I have to do, ask Gabe for money for a coffee? The thought makes me just as sick as the thought of leaving Lottie. I’ve never been financially dependent upon anyone, even my parents, for most of my life. The thought of having to ask permission to buy things is horrible. Or would I ask him for an allowance like I was sixteen? He’s supported his mother since his father died, he said to me when we got married, that he loved me because I was different.

But then I look at Lottie and she starts to cry. I pick her up out of her car seat but I can’t take her in like this. So I bring her into the front seat and sit with her across my shoulder. I can feel her breath on the side of my neck and she is sucking my skin with her little guppy mouth. My milk lets down and I feel the liquid seeping through my white blouse. I start to cry. Which makes the milk come harder. God Anna, pull yourself together. You should be happy this is your worst problem for Christ sake. There are women in this world who can’t even feed their children, who are worried about life and death situations.

The clown laughs at me, Look at you with your first world problems, you white middle class ungrateful idiot. Most people in the world should be so lucky to have your problems. This is what you wanted isn’t it? The clown asks me. You wanted to be here? To have it all? And it was. When I was pregnant it all seemed so straightforward. I would have this baby, and sometimes she would be cared for by someone else and I would go to work and keep building my career. It was so simple. Logistical. Sensible. You’re so weak. Look at all these other women dropping their children off. Do you really want to live like your mother? To be dependent on a man? To
have your child define you? Look where that got her. You're going to turn your daughter into a clingy dependent Velcro child who suffers severe separation anxiety.

I want to be stronger. I don't know why all my plans have changed. Why things seem too complicated. It's as if I walked into hospital one person and emerged from it another. It's as if the hospital took my skin, and now all my organs are exposed. I imagine myself looking like one of those plastic biology displays students use in science class. Here is the spleen and here is the liver. I have no problem with child-care centres. I understand why women need them, want them, and loved going to work. Maybe if I loved my job it would be different. But didn't I? Didn't I love working before I had a baby? It was my world.

Another woman walks up to the centre with a baby not much older than Lottie. She stops at the base of the steps and looks around. Our eyes meet. She looks straight at me. Gives me a small smile. Closes her eyes. Takes an exaggerated deep breath and then exhales slowly out.

Ok it isn't getting any easier sitting in the car. I open my car door, grab Lottie's bag and my hand bag, and walk up to the centre, open the door, hand her to a young girl wearing a necklace with beads the colour of a rainbow, and turn and walk away as fast as I can. I'm supposed to sign a book, to wait with Lottie until she's settled in. But I can't. As I walk I cry. I walk past the clown and he is cackling. A throaty cackle that rings in my ears. It feels sentimental and selfish but I cry so hard that snot falls from my nose and onto my work clothes. I wipe my nose with the sleeve of my new expensive shirt because none of my old ones fit me, but it doesn't help. I open my bag as I run to the car to try and find a tissue but as I do the contents of my bag fall onto the road, in the middle of the road. The clown laughs louder, a belly laugh now with his head tilted back. I am still crying. I'm not just crying, I'm sobbing. I get down on my hands and knees and pick up a wallet, keys, phone, a make up bag and a handful of pens, a Lottie's little stuffed monkey. No tissues. There is a car coming and I pile everything into my arms and run to the car. My nose is running so much that I have to purse my lips to stop myself from tasting its salty slime. By now the clown is laughing so loud that he drowns out the sounds of my crying and the engine and the voice inside my head that is yelling at me to go back in there and take my baby back from strangers. To smell my baby girl and to feel her soft breath on my cheek where it belongs.
Some Uncertain Facts

There are about twelve people, all of them middle aged, sitting around an oval table. I sit between a woman wearing a purple cravat and a man wearing amethyst earrings. Everyone leans back from the table. I sit forward with my hands clasped in the hope it will make the meeting go quicker.

I might have arranged child care, but I think about Lottie’s sweet smell and I have to use every ounce of my discipline to keep from running there, just to make sure she is alright.

There are no windows in the room. It’s as if we are in some stranger bunker even though we are in the middle of the third floor. The chairs are squeaky and the academics at the table move forwards and backwards at different times like a thoughtful tide.

The woman with the cravat leans towards me, ‘You’re not an ecologist are you?’

‘No. I…’

‘Good,’ She nods and leans back into her chair, ‘I’m always afraid they’re going to start letting ecologists in here.’

I turn to the man with amethyst earrings. ‘What’s your field?’

‘Paleoclimatology. I’m writing my sixth book.’

‘Sixth?’ I repeated.

‘There’s a lot there.’ He says defensively.

‘I’m sure.’ I say.

‘Someone has to set the record straight.’

‘I’m sure.’ I repeat.

‘I research deep. I research hard.’

‘How nice for you.’ I smile. His checked shirt is missing its middle button but, as if to compensate, he has fastened the shirt all the way up to his neck as if he’s going to put on a tie.

He looks at me narrowly. ‘Of course you probably think I should be writing a book about dinosaurs.’

Thirteen

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He looks at me narrowly. ‘Of course you probably think I should be writing a book about dinosaurs.’
I just nod, but of course I think anything but that.

‘Right, let’s get started.’ Professor Madden remains standing but rests his weight on the end of the oval table. ‘I’d like to introduce Dr Anna Mason, she’s our new micro-palaeontologist.’ He gestures with his head rather than his hands. I wave my fingers in the air like bug’s legs.

As pepper-faced man sits down the climate change denier turns to me, ‘Of course.’ He just keeps staring at me. I smile back. I don’t have the patience for this anymore.

There is a man with glasses diagonally opposite me. They must be tinted, those glasses that change from being for reading to being for the sun. The man is sitting in strange light so that as he moves his head his lenses change and it makes him look as if he is trying to hide something, behind his dark eyes. ‘I’ve installed the three-dimensional printer. So, well, it’s working.’

‘Thanks Dr Burrows.’ Professor Madden always uses people’s last names.

‘We can now separate, non-destructively, fossilised bone.’

‘But, most importantly, it’s less time intensive.’ Professor Madden adds.

‘Well, yes, but, I think, most importantly, the printer will allow us to share, enabling scientific exchange.’ The men look at everyone else in the room but their focus is on each other.

The only other woman in the room, who is wearing a purple cravat, intervenes. ‘Well, next week I’m taking dynamite to that quarry. I’ve decided it’s the only way. The rock is tilted at seventy degrees and, of course, it is the most difficult of situations. I always seem to get those jobs.’

‘There are better ways.’ The climate change denier contributes.

‘Really?’ The woman challenges. ‘How else are we going to remove the rock covering the fossils?’

‘I’m just saying.’

‘No, you’re not really saying anything.’

‘Well, our team is just about to uncover something, something significant. I can feel it.’ A man with long hair and a mismatching suit leans forwards.

‘James, Jesus, you think every discovery is significant.’ The man with glasses shakes his head.

‘It will be.’

‘No, most finds just confirm, not contradict, our understanding of human history, so how can anything you find be significant?’ The man’s glasses turn dark.

‘Ok everyone, this isn’t getting us anywhere.’ Professor Madden stands and leans on the table again. I get the feeling all the meetings travel the same trajectory, a self-important
arc. ‘We’ll find out about the government grant next week. Fingers crossed everyone. Anna, we’ll fill you in if the answer is yes.’

‘Though it won’t be.’ The man with glass speaks with his chin down and I can’t see his lenses.

This is how scientific meetings go. There is the occasional argument, shaking of heads and the gathering of allies in various states of agreement or challenge. *Okay, that may be how you read it but it’s not what they meant.* Then, *How do you know what they meant?* And on and on it goes.

During the long meeting there is the competing hourly chimes of two churches outside, followed later by the single off-tone of the half hour. I’ve bit my lip and it’s ulcerating, but as the meeting goes on and I get caught up in the conversation and the projects and in contributing to research again, I remember faintly what this used to be like, who I was and I yearn for Lottie a little less.

‘Anna, there is an organisation that wants to drill north west of here, but we need to check first. Think you can manage it?’ Professor Madden, with his spotty face, doesn’t wait for an answer. ‘We don’t think there’s anything there, but we have to get the all clear anyway. Set up the team, send them out, it’s a small space and shouldn’t take long.’

I know exactly where the dig site is, just metres away from where we hit the kangaroo, and I’ve been reading up on the area since my interview. Before the boom it was amongst the emptiest regions on earth. There was almost nothing. Few people, no railways, desert tracks, a station homestead here and there. Now places like this dig site sit amongst hundreds of people, huge machines, wide level roads and railways leading to ports that never existed. I’m interested to play my part in the progress. But it’s a dull excitement, like it’s held between cotton wool.

And so this is how I will learn to return to work, through banter and busyness, other people’s observations amidst my own vague care. This is going to go slow. I think of Lottie’s smell, of the wet, warm breath of her, of the need of her. It takes everything I have not to walk away. Returning to work will be a shifting away from her, an emptying of my arms.
I’ve been working full time for weeks now and it’s dark when I get home and Gabe’s reading a business magazine on the dining room table. Lottie has fallen asleep in my arms because the lady at child care said she’s been *difficult and fighting sleep* all day.

‘Hey.’

‘Hey.’

‘Would you mind looking after Lottie for an hour or so? I really need to go for a run or do something.’

‘Ah, sorry hon, I already agreed to fill in for a guy who can’t give a lecture at the hospital tonight. Interns.’ He laughs, though I’m not sure why. ‘I was just about to get changed.’ He folds up the magazine, kisses me on the cheek and climbs the stairs three at a time. We haven’t even spoken about the other night. It’s as if I never bit him. But that’s Gabe I guess, a steady life can only be kept anchored if there are no surprises.

After Gabe leaves I heat up a frozen meal and eat it as I breastfeed Lottie. Her hair has gotten lighter and it’s falling out on the spot her head rests when she sleeps. When she falls asleep I lie her on the couch with a pillow on both sides and one at her head like an arrangement from Stonehenge.

There are coffee cups, plates and a bottle top opener on the kitchen bench. I fill the sink with water and bubbles. I don’t understand why I have to ask for permission to do anything. Why it’s just assumed that Gabe can do whatever he likes, but that I have to be bound to the home. Even though I’m working. Like he’s a bloody babysitter. Even as I think this I feel guilty. There’s that feeling again. Not that he would ever feel it. I have to bear the lion’s share of attachment and guilt.

I pick up a sponge in my hand. Strange, that an object can be so light but become so heavy so quickly with liquid. I glance at my hands. I always wanted long, thin fingers. Delicate.
Finicky. I wanted to be able to move them around like a conductor’s stick, orchestrating everyone around me. But what I have are short, swollen stumps. They’ve been that way since I was young. I remember playing at the sink with these hands as a young girl, adorned by a raincoat and hat. I experimented with crude plastic objects I would fill up to see what filling was and pour out to see what pouring was.

*Shit,* I have to fill in a bunch of forms for Lottie’s child care by tomorrow – emergency contacts, allergies – and I have to write another cheque. I pull the forms out of my bag, but haven’t dried my hands properly so my fingers leave wet lines across the official type. There are twelve pages, what the hell could they possibly need to know that would fill twelve pages? They were supposed to give me these forms weeks ago. *Only in a small town,* I think. There is a lot to agree to. If I pick Lottie up after six, I have to pay ten dollars per minute. If she is sick she can’t come in. If she hurts herself they’re not liable. I sign the form and sign a cheque. Lottie’s day care takes half my wage. What’s the bloody point? Lottie cries and I put down the pen to pick her up. I bob up and down, twice for every one step, and hum a lullaby I made up because I didn’t know any. Lottie’s smell still makes my insides ache.

I pull her back from me and realise I have left black writing across her face and arms. Ink that must have come from the forms, that must have been imprinted on my wet hands from washing dishes. A phone rings and I notice Gabe’s mobile on the hallway table, so I answer it in case it’s the hospital and important.

‘Oh hi Anna, this is Mark, I work with Gabe, just wanted to tell Gabe that I gave the lecture and it all went well. Hope he’s feeling better.’ Sometimes in those moments you can be taken aback and know what to say all at the same time. I hang up and slowly walk back into the kitchen. Maybe he has recoiled from my bite, from the baby, from our new life in ways I didn’t realise. Moved towards something, someone, else. I dig up the planted thought in my mind and throw it away. There’s no proof and it’s not like I don’t have enough on my plate at the moment.

I look from the microwave dinner, to the clean dishes, and from the child-care forms to my briefcase full of paperwork. When does it stop? When do I get to stop? There used to be lines drawn in the day I could count on. Times when I could stop what I was doing, when there was room to breathe. Now it all melds into one, there is no distinguishing parts, just a blur.

Tomorrow I have to go to the dig site again and collect some specimens the team thinks are worth looking at. I’ll have to drop Lottie off before it gets light and I won’t see her again before it’s dark. The other day when I picked her up, a child-care worker told me that Lottie doesn’t like banana any more. Shouldn’t I be the one who knows that kind of stuff?
And it’s absolutely beyond me how none of this affects Gabe. I don’t know how he does it but sometimes I wish that I could feel that same sense of detachment. As if my decisions aren’t a reflection of how good a mother I am, or how my daughter is going to turn out.

I look at the briefcase of work that I use to see what filling is and to the forms for the care that demonstrates to me pouring. The endless movement is exhausting and I don’t know what else to do but to ask to work part time.
Fifteen

When I drop Lottie off she screams. She doesn’t move very much. Just sits in the carer’s arms and screams. The drive out to the dig site seems to take forever and I sit in the passenger seat as Professor Clarke, the climate change denier, drives. Professor Madden has asked him to tag along. We drive through the worn out faces of the land. The view either side of us is covered with rock and red earth, scarred by deep gorges and dotted with spinifex. Hills have been fashioned by erosion over millions of years. Sheer red cliffs, weathered by the winds and waters of centuries, thrust up from the beds of winding water courses, from plains and plateaux. Ghost gums cling in solitary isolation from rock walls. There is space, dryness, emptiness. I go to wind down the window to hang my arm in the wind but Professor Clarke shakes his head and turns up the air conditioner. There is such a difference between outside and inside the car that it feels as if the landscape is a painted backdrop on a movie set. Professor Clarke is full of circles; his bald head, round stomach and swollen legs. He’s sweating even inside the cool car and it makes his breathing laboured.

‘My grandfather…he…he used to live out here.’

‘Really?’

‘Only…towards the end.’ His words are punctuated by short sharp breaths, like he is telling me a story in Morse code.

‘For most…of the rest…he was part of the fall of Singapore.’ Surprisingly, history was never my strong subject at school. I could never touch it with my hands. Whenever anyone inserts history into the conversation I am better to nod in case I’m asked any questions.

‘He worked on the Burma Railway…he built it.’ Professor Clarke holds up his fingers like sausages and looks at them as if he is amazed they could ever do anything more than just sit throbbing on the end of an arm. ‘Every time we visited, all he…he used to talk about was the thousands… of Thais at…his camp. They were treated real bad…real bad. Tortured and abandoned.’
'Oh.' I say. There doesn't seem much else to say. I imagine this old man, stuck as a young man in his head, blackened and ferocious in his endurance, grunting from the impact of hammers and picks, surviving on the noises of toil that meant he was still alive.

'He was friends with...one of the Thais. My grandfather used to tell us about this one man who was so thin he used to...do this trick where he would...hold things, like pencils and cigarettes...under his ribs.' He tells me this with a nervous laugh and a crackly cough. As if it is his ribs he is showing me.

'What happened?' I ask, because it seems as though I should say something, should ask something even though I know the story will come out of his mouth whether I want it to or not.

'He died.' He is nodding. 'He got cholera. Not...enough food. They had to put him on the bonfire...with all the others...there...were no spades to dig graves. My grandfather just kept repeating the heat...on my face...they were dead...but when their ligaments warmed...they contracted. Made their bodies sit...bolt upright...as if they were alive. Then they would suddenly exhale sharply...like they had been...hit in the chest.'

It means nothing to me. They are words that evoke memories and feelings for the Professor, but for me they just summon two-dimensional pictures, as horrifying as they are.

'And he turned away. He...just...turned...away. He looked away. Looked at the ground. The...black earth...a swamp of sticky yet slippery mud...from the rain.' It's as if this grandfather's story belongs to Professor Clarke himself.

'When I started hearing...those stories...was about the time I changed my mind.'

'Your mind about what?'

'Our climate.'

Maybe it's possible for us to become trapped in our ancestor's memories as well. I think of Byron's lump of death – a chaos of hard clay. Under skin and bone we're all awash with something borrowed.

At the dig site three young volunteers run up to us excitedly. They think they've found something and I smile to myself at the naïve enthusiasm, until I look at what they're talking about and read their reports. So much for nothing being here. I enter the team's makeshift lab to get a closer look. They seem to be ten-micrometre tubular microfossils found in between sand grains in 3.7 billion-year-old sandstone. The fossils are very clearly preserved, showing precise cell-like structures all of a similar size. The organisation who wants to mine set the lab up with all the technology they'd need to run tests on site – time is money after all. The impressions, of likely sulphur-based bacteria, were found well preserved between quartz sand
grains in prehistoric sedimentary rocks. We have no reception on the way back to Murdoch University, and it slowly begins to sink in that this could be a career changing and defining moment. This is it. This is making history.

But Professor Madden seems to have been primed by someone as I enter his office. ‘Don’t start with me Anna. This is the last thing we need.’

‘What?’ I know he’s all about economics, but this goes beyond science.

‘Look, I need you to check the reports. If they are what we think they are the University wants to send out press releases and papers first thing next month. You’re responsible for that team, go through everything with a fine tooth comb.’ I stare at him a moment. ‘Is there anything else?’

‘Yes. I’ve spoken with Human Resources and the Dean and they have signed off my application to work part time. All I need is your approval.’

‘Anna, I made it very clear when you...’

‘I know, I know, but now I’ve been here I think I’ve made it clear that I can make a significant contribution, I believe that I can do my job in less time.’ I also know that the Dean isn’t Professor Madden’s biggest fan, that she is trying to push him out of the University altogether. I think she liked the idea of making him squirm.

‘I just don’t have time for this...when does it start? It’s now isn’t it, bloody human resources, isn’t that against...’ The only way I could get the Dean to agree was if I started part time work this week so she could use the money on another one of her projects. ‘Whatever, send me the papers. But I want that complete report on the microfossils by the end of the month. Oh and I need you to date this amber by the end of the day.’

I look at the clock and it’s already two o’clock. He knows I have to pick Lottie up from child care. I open my mouth to say something but think better of it. Maybe if I’m really focussed I might be able to get it done. But I need to express straight after this meeting because I didn’t get time for lunch. I’ll have to sit in a cubicle in the toilets too because the small meeting room is booked. That will take at least half an hour. Which will make it about three thirty by the time I’m able to start work on the report. And as I start to get anxious about the timing, I start to feel emotional and as I start to feel emotional I begin to feel my milk come in and my blouse become wet. I walk out of the Professor’s office.

When I sit down at my desk I’m frazzled. I’m on the brink of crying and so walk to the bathroom as carefully as a cup full of liquid. I keep level and steady, careful not to spill over the edges and trickle or spill down the sides. When I return to my desk I look down and notice that milk has seeped through my shirt.
The woman with the cravat and the man wearing earrings begin to notice and become embarrassed for me. There is no room for the body at work. We've spent decades trying to get our bodies into boardrooms but really we have to check them at the door. Like some strange cloakroom where we have to leave our wombs and our hearts and our breasts. I'd never felt this way before. Always fitted in. I'd been so good at playing a man's game. Now my body was betraying me. It was as if people walked around pretending they were all single, all always available at a moment's notice, no strings, as if children and family are a burden; a weight around your neck.

That afternoon I sit in the lab with my familiar white jacket I brought with me from Melbourne. It's a little tighter than it used to be. It's almost four and I look around at my usual tests. I start typing up the report. I usually leave days for this kind of analysis. I think of Lottie in the centre, her screaming face just that morning. I look at the amber in my hand. The more I look at it, the more I realise it's just a stone. It's just a fucking stone. I don't care how old it is, I don't care what's in it, I don't care exactly where it's from. All I know is that my baby is an hour away from me and I should be with her. I've done this a thousand times and could provide pepper-faced man with the facts without testing. But I decide to just test the specific gravity and let that tell me the rest of the information. I drop the amber into the water and it sinks quickly. I write the report and as I leave it on the pepper-faced man's desk I notice that he and the rest of the team have already left.
The three days a week I now work begin to close in on me. I thought I'd have enough time to check all the analyses on the microfossils, but I didn't realise there would be other projects given to me as well. I've checked through maybe half of the information. At the dig my gut told me that what I was looking at was exactly what had been reported – the oldest known fossil. But now that I look through the reports and run tests myself, I'm unsure. But time is running out. Piles of papers and emails and phone messages accumulate until there just doesn't seem like there will ever be enough hours in the day to get everything done. I feel like I spend the days I'm working just keeping my head above water, replying to the most urgent emails, completing the most mundane but important tasks. When I'm with Lottie there is only ever part of me with her because I'm always thinking about all the work I need to get done. But then when I'm at work all I can think about is the fact I'm not spending enough time with my daughter. Everything happens around me or without me – meetings are scheduled on days I'm not working and Lottie crawled for the first time at child care. A lady had give me a small photocopied piece of paper that said, Mummy, today I dotted line for the first time. She hadn't even filled in the word crawling.

It reaches the final week, which means I have only three working days to check my team's reporting on the microfossils and I've still only done half of the work. I'm sitting at my desk staring at the keyboard when my phone rings.

'Hi Anna, it's Meredith from Bright Start, we think that Lottie might be a bit unwell, can you come pick her up?'

'Is she ok? What is it?'

'Bit of a cough, runny nose. The usual, but still…'

'Does it have to be right now? Can it wait till the end of the day?'

'Yes, right now I'm afraid.' I hear her talking through clenched teeth.
'Ok, I’m on my way.’

When I get there Lottie is resting her head on Meredith's shoulder and is sucking the side of her hand. How could I have even questioned getting her right away? I pick her up and hold her floppy body and she feels really hot. I take her to the car and strap her in. Sitting in the driver’s seat I look at the clown painted on the side of the child-care centre. He is not laughing at me anymore, he is a sad clown. He simply shakes his head at me as I pull out of the street and head towards the doctors.

The surgery waiting room looks like a casino, as if there should be slot machines and craps tables in the corner. The carpet is red and blue with swirls of gold; the walls have a faint silver foil and the chairs are covered in green leaves. The lighting, though, is the opposite of what you want when you’re gambling. It’s bright and constant and as I sit in the gaudy chair, I have to dip my head to protect my eyes.

We have to wait for two hours until we’re taken into a small room with two office chairs, a bed and an old computer on a desk. ‘I’m just a bit worried about her because she’s so hot. And she’s not really responding to anything. There, see that cough? And then there’s her nose, which I’m worried could be an infection, but maybe her ears, can you check her ears?’ I’m talking to myself. The doctor isn't even nodding his head in response to me. When he's finished examining Lottie he types a few lines on the computer which I strain my neck to read but can’t. Lottie, even though she has been examined and interfered with, falls asleep on my shoulder.

‘You don’t want to create bad habits.’ The doctor says as he scribbles on a note pad.

‘I'm sorry?’

‘Falling asleep in your arms. You should put her down.’

‘How is she?’

‘She’s fine. Just a cold. She feels hot but in fact she doesn’t have a temperature. It helps to sometimes, well, check that first, before you get yourself all worked up.’ The doctor peers down at me through his glasses.

‘Oh, yes, ok.’

‘First child jitters, I’m afraid, you’ll learn to know when there’s something wrong.’ As he ushers me out, I feel like an idiot.
Seventeen

When I get home it’s dark. Lottie is asleep in my arms.

‘Hi love.’

‘Hey.’

‘Alright. I have a surprise for you.’ I hate surprises. And after the day I’ve had I just want to curl up with Lottie on the couch and put my head under a blanket.

‘I know you’ve been doing it a bit rough recently so…’ He doesn’t even give me time to tell him Lottie’s sick. He walks into the lounge room and comes back pushing a woman in front of him by the shoulders. She is, what my mother would call, pointed. Her fingers are long and her nose looks like the carrot on a scarecrow. ‘I’ve hired you a nanny.’

‘What?’

‘A nanny. I know you’ve been finding child care hard so I thought this would solve your problems and you can just concentrate on what you should be concentrating on.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘Well…the big picture, I guess.’

‘The big…?’

‘Sticking to your plan.’ Gabe is wearing a navy blue V-neck t-shirt that sits tight across his shoulders. Down the side I notice a slice out of the seam and I know it’s from Gabe ripping the tag off. He has those rips in nearly all his t-shirts. The tag annoys him but he’s too impatient to walk to the kitchen and grab the scissors so he just tears the tag off.

‘Hello Anna my name’s Kathleen and I have a lot of experience with babies. Why don’t you hand the little one to me for a while and you’ll see?’ The floor drops from beneath my feet. The woman reaches out her arms towards my baby, who is unwell and just wants her mum who she never gets to see. I walk backwards away from her. And away from the strange man.
‘Get out of my house.’ I say this as much to my husband as the nanny but only the woman leaves. And all at once I realise that Gabe will never understand. That what I need from him I will never be given. As soon as the woman is gone, Gabe steps forward towards me and stabs his finger at my head.

‘You can’t do that Anna, you can’t treat people like that.’
‘And you think you’re treating me well?’
‘She’s just doing her job, and apparently does it very well.’ As Gabe talks his eyes flutter open and closed like he has dust in them.

‘She’s proof that you’re not listening.’
‘Then you’re not being clear. You never are. You just expect people to give you whatever you want whenever you want and when they don’t you treat them like shit.’ Gabe rubs his eyes a few times. The physical distraction disarms his anger.

‘What’s wrong with your eyes?’
‘Ah, conjunctivitis, it’s nothing.’
‘Sit down and I’ll put some hot water on it.’

‘Don’t, don’t touch me.’ But it must be annoying him as he lets me anyway. ‘I’m practically blind in the mornings.’ I put Lottie on a bouncer and walk to the bathroom and notice some expressed milk in a bottle. I pour it into a bowl and return with some cotton wool. I now know breast milk is a cure all for everything. I sit on the edge of the couch and Gabe sits in a chair next to me. ‘Close your eyes.’ I dab the breast milk gently onto his eyes, I am more numb than angry now.

‘I don’t have the energy for this.’
‘I’m sorry?’ Every time Gabe says he’s tired I feel like strangling him. ‘You like feeling tired.’
‘Not this tired Anna. Not this way.’

‘No, because it’s not all about you anymore. The Gabe show. Ladies and Gentleman today we’re going to talk all about Gabe.’ He pulls his head away from me.

‘There’s no need to be like that.’ I hear Lottie cry. I sit for a second. ‘Aren’t you going to go to her?’ It is the way he says it that reignites my anger. There is a nastiness in the tone as if I’m doing everything wrong by putting her before this conversation. I get up and cradle Lottie. Gabe lets out a howling laugh that alarms me. He is mocking me. If we stay in here we will grow mocking and violent. One of us will stick a foot out, and the other will trip. A slapstick routine.

‘That’s the problem with you, you only focus on the bull shit.’ I rock Lottie in my arms.
Then Gabe retreats, slumps in the couch. His face is in darkness. The shadows move around his face and change it from convex to concave. 'I'm doing the best I can.' He seems slightly resistant of the words he speaks, like he is at the mercy of some strange ventriloquist. His hair, too, appears uneasy on his head, reaching or curling in different directions. I can't talk to Gabe anymore. I just look at him and walk outside.

It's warm and dark, but the full moon lights the land. When I was twelve I had my appendix out. Ever since, I sometimes get ghost pains near my right hip. It isn't a stabbing pain, more like a pang, a tingle, a reminder that something was once there but now isn't.

Now I'm working part-time I'm at the mercy of a different kind of ghost pain. I start to feel as if I'm not doing anything well, that I just can't win. If I work full time I feel guilty that I'm not at home more; if I were to stay at home I'd feel guilty that I'm not contributing to the family income or furthering the career for which I've worked so hard; and when I work part-time and stay at home the rest of the time I feel as though I'm not doing either job well. I spend my whole time feeling guilty. Either guilty that I'm not paying enough attention to work, or guilty I'm not paying enough attention to Lottie. Guilty feelings that cannot compare to any other emotion.

As I'm walking across our property, I try to find another word for guilt. But all I find is disgrace, fault, error. I want to try and find another word that doesn't have so much shame attached to it. But, if guilt is in some ways linked with absence, maybe another alternate word can be found. Another word for absence is wanting. Maybe instead of saying or thinking I feel guilty I can say or think I feel wanting. Because what could be criminal about that?

I reach my favourite part of the garden and sit on a large boulder. Lottie is still burning against my body. Her breath is laboured, she snores. The large skeleton of the old cotton mill stands tall, down the road. The building still echoes a cycle of boom, bust and abandonment. I imagine the ghosts that are inside. The women who would have toiled on their feet in the heat with calloused hands and grubby faces. Spinning and weaving. Amid the cotton and dust I imagine them in long skirts, thick sacking pinafores and grey shawls, cleaning the raw cotton, beating and scotching the tangled fibres that were combed and carded. I can almost hear the noise of the roaring rooms and rows and rows of cogs and spindles. Now it's just bricks made quiet by time. Melancholy smokebush grows around scattered bricks on the ground. The blue petals look brighter than usual against the brown bricks. They'll be gone in a few weeks. That's the thing about wild flowers, they are abundant yet transient, blink and they're gone.
I kiss Lottie's cheek. 'Poor baby, my poor little one.' Since she was born I've been dismantling things that, before, I took for granted. What is a kiss? How lovely is a kiss? How have I never marvelled at a kiss before? I wish my kisses could take her sickness away. Lottie coughs and coughs, reaching so far down into her stomach that she is almost sick. 'Sshhh, Sshhh.'

As I look across our property I see a statue that I've never noticed before. It's a figure of a young nude woman with short hair and a semi-circle on a headband on her head. She holds a bow in her left hand and looks as though she is walking on the spot. It seems as though weather has gotten the better of her, even though she is made of stone. Her nose is cracked and one of her hands is missing. Her eyes have also been damaged so that it looks like she is blind. But she is still beautiful. Someone has made a daisy chain of yellow flowers and placed it on her head. But then when I look at the back of her there is graffiti across her legs that reads whore.

The fact that someone has come onto our property and vandalised the statue makes me feel unsettled. So I start walking back to the house. There's no way I can Lottie her in child care tomorrow and I've left myself exactly three days to check over the rest of the fossil reports. And they're at work anyway, so I don't even have them on me. Anyway, I can't exactly bring the fossil home. The discovery of possibly the oldest known fossil is the biggest moment of my career, it is a contribution to science for which I'd given my right arm only months ago. Now, I'm almost too tired to care and I don't have any fight left in me. But then I can't bring myself to tell Professor Madden that I haven't been able to complete the task, because I was the one who convinced everyone I could work part time. I don't want to be the one to prove him right. I just wish I could talk to Gabe about it all but it feels like we're just passing each other by at the moment and what few words we utter to each other are inconsequential. The team on the dig site were only volunteers and Professor Madden, even though he has his agenda, is right to say that the site shouldn't have contained anything remarkable.

The skyline is broken with iron water tanks and windmills. The first thing that shocked me about this area was the amount of galvanised iron. But the windmills don't work anymore, most of them just stand there, broken. They were built to produce grain and had everything a windmill would need to be productive, except that they weren't suited to the climate and so have gone to rust and ruin. Like the cotton mill the water tanks and windmills fought to do their jobs, they battled against the wind and sun and work. They protected machinery, collected water and harnessed the wind; they held up levels of workers and caught falling
weights and spun around and around. But over time, weathering levels everything on this land. And the desire to fight isn't enough.

Lottie’s sickness is consuming. By the time I get back to the house I am convinced the fossils, or rather traces, are not 3.7 billion years old. After all, my team are volunteers, locals who know how to use a shovel, how can I trust their reports on something so important? It seems impossible that we have found the oldest ever recorded fossils, older even than the specimens found in Port Hedland last year. Even though my instincts told me the initial findings were true, the other reports I’ve done make me believe that the rippling layers the team claimed to be the work of bacteria aren’t fossils; that the patterns were actually formed by natural non-organic processes. And the last thing I want to do, if I’m not sure, is to create a media frenzy and to put a stop to the mining project. I really should test the carbon but there’s no time left.

Lottie’s little body feels as though it’s getting warmer and she breathes in and out through her mouth. I’ll write up a report that contradicts the initial one and email it to Professor Madden in the morning.
Eighteen

Friday comes around and I still haven’t sent the report. Lottie has been unwell and there are brief moments in between the times she’s cradled in my arms. To make matters worse there are workmen in our front yard who wake Lottie up every time I get her down to sleep. Gabe doesn’t like the pebble driveway, so he is making pavers by cutting redundant tombstones into squares. They’ll be done by the end of the day, but in some ways so will I. I have to get this email sent because even that is not really enough. I think about calling Elizabeth, but it’s all too hard and, anyway, Faye just lives down the road. I only need an hour or so to have my hands free.

Faye walks in with muddy boots and red eyes. She takes her shoes off at the door and I’m not sure whether to ask if something is wrong. So I just thank her and tell her to make a cup of tea if she wants to, to make herself at home. Lottie is happy to play on the floor with Faye, though as I’m walking up the stairs I see Faye looking off into the distance, going through the motions of rolling balls and walking toys along in that exaggerated way people do when they’re playing with children. I feel terrible for asking her to look after Lottie. I take a step back down the stairs to talk, but then catch myself as I just need to get this report done and emailed away.

Sitting at the keyboard I can hear Lottie begin to cry and all I can think about is Faye’s red eyes. I try to start typing but Lottie’s cry is escalating and all at once there are the four horses in my room again. I thought I’d left them at the birth, but here they are with their steaming breath and hard heels. I feel ropes tied around me and the sensation I thought I wouldn’t have to feel until the next birth strikes again. I am drawn and quartered, doing everything I can to stay seated as one horse pulls me downstairs towards the people in my life and another pulls me towards the University where I should be doing this report properly. One horse is pulling me towards the computer to just get the minimum done so I can try
and appease work and then go downstairs and the last horse is just trying to pull me away somewhere, anywhere away from it all.

I take a deep breath and try and tell myself that I just have to get through this moment, that it’s not going to get any worse than this but I have to pick a horse, otherwise they will just keep pulling and pulling until I am ripped apart and my organs and arms and legs and bone and marrow flies around the room and downstairs and to the University and onto the computer and out onto the wind so that pieces of me are scattered everywhere.

Just to keep it together I stand up and walk downstairs to where Lottie is now inconsolable and it takes me minutes to calm her down. All the way through it Faye is sitting at the table staring at the door, so I make her a cup of tea and sit down to breastfeed Lottie.

‘You ok?’

‘Me, oh nothing hon, right as rain.’

‘It doesn’t rain much here.’

‘I brought some things over for you.’ She hands me a basket overflowing with food. ‘All from our farm. Eggs, milk, flowers, jam.’ She moves the items round the basket as she names them, ‘bread, turnips, carrots.’ But she moves things so fast that they knock over the milk bottle and it smashes on the tiled floor. ‘Jesus, sorry.’ She wipes up the liquid and sits back down with the wet cloth in her lap.

‘What’s going on Faye, talk to me.’

‘You know, you have to be persistent to be an optimist.’ Faye looks down and realises the damp cloth is growing a wet patch on her lap. She stands up quickly and just moves from side to side. She reminds me of a giant in a town full of little people. Not because she is particularly tall or large, but because of her relationship with noise and movement. Like some female Gulliver. Instead of walking with her legs straight out in front of her she moves the entire half of her body as she steps with one leg so that when you watch her take a few steps it seems as though she has no joints. She takes Lottie from me and starts singing *Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross to see a fine lady upon a white horse, with rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, she shall have music wherever she goes.* She skips around the room a bit, or really gallops with her as she walks. Lottie coughs lightly which is her way of laughing at the moment. It’s like she has the first part formed but then the rest gets stuck in her throat. ‘She’s ok now. I think she was just hungry. You go finish what you need to do.’ I pause, but Faye moves me with her free hand towards the stairs. I give in, I have to send this email.

I open a template I’ve used a thousand times before so I can just cut and paste some of the information. I tick boxes, type the right words, I do the bare minimum because
at the moment I just need to get it off my plate. Because just having this task before me is going to send me mad. I see the horses champing on their bit in the corners, Ok, ok, I whisper, just give me a second. I attach the short report to an email and send it to Professor Madden at three in the afternoon on the Friday it's due. I remember the days when I used to get everything done ahead of time, when if I completed something two days in advance I would think it late.

Lottie is asleep in Faye's arms when I come downstairs again.

'I'll just stay here until she wakes. She needs to sleep at the moment.' I nod and make Faye another cup of tea.

'Where are your children now?'

'Oh long gone. I think I almost have a child in every state in Australia. Oh except the Northern Territory. So yes, every state.'

'Do they come down much?'

'When they can. You know how it is. They have kids of their own now, travelling is expensive. I understand. I was hoping some would come down for Christmas, but…' She shrugs her shoulders, takes a sip of the tea too early and burns her tongue. 'You should come over some time. Though maybe not this week.'

'Oh?'

'We moved to York just after Henry died in a farming accident. We used to have a dairy farm in Byford, just south of Perth. It started with a vegetable patch. Then we began keeping chickens in our garden. Then we acquired a Jersey cow and bought extra land she could graze on.' Faye moves tentatively to take a sip of her tea, making slurp sounds as she sips too early and there's no liquid, and then finally takes a sip and nods. 'Our aim was just to provide milk for ourselves and the boys when they were young. Back then we would have never described ourselves as farmers. When that cow had a male calf I just couldn't bring myself to kill him. I'd named him Cliff. We had to kill him eventually but I just couldn't do it for no reason. So we decided to rear it, slaughter it and eat it. We became quite the trailblazers.' Faye snorts and her body heaves. 'Problem is that because we weren't killing almost half of our cows, we suddenly had more cows than we had land. Then we visited a friend's farm and I noticed a group of newborn bull calves in a pen. I asked our friend what would happen to them and he said they were going to the abattoir. We took them home. That's how it all started.' I realise I know nothing about Faye.

'What happened to the farm?'
‘Well, we sold it off, I bought a property here and already had my nursing qualifications, so worked as a midwife to keep the kids in clothes, that type of thing. But I kept three of the cows for milk and company. That’s where the milk comes from.’ Faye points to the basket.

‘Thanks so much for that, you really didn’t…’

‘You know the thing that people don’t realise about cows is that you have to win their confidence. You have to be kind. You have to get to know their individual temperaments. Some are nervous and need special care, others have been badly managed in the past so need a bit of reassurance.’ Lottie wakes up and Faye stands up to hand her to me along with a half drunk cup of tea. ‘Thanks.’

‘Hey, I should be the one thanking you.’

‘No worries chicken.’ The reference reminds me of my father. And with that her muddy boots are replaced and the door opens and closes. The room is quiet without her and I think about how I have a tendency to fill my days with so much activity that I don’t usually notice the silences. That when I notice them, everything seem lacking. The in between moments make me feel as though I am constantly falling short of something, though I don’t quite know what it is.
I attend work the next week with more optimism. Lottie seems better and she leaves me a little easier when I drop her off at child care. Maybe this is going to work out after all. I’ll see her for four days in the week and leave her for three. Professor Madden has shaved and has clearer skin, the woman who usually wears a purple cravat is absent and the changing lens man smiles at me as I sit down. Ok, I might actually be able to pull this off. I begin to think I’ve been a bit silly for worrying so much. It’s just taken some time. I needed to let myself adjust, to let Lottie adjust.

Professor Madden replied to my report with congratulations, relief and the in between the lines smugness of I knew I was right. He’s glad the project is going ahead and I’m sure my report made him feel as if he is staying true to any ‘benefits’ he is receiving.

Professor Madden walks out of the meeting room and comes back in, dropping a pile of papers on the desk and stands gripping his wrist and spinning his fingers so that it looks as if he is trying to unscrew his hand from his arm.

‘Anna. What the hell?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I’ve just received reports from the Western Australian Museum, that fossil, those fossils, they are 3.7 billion years old.’

‘What?’ My heart quickens and I fiddle with my pen, taking the lid off and putting it on over and over again.

‘Now I’ve signed off on a mining company’s project, a project they are well into. They’ve been drilling that site for days now. God knows what they’ve done. I already have the newspapers calling me.’

People are trying to read my face – freezing my brain with stony looks and stares made malicious with obscurity, so that I can’t read their faces, while they are busy reading mine. The
Some Uncertain Facts

room is barbed wire. I learn that morning that words that soak into your ears are whispered not yelled. They are the ones that stay with you forever. The pepper-faced man is still talking.

‘I thought you measured the carbon? Jesus Christ Anna, you’re either a liar or incompetent, neither of which I want in my team. You didn’t check it did you?’ The room falls silent and I don’t know what else to do besides stand up, walk out, pick up Lottie and go home.

When I get home Gabe is in the lounge room with his head in his hands. ‘What are you doing home?’

‘I was just about to ask you the same thing?’ Gabe shifts his weight from one foot to another. ‘I need to tell you something.’ And in that moment I know. As Gabe stands in front of me, with his hands in his pockets, all the little deaths inside my bones tells me he is having an affair. Everything makes sense. I feel a light weight on the inside of my stomach vanish and then appear again, vanish and return, like the history of something, like the story of all things.

‘How long? Don’t lie to me.’ I say this slowly, my voice hard. Gabe seems to be looking down, watching his own mouth move. Anxiety seems to shrink his face: his mouth caves in, his eyes grow beady and dark. ‘How dare you. You know, it’s not even me I care about, it’s the legacy you’re leaving your daughter. Have you thought of that? Of your daughter telling people that her father is an unfaithful lying cheat? What a lovely…’

Gabe steps forward and holds my elbow, ‘Hang on what? No hang on, that’s not it.’ I look at his face. I wait.

‘I lost my job.’

‘What?’ For a second I think he’s trying to twist the story.

‘Sit down.’ I wrestle my elbow back with Lottie in my arms and step away giving him a defiant you better tell me what the hell is going on look. Gabe raises his shoulders up and down a few times and sits down on the coffee table. I’m about to tell him not to as people eat off that surface but I stop myself.

‘Just after Lottie was born I was brought into a delivery. The husband was downstairs filling out her admittance forms. The labouring woman was in pain and we spoke for some time about her options. She decided to have an epidural. Her husband was still downstairs as we administered it and I left.’ Gabe stands for a moment and then sits back down, but it takes a moment for his whole body to sink…first his thighs so that his feet are resting flat on the ground rather than perched high ready to flee, then his chest, which has been upwards and forwards as if his sternum is being pulled by an invisible string, and finally his head, that has been quickly surveying the room for any signs of danger. There is a giving in to his movement.
'Apparently the husband came in and felt I had, ’ Gabe coughs still with his head lowered, ‘coerced his wife to have an epidural and they sued me and the hospital. As it turned out the couple happened to be influential donors. The hospital wanted me to apologise.’

‘And you did.’ I sit down on the couch with Lottie. ‘And I was fired even before the case was settled.’

‘But wait, hang on,’ I lie Lottie down on the couch, ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Look, these things you know, they happen in our line of work all the…’

‘So then what makes this different?’

‘I don’t know. Money. Influence.’

‘But I still don’t…so would they have just let it go if you’d said sorry?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘But you didn’t at least try?’

Gabe stands up now, the string connected to his sternum pulled tight. He walks around the room with a new energy. ‘You don’t understand.’

‘I understand losing your job.’

‘I couldn’t do it. I just…’

I try to do the math in my head. I walk up to him and between gritted teeth spit out. ‘So you haven’t been working all this time? What the fuck have you been doing?’ He doesn’t say anything. I leap away from him and begin pacing furiously about the room touching furniture not looking at him. I pick up Lottie again, holding her close to me. Relieved she’s in my arms. ‘How could you not tell me?’ Nothing around me seems to be holding steady; nothing holds. ‘And why haven’t you helped? Why have I had to bear all this load on my shoulders?’ I’m not even angry Gabe lost his job, what I’m furious about is the fact that it never occurred to him to be a father at home with Lottie.

‘There’s something else.’

‘What.’

‘The job, what happened, it meant I haven’t paid the mortgage in well…’

‘What?’

‘And I can’t work, in any part of Australia. Not as a doctor anyway.’

Gabe is silent and I am silent and then he begins to speak. His words rumble at the edge of my life like a truck. One of his pant legs is tucked into his shoe. I don’t know why but it makes me feel a momentary pang of intimacy, but it quickly disappears. ‘So hang on. That’s why you’ve been pushing me to go back to work isn’t it? It’s not because you fucking want me to focus on my career or that you believe in my research, it’s that you, we, need the fucking
money. I'm spitting now. Gabe turns around, walks back up the stairs and slams a door, and sucks all the air out of the room. I can't leave. Where would I go? I have all of Lottie's things here anyway. The air is heavy. I feel as if there is this voice inside me, a voice that I have never felt or heard before, a voice I don't even know how to vocalise. I'm coughing, growling, I grit my teeth so hard I can hear bones in my head. I can hear them grinding away at each other. I'm sharpening my teeth, turning them into knives so I can slice something up. Carve. It's me against everything, everyone else. Me and Lottie against everything else. I need to make a sound. I need to break something, to unleash some animal inside of me. If I stay in this spot any longer I will explode.

Then I hear the music. I hear the tambourines. It's the tarantella and the tune drums into my mind, *dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum*. I can see the colourful ribbons flashing before my eyes, spinning and spinning round on the long black skirts, *dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum*. I start to breathe deeply. I can hear the wind outside and I pace the room. I want to scream but Lottie has fallen asleep over my shoulder so I scream into my arm. My mouth leaves a round wet patch on my sleeve. I don't know how it got to this, I walk up and down the room quietly. Creeping almost. The wind becomes louder outside and my chest hurts. All the decisions over the past year fizz in my head.

Gabe walks into the room. 'I'm doing my best Anna. I'm doing my best. My best.' The more he speaks the more I feel foolish, deprived of reason. My rage flaps awkwardly like a duck. I feel like I did the last time I saw my mother, bony and withdrawn on the steps to our house. I hugged her goodbye, the empty sack of her, and then flew away. Family. I think. What a racket.

I look at my husband and for a moment it seems they're all in Gabe's eyes – my sailing father, my over-sensitive mother, the clown at the child-care centre, the pepper-faced man at work, the rest of my colleagues with accusatory eyes. I cover my face with my hands, like a child who believes darkness means invisibility, then I take Lottie upstairs, grab some of our things and lock myself in the attic.
WINTER
Twenty

Even though the attic has been renovated, spiders still get in. So I spend my time watching Lottie breathe and killing arachnids. They’re legs and bodies are black and thick. Not like a dainty daddy longlegs. I step on them with my shoe and just leave their squashed bodies right where I kill them. Like fallen stars. They are large and run fast, mind you they aren’t as large as the spiders in Queensland, those ones are more beasts than stars. Often I have to step on them twice, stepping on them once usually just makes them run faster.

I don’t want to think about anything at the moment. I beat notions of work and motherhood and marriage out of my mind. But when I push them aside once, they just run faster through my mind so I squish them with mindless distraction. I start to go through the cardboard boxes I asked Gabe to put up here when we moved in. I imagine lots of married couples have toasters and irons in their attic. Wedding presents that multiply like cells. Not us. We didn’t want the awkward ceremony, the embarrassing relatives, the cumbersome, repetitive presents. One day, in the middle of our usual breakfast of corn fritters and tomato chutney, Gabe had turned to me and said, ‘Let’s just go to the registry office today.’ And so we did. And we asked everyone to send a donation to the Queensland floods fundraiser.

I think about our wedding and our blasé decision over corn to get married. I think about how proud I was of myself to not care so much, to be alright with doing the sensible thing. I was careful to be unlike those other brides who become consumed by the glitter, by weddings that act as shining spoons to distract you from the reality of a relationship. But now I realise that I want the awkward ceremony, the embarrassing relatives, the beautiful dress, flowers that cost more than a month’s wage, and I want the wedding presents so that when Lottie is older I can say we got that vase for our wedding.

In one box are old clothes that will never fit me again. I hold the scooped-neck top up and stretch the waist, how did I ever fit into that? I feel as though, over the past year, I’ve
been a babushka doll, a small one to start with being put into larger doll after larger doll until I’m ten times larger than my original self. Now I’m slowly shedding the other dolls but my smaller self is still within many other layers.

I unwrap four glass mason jars from a box I brought from Melbourne. When I was a young girl they used to sit on my bedside table. Multi-coloured chipped buttons, some with cotton still attached, line a jar that is speckled with paint. The round fasteners are a homage to security. The next jar contains round, lace patterns my mother used to place under cups of tea to safeguard our coffee table, God knows why, the table hardly deserved her protection. The third jar once held strawberry jam and is filled with glass I collected when I was on the beach and my father was mooring his boat. The translucent turquoise and blurred amethyst have been tended to by waves and it’s hard to imagine their once sharp corners could cut. They remind me of the thrill of discovery. The final jar has little white skeletons of water creatures I also collected with Dad. So small yet so defiant. After Mum left Dad I put the jar of lace and the jar of buttons in a bottom drawer, wanting to bury the remnants of domesticity.

The jars smell of my childhood home. They smell of mould. Mum and I weren’t dirt poor we were carpet poor. All the little one-bedroom apartments we could afford in Queensland were run down and had carpet with smells and stains that still linger with me. I used to put a sheet on our bedroom floor as if I was playing an imaginary game. Maybe in some ways I was.

That’s what motherhood looked like to me. Stained carpet, beans, having to use the next-door neighbour’s newspaper for toilet paper. That’s what motherhood looked like to me when you chose to leave your husband and stay home. I had fought my whole life to give myself, give Lottie, more. Now I don’t know how to reconcile the two worlds. Gabe losing his job means I have to bring in money, enough money to cover the mortgage at least for a while. But thinking of working full time makes me nauseous. Working part time won’t bring in enough money. And anyway, I end up having to work a full time job just in less time. All this time I’ve been taught that the battle we fight is in keeping our identity when we become mothers. I read magazine articles, blogs, papers, but now I realise that it is money. It is all about motherhood and money. I don’t want to be completely dependent on Gabe, but I don’t want to work the hours to cover the costs of my previous lifestyle. So that’s it then. There’s the impasse. The way hope becomes history.

A spider scuttles across the crate in front of me and I let it run by. In some countries, instead of a tooth fairy there are such things as tooth spiders. The tooth spider can steal your children, mix them up, bring you a changeling child.
How do I escape my mother’s motherhood while being able to be a mother myself? Is this what it comes to – that you can never escape? That certain things are doomed to continue, generation after generation? I put everything back in the boxes and push them into a corner. I take the mattress off the bed and put it on the floor so Lottie won’t roll off and hurt herself.

I haven’t been up in the attic before. I don’t know what I expected, maybe cobwebs and exposed beams, dusty floors and forgotten relics. But it’s not, it’s more of a twenty-first century conversion. There is a single bed, freshly painted pastel yellow walls, polished floorboards and electricity. There’s a bathroom with a toilet and shower. The wood in the roof is exposed and low, criss crossing my head like a large lattice hat.

I let out a large breath as if I’ve been held down underwater for more time than I can take and have just broken through the water and opened my mouth. I put my hands on my hips and bend over. My head is pounding. Lottie is sleeping on the bed with the Stonehenge pillow arrangement around her body. For the past three months I feel as though people’s opinions have been walking around in the bare rooms of my brain, looking for a place to sit. In Lottie I feel both an expansion and diminishment of my own personality. In everyone around me I feel appraisal.

I’m paralysed. Bent over in two with my hands on my hips like a wind up doll that has come to the end of its motion. I slowly uncurl but remain standing like a teapot with two handles. Trying to figure out how to balance work with motherhood is like trying to imagine what it will be like to one day die. That emptying feeling you get when you close your eyes and try, really try, to understand, to comprehend the fact that one day, I, my body, my mind, everything I see and experience and dream and do will not be here. Will simply not exist. All I can manage is blinking. Top eyelash to bottom eyelash, then open, top eyelash to bottom eyelash, then open.

I’ve never noticed before how a dark night can get darker. That we focus on dusk, that time of day when the sun sets and light diminishes. But as I stand staring out the window for what seems like hours, is hours, I notice that there is just as much different between the darkness at ten and the darkness at twelve. There is just as much diminishment.

The day is now dark and cavernous. I feel myself sinking into the pools of death deep in my bones, the dark wells of loneliness, failure, blame. I finally manage to move and lie with Lottie. The windows are closed, but my left ear catches noises outside. I feel clammy and doomed. I felt doughy and muddy. This is good, I suppose, decomposition? Maybe a palaeontologist will find me in years to come. I wonder what parts of me will disintegrate and what will remain. Will they be able to tell who I was? A mother? A scientist? A wife?
All the soft parts fall away, only the hard remains. The scientist, my mind, the logic of it all. Everything else is disposable, degradable. Who am I now? It's as if I'm not anything.

I look out the window and see all the landscapes I have lived. There is a forest of stone. Petrified trees hardly ever fossilise where living trees grew, and when finally uncovered by erosion, their calcified remains are usually lying prostrate. Torn and uprooted and broken by nature, the trees are washed miles from their final resting place as river flotsam, later to be buried under tons of sediment at the bottom of shallow swamps. But the same erosion that is uncovering the dead past is also covering the living trees in the same position in which they grow. Slowly, relentlessly, the dune is advancing, migrating, drowning, choking strangling, burying all vegetation in its path. Only by gaining some concept of time can we begin to understand how a living forest can be entombed by drifting sand, then reappear calcified tens of thousands of years later. But in this new world time is blended. The distant past looms mysteriously before me in the present. And as my thoughts skim back over the broad, sweeping panoramas of this foreign land my mind, my imagination is engulfed by the magnitude of change.

In this temporary dissolve, seeing death and birth, seeing the beginning and then the end, how they are the same quiet black, same nothing ever after: everyone's life appears in the world like a computer screen on television. First dark, then light, then dark again. But it is all staggered so that somewhere there is always dark. That's not it. That's not it. The thoughts don't stay in my head.

A shadow falls across me, and I can feel myself retreat to that place in my bones where death is and you greet it like an old acquaintance in a room: you say hello and are then ready for whatever comes next – which might be annihilation or it might be salvation. Time reveals the true nature of things. But it is the ambiguity that drives me mad. It is life's ambiguity that makes me mad. I want to have it all but I need to redefine what 'all' is. All, all, I roll the word around my mouth. It tastes bitter. I swallow all of these words, every whisper, and it eats away at this heart of mine.

The sun warms the room and melts me down to some equation of animal sadness, leather and brine. I begin to understand why people want to live in dusky nether zones, the meltdown brought on by sleep or drink or this. It seems truer, more familiar to the soul than the busy complicated flash that is normal life. Lottie's cheek leans into me, my breasts push back instinctively, I bring her up to my face and connect our heads, mine now connected to the rest of my body only by filaments and strands.
I manoeuvre my body, like some burglar weaving through lasers, away from Lottie so she doesn’t wake. I look at myself in the mirror in the bathroom. My body becomes cold and my heart is sweaty. I sit on the floor with my head between my legs but it doesn’t help. The outer regions of my eyes become blurry.

Before I had a baby I was a ship in a bottle. Happy thinking that my airless, sterile, safe environment was all there is. Then giving birth shattered my glass and I was released out onto the ocean. I’m now free, but it’s like I’m experiencing life for the first time. I’ve never experienced the ocean before so I have nothing to guide me. No compass, no relative experience that I can compare anything to. There are nights that are rough and terrifying, and there are days that are warm and calm. But maybe the fear is better than being in a bottle. Then again, maybe not.

I lie on my back and the feeling passes slightly but only enough so I can stand again. I look at the mirror. It becomes a circus amusement, a fun park ride, where my body is distorted and my head is warped. I move my body and the reflection changes again so that I am tiny, a shadow of my actual size, then the image transforms and I look like a giant hourglass with a humongous head and thighs and a tiny waist. All the while, as I’m looking at this strange woman in the wall in front of me, half of my body is poised for Lottie. Listening out for her sounds if she needs me. It’s strange how you can be so engrossed in darkness yet a part of you can remain in the light for your child.

Then, all at once, my reflection is no longer there. I am a vampire, a creature of the night. This is how anomalies are told apart from humans; people created vampires to explain the mystery of death. And it is in a mystery that I am captive. A grey I cannot understand or hold on to, an in between I do not want. The absence of my reflection is the only way I can explain away the distortion of my image. I have crossed over now. There is no part of me that is the same as before.
I take a white hand towel and wrap it around one arm and then another towel around the other. I look like a linen boxer. People think that breaking mirrors has to be loud and dangerous. But the thing is it doesn’t. It can be quiet and safe.

I push all my weight into the mirrors with my bandaged arms. I heave my body into the glass until cracks begin to show and then spread across the pane. It sounds like ice beneath my feet. The mirror holds itself together for a moment in suspended reality. Trying to decide whether or not it will hold to the wall or break apart.

Then slowly, gradually, pieces fall into the sink like money in a wishing well. The sink is full of silver and black. I take the towels off my arms and look at my white wrists…but then check I haven’t woken Lottie. And that’s it. All these people who think that mothers on the brink risk their children’s lives. She is still foremost in my mind, amongst the scattered thoughts and fear and regret. I know I will keep her safe above all else. I forget my wrists, my skin, my blood.

I take three spare white cotton sheets out of a drawer and rip them carefully, quietly. I am on the floor on all fours, hunched over like an old woman in the cotton mill. I start the tear with a pair of nail scissors from the bathroom and then continue the rip by holding one side with my teeth and pulling with the other. Then I hold both sides with my hands and pull and pull so that the distance between my arms grows from small to large.

The edges fray so that little strands of cotton escape the line. And when I’m finished I have hundreds of white rectangles strewn around my body. Lottie stirs, rolls over and falls back to sleep. I start with the exposed wooden beams, standing on a chair and tying strip after strip around the striped roof. Then I take all the pictures off the walls and tie strips around nails and hooks, the bedposts and window fasteners, the holes in the cardboard boxes, the doors, every material that juts out from the wall, or ceiling, the handles on the chest of drawers.

I stand back and look at the room, and it’s as if I’ve put the room’s hair in rags to make it more beautiful. My mother would be proud. My father would be bewitched. I step, one foot in front of the other so my heels and toes touch, like a tight ropewalker who, at any moment, could fall to their death. Walking around the room, it’s as if I’m in a daze. I lift my hand up to feel the ends of the rags brush my palm. In circles and circles I walk, my eyes half closed, my fingers playing with the soft tickle of the frayed cotton. My waving looks like that of a distant queen.

In the bathroom I hold up my skirt like a basket and collect the pieces of glass. They tinkle, tinkle, slip and slide against each other and around the fabric. I am careful not to cut
myself as I walk around the room and tie the sharp fragments to the strands of cotton on the sheet’s edges. They glisten in the dim room’s light.

I remove my top, my skirt, my bra and underpants, I take off my wedding band and my earrings. I shed everything that rests heavy upon me and changes me, that makes me and defines me. My naked body stands in the centre of the room as my baby girl sleeps soundly.

And as I look around the room I can see bits and pieces of myself, hanging reflections, parts of me around the room. An eye. A strand of hair. A glimpse of skin. A mother’s breast. A wife’s mound of hair. A scientist’s finger.
I’m curled up with Lottie in the morning light when Gabe knocks on the door. ‘You don’t have to talk to me Anna, but you need to eat something. For Lottie’s sake.’ I stand at the door and listen in an exaggerated stance like I’m in a children’s pantomime. I imagine him with his hands on his hips. One foot in front of the other. Ready to step in. ‘Anna please.’

Loving a baby makes you see other love in a new way. It makes you realise that not all loves are compatible – that in this instance my love for my daughter is not compatible with my love for my husband. There is no risk of shaken baby syndrome – the only person I felt like shaking is my husband. He keeps on.

‘You know Anna, even if I didn’t lose my job, I still would have wanted you to keep working. It’s your dream. It’s who you are. I just didn’t want you to lose yourself. Christ, isn’t that what you said women have fought for?’

_Fuck off._

‘I know you. Remember that job in Sydney, that you initially hated but you stuck it out and it turned out to be your favourite dig? This always happens…

_Fuck…off_

‘You change your mind, if you acted on your whims imagine all the things you would have missed out on.’

_I haven’t changed my mind._ I think. _I have changed my heart._ There is a long silence. I lean up against the door with my back facing Gabe.

‘I’m no where in this am I?’

_What?_ I think.

‘Have you stopped to think how I would have felt? How ashamed I was. Do you even…’

He sighs. ‘It’s all about you, isn’t it? I’m just the person who…’

_Don’t you dare._ I think.
'Jesus. I can't do anything right anymore Anna. What do you want from me? You wanted all this.' I hear his arms slap against his thighs and realise he must have gestured around himself, lifted his long, broad arms up and then let them fall. 'You wanted the big house and the doctor husband. Well, if you want those things you have to take the shit that comes with it. The expectations and responsibilities.' Gabe's voice rises and he throws his anger into the ring. 'Enough. Enough. You played your part in this Anna, you played your part.' Then I hear footsteps down the staircase.

There is nothing in that moment, it's as if I only partly hear the words, as if I can't react. The story has gone too far now, I'm too far gone. It's as if every moment recently slips through my fingers. In the past I would have groped to catch every word, to try and hold on to everything that happens to try and control every outcome. Now, I don't have the energy and I don't have the desire. But still… the silence wails in my head. I'm left here with a thousand words I should have said. These moments are beyond any vocabulary and I have no way to talk to him. Just thinking about the reality of the situation sends me reeling into darkness again. I can't accept that I'm unhappy and that every plan I've ever made has fallen away. The idea that I might leave Gabe, that I might give my daughter the same legacy my mother gave me, is unbearable. I want to collapse, to scream, to wail uncontrollably, but I can't. Lottie wakes up. I open the door and pick up a tray of food – sandwiches, water, mandarins. I close the door and lock it.

I pick up Lottie and walk over to the attic window with her in my arms. I can see the crop marks and soil marks from earlier cultivation and settlement, the patterns of ridge and furrow. I can see the warm brown rooves of the town, half buried by red mountains. As I watch the world from the window I can see people guiding cattle and tending to farms. They seem so large, so much more real than my life now in this room. I think about Gabe and Professor Madden, about my job and the academics at the university. They are all part of an other world, a distant world, a universe I am not part of anymore.

It's as if I'm looking through the wrong end of a telescope and people get bigger as they walk away.
In bed with Lottie, I am dislocated, frightened by the disappearing sunlight. I have looked for happiness in all the wrong places and it has finally broken me. There is another knock on the door.

‘Anna, it’s me Elizabeth.’ I can smell her through the door.

*Thank God for locks.* I remain in bed.

‘How are you?’

*How am I?*

‘Gabe’s doing his best hon, it’s hard for them to understand all this.’

*All what?*

‘We are gatekeepers, us mothers, it would have been better to let him in.’

I squeeze my eyes shut and open them, squeeze them and open them. Then I open my mouth as wide as I can as if I am screaming silently, and then close it, I stretch it wide and then close it tight.

‘I know what it feels like Anna. I know what it feels like to want to be with that little person every second of every day.’ And I know she does, but she doesn’t know the rest. Forty years ago it was a different world. She didn’t have all the other crap, the other choices, the other pressure. She might not have had the same opportunities, but I’m not sure it’s all it’s cracked up to be.

‘You girls, you make it so much harder for yourselves. It’s simple isn’t it Anna? If you follow your gut? Wouldn’t you just stay home while Lottie is so young? I’m old fashioned, maybe, but there is something in that.’

And there it is. Doesn’t she think I have said those same words to myself? But the thing is I’m not sure what good I would be to Lottie if I was home every minute of every day. I’m not sure I’d be a very good mother if there was no slit of space for myself, no little carrot to race after. Maybe I’m still like Gabe, more like him than I think.
‘Trust me, Anna. Listen to me. Life is so short, it can be taken in a second, and when that happens you wish with everything you have that you just held everyone you loved close to you and didn't worry about anything else. You've lost perspective.’

And I have. I have. But not in the way she thinks.

‘You know, you have a beautiful healthy baby, a husband who adores you,’ she stops. ‘People make mistakes, sure. You're just so ungrateful.’ As she walks away I hear her whisper under her breath, selfish bitch.

And I am five-years-old again, blindfolded and playing pin the tail on the donkey and Elizabeth is twirling me around and around, her hands placed firmly on my shoulders and then just when I think I can't spin any longer she stops me rigid and says, ‘There you go, go for your life,’ and I stumble forwards with the paper tail in my hand held out in front of me and I lift it up and I pull it down and I switch it from right to left and just when I feel like I've found where the tail should be I push it on confidently, and remove my blind fold, only to see that I've actually pinned the tail on the donkey's head and everyone is laughing and laughing and I turn to Elizabeth and she is laughing the loudest and clapping her hands in delight. It seems a common theme to be on your knees in this family.

I understand why women stay at home. I understand why women work. I understand why women do a bit of both. I understand why women use child care and shared care, community care and nanny care. That's the problem. Everything, all at once, seems equally important and equally possible. It's all the options that do my head in. The fact that I can be anything I want to, but that everything comes with a price, with a voice in your head that says you should be doing something else. That every decision comes with voices from people around you that contradict the decisions you make, but that all have a point.

I sit on the edge of the mattress and peel a mandarin. I hold each moon-shaped piece up to the light of the window to check for pips before breaking them in half and holding them up to Lottie's lips. How do you move forward when there seems nowhere to go? I can't go in Gabe's direction because I've lost the wonder. And anyway, work wouldn't want me back. And I don't want to be away from Lottie all the time. I can't go in Elizabeth's direction because I'm terrified I'll wake up one day twenty year's down the track, with three children who have started to live their own lives and move away, and realise I have nothing. That my life has been lived completely and utterly for others.

So what then? I think about Gabe's and Elizabeth's words. It is the afterthought that always gets me into trouble. The dissection of a conversation. I look at each word they said as though I'm peeling a mandarin, holding up the half moons to the sun to check for pips. Then
I think about all the words I have thought to myself. Can any of these ideas be trusted? Really?
I’ve stepped off the path now. I’ve abandoned the road. I’m living in the bushes. I’m a bush woman now. Rather than black and white I find charcoals and creams, hues of perspective.
Lottie hasn’t woken to feed in a while and I walk over to the mattress. She looks pale so I turn on the light and pick her up. She is floppy in my arms and when I try to wake her she doesn’t open her eyes. But she is still breathing, thank God she is still breathing. She stirs and then falls asleep again. I’m imagining things. I put her back down and click my tongue. She’ll be fine. I’m imagining things.

I look out the window. It’s been a week now. In places the sand has blown away right down to the level of country on which vegetation grew a thousand years ago. The land is stripped and revealed. Everything that has been planted in recent years has disappeared and what I see is the most corporeal. I know that if I was walking across that plain right now it would be like walking over patches of fine, broken glass that crackle underfoot.

Something isn’t right. I don’t know how to describe it, but I know it. I know it. Lottie’s body is whispering to me in small and unsure sentences that float through my heart and mind; they linger then disappear. It’s as if I need to catch one in my hands, like a firefly, to clasp something she is saying within my facing palms and then slowly open them up and hold the gap to my ear. What’s that? Ah ha, ah ha. Then I would know. Then I would be sure. But I can’t seem to catch anything though I’m groping in the air, through the room in which I have made us captives. Lottie’s whispers elude me.

The last time I thought Lottie was unwell, I felt stupid when they told me it was nothing. The way the doctor looked at me. I’ve spent my whole life studying, working, so that people will never look at me like that. I didn’t want to be that overly sensitive woman, emotional, too protective. I have trained myself, over the years, to feign strength. But maybe that’s just it. I have thought that to be strong is to be logical, resistant to care. Maybe it is in the emotion where strength actually lies.
And leaving the room would be a kind of white flag, a breaking of resistance. It seems that it’s only in this room where I can unravel, dismantle in the way I need to. Staying in this room is my lobby, my demonstration, with imaginary placards and crowds of people in my head and heart who rebel with me.

I pick Lottie up in my arms. Listless, that is what she is, in my arms she melts and is more body than soul. I put her down for a moment and try and wake her up but she opens her eyes faintly and closes her eyes again. I put on my bra and my underwear. I lift Lottie again and jiggle her around a bit pretending as if everything is alright. But she resists my optimism. I lie her down again on the bed. I put my top on and my skirt on, my earrings in my ears and the wedding band on my finger.

In the past few months I have pressed my gut down, pushed it so low inside my body that its voice is a quiet squeak of a sound. Lottie is so warm. Something is not right. I am clothed and conscious and slowly the broken mirror and the torn cotton strips, my silent voice when Elizabeth and Gabe spoke to me and the locked door begin to seem merely superficial.

I open the window.

A gust of wind breathes through and fills the room. I step back and the dangling pieces of cotton strips sway and the fragments of mirror spin, hitting each other, tinkling like a wind chime. Bits and pieces of me move in the breeze. I used to have a simple, intact identity, but now I am everything, everyone, everywhere. I realise that in the past I didn’t exist except in the mirror of male approval. But, women should be able to reinvent. And I decide, with the scattered parts of myself forever changing in front of me, that it’s time I did so.

I rush downstairs and initially can’t find Gabe anywhere, but then I notice him, sitting at the dining room table in the dark, with not even a coffee cup in front of him. He looks up and sees me and knows in an instant.

‘We have to get her to hospital.’ I rush towards the door. Usually he would say let me have a look at her or why don’t we give it a bit of time and see how she is but this time he puts on his shoes and leads me to the car with his arm around my shoulder. A sick child lassos you to the here and now. And this sick little body, for which we’re responsible, picks us up from the depths and drags us out together into the night.
SPRING
We’re rushed into a room and my baby is taken out of my arms. For what seems like a few minutes my hands remain in front of me as if at any moment they are going to give her back to me. There are voices around us, *we’ll have to transfer if she gets much worse…don’t have those facilities.* They try and find a vein in her arms for an IV but can’t find one so she becomes a pincushion and she’s screaming and screaming. I barrel over in two and shake my head trying to make the noises go away. They start talking about trying to find a vein in her head. It’s too much; it’s too much for a little body, for a mother. Finally they’re able to get a drip in her arm, but then they start talking about doing a lumbar puncture to check for meningitis. But they decide not to at the moment. Lottie starts to calm down and for a moment I hold it together until she opens her eyes and looks at me and even at nine months old she looks terrified. Then all at once without explanation they need to run some tests and no one’s explaining exactly why but she’ll need to go under and I’m gripping Gabe willing him to make it all go away to do something with his doctor hands that no one else can do but he just stands there silent, immovable.

The anaesthetist explains to us that only one parent may come in to *hold the child’s hand* as she goes under. *They are only tests* he reassures. Gabe stands there and says nothing. Not a word. No matter how I twist it in my head, Lottie is going to temporarily leave herself and all I can think about is *what if she doesn’t come back.*

Lottie just lies there on the table as she is wheeled down hallways to the operating theatre, as she is transferred from trolley to operating table, and even as the surgeon and the anaesthetist re-introduce themselves. I reassure her, or maybe I’m reassuring myself, with that special cheerful voice I use to say goodbye to her at the child-care centre. Why the fuck did I ever want to leave her? I promise myself that if she is ok that I will never leave her again. She just watches me as she breathes in the gas, but then my little baby starts to panic and gasp, and then she looks around the room until her eyes grow more distant and finally, she is gone.
But then her eyes stay open as she loses consciousness. She doesn’t appear asleep, she appears dead. No mother should have to see her baby like that. As I unravel myself from my child I unravel myself and it chases all the sanity in me away. I tighten my fist and shake it up and down like I’m trying to pull some invisible parachute chord.

Waiting rooms in hospitals squeeze people out of shape. Bodies sit on chairs bent over as if leaning on an invisible crutch; legs jut out at odd angles as heads try to get some sleep while upright; and arms cross bodies to try and keep everything we pretend is not within us inside. Waiting rooms also squeeze our reality out of shape. In those moments we realise that life is not what we imagine, that each of us pretends terror only happens to other people as we separate ourselves with convenient fictions.

A nurse comes up to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. ‘Need a cup of tea?’ I look up at her and realise it’s the nurse who took my phone off me when we hit the kangaroo. When I was pregnant. And that nurse, who I had hated with the fervour that only another woman can muster, sits next to me and she wraps her arms around me as I cry. That small town body, which I had thought was so much below me, is the strongest thing I can hold on to. Eventually she gets up and brings me a cup of tea that is hot and sweet and I am grateful.

Gabe sits in the waiting room motionless, staring straight ahead. He hasn’t said a word from the house, all the way through the process at the hospital, until now. I’ve stopped crying but feel numb. He moves next to me.

‘I fucked up.’

‘I don’t want to talk about it now.’ He nods.

‘I’m so sorry. I erased her, the worst thing I did was erase her.’ And with that, the man who has made his whole life out of numbing others and probably himself breaks down and cries. The body that used to be so sharp with angles crumbles into curves in my lap.

When you become a mother you realise, suddenly and violently, what fear actually is. And nothing can prepare you for that day when something you have spent countless nights fearing will happen, actually happens. You rest. You grieve, you reach out, you recover, you trust, you remember, you hope and you accept. You gravitate to kindness, to help you relinquish control over the things you can’t govern. You love because it’s sweeter than bitterness. And you realise that people are incredible, resilient, willing and capable, and that you are one of them.

The hospital’s structure begins to warp and soften around and beneath me. The shifting sands of a child’s family, the questioning of history’s accuracy, the reasons we try so hard to succeed. The sun heats the window’s glass and the room becomes hot. Gabe is draped across me and I look around the room at other bodies trying to console each other, arms wrapped
around bellies, children’s heads resting on shoulders. I think of Professor Clarke’s grandfather and the bodies upon bodies; the fire. Outside I catch a glimpse of people going about their normal lives, as if unaware that anything like this could happen to them. I look at the bonfire of bodies in the waiting room as people outside turn away.
Twenty-six

Lottie had a severe infection and the doctors say it's lucky I got her to hospital when I did. Lottie is in the clear but Gabe and I are not. Now we have that parent's strange mixed expression of merriment and weariness. But there is not enough energy to save the house and I'm not sure we know what that would even mean. What Gabe doesn't know is that I have a little money tucked away that wasn't sunk into the house. It's what my mother used to call the 'leaving fund' just a little here and there in case you ever need to leave. I'm not sure why I started the account since Mum's decision to leave Dad makes my heart jerk even now. But it will be enough to put a deposit on a small place somewhere, but it won't be enough to cover ongoing payments.

I can't be everything – earner, mother, wife, provider – it's not in me. It might be in others and I thought it was in me, but it's not. Since having a baby I have lost my internal compass. Or rather motherhood is a magnet screwing up its reading. All I know is that my north has changed. I think about Lottie, I think about Gabe. It feels as though the Anna who married him was a completely different person. How did I get it so wrong? The thought of starting again makes me feel as if I'm swimming in the blackest ocean.

Gabe and I have spent the day packing up the house for the auction next week. Packing up everything for which we have worked our whole lives. People are blasé about money and possessions but when you come from nothing they are everything. And they were going to be my gift, my legacy to Lottie. The things I never had.

That night we sit amongst boxes and bravado. Since Lottie's illness there is a new found truce but it covers everything else only lightly. Gabe walks outside and I lie down on the couch with Lottie. I just watch her stomach move up and down.

When Gabe comes back in he takes me silently by the hand and wraps a blanket around Lottie. His act of warming her touches me. We walk down the driveway and in the
distance I can see little lights. It's already getting dark. I almost lose my balance and topple to the side. It's the pebbles beneath my feet. They scatter unevenly and I stand upright again holding Lottie tighter, Gabe moves his arm around me. In fact lots of things around me look unstable… separated; the misshapen stones of the boundary wall, the graveyard stones of the driveway and the few trees that are the clustered remains of a once continuous covering. It's as if everything that binds has decayed. Even the dirt looks as though it's being torn apart by ants and worms, as they carry it from one side of the fence to another. I follow Gabe down the driveway.

There are one hundred and sixty-eight steps from our front door to the edge of the driveway. I counted them the day we moved in. Growing up in Melbourne there'd been ten small steps from the fly-screen front door to our pine fence. I'd counted them when I was young. I don't remember exactly what age I was, before my Mum and I left, all I knew at the time was that the distance might as well have been an ocean whose tide carried me back into the sadness every time I tried to escape suburbia.

The driveway gets darker and darker.

I keep walking. There are no cars driving on the road. People always get lost trying to find our house. Stands to reason, Gabe says. Most people are blind. It's taken me a long time to get used to the expanses in Western Australia, the room for shadows you don't get in Melbourne. Even in the middle of the day it's hard to make out driveways in our street. Tall trees, red rocks and damp grass plot together to create confusion. Visitors drive down Birley Lane squinting at every gap on the side of the road until they come to a fork and realise they've gone too far. Then they turn around, drive back round the winding road and through the thick trees until they realise they've missed the house again. The only thing that distinguishes the end of our driveway from the road is the difference between dirt and sand. It's getting darker. More shadow, more confusion. It's impossible to get a perfectly dark sky in Western Australia. It's not that houses are too close together, they say, it's that they are not far enough apart. Either way it's dark, but not as dark as beneath a tight blindfold.

At this moment in my life, I've never wanted so much as to be back to where there is ten steps from my front door to the fence. To be in a place where others make my decisions and the world close to me seems bigger than it actually is. Though maybe I didn't appreciate it at the time.

As I come closer to the dam I begin to see what Gabe's been doing. Initially I can just make out white dots on our dam. At first glance I think it's rubbish, that maybe Gabe wants us to clean it up. Maybe someone has broken into our property again, it's probably the same
vandal who spray-painted our statue. But then I see little white boats floating on the water. As if made by a child. The wind creates a subtle ebb and flow.

I look at Gabe trying to read his face. In his face I see a softness, a care and concern I’ve never before witnessed. His eyes turn down at their ends and his mouth and teeth are slightly open, ready to be filled with someone else’s words and ideas. He gently moves a strand of my hair away from my cheek. Gabe has folded hundreds of little white boats. The white wax on them glistens and each has a little candle in it. The light from the candle reflects in the water and the scene sparkles. The boats float and collide into each other.

I look up at the stars, a cosmic fossil from thousands and millions of years ago. The only thing an astrologer can do is predict the past. I think of prediction, of control, of history and it all falls away. All I’m left with are the people I am here with now, in this moment. And I realise the part I have played. It must have been hard for Gabe when his integrity was called into question, when he lost his identity. He has gone through a kind of dismantling as well. But all I have seen is myself. There was wrong on his side, oh, there was wrong. But, I think of that little boy, the boat boy, the little boy who had to step up when his father died, who must have been trying desperately to do the only thing he knows how to do – hold everything together. Gabe takes my hand. I feel a grateful marital love. Is there any love that isn’t at its core a grateful one?

‘I’ve been offered a job in the States. With a pharmaceuticals company.’ I raise my eyebrows at him but think better of saying anything. ‘I know, not exactly ideal, but it’s a living until the case gets sorted out with the hospital here.’ How strange, I think. A few seconds ago I felt close to something, close to him, now suddenly not. I feel as if our life is one of the silver coins my mother gave me as we drove away from my father. I’m rubbing so hard over it to try and figure out its value, its identity, but as I rub harder and harder I eradicate the ability to distinguish it at all.

‘You and Lottie will come?’ Gabe’s usually makes statements. This is a question.

I watch the tiny boats and the lights flicker. ‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I don’t know.’

Gabe nods. We have been a pendulum swinging, far one way and then the other and now we rest here, still but still confused, separate but together.

I move my arms to place them around Gabe, and he feels so big there, huge, filling my arms. With these hands on me, I feel a little forgiveness and I begin to think generally of forgiveness, how much it’s required in life: to forgive everyone, yourself, the people you love, and then wait to be forgiven by them. But where is all this forgiveness supposed to come from? Where is this great inexhaustible supply? Maybe, I think, love just has to come with a little bit of amnesia.
Spring

Twenty-seven

The Wattle tree branches seem to encroach inward and rotate a little to the left, a little to the right, like something mechanical. Their bristles stretch outwards in a delicate yawn. They look like the poms poms we used to make at school by wrapping wool around a cardboard doughnut and then cutting round the edges. But they aren’t made of wool they are made of something closer to dust.

I stand under them, watching the people crowd around and talk about our house. Great open plan, spacious bedrooms, how much do you think it’ll go for? I look down at the netting of my open hands, the dried riverbed of life just sitting there. Gabe isn’t able to stay for the show and so is inside sweeping the floors and watching Lottie. A young couple stands in front of me, hand in hand, whispering in each other’s ears. The woman throws her head back laughing and lightly shoves the man so that he steps backwards on one leg. They look at the brochure that’s been handed out, flipping it over and over, pointing with hopeful fingers. Then the woman turns side on and I see that she is pregnant, probably about six months.

Then a loud squabble distracts everyone and the crowd turn their heads to the left. Two birds are fighting on the ground under the tree. They are small and dull, but if you look closely their feathers show remnants of patterns and colours that must have worn off over time. One has a worm in its mouth and is half running, half flying away from the other. Their wings are flapping so hard that red dust is billowing, getting caught up in the wind and blowing over the auction. They aren’t flying away properly because their wings are broken, bent at odd angles so that when they try to rise off the ground it seems as if they are drowning, flailing. The auctioneers assistant runs over quickly and shoos them away, chasing them down the driveway until the front yard is quiet again. There is dust everywhere. Wounded landscapes are hard to heal. I feel an arm on my shoulder.
‘Hey’ Faye leans in, squeezes my shoulder and kisses me on the cheek. It’s nice to see a friendly face. ‘Good turn out.’

Yes, little ants to carry heavy things away, I think.

‘Won’t have any problem in this area. They’re snapped up in a second.’

‘Gabe’s inside cleaning.’

Faye nods. ‘Moving back to Melbourne?’

‘Houston. Gabe’s consulting for a medical company over there.’

‘What?’

‘Just ready for something different I think.’

‘Nice weather.’

‘Yeah, it’s not too hot actually we…’

‘No, I mean in Houston.’

‘Oh, is it? I don’t know much about it really.’

‘What do you think you’ll do?’

‘Well, at least there’ll be good weather then.’

‘I’m sure they have opportunities for geologists there.’

‘A warm Christmas will seem familiar at least.’

‘Or you could try your hand at something else? Or stay at home?’

‘You can get a lot of house for your money too.’ People start to quieten around us and two men in black suits stand on a rock at the bottom of our property. Faye turns to me. She hands me a card for the Country Women’s Association. Again.

‘These women, just if you want some company…Anna,’ she pauses, ‘You know, sometimes figuring out how to be a family takes a family, not just one person.’

Ok ladies and gentleman, up for auction today is this beautiful, newly renovated Victorian property.

‘And believe it or not, it’s ok to change your mind.’

If you cast your eyes to the right you can see public transport and schools within walking distance, and if you look to the left you can see land that could be used for farming.

‘Just because you want to stay at home now, doesn’t mean you might not want to work full time next year.’

You would have witnessed the craftsmanship of the renovation in your walk through. Surely it’s clear no money needs to be spent. You can move right in and enjoy it.

‘And if you want to work full time for a few weeks, a few months, it doesn’t mean you can’t work part time for a while later either.’
Four bedrooms, two living spaces, a large open plan dining kitchen, two bathrooms and a
two car garage, I can see a few people in the crowd who look like they've worked hard to deserve
this kind of lifestyle.

‘Motherhood is messy and it's humbling and it makes you a better and a worse person
all at once. But the one thing it's not is stationary. You don't have to be either.’

Ok, that's enough from me, now I want to hear from you. Who's going to start me off?

I look at the web in my open hands again and turn to Faye. I open my mouth to say
something but close it again. The birds come back, fighting and flapping their wings under
the trees. One of them knocks the other into the tree and it falls to the ground. And as I look
up at the encroaching branches, numbers fly around in the air with the red dust and our
house is sold in three minutes. The auctioneer jumps off the stone. I notice there is stone
everywhere on our property and we're not even in the outback. Yesterday I'd heard a man in
the bakery tell the woman behind the counter that, there's stone everywhere on this land. You
don't even need to go diggin. This is the country where the skeleton isn't hidden by a decent
covering of soil. I imagine the stones sticking out like protruding bones.
Some Uncertain Facts

Twenty-eight

The last time I saw my mother she was in the grips of gardening and cleaning. If she didn’t have a sponge in her hand, she had a spade. Oh, there is a certain pleasure, she used to say, in the to and fro motion of the sponge cleaning away forgotten grime. On a Monday afternoon, in the middle of spring, I told her I was moving to Melbourne. That day. I didn’t think it was worth having an emotional build up to the event.

‘The nearby factory gave me some pieces of foam.’ She’d grunted as she tried to reach the top window outside the bedroom. ‘Very efficient cleaning devices.’ But our driveway was sloped, and the foam was an odd shape that slipped in her hands and she staggered sideways and nearly tumbled down the bitumen. You were never very far from our fence though, and she grabbed it, composed herself and climbed back up.

‘Mum, I’ve packed all my things up. I left you that good fry pan you got me for my birthday. You use it more than me anyway.’

‘People think you need fancy devices to clean a house properly. All those silly commercials on in the middle of the night. But you don’t need strip washers, extension poles or brush devices.’

‘My plane leaves at eleven. I’ll just get a taxi though, it’s probably easier.’

‘I prefer to just use the basic sponge and squeegee approach.’

‘I’ll come back, Mum, I will come back and visit.’

‘A man was on the tube the other day trying to convince me to use synthetic sponges. He said they are cheaper and last longer, that they are more durable to wear and tear.’

‘Maybe for Christmas, that’s not long away now.’ Mum dropped some more detergent into the bucket.

‘Then he started talking about the earliest window cleaners who used brushes filled with white Russian or black Chinese boar bristle and that if you cared for them properly they
could last for years. Though God knows where I would get something like that in Queensland.’ Mum dropped the sponge and stepped down the driveway to pick it up, and from that angle with her body on an angle, she looked like a dropped puppet. Then she walked around to the garden she shared with the other tenants.

‘Well, I’d best be going Mum.’ One of her Terracotta pots had split in two. *Without warning*, she said. *Without days or weeks of creeping cracks*. It’s not as if the fig’s roots pressed so hard against the sides which contain it that it broke. It’s more like they were screaming so loud the pot shook and shattered like fine crystal. The Moreton Bay Fig had been in the garden for twenty years. My mother spent what little money she had on bulbs, but more often than not the birds brought the seeds. I still don’t know how she found those seeds, so small, so camouflaged, so hard to decipher against dirt, rock and woodchip. It seems impossible. But she did. She used to walk around the communal garden with a teacup, picking up small seeds she saw on the ground and putting them in the cup.

Most of the pots my mother owned were broken. She would rescue them from hard rubbish collections on a Tuesday afternoon. It was the only time she left the house. The only time she went looking for something for herself. My mother would, when her hands didn’t fail her, spend hours sewing them back together with neat stitches. She used her neighbour’s drill to create a hole with the smallest bit she could find either side of the crack. She whispered away the fragments with her frail mouth, slightly shaking and nodding. Then, as she thread copper wire through the holes and pulled the pot together, my mother created a corset. Her own form of control.

‘I’m off Mum.’ She nodded, walked up to me, and said.

‘You know, you are my greatest garden.’ And with that she’d given me a fluttering moth kiss on the cheek and I walked away.
Some Uncertain Facts

Twenty-nine

Professor Madden surprises me as I stand amongst Gabe’s moving boxes. I just look at him, wondering if I can just walk away and not let him in. Lottie has pulled herself up and is standing against one of the boxes marked ‘fragile’.

‘I’d offer you a cup of tea, but…’

‘No, no, of course, that’s fine.’ I half watch Lottie and half wait for Dr Madden to reveal why he’s here. Over the past months I’ve quickly learnt that a mother’s attention is always divided. My eyes constantly dart from one subject to another.

‘Look, I don’t mean to be rude, but I have a lot to do so…’

‘Yes, yes, of course, I…’ He scratches his face with the palm of his hand. ‘Something’s come up.’ Lottie is coming close to hitting her head on the corner of a box so I pick her up and put her on my right hip, but she squirms and wriggles and wants to be put down, so I make some room for her in the kitchen and try to keep her contained. ‘We have a project that, we won a big tender, but we don’t, well, you have the skills and others…you see it’s a new area for the university, but I think you have some experience and…’

‘You’ve got to be kidding. After what I did?’ I thought I was a liar or incompetent, but I don’t want to let the words out of my mouth to dangle awkwardly in the room.

‘No wait, please, hear me out we…’

‘I’m moving to America anyway, so it doesn’t really matter does it?’ I haven’t decided whether I’m going with Gabe yet, but pepper-faced man doesn’t need to know that.

‘Well, I’m hoping I can entice…’

‘What? Why would you want to? I’m sorry but I’m not really understanding. I know I messed up, ok? I wouldn’t want me back either.’

‘Well, you know me and economics, it’s a lot of money and to keep the project we really need to demonstrate…we need a bio which will…’
'It doesn't work Dr Madden. It just doesn't add up. You want me to work full time. And I don't want to. But if I work part time I'm doing the same amount of work in less time and I end up having to do a half-arsed job.'

'Yes, well, I wanted to talk to you about that, we…' I shake my head.

'The fact is, I'm a mother now and in many ways that makes me a better scientist, but not if I have to be at work pretending that I'm not a mum. If I have to leave early or take a few days off, all that should matter is that I get my work done and I get it done well. Does it really matter if I'm there early and leave late? Believe me, most of the people doing that aren't working, they're searching the Internet for properties or jobs or a quick fuck.'

He recoils and glances at Lottie. 'Look just let me talk. They've found some human remains in a remote area, like the skeletons they found in Indonesia last year. They're small, 38,000 years old. We think they might be a new species.'

'I don't understand it's not my…'

'No wait. They're not fossilised. They're soft, like wet blotting paper. They have to be left to dry before they can be dug up.'

'But I still don't, it's not my area of…'

'Yes, but you've worked with people who've done it before. In Wales, they had exactly the same process.' I think back to my trip to Wales and realise he's right. Though at the time I thought they were crazy. That it wasn't a real fossil. At the time, I had more important things to do. But yes, I had watched. I remember what they did.

'Ok, I'm listening.'

'We need you to work on the project. You would be on a part-time contract, but…'

I shake my head. It's not just the full-time, part-time equation that doesn't add up, I can't imagine working for an organisation, working with people, who think I am a joke. All of my hard work was undone in that meeting. I saw, in those faces, the undoing of a million hours of study, of work, of dedication. 'No you're not listening. It doesn't work. And the fact is, anyway, I'm moving to America.'

'Yes, well…' I lead Dr Madden out the door.

But the idea of these soft fossils haunts me. My mind begins to race, begins to be occupied by the puzzle. How would I do it? There is the flutter of wonder again. But my pride is too strong and these thoughts are only that, rumblings in my mind. I should at least have a chat to Gabe about it.

He's gone to Elizabeth's house to help her pack. I've never been there. How strange. She's always come to our house. But I know her address because I mailed her a thank you
card for Lottie’s presents. I see her nearly every day but I mailed it to her just because I know she would have thought that the right thing to do.

Elizabeth’s house is small. Very small. Two bedrooms at the most and a little run down. The garden has gone to the gods. The front door is a little open so I walk in, but am hit by a strong odour and can’t manoeuvre past the entrance hall. It takes me a second or two for my eyes to adjust as the curtains are closed and the entrance is quite dark. Thick stripes of light criss cross the room like streamers and there are small grains of dust spiralling like fireflies. Then I see there are belongings everywhere. At first I think it’s because they are packing everything up, but then I realise that these things have been here a long time. Years. I’m not sure I can even get inside, let alone to another room. My eyes adjust to the light and I see clothes piled on top of each other, empty cartons of food, newspapers and magazines, piled higher and higher almost touching the roof. It looks like a garbage dump where all of Elizabeth’s things have been left to rot. Then there is the slow acknowledgement that this is hoarding. This is what hoarding looks like. And it’s so far away from Elizabeth’s knots and starch and the zip lock bags and containment, everything she contains. Maybe I’m in the wrong house. But no, I know I’m not.

I make it to the bedroom quietly, as I can hear noises and Lottie is asleep in a sling across my chest. I don’t want to wake her. I look around the room. My eyes adjust again and I hear crying. I peer in the doorway and see Elizabeth lying on the bed. And Gabe is lying behind her, propped up on his elbow, cooing Shhh, Shhh as he gently strokes Elizabeth’s hair. It’s grief. The anniversary of her husband’s death. I see Elizabeth’s stockinged feet curled under her as she rocks, still consumed after all these years. She looks like a little girl. My breath catches the way it does when a gust of wind flies directly in your face and pushes all the air out and away from your body. It’s an intimate portal – an engaged toilet, a birthing suite, a funeral parlour – the spaces we keep for our humanity.

I start to walk backwards, feeling like an intruder, this knowledge isn’t meant for me. But as I move out the door I notice Elizabeth’s handbag on the ground. I carefully reach into my handbag, making sure not to wake Lottie. I fumble around until I put my hand on Elizabeth’s round, compact mirror. I kneel down, slip it back into her bag and walk away.
Thirty

Gabe and Elizabeth leave for America while I finalise the sale of the house. I still haven’t given Gabe an answer. I rent a little place for three months. The new house is a cottage. Like our previous house it seems to be cut in two by colour and materials. The roof is grey slate and the bottom half is terracotta wood. The windows are slightly different sizes and the frames are grey blue, except one, near the front door, that for some reason has been painted bright blue. There is a small entry and living room with an open fire and two bedrooms. I stand in the kitchen as Lottie sits on a crocheted blanket on the floor. The room is an afterthought, an extension on the back with a diagonal glass roof divided into rectangles with thick black lines. The bench top sits against the farthest wall of the house and pale red checked curtains cover the shelves. In the middle of the room is a large wooden table that is used as an island. Even though we might leave to be with Gabe, I decorate the house in the lead up to Christmas. I finish by hanging fairy lights around the kitchen window from which we can see a small overgrown garden.

I’ve put allocated boxes with their large black writing to their own rooms. I unpack the final plate in the kitchen. We sold most of the furniture and belongings in the old house and have only kept what we really need. It’s cheaper to buy things in America than it is to ship belongings over there. So, I’m borrowing things from Faye and her friends, until I leave, if I leave. I like the way the plates now don’t match, different colours and patterns and pictures line the drawers. An egg blue bird sits next to a pink cow sits next to a saffron yellow flower.

I move to Lottie’s room, which is painted mint. Faye made a garland from her grandmother’s handkerchiefs to hang over Lottie’s cot. It’s a mixture of small flowers, polka dots and long forgotten embroidered initials. I’ve painted her second-hand cot a colour called ‘folklore’ and it seems somewhere in between watermelon and peach. The rug came from one of Faye’s friends who knots the remnants of ribbons together until she makes a large stripy oval. It feels pebbly beneath your feet.
With Lottie asleep I unpack the final boxes labelled Anna Bedroom. Gabe’s name is absent as he sits on a plane somewhere over some ocean. There are a few things we kept from the attic that I’ll take with us overseas. I unpack cotton clothes and woollen cardigans. It is a far cry away from the tight suits with which I used to line my wardrobe. The last box holds the four jars filled with my childhood’s remnants. I consider throwing them out but before I do I open the lids. I look through the circles of lace and realise there is a piece of paper rolled up and fastened with a rubber band. I almost just throw it in the corner, but then unravel it knowing it will probably be an old advertisement for soap or some fortune teller down the shops. But it’s not. It’s a handwritten note and, still, it seems like nothing and I go as far as putting it on the bed to throw away later. But then I stop and read it again. *I miss you*, it says, *I’m waiting*, it says. And as I read the handwriting the realisation hits me. *Love Hannah*, then there is a row if crosses filling the whole of the bottom of the page. It must be someone else’s, I think. But no. It says clearly up the top who the letter is for. It’s a woman named Hannah writing to my father. It’s the undoing of a million threads inside my head. And the shame comes like a lightning strike. It’s the horrific unforgiving of it all, the abandonment of it all, my role in it all.

There is a strange thumping in my head and I feel something tense and moist in the room, I begin to fiddle with the lid and try and fit it on the jar but the two don’t match anymore, so I just nervously tap one on to the other sensing that if I turned just now my mother would be behind me, a little older than when I last saw her, standing near my father and this strange woman holding a fish and my father’s hand, a nativity scene corrupted by error and dream.

I left my mother to die. I have believed a lie all this time, believed my mother to be weak and shallow when really she must have been strong. I didn’t even go to her funeral, *oh God*, I had been at a conference and spent five minutes online picking out a wreath of gerberas, not even roses. I left my mother to die and in doing so I killed myself. The part of me that matters. Now that’s the only part of me my baby needs. And I’m ashamed. It’s the shame that tightens my insides.

It comes, then, in waves, not crying exactly, but something much worse. I am torn dry by ragged sobs; I run out of air, there is a grating in my chest. It seems to me that everything I have ever known in my life I have known at one time or another, but I just haven’t known all those things at once, at the same time, in a single moment. They are scattered through, and I have to leave and forget one in order to get another.

I have spent my life holding onto a certain number of beliefs: my mother stole me away from my father who was a saint, palaeontology is the most important science, Gabe would
be a secure, dependable husband and father, and that I was going to have it all, a career, a family, a life. Now. They are gone. They are all gone.

I feel as though I’m disintegrating, that there is a drying out of my flesh on old bones, my father’s apparent wooden ship once built but now taken apart and lying in pieces across the bedroom floor.
SUMMER
Thirty-one

I take Lottie and run to Faye’s. The smartest thing I’ve learned over the past year is that I don’t have all the answers. But when I get there, there is a note on the door, *Please don’t knock or come in, just call the police.* My chest contracts as it does in those moments that spark adrenaline. I’m not sure what to do but I have Lottie and don’t want to risk it.

The police come and push me out of the way. I stand on the edge of Faye’s garden. She wanted to grow snow peas. So she sectioned off a square at the edge of her property with redwood railway pillars. Faye drove to Perth and bought special soil, nutrients in buckets, a watering system on a timer. But the high temperatures kept killing the seedlings. The lack of drainage was worse than the lack of water. The last lot she planted was in winter but she planted them too close together. They just couldn’t grow, that close.

I look across the land at her neighbour’s property. Fat stock bellow from the paddocks and fences are sewn in between squares of grass. There must be hundreds of cows on their property. Not the pretty ones you find in gift stores that are painted on the side of bottles people never use for milk. These are producers. A little ratty around the edges. Their white and black inkblot skin is not as clearly defined as the ones you see in picture books. The colours bleed into one another, so that it looks as if they are painted with watercolour. The cows perch on the sides of small hills, slightly bending their front legs so they don’t topple backwards or sideways. There doesn’t seem to be any flat land at all on their property. Their property has a vegetable patch the size of a basketball court with corn and tomato plants fast approaching hoop height, two scarecrows, tons of sheep, pigs, chickens in a hand built shed, and two sheep dogs. In this part of Australia you soon realise that land is not just real estate. I look at the neighbour’s abundance and then I look at Faye’s snow peas.

An ambulance arrives and they wheel a trolley somewhere, I don’t see it and I’m not sure I want to. But I rush over to the police anyway.
‘What’s happening, is she ok? What’s going on, please, I’m her friend.’ Everyone brushes me off until a paramedic comes and sits me down on the porch park bench.

‘We found the woman…’

‘Faye,’ I correct her.

‘Faye, we found her in a child’s cubby in the backyard.’ I think of the little wooden miniature house with its tiny door and tea towels as curtains, the paint peeling off the roof and the wooden floor covered with footprints of sand.

‘What, what do you mean you found her.’

‘She. She’s gone.’ They are such strange words, unreal for a few moments. ‘She was lying amongst what looked like children’s drawings. She took a lot of pills.’

‘Is she going to be ok?’

‘No, hon, listen, she’s gone.’ The woman pats my leg, brushes Lottie’s hair with her hand.

‘Is there any next of kin we should call?’

‘Children, she has three children. One is in Melbourne, one Sydney and the other Brisbane. I don’t have their contact details but I can find them. Her husband died in a farming accident, years ago.’ I’m then silent for a while and so she walks over to the second ambulance and drives away.

I sit there for a long time holding Lottie close. I have a twitch in my eye. I think back to every conversation, every mannerism, to find something, anything that could have told me this might happen. Have I just ignored the obvious? Have I been so caught up in my own problems that I never stopped to think about her? I hold up moments like those pieces of mandarin. But there is nothing. I was so sure she was ok. I was so sure.

I once heard that happiness is someone to love and something to look forward to. Maybe Faye felt she had neither, that the people she loved were too distant and anything she hoped for was long gone. But then I know it’s more complicated than that; that there is a depth of darkness, a sneaking, surprising shadow that can’t be explained away. All I know is that I learned that day that some people can help you be a stronger person without being able to be a strong themselves.

I can’t be near Faye’s house a second longer so I stride with Lottie down the driveway and out the fence. As we’re walking past the neighbour’s property I notice a vegetable and fruit patch with perfectly formed tomatoes. They grow in neat formations, tied around straight green stakes with thin strips from a woman’s stockings. The image seems like a
photograph taken and printed on a neat label, trying to convince someone to buy something with tomatoes in it.

There isn’t anyone around so I take Lottie and we walk onto the property. I stand there for a moment with my little girl in my arms staring at the tomatoes. My mother had exactly the same type of set up at home with Dad. She used to spend hours on those tomatoes and then serve them up for dinner with a proud face. Then we’d left. I wonder what happened to that fruit. I think about Faye’s peas, about the care and effort she had put into making them grow, or not making them grow. I think about the way she had focussed on the crescent shapes as though they were something more than vegetables. Ring ins, substitutes, extras in a television show.

I take each tomato off, drop it on the ground and stomp on it. The skin breaks beneath my toe and heel. I can feel the skin split and then let its insides explode across the soil. I do this to four or five before I help Lottie take one in her hand go on, let it go, drop it on the ground. And we both let it fall to the ground. It is the universe’s work we are doing, the evening up of sides.
Thirty-two

The first thing I smell as I walk into the Country Women’s Association building is yeast. There are twelve women standing around a tall table near a kitchen, they wipe their hands on aprons and across surfaces, they knead dough with their ginger-like knuckles. They stop and look at me, they remind me of the beach glass I collected with my father, the smooth surface of a long life lived. They are frictionless faces. They continue to stand still and look at me as I break down. A woman walks towards me and takes Lottie in her arms. Then another feeds her arm under mine and takes me to the couch. The room is silent except for Lottie’s noises of life. I unfold the business card out of my hand as if it’s a birthday invitation that I forgot about. Another woman sits next to me and hands me a cup of tea. And they all just sit with me. They hold Lottie; they rest their hands in their laps and their thoughts in their minds. And it’s then that I let myself cry. It is a silent grief that burns my eyes and floods my heart.

‘Faye cared a lot about you Anna. She spoke about you often.’

‘I don’t understand. I missed something, I messed up something.’

‘That’s not how these things go. You can’t take them on.’ A different woman responds to me like they are telling a story in a circle where each person adds a new sentence, one after the other.

‘But these things, big heavy things, don’t just happen.’

‘There was loneliness. Especially after she lost the cows.’ I think about the calves Faye saved when she started her dairy farm; the cows she had brought with her after Henry died.

‘What happened?’

‘They got sick. So she shot them. It’s hard to dig this land so then she had to burn their bodies.’ I think of Professor Clarke’s grandfather, of the hospital waiting room, of Faye the day she looked after Lottie with her muddy boots and red eyes, of the wars we wage. Then I give one of the women the card Faye gave me what seems like a lifetime ago. I turn the card
over in my hand and notice that Faye wrote something on the back, *Make something with your hands*.

‘Do you cook?’

I half grunt. ‘Cooking has never really been...’

‘That’s ok. How about sewing?’ I screw up my face. After a long time one of the women asks if I ever did art at school, and what was my favourite part. I think of the blue-glazed bowl that I made and hid from my mum. ‘Ceramics,’ I whisper. I remember the art room that was warm in winter and the teacher with red-framed glasses who shaved her head and always wore woollen tights. She takes me over to a little room with four wheels and puts a circle of wet clay on the rough surface. Then she sits next to me on another wheel.

‘First of all you need to wedge the clay. Mix it by hand, rotate and press the clay.’ She begins to knead the earth in front of her and I copy as best I can. ‘You need to remove all the air bubbles because otherwise it will explode in the kiln. The air pockets expand and burst.’ I can hear Lottie giggling in the other room and my eyes are aching. The clay is cold in my hands.

‘Ok, so now we cut the piece of clay in half with this wire, and you can see if there are any holes. It will look like Swiss cheese.’ She peers over, ‘Good, now you can start.’ But I’m not sure where to start. I sit motionless for a while. The woman smiles at me. ‘The most important part in this whole process is centring the clay. If the clay isn’t centred it will flip and flop everywhere. When you begin to pull it up, it will be off balance and you’ll fight against the clay the whole time. It doesn’t matter how experienced a person is, how creative, how brilliant, if the clay is off centre nothing can be done. You have to start again.’ I give it a go, but the clay splats on the right hand side. I sigh with my body and the woman laughs. ‘It takes time Anna. It takes time. When centring it is important to use your whole body.’ She sits behind her wheel and shows me. I feel embarrassed by such physical exertion, at the thought of doing it wrong. But I try anyway, it takes me three goes, but I eventually figure out how to press my forearm against my thighs and how to throw with enough force to make the clay stick. ‘Ok, now with the wheel spinning slowly, oh, not that fast, a little slower, pat the clay into a cone making sure you keep forcing it to the centre of the wheel. Good, now you’ve got that, spin the wheel a bit faster and wet your hands in that white bucket. Press your left elbow into your thigh; you have to use your whole body weight to keep centred. Good, now using the left hand as a guide push the clay down, ok, now use both your hands and your whole body to keep your arms from moving with the clay, press the clay on both sides to force it upwards. Now, now your clay is centred.’ I stop the wheel and sit back sweaty and breathy, but smiling. The woman next to me laughs. ‘Noni, my names Noni.’ And she reaches out her wet, clayey hand and I shake it.
'Ok, what next.'

'Now we open up the centre. This is tricky, so don't be discouraged, it took me weeks to learn this, but if you did it at school you've got a head start.' I don't tell her that I gave up, that I let other things get in the way. 'You have to keep your hands focussed, still, strong. Or else, the whole bit of clay will wobble around. Press down with your thumb and use your other hand to try and keep it still. Leave a bit of clay at the bottom.' I try to pull the clay out but it wobbles everywhere and I stop. 'That's fine, that's the beauty of clay. We can just try again. You don't have to get it right the first time.' Eventually I get the knack of it, figuring out the right proportion of tension and force. I have to be more confident but more relaxed.

'Ok so if you are centred and open, building it up shouldn't be very hard. But don't try and pull the piece of clay up all at once, it takes two or three goes, and some concentration. The speed of the wheel should be medium, but for now maybe just go slow.' I move the wheel slowly and wet my hands. I pull the clay up, feeling it's motion in between my fingers. It grows and expands easily with guidance. But then I start widening the top and move too fast. The woman stops the wheel and redirects the clay. 'Remember your wheel is spinning, and if you pull too far in any direction it will fall.' After another hour or so I have finished a bowl. 'It's a watermelon bowl.' Noni tells me. 'Big and shaped like a watermelon.' The sides aren't perfect; they wave around a little like the underside of an octopus.

As I walk out a woman hands Lottie back to me. She has jam across her lips and a smile on her face. They also give me a handwritten and photocopied flyer for the Christmas Fair. 'You should bring some bowls. Hundreds of people go. You could enter something in the craft competition. Noni will bring a wheel around for you tonight, we've got some clay too, then you can fire and glaze them here. Let us know.'

As I walk out into the warm air, with my bowl in one hand and my daughter in the other, I think of Faye, of my mother, of the community of women behind me. I think about everything for which I should be embarrassed, guilty and sorry; about all my mistakes and the levelling power of motherhood. And I decide that creating something with my hands is perhaps a little like starting again: a good idea that, like all ideas of hope, lives awkwardly on earth.
Thirty-three

Lottie is asleep when Gabe calls on Skype and I move the computer into the kitchen so the familiar beeping sound doesn't wake her. He is a little blurry and when he moves he sometimes freezes for a moment before coming back to life.

'It's good to see you. It's busy over here.'

'How's the new job going?'

'Good. No, not really, I hate it.' He shakes his head. 'I'm not a salesman. I'm a doctor. But the case in WA is still going. I'm not sure exactly what's going on.' I search for things to talk about before I say what I've made my mind up to say. All those silly words and phrases we use to fill the spaces in between what's important. But there is nothing. Gabe senses something. I left him a message about Faye last night.

'How are you doing? I'm sorry about Faye.' Now it's my turn to nod and nod.

'Gabe, we both matter, don't we?'

'What?'

'I'm not coming. I've lost the ability to wait.'

'Sorry?'

'I'm not coming over Gabe. I can't. I don't want to. I love you.'

'Anna, come on, you've had a big shock. You need to give yourself a bit of time to deal with it.'

'It's not that.' There is silence for a long time. Movement on the screen, blurring and freezing.

'Anna, Anna... just because... you don't have to...'

'No, it's not that. I want to stay here. I'm tired of running away, or running towards things. I feel safe here, at home here, for the first time in my life.'

'But I can't work in Perth Anna.'
‘Maybe you should try and talk to them, apologise.’ His shaking head creates blurs across the screen.

‘It’s just not that simple Anna.’

‘I love you Gabe, but…’

‘Shit.’

‘No, no…it’s not a big but, it’s a I need to make something clear but…’

‘Alright.’ Gabe says this slowly, rolling the word up a big hill.

‘If you come back I need things to be different. I need us to talk, to share the load, for you to be able to be more flexible. I want you to be able to be a father and a husband first, a doctor second.’

‘Anna, I’ve always been…’

‘No you haven’t. You don’t understand. If I want to work part time, I want you to be the one who looks after Lottie, but then I want to be able to change my mind, to work full time sometimes, to maybe stay at home at others. I don’t want her in child care at the moment. If she’s not with me I want her with her father.’

‘That’s not the way the world works.’

‘And it’s not just time Gabe. It’s all the thinking. I don’t want to be the only one filling in forms and making sure Lottie has the food she likes and the clothes she needs in the right size for the right season. I want you to worry about those things too. I don’t understand why I’m expected to put the needs of our child first and you’re not. I don’t understand why I have to be grateful every time you do something for her that I do every day. I need you to share the load.’

‘That’s not the way the world works.’

‘Only because people don’t try.’

‘We can’t survive that way Anna, we won’t bring in enough money.’

‘I would rather have less money and more family.’ It’s not as if I am asking him to be a woman, a mother, that I think there is no difference between us. There is a sturdy common sense in accepting the differences between men and women as salt. But maybe I’m just asking for something men have forgotten how to give.

‘That’s fine Anna, but I don’t have that luxury in my career, I don’t have a choice.’

‘That’s what men always tell their families, what they tell themselves. But men always have a choice, and now I want you to make yours.’

‘That’s blackmail.’

‘No, it’s negotiation.’
Gabe shakes his head. ‘I think we should talk about this later. When you’ve had time to deal with everything else.’

‘I want you to come home Gabe, but only if things change.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I said…doesn’t matter, I think you…’

‘Sorry I can’t hear you, you’re picture’s gone.’ Gabe’s image freezes in time and there’s nothing else to do but hang up the call and close the computer.
Thirty-four

This year, I decide to go to a different Christmas tree farm. There is one called Pat’s only an hour and a half away. And this time we are early enough so that all the trees are green and full and there are rows and rows from which to choose. As we start walking down an isle I feel my bag vibrate, take out my phone and see that Gabe has called. I quickly try and call back but there is no answer so I check the time of the call and it’s about half an hour ago, why was it vibrating now? Maybe because I hadn’t checked the message. Who knows. I try and call again but no one picks up. I put the phone back into my bag but now I’m distracted and can only think about our conversation and the fact Gabe called and how I want to talk to him. So I take my bag into a red barn at the top of the farm and ask the woman at the desk to look after it while we browse the Christmas trees.

A young man comes up and starts to walk next to us. ‘Need any help? I’m a wealth of knowledge if you need it.’ He has a tall red and black striped stick in his hand, which must be used for measuring the trees.

‘Sure, any advice?’

‘Well for me, expensive and tall doesn’t always mean better.’

I smile because the kid must be about fourteen years old, ‘Ok.’

‘All these people, buy these monsters of trees and then sometimes when I know them and I go over there before Christmas they stick out like a sore thumb.’

‘So…so give us your best tips.’

‘The tree’s peak should be at least fifty centimetres away from your roof and be able to have a metre wide distance around it.’

I’m actually quite impressed by the boy’s knowledge.

‘As you walk around the farm you should bring ribbons and tag ones you like as you go, that way you can compare them later.’ I hold my hands out to show they’re empty. The
boy reaches into his pocket and pulls out some pale blue strands of ribbon, holds his hand under mine and pours them into my palm. ‘Then, last but not least, I look for a good top and a good bottom.’ I think about making a crude joke, but decide the boy is too young. ‘You need to make sure, even if you trim it a bit, that you can put your star or angel on the top, and you have to make sure that there is not going to be too much stump showing down below. I say go with your gut. You’ll know when you see the right one.’ He salutes his hand and walks away. I smile to myself at the pantomime of it all.

I take Lottie down the first aisle. ‘Which one do you think sweetheart, this one? No me either, what about this one? You tell me when you like one. This is nicely rounded, oh, no bald patch. This one is too pointy.’ After a while they all start to look the same. I watch the blue ribbon ends sticking out from my hand jump up and down as we walk. I begin to see that there is a pattern to the trees, that someone has planted them in neat diagonal rows. But then, they are only diagonal from my perspective, they could be horizontal, vertical, really they’re just lines.

I turn around a couple of times and am enclosed by Christmas trees. The repetition and prediction is isolating. It’s easy to control a situation when there is no one else around. To have an event live up to all your specific expectations because there’s no one throwing their words in, their behaviour in, their opinion in. I can talk to pretend elves any way I choose; I can pick the Christmas tree I want; I can cut the base and stand it up and decorate it any way that I like. But all that fulfilment can be alienating. It’s not too much to ask someone to change is it? Maybe it depends on what else you’re asking for. Part of me wishes I could leap across the length and breadth between my memories and Gabe’s memories and the different ways which we interpret the same words, pictures, gestures.

I want picking out a Christmas tree every year to become our family tradition. Something we all did, and who knows, maybe when more kids came along, that they could do as well. I wanted the smells and the structure of such an annual event to transcend the bubbles that would surely burst at some stage. The time they realise that parents creep around trying to keep lies alive. But then I realise there is a difference between tradition and obligation.

I stand there for what seems like a long time, waiting for something. Maybe someone, to come. But this is an excursion of discovery and not anticipation. I need to get out of my head, it’s not doing any of us any good. Especially me.

Lottie plants the palm of her hand gently on my cheek. I remember Faye’s advice when I was giving birth, Leave your head at the door. I wave the boy with the axe and measuring stick over. ‘We’ll take this one.’
‘Good choice.’

Walking back to the barn I think about how lucky I am to be sharing this Christmas with my daughter and the excitement of decorating the tree reignites. I think of Elizabeth’s words of advice when I was in the attic: *keep perspective, love the people in your life*. Maybe it is in a combination of Faye’s and Elizabeth’s worlds where wonderful resides. And without my head interrupting and with a bit more perspective I feel a little less lonely and a lot more grateful.

Thirty-five

I have used my *leaving fund* to buy a white Victorian weatherboard with a sweeping veranda. I think of what I could have bought for the same amount of money in Melbourne or Sydney; a one bedroom shoebox in a new high rise…maybe. There are three bedrooms and the house has polished floorboards, there is green and pink leadlight placed carefully in some windows and the kitchen opens up to a large yard that is surprisingly green. But what really sold the house to me were the lemon tree and the wattle tree, standing next to each other at the end of the property.

We still have an array of donated furniture and utensils, but Lottie helped me pick out a new taupe fabric bed, a navy corduroy couch, a twelve-seater handmade wooden table with round chairs and a pale green kettle. I re-thread our Christmas lights around the kitchen windows that look over the garden and we hang our painted handprints above the table. In the second living room I keep the potter’s wheel, borrowed from the Country Women’s Association, and the twenty-five bowls I have made in the past two weeks.

I haven’t heard from Gabe and in some ways I’m pleased. He is the kind of man who is best left alone with his thoughts. It took me a long time to learn that. I used to push and push, plying for conversation, trying to justify what I was saying and get an answer in return. He would just get angry and shut down. Better that he has space to make up his mind. I don’t want to do things quickly anymore, I want to do them right.

One morning I get up and look at the twenty-five bowls I’ve made in the past week. I enjoy the process, but they’re nothing special, certainly nothing I would bring to a fair. I’ve tried using the superfine clay that makes porcelain and then painting some designs on it, but the result is child-like and cumbersome. I fill the pale green kettle with water and put it on the stove. Take a mug I bought from the shop down the road and put a tea bag and a sugar in it. I have only just recently begun to remember my grandmother who passed away when I was quite young; my mother’s mother. She always used to say that *if a cup of tea isn’t strong enough to bend your spoon then you might as well be drinking hot water.*
I was initially excited about the pottery but now I think it will be a brief affair, a sideways glance at a party, a brush of a hand against mine. How could I have even thought I might have a talent for this? I stand staring at the bowls with a cup of tea in my hand and think I shouldn’t have said those things to Gabe, I should not have let those words, carved in my head, out of my mouth, and now they belong to him. My body trembles. The things we do, the way we reduce ourselves to elicit a response from others. And with that I pick up two of the bowls, walk outside and throw them against the wire fence. They shatter loudly into bits and fall to the ground and I stride into the room grab another two and walk outside and throw them too. I do this again and again until the back yard has a perimeter of white porcelain and it looks like the lines of salt my mother used to leave around the house to keep out ants. Dirty creatures, she used to say, come after the rain. There are only five bowls left in the lounge room that are still soft and wet. I’m just about to pick those up too when Lottie crawls up to one of the bowls and puts her hand in it, creating a print on the inside wall. ‘Lottie,’ I say, ‘No sweetheart, not for Lottie.’ But she is laughing so hard that I can’t help but let her play with just one. She laughs and pushes her handprint into the other side. And there is something about that imprint that is beautiful and innocent. Lottie’s pattern makes mine look contrived. Even though they are now broken. But I need a world that’s steady, not one in bits and pieces.

When women initially become mothers something falls away. The posing that’s part of the ordinary world vanishes. Tied to the past but expanded by the future. That’s what I wanted to capture in some small way. I walk into the bedroom and take out the jars from my childhood. I run my fingers over the lace and the buttons and the sea glass and skeletons. I shake them and brush them and with that action I dust off my highest hopes.

I put the newest most pliable bowl on a wooden board on my lap and I take a circle of lace and I push it into the clay. As I pull it away it reveals an almost cellular formation, an intricate design I could have never created by myself. Then I rifle through the jar of buttons and pick out large domed lattices. They would have been too fussy for my mother to actually use. One by one I imprint them into the clay of the second bowl as if they are rocking horses. I look at the sea glass and the skeletons and I decide to put them back in their jars and into a low drawer.

There is a flutter in my stomach and a new pride at showing people my work at the Christmas festival. I just wish that Gabe could be here to see sides of me he has never known. I sit with Lottie on my knee and look at the new bowls. Finally, I feel the rage loosen from my back and float aimlessly around me, the rage that did not know at what or whom to rage
though it continued to rage; the broken Christmas bauble, the shattered mirror, the squashed tomatoes, the flying porcelain.

The lace imprint is fine and delicate. The buttons make an interesting pattern. I imagine glazing them blue and then painting over the indented lines with soft pinks, hard greens and bright yellows. *I have made something with my hands,* Faye. And seeing all those creations before me, I know what she wanted, I know what she meant.

I run my fingers over the fine impressions, over the miniature peaks and troughs of my own history making.
Thirty-five

For several weeks, the silverware has been on display in the optician’s window, hopefully inspiring the local people to have a go at winning one of the craft, cattle or baking trophies. Excitement is building on Main Street. The dirt road that winds like spaghetti through the town and village is drawing a crowd as people put their bags down to get a good spot to view the Christmas Parade. Outside tearooms and antique stalls, and haberdasheries and hardware stores, the road is made up of buildings that are a mixture of galvanised iron and artificial stone pressed into iron sheets. Over the years, as the iron has aged and weathered, it has changed colour, turning the pubs, shearing shed, petrol station and cinema into a kaleidoscope of colour. The road thickens with people cooling their hands on lemonade from Doris’s mobile cart. I walk past the church hall where kids are getting dressed in their Christmas costumes.

All the children start racing out of the building and we shuffle to catch up. The street acts as a kind of red carpet for the parade as people cheer and cameras flash to capture the moment. I look up and there is an angel on stilts, her chiffon skirt brushes over us and I open my mouth at Lottie in an exaggerated surprised expression and she giggles.

There are two children dressed in a reindeer costume, one is the head and one is the bottom, but the child in front keeps walking too fast for the child behind them. They ruin the illusion as the back end has to run, his head poking out of his bent over body, his little legs flailing to catch up. There is a bit of wind and because the street is up high you can see down across the landscape. There are cows grazing the surrounding hills, covered with blankets of pink desert rose, and acacia and eucalypt shrubs. A man with a large candy cane striped tray hands me lemonade. I turn back to the parade as a little girl dressed as an elf squeals because a boy dressed as a fairy pokes her with the star on the end of his wand.

The brass band stops every few minutes to change music and to let the horses rest. There is something of a pantomime atmosphere as the parade finally gets to the end of the
street and a snow queen gets off a carriage and walks up to the city’s community garden. She is handed a large key she uses to open up the large wrought iron gate. People believe, on the first weekend of the month, that this gesture lets summer in. Though in this part of Australia it can sometimes feel as if summer is always with us. When the music is over the crowd disbands and the children are walked back down the hill.

The stalls celebrate the legacy of local wisdom. There is livestock judging, children’s games, live music, homemade food, racing pigs, lumberjacks, trained sheep and well-groomed dogs. We walk past the cattle auction and I can hear fast tongues, pigs, goats, cows and their owners scurrying into the holding pens.

On the way to the competition tents there is a Crafting Room and Workshop with knitting, stitching, needlework and embroidery, there is a Garden Feature with the best flowers, fruit and vegetables for the season. There is a small market with patchwork quilts and glass-blown tree decorations, and there is a makeshift theatre with singing and music.

Inside the competition tent there is a ‘knitted veg’ section from the local ‘knit and natter’ group; and there are the more usual vegetable displays, there is cake-making, homemade alcoholic beverages, flowers, and children’s dolls. In the food section there are Henry’s sausages, cheeses and preserves, plus the cakes, quiches and wholesome ready-made-meals that are prepared in nearby shop kitchens.

The judging has already happened and I peer to look at the coloured ribbons but they haven’t awarded them yet. There are only white rectangles with grey-lead marking I can’t read form this far away. A large woman with hair like a bronze wire brush clears her throat.

‘It’s a long time since we’ve seen quite so many beautiful entries in the same show – willow weaving, patchwork, stained glass and woodwork, but plenty of new crafts as well. We judges are trained to judge all kinds of crafts – we’ve all had a go at most things and when we’re stumped, we have our handy crib book to refer to. Each item is judged on its own merits and marks awarded for the design, the choice of materials, the workmanship and techniques and last of all, but possibly most important, presentation. Firstly, the lovely woven willow cheeseboard and cover scored highly, though a couple of minor points lost it the highly sought after perfect score.’ They hand out a blue ribbon to a short woman with dyed blonde hair. ‘Just along the bench is another lovely entry. This class was for ‘ladies over 60’ . Well, perhaps some ladies would blush when entering this particular class, but one in particular will be pleased that she did. The lace on this tiara is outstanding and had it not been for the slightly darker patch right up there, centre front, those twenty marks would have been won. Never mind, though, nineteen and a half isn’t so embarrassing, is it? Well done Liza.’ I jiggle
Lottie up and down to give my energy somewhere to go and to seem less conspicuous. ‘Now the ceramics. We had a large number of entries in this area.’ The brush-haired woman diverts her mouth from the microphone and whispers to someone else. There is walking around and turned backs, shuffling of papers and moving of objects. ‘There was some lovely pieces by York Primary School, who took for their theme the Nutcracker. Another special mention should also go to Les Witten who, even though he is a whittler by trade, gave it a red-hot go. Finally the winner in this division used Japanese brushes to create wonderful bottlebrush designs, thank you Noni Walker.’ The woman who taught me how to use the wheel at the Country Women’s Association walks forward and collects her blue ribbon and I clap with genuine enthusiasm.

I walk out of the tent disappointed though I’m not sure what I expected. I miss Faye most days but today more than usual. A wiry man with rimless glasses taps me on the shoulder. ‘Hi, Anna, I’m Ted, how are ya.’ ‘Um, good.’ I shift Lottie from my right to left hip. ‘Noni told me you were the one who did the watercolour lace bowl? I just nod. ‘Do you have anything more like that?’ ‘A few, some the same, some a bit different.’ ‘I’d like to see them if possible? I own a shop in Perth and I might be interested in selling them?’ ‘I’m sorry?’ The man laughs and takes out a business card. He hands it to me. Lottie takes it. ‘If we liked them, how much would you sell them for?’ ‘They’re a hundred and twenty.’ I hear Noni’s voice before I see her step around Ted. ‘Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves, I’ll see the others first.’ Ted walks off and Noni smiles at me. I feel an intense, aching happiness that I know should be held onto tightly in case, without warning, it slips away.
Faye’s funeral is so crowded with black-clothed bodies that all I can do is stand on the outskirts and listen to the priest. But then even that is difficult as the bodies muffle and rebound the sound. So I stand holding Lottie and sway from side to side. There is a little boy diagonally opposite me who couldn’t be any more than about six. He stands in front of what seems to be his mum, and her hands rest on his blonde hair. He has a puzzled look on his face, which is pointed to the ground, but I can’t make out what has gotten him so confused. I watch him for a little while and can’t help but smile to myself. Then I see him tug on his mother’s skirt and say in a voice too loud for a funeral, ‘Mum, why is everyone wearing a uniform. Are funerals like school?’ I look around and, even though people are dressed differently, the clothing does look like it came from the same shop, and maybe, in a small town, it did. The woman bends down and talks in her son’s ear and I watch him nod, look around, nod, nod.

I can’t see the coffin and I’m glad. There is something about looking at those boxes and imagining the person’s body inside which is testing – testing of one’s ability to keep standing there, testing of one’s faith and testing of some strange equilibrium in your head that keeps your mind away from the fact that one day you are going to die too.

It’s a warm day. So some people have brought umbrellas, black umbrellas, except for one little girl who I can’t quite see. Her covering is bright yellow and has a head sticking out of the top so that if I could see her body she would look like a chicken. Faye would have liked that, I think.

It’s hard to buy baby’s clothes in black. I have never thought of that before. Maybe people think that they are too innocent for the shade, that humans need to experience more loss, more of the dark side of life before they earn the right to wear black, or maybe it’s not about earning the right it’s about losing innocence. So I have dressed Lottie in white since
it seems a fitting juxtaposition. It’s another shade that isn’t a colour, one that eludes the association with emotion.

I strain to try and hear where the priest is up to but his voice is whispers of deep tones. I’ve never said a prayer before in my life, always relied on the conviction of science and the reliability of data, but I now know that those things are not as stable as they seem. So I look down to the muddy ground, but now all I can think about is the mud. Why is it muddy? There can’t have been any rain for weeks, months, and then I think about the people who dug the grave this morning and that they might have poured water into the deep hole to stop the dry earth from blowing around.

There are lots of children standing around getting fidgety and I try and figure out which ones are Faye’s children. Probably the ones crying. That is the way it works isn’t it? Family and close friends cry and the rest of us just stand around not quite knowing how to feel or how to look because if you cry then people think you’re being grabby, trying to muster in on their grief, but then you obviously can’t smile, so I just stand there with this blank expression like I’m having my eyes tested; serious and focused.

People start moving around me, though I can’t quite understand what’s going on. But slowly people start to walk back to cars with headlights still on. I can’t help but think about the car batteries and whether anyone will need a jump-start. Or maybe they left their motors running. As people disperse I see flowers and petals being dropped into the rectangular hole and onto what must be Faye’s coffin. Even though I have, had, only known her a short time, I feel closer to her than I have any other woman in my life. It’s that thought that makes me sad, and it also makes me feel selfish.

Then I notice a woman with a child not much older than Lottie drop a white card into the hole. It must be a note I think. Then I notice another woman do the same thing, but this time I can just make out some of the printing and see that it is a Country Women’s Association card. Then more women seem to notice this gesture because they start to open their bags, pull out their purses and rifle through them to try and find the card. It is spontaneous rather than prepared. Then, in seconds, there are all these cards fluttering down onto Faye like snow, flipping this way and that until they land either emblem side up or, what I imagine is, handwritten side up.

I don’t have my card. I think I left it with Noni when she taught me how to use the wheel. But I have brought something else. I take the white coat and initially wonder if they will mind me putting such a large object in, but no one stops me so I walk up to the hole in the ground and on top of Faye’s body, on top of the casket, on top of the flowers and petals and advice that she has given so many women, I let drop my hospital gown covered in sketches of fossils.
As people with shovels fill in the hole I imagine the layers of contribution. The history we hide behind. I’ve spent so may years reassured by the hardness which survives time, that stays around long enough to tell its stories. But now all I want is to know the soft parts. To capture them in my hands long enough to decipher them. To yell to everyone that they’ve got it wrong. That they’re using the wrong thing to write our history.
Thirty-seven

On Christmas Eve I finish making my first order of bowls and pack them into the boot of a second-hand hatch. There’s a package from Gabe in the mailbox, which I put on the dashboard as I strap Lottie into her car seat. It’s a warm day and the four wound down windows create a swirling breeze like we’re driving a convertible as we pull out of the driveway and onto the road.

Lottie’s favourite song at the moment is *green grass grows all around* and I sing it to her as she tips her head from side to side and slaps her legs. I’ve cushioned Ted’s bowls as best I can to safeguard them against bumps in the road. With pit stops the trip should take us about an hour and a half. I look at the map on my lap on which I’ve marked the journey with a yellow highlighter. We’re on our way, and I keep singing to Lottie.

My new life was hidden beneath layers of sediment and stone. The birth came along like a hurricane and removed a layer, the truth about my career shook the ground like an earthquake and revealed another layer, my husband’s humanity removed another, and the truth about my childhood removed the final covering. Now, I’ve dusted myself off and it’s as if I’m exposed to the elements for the first time.

My mobile rings and I decide to pull over to give Lottie a bit of a break. I let the phone ring out, stop the car, take out a large cream blanket and put it under a wattle tree. It bows around her under the weight of its golden blooms. Lottie picks up a yellow flower that has fallen from the tree and grips it between her fingers until her hand is covered with yellow. A crystal clear waterhole glistens in the sun. In places the cliffs around us pile tier on tier up the mountainside, running horizontally for miles, looking like the frilly hems of a petticoat. The wattle tree is a solitary figure on the land. Plants cannot run from hostile conditions, to survive they must adapt and diversify.

I call back the phone number on my mobile.

‘Hello.’
'Dr Madden, hi.'

'Hi Anna, we were wondering if you could look at some reports for us in between Christmas and the New Year?'

'I can't do that week, but I can do the first week in January.' I have agreed to consult on the soft fossils they've found in remote Western Australia.

'Very well, I'll send you an email this afternoon with all the details.'

'No worries, thanks and Merry Christmas.' In the bakery yesterday a lady asked me whether I was working or staying at home. *Both,* I'd said.

As I hang up I watch Lottie doubled over, balancing on her feet as she stands up. Then I squeeze a piece of orange in my hand as I watch her take her first steps. They are clumsy and unsure, but it is walking, it is walking. I clap my hands. I tip her upside down and kiss her neck as she giggles with that baby belly laugh that is the most wonderful sound in the world. Then I pick Lottie up and swing her around and around in the air. She is laughing as I exclaim, *Yeah, well done, my clever, clever girl.* And as I spin there is a new unravelling. The abundance in a desolate landscape, the love a fishmonger gave my father, the understanding a mother must have for her daughter’s fury.

I put Lottie down and go to the car to get Gabe's package. Standing in the sun, between the car and Lottie on the rug I open the padded envelope. There is a round object wrapped in white tissue paper and as I open it I realise that it's a green Christmas bauble, exactly the same type as the bauble I’d thrown onto the ground last Christmas. Hanging off it is a small tag with, *would love to be there for Christmas but fares are expensive, will try and make it home in the new year if I can get the time off work.*

As I look at the bauble and stand between Lottie and the car full of porcelain bowls, I think about the negotiation between self and other, the personal and public. And I understand that grey is not a compromise; it's the bridge between two sides.

I think about the hard parts of motherhood that have been preserved, taught and re-taught to a new generation of mothers – the science behind sleeping, the routines, the need to work yourself and your life to the bone, the guilt and the myth that you have to do it all alone. I think of the soft parts that have melted away – the moments when mothers decide that old carpet and shared bedrooms are better than lies; when children's gifts are carried around till the end; when arms are outstretched in hospitals and wrapped around in midnight consolations; and when a mother, a wife, a woman finally asks for what she needs.

The winds change and a cloudless sky makes way for monsoon. I run, carrying Lottie and the blanket, and pack everything back into the car. Lottie is laughing as she gets wetter.
and wetter and I realise it’s the first time she’s experienced rain. I look in the rear-view mirror and Lottie has marked me with the pollen on her fingers. My arms and face are streaked with yellow. I wind the windows up and look at the map. I know exactly where I’m going. And exactly where I’ve been. My phone rings, it’s Dr Madden again but I put it on vibrate. The delivery of porcelain bowls and the phone can wait. I wind down the windows, just a little, and unbuckle my seatbelt so I can turn around and watch Lottie squeal in delight. And to anyone else it would seem like nothing, but to me it is everything.