SECRETLY IN A BOAT I WENT

(Volume 1, Book One)

An exegesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy (Creative Media)

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Melody Gloria Ellis
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CONTENTS

BOOK ONE—RISING

A note on the images................................................. 7
A note on the transliteration......................................... 9
Greek alphabet .......................................................... 10
Pronunciation............................................................ 11

FIRST MOVEMENT

Introduction ............................................................. 17
Project overview......................................................... 22
Project structure ........................................................ 24
Project method .......................................................... 27
Why an erotics? ........................................................... 30
Limitations and dead ends ............................................ 31
Research questions ...................................................... 33

SECOND MOVEMENT

Secretly ................................................................. 37
Subjectivity—where it all begins.................................... 38
A paradoxical desire—betrayal...................................... 44
A paradoxical desire—hiding........................................ 53
A paradoxical desire—stealing...................................... 57
### In a Boat

Let me repeat that ................................................................. 63
Collapse and failure .......................................................... 67
The absent body ................................................................. 70
The boat as body ............................................................... 75
The handmade body .......................................................... 80

### I Went

No place like home ............................................................... 86
The missing ....................................................................... 90
The wound of nonbelonging ................................................. 93
Representing the wound ...................................................... 95
The intractable sear ............................................................. 99

### THIRD MOVEMENT

Conclusion ................................................................. 110
Illustrations ................................................................. 114
List of illustrations .......................................................... 125
Works cited ................................................................. 129
Appendix A—Song lyrics for ‘Secretly in a boat I went’ ............ 139
BOOK TWO—FALLING

Preface ......................................................................... 143
A note on the images .................................................... 144
Initial instructions .......................................................... 145

LOVE

I desire ...................................................................... 151
I suffer .................................................................... 166
I am angry ................................................................. 192

POWER

I contest ................................................................. 214
I love ..................................................................... 239
I want to be loved ...................................................... 259
I am afraid to die ....................................................... 270

List of illustrations ...................................................... 287
Works cited ............................................................. 289
BOOK THREE—FALLING-RISING

ONE PART OCEAN, ONE PART SEA

Ocean—Ο Ὀκεανός
Don’t leave me this way................................................................. 295
An incomplete list of lies told....................................................... 297
The tale of the tail................................................................. 299

Sea—Ἡ Θάλασσα
Ainslie is not a Greek name (36 entries for sea)............................... 323
Once, in a story................................................................. 375
**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

**BOOK ONE—RISING**

1. ‘Acropolis’, private family collection. 8
2. ‘Market’, private family collection. 16
3. ‘Unknown Fountain’, private family collection. 36
4. ‘Stadiou Street’, private family collection. 62
5. ‘The Theatre of Herod’, private family collection. 85
6. ‘My Grandmother I’, private family collection. 101
7. ‘My Grandmother II’, private family collection. 102
8. ‘My Greece, my father and I circa 1988’, private family collection. 104
9. ‘Great-great Grandfather Hood’, private family collection. 105
10. ‘Pigeons’, private family collection. 109
11. ‘An Athenian Ruin’, private family collection. 113


23. Melody Ellis, from *I Rented a Hotel Room*, 2013


February 2014,


33. Frida Kahlo, ‘What the Water Gave Me’, 1938, viewed 9 February 2014,

BOOK TWO—FALLING

1. Roland Barthes, photographer unknown, viewed 10 February 2014, <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-sw4bG9IA8-g/TqAAoIyYSQI/AAAAAAAAX1s/KnieB0ot4Ho/s1600/RolandBarthesSmoking.jpeg>.


4. Francesca Rendle-Short, screen shot of Skype conversation, personal correspondence, 12 August 2013.

5. Francesca Rendle-Short, screen shot of Skype conversation, personal correspondence, 30 May 2013.


8. Sigmund Freud, archival footage, date and author unknown, (digital photograph taken by Melody Ellis while watching the television series, *Masters of Sex*, on a laptop, ABC iview,
December 2013).


SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

_Secretly in a Boat I Went_ is an experimental literary work that explores an obsession with and longing for Greece. The project consists of three books—‘Rising’, ‘Falling’ and ‘Falling-Rising’—that together are an imaginative and theoretical response to the experience of not belonging. It begins with everything that being a half-Greek Australian has represented in my life, including being born a bastard child (an abandoned child), food, love, pride, shame, storytelling, music, feeling left out, secrecy, hiding, power, escape, failure to belong, recognition, return and betrayal.

In homage to Roland Barthes, the inspiration was to produce an ‘erotics’ of belonging. A highly subjective work, this practice-led project uses the self (myself), as representative of what I am calling the ‘nonbelonging’ subject.

_Secretly in a Boat I Went_ moves fluidly between the fictional and the autobiographical, the visual and the textual, and the imaginative and the theoretical, in what is a complex and layered exploration of desire and place. It explores the ‘prick’ of Barthes’ _punctum_ taking his notion of wounding further to explore a different kind of jab contained in the experience of being cut out and/or noticeably absent.

_Secretly in a Boat I Went_ is both a composition and a conversation. Not unlike the psychoanalytical encounter, it seeks to uncover heuristically what is unknown—unconscious. As such, it is a digressive and associative text with moments of collapse and renewal. The intention is that as a collection the three books of this project can be read in any order despite their numbering, and that they are stand-alone works.

_Secretly in a Boat I Went_ is informed by philosophy, psychoanalysis and literary theory. It is a road and a body of water, an anchor and a sail; it is a secret and a betrayal, a whisper and a shout. It is a fiction and yet all of it is true. It is a shed skin, an archaeological dig. It is an experiment, a hunch, a rebellion and an ode. It is
one part ocean (Australia) and one part sea (Greece).

*Secretly in a boat I went* is a piece of music—it is a song, and I shall sing it to you.

Keywords: nonbelonging – desire – betrayal – absence – experimental memoir – the body – psychoanalysis.
An homage to Roland Barthes
CONTENTS

A note on the images .................................................. 7
A note on the transliteration ....................................... 9
Greek alphabet .......................................................... 10
Pronunciation .......................................................... 11

FIRST MOVEMENT

Introduction ............................................................. 17
Project overview ...................................................... 22
Project structure ...................................................... 24
Project method ......................................................... 27
Why an erotics? ........................................................ 30
Limitations and dead ends ........................................ 31
Research questions .................................................. 33

SECOND MOVEMENT

Secretly ................................................................. 37
Subjectivity—where it all begins .................................. 38
A paradoxical desire—betrayal .................................... 44
A paradoxical desire—hiding ...................................... 53
A paradoxical desire—stealing .................................... 57

In a Boat ................................................................. 61
Let me repeat that .................................................... 63
Collapse and failure ................................................ 67
The absent body ...................................................... 70
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The boat as body</th>
<th>75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The handmade body</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Went</strong></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No place like home</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The missing</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wound of nonbelonging</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing the wound</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The intractable sear</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THIRD MOVEMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion</th>
<th>110</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of illustrations</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works cited</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A—Song lyrics for ‘Secretly in a boat I went’</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A NOTE ON THE IMAGES

All of the photographs in ‘Rising’ are part of a private family collection, except for those credited otherwise in the list of illustrations.
I.

Acropolis

After the death of my grandmother, when we were packing up her house, I found a series of black-and-white photographs stashed in one of her books. They were taken in Athens in what looks like the 1960s. I slipped them into my bag, and carried them around with me for weeks, perhaps months. I felt that I was looking where she had looked, with her, through her camera lens. Eventually I hung them on my wall, and then, when I packed up my house to visit Athens myself, I carried them with me in my luggage.
A NOTE ON THE TRANSLITERATION

*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines transliterate as ‘write or print (a letter or word) using the closest corresponding letters of a different alphabet or language’ ([Concise Oxford English Dictionary] 2011, p. 1533). These ‘closest letters’, however, have nothing to do with pronunciation. The Greek *ita* (H η), pronounced i like beat, is transliterated with the latin letter H h. There is no standard transliteration for Modern Greek, and according to Gerald P Verbrugghe, Associate Professor in History at Rutgers University, there ‘are now five main systems that a person in the English-speaking world could render Greek words with Roman letters’ (1999, p. 499). For example, the verb ‘I want’, θέλω, is transliterated variously as *thelw* and *thelo* since Greek has two ‘o’ sounds—*omega* (ω) and *omicron* (ο).

Several texts, including Neni Panourgia’s *Dangerous Citizens* (2009), which I refer to many times throughout this project, exclude the Greek text altogether and use only an English transliteration. Since *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is about an obsession for Greece, I wanted to use the Greek text wherever possible both for aesthetic and conceptual reasons. Throughout Books One and Two I have used the Greek text followed by an English transliteration in brackets, while in Book Three I have used the Greek text followed by the direct English translation.

I have used *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek (Greek-English)* compiled by J T Pring (1982) as a guide for the pronunciations below, which I have modified slightly in line with my own transliteration choices.

---

1 This number may have changed since Verbrugghe wrote this article. However it is not the number of transliteration systems that is important here, rather I wish to emphasise that there is no standard used.
GREEK ALPHABET

A α
B β
Γ γ
Δ δ
Ε ε
Ζ ζ
Η η
Θ θ
Ι ι
Κ κ
Λ λ
Μ μ
Ν ν
Ξ ξ
Ο ο
Π π
Ρ ρ
Σ σ, ς
Τ τ
Υ υ
Φ φ
Χ χ
Ψ ψ
Ω ω
## PRONUNCIATION

### Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roman letter equivalent</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>η, ᾶ, ῶ, ὁ</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ε, ατ</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>α</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o ω</td>
<td>o</td>
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<td>ou</td>
<td>ou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>αυ</td>
<td>af</td>
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<tr>
<td>αυ (before voiced sounds)</td>
<td>av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ευ</td>
<td>ef</td>
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<td>ηυ</td>
<td>if</td>
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### Consonants

<table>
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<td>over</td>
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<tr>
<td>γ g</td>
<td>(Spanish fuego)</td>
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<tr>
<td>γ (before i and e) y</td>
<td>yield</td>
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<tr>
<td>δ d</td>
<td>father</td>
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<tr>
<td>ζ z</td>
<td>lazy</td>
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<td>θ th</td>
<td>author</td>
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<tr>
<td>κ k</td>
<td>skin</td>
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<tr>
<td>λ l</td>
<td>leave</td>
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<td>μ m</td>
<td>may</td>
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<td>ν n</td>
<td>not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ξ ks</td>
<td>box</td>
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<tr>
<td>π p</td>
<td>spin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ρ r</td>
<td>three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>σ, ζ s</td>
<td>see</td>
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<tr>
<td>ρ t</td>
<td>stick</td>
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<td>ϕ f</td>
<td>fat</td>
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<td>χ ch</td>
<td>(Scots loch)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ψ ps</td>
<td>taps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consonant-diagraphs with special value

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
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<th>Pronunciation</th>
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<td>g</td>
<td>get</td>
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<tr>
<td>ντ</td>
<td>nt</td>
<td>do</td>
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<tr>
<td>τζ</td>
<td>tz</td>
<td>waltz</td>
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FIRST MOVEMENT
It is with apologies to my mother and father that I tell this story.

Stephanie La Cava

My way of thinking was born with the thought that I could have been born elsewhere.

Hélène Cixous
After the death of my grandmother, when we were packing up her house, I found a series of black-and-white photographs stashed in one of her books. I slipped them into my bag, and carried them around with me for weeks, perhaps months. At some point I had the rather uncomfortable realisation that there was no way of telling whether or not she had even taken these photographs; they might have been taken by someone else. Nevertheless, I imagined she did. I still imagine looking at these photographs and seeing what she saw. Look at the way the stallholder in the white fedora stands in this picture. And who is the girl? A relative? A stranger? I imagine that she is me.
Introduction

‘To write is a mode of Eros,’ writes Roland Barthes (1972 [1964], p. xvi). In homage to Roland Barthes, the inspiration of this project was to produce what I am referring to as ‘an erotics of belonging’. By adopting the term ‘erotics’\(^2\) for this investigation I suggest from the outset that this lexicon of not belonging approaches more than just the invariable displacement of the subject. It also speaks to the crux of this work, which is *desire*.

Part fiction, part memoir, part visual artwork, *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is a polyphonic project comprising three books: ‘Rising’, ‘Falling’ and ‘Falling-Rising’. A deeply subjective work, this project uses the self (myself) as representative of the subject who does not belong. However, this is a multiple, not-always-the-same self—a carefully constructed me. It is a self ‘made up’ in the writing and the making of this project. Another way of describing this narration-of-self would be to call it a ‘curation’. Indeed, this project is informed by my undergraduate studies in Fine Arts and years spent curating and installing exhibitions. It seems that as an artist I wanted to write, and that as a writer I wanted to make art. The impetus for this project sits somewhere in between these two modes of practice.

If this project is a construction of ‘self’, it is also a deconstruction. There is a cyclical pattern to this work that rises and falls naturally—is built and collapses, attempts, fails, and attempts again.

*Secretly in a Boat I Went* begins with everything that being a half-Greek Australian\(^3\) has represented to me. It begins with a list:

being born a bastard child (an abandoned child)

---

2 The last line of Richard Howard’s preface to Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* describes the work as ‘an erotics of reading’ (Barthes 1975, p. viii).

3 Note that I say half-Greek Australian, rather than using the more common Greek-Australian descriptor.
By all accounts we associate not belonging as something to be avoided—to be out of place is one of the fundamental aversions. And yet, as the writer and academic Junot Diaz says: ‘The vocabulary of inside and outside is a vocabulary that we are all accustomed too … it’s a vernacular that we’re all really, really fluent in … what teenager feels that they belong?’ (Junot Diaz & Peter Sagal: Immigrants, Masculinity, Nerds & Art 2013).

The subject who does not belong might be many things—exile, refugee, activist, artist, itinerant—to name just a few. They may belong in some contexts and
not in others; they may have the appearance of belonging but be radically out of
place. Or, they might be constitutively out of place, which is the experience that
preoccupies me as a writer. Some of the ways that I have characterised the subject
who does not belong in Secretly in a Boat I Went include an insecure lover, an only
child who does not meet her father until she is eight years old, a girl who grows a tail,
and a foreigner in Athens in 1967 when a group of colonels from the far Right seize
power by military coup.

Above all, Secretly in a Boat I Went explores belonging in relation to place, in
relation to Greece.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘belong’ to mean:

1. (belong to) be the property of, be the rightful possession of; be due to. 2. (belong
to) to be a member of, (of a person) fit or be acceptable in a specified place or
environment. 3. (of a thing) be rightly placed in or assigned to a specified position.

To belong, then, seems always to be inherently tied either to people, place or
both, which accounts for the loneliness of not belonging. To not feel rightly placed is
the key descriptor here, and is to be profoundly displaced. That we think in terms of
belonging to certain places or people is interesting as it evokes the other meaning of
belonging that is used to describe our material possessions. So, as human beings we
experience belonging in relation to places and people, while our material possessions
belong to us.

But, let me rewind here. Let me begin, again, with a story about a little girl
raised by her single-parent mother. About a little girl who, lying in bed at
night, wondered where she had come from and why here? A story about a
little girl who did not meet her father until she was eight years old. Whose
father was the black sheep of his family (and she, the black sheep of the black
sheep). Let me tell you a story about a little girl on her best behaviour with her newfound Greek family, holding her breath and hoping no one would notice her turning blue.

During my candidature, when friends or acquaintances asked me what I was writing about for my thesis, I felt somewhat embarrassed to say ‘belonging’. Instead I would reply that I was writing about Greece or the mechanisms of power within the family and the state, or that I was interested in experimental memoir. Usually at some point during this description, I would blush and add, ‘Essentially, it is about belonging.’ But I wondered what I could add to the already vast amount of material on the subject of belonging. When Jacques Derrida was asked in an interview to say something about love, he said, ‘I either have nothing to say [about love], or what I have to say would be full of clichés’ (Derrida 2002). I felt the same way about belonging, and so I had to bring the subject as close into myself and my own body as was possible. I wrote out of and through my own experience of bodily displacement rather than attempting to speak generally on the subject. I wrote about my Greece. It was the only way. And so it was in the writing and the making of this project (this body of knowledge) that my own inapposite body was located.

Throughout this project I have given considerable thought to the best way to describe the condition of not belonging. I began by using the adverb not despite it being an unsatisfying descriptor. For some time I considered the suffix un, and finally decided on nonbelonging. This was for two reasons: firstly, as a nod to ‘nonfiction’, a similarly complicated term that does not simply mean not fiction; and secondly, after Deleuze and Guattari, who in What is Philosophy? argue:

*Philosophy needs a nonphilosophy that comprehends it; it needs a nonphilosophical comprehension just as art needs nonart and science needs nonscience …like Klee’s*
nonconceptual concept or Kandinsky’s internal silence. It is here that concepts, sensations and functions become undecidable … indiscernible (1994, p. 218; author’s emphasis).

Nonbelonging—like Deleuze and Guattari’s other ‘nons’— is a more nuanced and less dichotomous term than ‘not belonging’, and has therefore been adopted for this project.
Project overview

*Secretly in a Boat I Went* began as a novel (Book Three) with three distinct threads. The first thread about a young Greek-Australian woman named Ainslie who is living with her Greek boyfriend in Athens when the 1967 military coup occurs. The second, about a young girl named Odette, who overnight grows a tail and whose father eventually has it amputated by force; and the third a series of autobiographical essays entitled ‘My Greece’, ‘My Betrayal’, ‘My Return’ and ‘My Tyrant’. When the first draft of this novel was completed, and I began turning my attention in a more focused way to the theoretical thinking of this project, a strange thing happened—I began stealing from the novel. And quite unexpectedly I ended up with a whole new creative work—a book of love and power. Suddenly I had two creative works, one collapsed novel (in ruins⁴), and another work of fictocriticism (Book Two), which is a response to the same themes of the novel, only said differently. In fact, each of the three books that comprise *Secretly in a Boat I Went* tells the same story.⁵ The aim was to explore the juxtaposition of my own experience of Greece, betrayal, return and tyranny in relation to the other, fictional narratives and theoretical thinking of the work.

The title of this project, *Secretly in a Boat I Went*, comes from a Rembetiko song of the same name, written and performed by Giorgos Batis in 1963.⁶ Rembetika⁷ is a tradition of Greek music often referred to as the Greek blues. It emerged in the 1930s following the 1923 compulsory population exchange, in which Greek Orthodox citizens where expelled from Turkey and Muslims from Greece. This ‘exchange’ led to the denaturalisation and displacement of millions of people. The tradition of

⁴ Ruins are, of course, such a defining feature of the Greek landscape.
⁵ Ainslie and Odette are proxy selves, Ainslie being the name of a Canberra suburb, and a reference to where I grew up.
⁶ See Appendix A for the full lyrics of the song.
⁷ Rembetika is the plural for Rembetiko. Musicians of this genre are referred to as Rembetes as well as Mangas.
Rembetika music came out of the trauma of forced migration, and the hash dens of Athens. One of the great tragedies of the so-called population exchange was that those Greeks ‘returned’ to Greece were treated as Turks, and were not considered to be Greek at all. The Rembetika songs came from an outcast people longing for a home they could not return to—longing for the past.

Musically, Rembetika is influenced by the classical Arabic tradition, since its musicians came from Asia Minor, the region that is now part of modern Turkey. It follows a ‘makem’ structure: in classical Arabic music there were hundreds of modes or *makems*, which soon after Rembetika emerged became known by the Greek word, δρομή (dromi), meaning road (Holst 1983). An example of this kind of structure is Falling, Rising, Falling-Rising—which I have appropriated as the titles for the three books that make up this project. Rembetika is a whole tradition of music that comes out of a longing for a lost homeland and represents an experience of displacement.

The writer Ben Okri has described being ‘steeped in Lagos’ (*Ben Okri in conversation with Vanity Fair’s Anderson Tepper* 2010). Okri was born in Nigeria and his writing often speaks to his birthplace either literally or poetically. The title, structure and feel of *Secretly in a Boat I Went* belongs to music, is ‘steeped’ in music—just as I am. After all, my musician father named me Melody after music—the same musician father who vanished shortly after my birth, the same musician father who makes me Greek.

The movement of *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is tidal and tonal. It is of travel (my grandfather to Australia, me to Greece), music (Rembetika) and water (the ocean, the sea). It is the shifting of weight from one foot to another, and back again.

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8 Since Greece had been under Ottoman rule for 300 years, to be treated as a Turk was to be treated like the enemy.
Project structure

Book One —‘Rising’—provides a theoretical context to the creative work. It includes a description of the project, the methodology undertaken, the research questions guiding the practice, and a definition of key terms. It is written in three movements and contains three chapters or parts. Part one, *Secretly*, discusses subjectivity, authenticity, betrayal, hiding and stealing. Part two, *In a Boat*, is interested in the body, the uncanny, absence, and the handmade body. Part three, *I Went*, considers the ‘wound’, Barthes’ *punctum*; and a different kind of jab, contained in the experience of being cut out and/or noticeably absent.

Book Two —‘Falling’—expresses creatively the key departure points for the theoretical investigation of this project, as well as providing important annotations for Book Three. It is a composition of autobiographical vignettes, photo essays, lists and ‘performances’, told in two parts: Love and Power.

In the prologue to his collection of criticism entitled *Critical Essays* (1972), Roland Barthes discusses the difficulty of expression inherent in the practice of writing. For example, he describes the trouble one might face in writing to a friend after they have lost someone they love, given the entire sentiment ‘could be reduced to a simple word: *condolences*’ (Barthes 1972, p. xiv; author’s emphasis). Barthes goes even further in this reductive gesture when he writes, ‘the affectivity of all literature includes only an absurdly restricted number of functions: *I desire, I suffer, I am angry, I contest, I love, I want to be loved, I am afraid to die*—out of this we must make an infinite literature’ (Barthes 1972, p. xvii; author’s emphasis). When I came across this list, in the English Literature faculty library at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, I knew immediately that it was appropriate for the work that I had been doing in Book Two. That each of these statements—of desire,
suffering, anger, contestation, love, and fear of death—summed up the work I was doing on Greece and belonging. So I borrowed them, stole them, appropriated them as an organising principle for the work—for the titles of the chapters of ‘Falling’. In fact, Book Two is full of material borrowed and stolen. It began as an exegesis and turned into a new creative work. It is a kind of cannibalisation of my own writing, to be digested here in Book One (the exegesis of the exegesis).

Another useful way of thinking of Book Two is as a footnote to the creative work, even as it is a creative work itself. In Dangerous Citizens, Neni Panourgiá (2009) uses what she calls parerga throughout, which are similar to endnotes but more comprehensive. This parallel narrative allows the author to include personal recollections, commentary, photographs and poetry within an otherwise historical text. She writes:

This is a text told in two parts. They do not take up the same space, although they both have things to tell, stories to recount and account for, histories that refuse to be forgotten. They bleed into one another; they cannot stand independently of one another … Parerga are not simply notes; they should be thought of as the extremities of a body, without which the text is truncated (Panourgiá 2009, p. xxiii, xxv).

Similarly without Book Two, both Book One and Three are ‘truncated’.

Book Three—‘Falling-Rising’— is a novel entitled One Part Ocean, One Part Sea. It is a fragmented text, told in five seemingly unrelated stories brought together by a prologue at the very beginning of the text that unites the otherwise disparate narratives that follow.

It reads:

If I were to tell you the story of my life, it would be best told like a dream. Like in a dream, all of the people in it would be like parts of myself; even you. It would move in and out of time and would be full of stories—some of them made up, all of them true. If I were to tell you the story of my life, it would be one part ocean and one part
sea. To be specific, it would start out ocean (Australia) and end up sea (Greece). There would be no other way of telling it (see page 287).

Greeks are emphatic about the difference between the ocean and the sea. They are quick to correct you if you make the mistake of calling the Mediterranean an ocean, as I once did. The Greek noun for ocean Ο Οκεανός (O Okeanos) is masculine, while sea Η Θάλασσα (H Thalassa) is feminine, which might account in part for the strong reaction. The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek lists two variants for ocean—going and beyond the—while the entry for sea includes 41 variations: Aegean, Black, heavy, calm, put out to, by, by the, on the open, beyond the, under the, command of the, feel all at, breeze, board, captain, dog, faring, fight, front, girt, going, green, gull, legs, level, loving, man, manship, monster, plane, power, scape, shell, shore, sick, sickness, side, urchin, weed, worthiness and worthy (Pring 1982, p. 279).

The number of entries for ‘sea’ speak powerfully to the importance of the Mediterranean to the Greek landscape, and indeed to the Greek ‘mentality’ (if it is possible to generalise about such a thing). Aegean, by the, green ...

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9 I experienced this with more than one Greek friend or relative.
10 I have used 36 of these for Ainslie is not a Greek name, 36 entries for sea a story in Book Three.
**Project method**

As a practice-led research project, the theoretical concerns of this work emerge through the creative enquiry, or from ‘*what only the novel can discover and say*’, as Milan Kundera has put it (2007, p. 72; author’s emphasis). The thinking of this project was possible only as a result of the making and not the other way around. This is important because one of the guiding interests of this work is form.

From the beginning, the methodology undertaken for this project has been akin to an archaeology, or a conversation with myself. I was interested in finding out what might emerge from within the work (not unlike during a psychoanalytic session). It was an experiment and an improvisation. In a public conversation between the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and Paul Holdengräber at the Serpentine Gallery in London in July 2013, Phillips and Holdengräber discuss writing. Phillips begins:

> Phillips: In writing you are engaged fundamentally in a conversation with yourself, even though it could be a multiple self … it is still you.
> Holdengräber: So writing is a way of making oneself bearable?
> Phillips: Or, of finding out whether one can bear one’s thoughts. Because when you write you are the audience … Presumably writing, at its best, is as unpredictable as speaking to someone else. Because the person you are speaking to when you write is an unknown part of yourself. (*Park Nights: Adam Phillips & Paul Holdengräber in discussion* 2013)

Kirsty Gunn said in an online video interview for the publishing house Faber and Faber, ‘My writing is a deeply heuristic process. I come to understand the story by writing it’ (*Kirsty Gunn on The Big Music* 2012). Helen Garner has said a similar thing when describing starting a new work and seeking ‘the particular area of darkness I want to go stumbling and fumbling into’ (Garner 2002, p. 151). Likewise this project was interested in approaching the unknown and engaging with a process of writing akin to an uncovering.
However, the question of how to classify the various components (creative and theoretical) of *Secretly in a Boat I Went* has concerned me throughout the writing of Book One—as I have sought to elucidate the making of the work. I have referred to the overall text both as a ‘work’ and a ‘project’, although neither term effectively describes what *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is.

In “‘Loose thinking’: writing an eisegesis’, author and academic Francesca Rendle-Short refers to the Biblical etymology of the word *exegesis*:

In my family, it was the brave person who conducted an exegetical analysis of the bible. Exegeses were only for biblical scholars to exercise … *Exegesis* has been part of my daily lexicon since I first lay my head on my mother’s lap through the sermon twice every Sunday (2010).

Rendle-Short makes the case for an *eisegetical* investigation in her writing rather than an exegetical one. She writes, ‘The two words *exegesis* and *eisegesis* come from the same etymological root: *seek* … either *ex* meaning “out of” for exegesis or *eis* meaning “into” for eisegesis’ (Rendle-Short 2010). I am particularly sensitised to this notion of writing *in to*. After all, Francesca Rendle-Short is my supervisor—full disclosure here. From the beginning she has encouraged me to allow all of my resistances and anxieties to become part of the writing itself—to ‘give it to the work’, as she emphasized over and over again during my candidature (2010–14).

In the preface to *Fighting Theory*, a conversation between the philosopher Avital Ronell and the psychoanalyst Anne Dufourmantelle, Ronell reflects on the experience of their collaborative process—in particular, to the surprises it yielded. She writes:

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11 I cannot yet bear to put this in the past tense. I have a certain constitutive anxiety about endings (don’t we all?).
Everyone should partner up with the questioning other whose smile one cannot decipher … Anne Dufourmantelle brought all sorts of unanticipated lifelines and ligatures… (Ronell & Dufourmantelle 2010, p. ix).

Similarly, the supervision I received throughout the four years of my candidature might be best summed up as an ongoing, intensive and rigorous conversation. It is relevant here, because if *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is a conversation with myself, it was also influenced by the experience of writing in the presence of another. To write under supervision is a very particular experience. It is to be interrogated throughout the writing process from the very earliest drafts to the final version of the work. To take this a little further, it is comparable to undergoing a ‘creative’ analysis. Like in the psychoanalytic relationship, the analysand is able to think things through differently in the presence of another mind. Writing in this way, under this kind of supervision, is to interrogate the work with another creative mind at every step of the way. And, as with analysis, there is a certain freedom to attempt and to fail while the analyst—or in this case the supervisor—sits with you, gently probing for what is really being said.

Finally, *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is a conversation with, or response to, those theorists who have informed the work—especially with Barthes, to whom this project is an homage. I have attempted to inhabit uncertain, uncomfortable and unknown terrains as I was literally led by the practice — writing and rewriting, pinching bits from my own work and rewriting it yet again. In many ways the approach to writing here might be better described as a making, a performing, a composition, or a curation, as I said earlier.
Why an erotics?

In the very last line of her essay ‘Against Interpretation’, Susan Sontag writes, ‘In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art’ (2009 [1964], p. 14). Here Sontag argues for an experience of art rather than a theory of its interpretation, or a preemptive attempt to make meaning. The term ‘erotics’ is intimately connected with desire, the body and pleasure. Even as it shares a similar vocabulary of desire—arousal, gratification, excitation, pleasure, seduction, climax and so on—it should not be confused with erotica.

As a methodology—a way of interpreting, looking, reading—an erotics wishes to foreground the body. It is an attempt to place oneself within the material and to surrender ones preconceived ideas of what will be discovered as a result.

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12 In particular, Sontag was against specific institutionalised rules of interpretation.
Limitations and dead ends

*Secretly in a Boat I Went* does not seek to address specifically the various and complicated ethical and political implications of belonging, primarily because it is outside the scope of this kind of project, but also because there is a great deal of scholarship already available on this topic. Rather, it is an imaginative response to the topic in the manner of Hélène Cixous: ‘I give myself a poet’s right, otherwise I would not dare to speak’ (O’Grady 1996).

*Secretly in a Boat I Went* is a work full of propositions, contradictions, dead ends and digressions. It resists a traditional interpretation of belonging, in Sontag’s terms, but is nevertheless anxious about doing so. One complication, or roadblock, lies in what the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion called the danger of taking a particular fact for a generalisation. He writes, ‘it appears to be difficult to realise that the “discovery” (duly formulated or “interpreted” as we say) may have a “particular” significance, but no “general” importance’ (Grinberg, Sor & Tabak de Bianchedi 1993, pp. xi–xii). Here he is speaking in the context of analysis, but nevertheless it applies in this context, particularly as I have already considered Book One in psychoanalytic terms.

The philosopher Avital Ronell expresses a different concern, though in my case related, when she writes:

Maybe I should quit here before deconstructive velocities overtake me, tempting me to erase and reverse everything that was said and duly noted. The temptation is always great to delete and then flee the scene of one’s own doing. (Ronell & Dufourmantelle 2010, p. x)

It is as if the combination of these statements by Bion and Ronell sum up the primary anxiety of this work: a concern about how to speak concretely but not to generalise or to fall into the trap of imposing simple answers on to complex problems.
When I find myself doing this I want to disappear, retreat, back off from the text. It is there that I am momentarily stopped, I fall short, I collapse; there that my thinking grinds to a halt. As a writer, I am still learning how to know when I am giving in to my insecurities rather than having the courage to think things through to their end point; how to know whether, as Ronell puts it, I am erasing what I have already duly noted.
Research questions

*Secretly in a Boat I Went* is informed by philosophy, psychoanalysis, literary and art theory. The key artists and theorists guiding the enquiry include Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Avital Ronell, Adam Phillips, Sophie Calle, Judith Butler, Susan Sontag and Marina Abramović. Together the three books—‘Rising’, ‘Falling’, ‘Falling-Rising’—provide a creative and theoretical response to the condition of nonbelonging, which is the central concern of this project and which I will discuss in more detail in what follows.

The central questions guiding this creative enquiry include: What is it to belong? To nonbelong? What would an erotics of nonbelonging look like? *Feel* like? If I were to give myself a set of instructions for belonging, what would it be? How dare I?
SECOND MOVEMENT
I don’t belong here / I don’t belong there.

Nina Simone

Traditional philosophy excludes biography—he was born, he thought, he died—all the rest is pure anecdote.

Jacques Derrida
After the death of my grandmother, when we were packing up her house, I found a series of black-and-white photographs stashed in one of her books. Photographs taken in Athens. I slipped them into my bag, and carried them around with me. I cannot quite locate where this particular photograph was taken. It looks as if it is close to Panepistimiou Street, but I don’t recall ever seeing this fountain there. Next time I am in Athens I will go looking for it.
Secretly
Subjectivity—where it all begins

To make ‘the self’ the subject of one’s work is at various times deeply personal, universal, vulnerable, narcissistic, shame-evoking, impossible and the easiest thing in the world to do.

In Woody Allen’s film *Stardust Memories* (1980) the main character, Sandy Bates, played by Allen, is a famous filmmaker whose fans claim to prefer his earlier, funnier movies to his more recent work. The following exchange takes place at a question-and-answer session following the screening of one of Bates’ films:

Audience member 1: A lot of people have accused you of being narcissistic.

Bates: I know, people think that I am egotistical and narcissistic, but it’s not true. As a matter of fact, if I did identify with a Greek mythological character it would not be Narcissus.

Another member 2: Who would it be?

Bates: Zeus!

Of course, to identify with Zeus is the ultimate narcissistic gesture and is a perfect comic response to the question. The dialogue is doubly ironic, because Woody Allen himself has been accused of being a narcissistic filmmaker. He has also repeatedly denied that his films are about himself. Allen is not alone in his denial of the autobiographical content of his work. In the preface to *Weight*, a retelling of the myth of Atlas, Jeanette Winterson writes:

I have written this personal story in the First Person, indeed almost all of my work is written in the First Person, and this leads to questions of autobiography. Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important. (2005, p. xv)
I will come back to her comments on authenticity in what follows, but for now I want to consider the claim that autobiography ‘is not important’. The urge to deny the autobiographical content in one’s work might exist because we both are and are not ourselves in such complicated ways. As Avital Ronell writes, ‘surprisingly little of my own story is available to me’ (Ronell & Dufourmantelle 2010, p. x).

To a certain extent I, too, have denied the autobiographical content in Secretly in a Boat I Went—even as I have declared it—as I have sought to emphasise the importance of bodily experience to this project. Of course, to make work about the self is not necessarily the same as producing autobiography, which is perhaps another reason some writers seek to separate themselves from the term.

There seems to be an invariable impossibility to the narration of one’s life, which is precisely what makes it so compelling and troubling. Judith Butler echoes Ronell’s statement about the unavailability of our life story to ourselves when she says, ‘In my recent work, at least some of it, I have sought to understand what it is to give an account of oneself when one is not fully transparent to oneself’ (Judith Butler: Primo Levi for the Present 2006). Butler makes the case that one gives an account of oneself in order to make oneself known, and importantly, that this account is given to someone. And yet to give a definitive account of the self, to answer who am I (either to the self or another) is notoriously difficult to do. I am reminded of Alice’s encounter with the hookah-smoking caterpillar in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. The caterpillar asks, ‘Who are you?’ Repeating the question ‘contemptuously’ when it is not satisfied with her reply (Carroll 2009 [1865], pp. 40–1).

In the opening chapter of Giving an Account of Oneself Judith Butler discusses Nietzsche’s ‘On the Genealogy of Morals’, where he argues that we give an account of ourselves as a way of justifying ourselves against an accusation. Butler writes that,
according to Nietzsche, ‘I offer myself as an “I” and try to reconstruct my deeds, showing that the deed attributed to me was or was not, in fact, among them’ (Butler 2005, p. 11). Butler also describes some of the circumstances in which one might withhold a reply to the demand to give an account, or to defend oneself. She writes:

“You have no right to ask such a question,” or “I will not dignify this allegation with a response,” or “Even if it was me, this is not for you to know.” Silence in these instances either calls into question the legitimacy of the authority invoked by the question and the questioner or attempts to circumscribe a domain of autonomy that cannot or should not be intruded upon by the questioner. The refusal to narrate remains a relation to narrative and to the scene of address. (Butler 2005, p.12)

Perhaps this is why I refuse to narrate my own life in a stand-alone way; instead I weave it with fiction, I give it to Ainslie, to the tail. I reimagine it.

In The Fake Marriage, Sophie Calle recreates a wedding photograph on the steps of a church in Paris to make up for the lack of ceremony in her real shotgun wedding in Las Vegas (see Fig. 12, p. 114). She writes, ‘the rice, the wedding cake, the white veil—nothing was missing. I crowned, with a fake marriage, the truest story of my life’ (Calle 2003, p. 77). Like Calle, I do not consider the truest story to have anything to do with whether or not it is actually ‘true’ in the sense that it happened. It can be imaginatively and poetically truthful. Could this notion of the truest story be what Jeanette Winterson means when she emphasises the importance of authenticity over autobiography? To be authentic is not necessarily to be true. By definition, fiction is a fabrication and is in this sense ‘untrue’. The word ‘fiction’ comes from the Latin fingere, meaning to fashion or form. What rescues it from being a lie, however, is that fiction does not pretend to be ‘true’. Indeed, the terms ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’ relate closely to the notion of a self and also to the autobiographical act. It is supposed to be a requirement of the autobiography that it be true. For it to be false is to undermine
the defining principle of the genre. It is to turn autobiography (true) into fiction (false). It is to break what Philippe Lejeune termed the autobiographical pact in which the author of autobiography makes a commitment to the reader to tell the truth (1989). As Barthes puts it, ‘language is, by nature, fictional; the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements: we convoke logic, or, lacking that, a sworn oath’ (2000 [1980], p. 87).

In Book Two, the most personal of all the books in this project, there is an attempt to be as honest as possible. I would call it a confession, except that there is something too obvious about ‘confession’ as it relates to writing about the self: confession = confession = confession. Even the word itself feels self-explanatory. Nevertheless, I discovered that the more ‘true’ or ‘honest’ I could be, the more fictive the work began to feel. I recall an experience I had at an autobiography conference at the Evora University in Portugal entitled ‘Landscapes of the Self’ (24–26 November 2010), where I gave a paper in the very first year of my candidature. At that conference, I attended one panel where a photographer presented a series of intimate portraits of young men, which he had taken in Russia in his early twenties. As he showed the images he read excerpts from his diary, written at that time, reflecting on his Russian–Jewish heritage and his homosexuality. What was striking about this presentation, aside from the wonderful portraits, was that in the end this artist came across as far less exposed than the two speakers proceeding him—even though they presented far more ‘removed’ discussions on their relationship to place. There was something about his direct and confident truthfulness that had the effect of creating an ambiguity where it was no longer clear whether or not what he was reading was true. For days afterwards I overheard people asking if he really was gay and if those things
really had happened to him. Even at an autobiography conference, questions of authorship, authenticity and truth caused anxiety.

This seems to me one of the contradictions of those artists and writers who use the raw material from their life in such a direct way. I am thinking in particular now of Sophie Calle, but also of Woody Allen and, even closer to home, of Helen Garner. Somehow it seems that the more unapologetically truthful a subject is presented, the bigger the sense of uncertainty between what is real and what is made up.

Which is perhaps why Margaret Atwood has observed:

If you write a work of fiction everyone assumes that the people and events in it are disguised biography—but if you write your biography it’s equally assumed you are lying your head off (1995).

Another way to say this might be as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it:

‘Absolute contradiction is for me another name for subjectivity’ (Slavoj Žižek: Maybe We Just Need a Different Chicken: Politeness and Civility in the Function of Contemporary Ideology 2008). Subjectivity as tautology.

The last book that Nietzsche wrote was a short autobiography entitled Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is. In a little paragraph between the foreword and the first chapter, he writes, ‘And so I tell myself my life’ (Nietzsche 1992, p. 7). It seems significant to me that he tells it to himself. In the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of this book, Michael Tanner asks, ‘And why what one is, rather than who?’ (Nietzsche 1992, p. vii). Perhaps Nietzsche used ‘what’ because in writing the self we create objects of ourselves; and there is some delight in that, because the moment we create objects of ourselves we are paradoxically more obscured.

13 It goes without saying that in asking this question the point was missed entirely. In my view he was deliberately dancing an ambiguous line and whether or not what he said was true or not, it was just as interesting.
This project is full of contradictory desire, most notably the telling and withholding of secrets.
A paradoxical desire—betrayal

In Book Two, I write about how my mother is yet to read anything that I have written. Yet, despite this, I continue to write about precisely those things I have sought to hide from her in my ‘real’ life. My mother is not the only one whom I have concealed my writing from, although in this instance she is the best example. ‘Like blood (thicker than water), writing is the most intimate—and costly—of possessions’, writes Jacqueline Rose (2003, p. 5). There is a lot at stake in writing; I am a different person when I write, and not only figuratively. I even make up proxy selves, such that I am a little girl who grows a tail, I lose myself, and my world falls apart in Athens after the 1967 military coup—to name just a few of the selves portrayed in One Part Ocean, One Part Sea.

The reason I have hidden my writing from my mother is for fear of what she will find lingering between the lines. In case she will discover I am not the kind or obedient child I appear to be. Writing—at least the kind of writing that I am interested in—is a terrible betrayal. The word for betrayal in Greek is προδοσία (prodosia), and the same root word is used for traitor—προδότης (prodotis). In the Greek language, telling secrets against the state is implied in telling secrets full stop. In The Art of the Novel, Milan Kundera defines betrayal as ‘breaking ranks’ (2000, p. 123). This is interesting given that breaking ranks is in essence a military term. In English, while a betrayal can make you a traitor, the two words are not so closely entwined, nor is the sense of secret-telling so explicit. No wonder, then, that shame is so inherent in betrayal, if it makes you a traitor. Rose reminds us in On Not Being Able to Sleep that Freud ‘listed shame as one of the traumas alongside fright and visceral pain’ (Rose 2003, p. 1).
I was never able to openly break ranks with my mother because I was frightened to abandon her (and what is betrayal if not the ultimate abandonment?) So, instead, I have hidden my words from her. Words that threaten to defy her – something I have never managed to do in real life but without even meaning to I have managed on the page. When I pick up a pen, or sit at my laptop to write, what tumbles out of me are stories of deep and uncomfortable shame, of loss, survival and belonging.

In his short essay ‘Negation’, Freud (2005[1925]) discusses the meaning of ‘no’ in the analytic setting. He uses the example of a patient retelling a dream. After being asked who the person in the dream is, the patient says emphatically that it is not their mother. Freud claims that the therapist can then understand that it was certainly the mother. He wondered, then, about the implications of the double negative if the patient is saying ‘yes’ both when they say ‘yes’ and when they say ‘no’.

There are several instances outside of the analytic context in which Freud’s double negation is relevant. For example when one says, ‘I don’t mean to be cruel, but …’ only to go ahead and say a cruel thing, even if what is said is relatively harmless. Here the negation provides permission to say the cruel thing. It lets the speaker off the hook, so to speak. Similarly when we tell secrets to one another, especially as children, it is often prefaced with the caveat: ‘Promise not to tell?’ By the time we ask this question, we are usually about to tell the secret anyway, so in this sense it is more like a request for reassurance from the other rather than for a genuine promise of secrecy.

14 Or, ‘I don’t know much about art, but …’
It would seem that we are reluctant to tell secrets without the promise of the person keeping it safe, even though we know that the promise to keep a secret ‘safe’ is tenuous at best. This is not to say that the person receiving the secret is disingenuous when they agree to keep it—just that what one will do with a secret is not necessarily known at the time of its revelation.

I have always admired those writers who dare to write about their family, especially when what they have to say is disparaging: Woody Allen, David Sedaris, Helen Garner and Jeanette Winterson, to name just a few. I am at once thrilled at, mortified by and jealous of their nerve. I wonder how these writers get along with their family after their work is published. There can be no faking it after something is put into words. There is no going back.

Woody Allen’s emphatic denial of the autobiographical in his work is an excellent example of the emphatic negation meaning precisely the thing that he wishes to deny. His denial is like Freud’s patient’s claim that the person in the dream is not his mother, even if the ‘him’ that the films are about is not the everyday him. Of course the irony is if Allen claimed his films were autobiographical, people might not believe it. Fiction is famously read into far more than so-called nonfiction. Fiction is like the Freudian slip. It reveals an excess of information that other writing does not. It is also a running gag in Allen’s films that people are upset about the portrayal of themselves by a writer (usually played by Allen himself). In the opening scene of Deconstructing Harry (1997), Harry’s ex-wife’s sister, whom he once had an affair with, confronts him over her portrayal in his book. She has a gun and threatens to kill him. In other words what one chooses to write about is potentially lethal, particularly where it implicates those close you.

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15 I do not mean to pick on Allen, but he seems the best example in this context.
In the end, the point is not so much about whether or not I want to betray my mother by writing, but rather that there is an audacity to writing that makes it a betrayal no matter what is written, or for what reason. I began this section on ‘paradoxical desires’ with an admission that I am afraid to betray my mother. Could it be that, like with a secret, the only way for me to tell this story is to emphatically deny the wish to betray her? While it is true that the idea of betraying those I love by writing mortifies me, I also have to let myself consider the possibility that it might thrill me a little too. It is an unpleasant thought, but one worth having. What is it I am afraid will happen? Joan Didion has described writing as ‘imposing oneself upon other people’. And here comes the nasty part; she adds, ‘setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the reader’s most private space’ (1976). Am I a bully? I must be.

To write is to come out of hiding. It is to say what I think, to put myself on the line, literally.

One of the questions leading this project is ‘How dare I?’ What gives me the right to write about Greece, let alone the coup of 1967 and the subsequent dictatorship? I was not there. I have not conducted interviews with people who were present. I have read some books and I am interested; I have a link to the place through my father and the various trips that I have made there over the years, but is that enough of a reason? As Neni Panourgiá writes in Dangerous Citizens, ‘How can fear, terror, pain, torture … be written (of, about, against)? Where can one start writing? … How can such a resistance be written?’ (2009, p. 14). The question of how to write about Greece is one that the Greek-Australian author Christos Tsiolkas asked me one morning in a café in Athens in 2013. I met Tsiolkas during his residency at RMIT University, and
he offered to read the first draft of my novel, and to meet with me in Athens since we were both going to be there at the same time. Being the generous type, he lingered over it for some time before finally bringing up legitimacy—how to legitimately tackle Greek history in general, but the dictatorship in particular. He was right, but it hit me hard. I wanted to run home and hide under the bed covers. I was embarrassed and ashamed to think that maybe he had read my draft manuscript and found me to be arrogant, naïve or, worse still, stupid.

What if I offend someone in what I write? Let me put that differently—I will almost certainly offend someone. Does it make me arrogant, ignorant, a sham to do so? Tsiolkas’ question of legitimacy and the response it elicited in me changed my project completely and for the better. It was after this meeting with him over coffee in Exarchia, an inner suburb of Athens, that I began to totally rethink what I was doing. It also clarified that I did want to write about Greece during the dictatorship—because even after the experience of wanting to run and hide, of being so afraid of speaking out of turn I still kept the story of Ainslie in Athens. In an attempt to make this moment of self-doubt productive I began writing what is now Book Two—a series of vignettes that is both an articulation and an interrogation of my declared preoccupation, desire and longing. In writing Book Two and Three (but to a certain extent this Book also) I deliberately entered into states of radical self-doubt.16

In The Infinite Conversation, Maurice Blanchot advocates for writing that brings everything into question (God, self, subject, objectivity etc.), thereby existing ‘outside discourse, outside language’ (Blanchot 2003 [1969], p. xii). ‘From this point of view,’ he argues, ‘writing is the greatest violence for it transgresses law, every law,

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16 In the writing at least, during the editing process I had to bring back my critical self. Avital Ronnel speaks about splitting herself up in order to write. She describes sending the super-ego on a ‘little vacation or shopping spree’, and bringing in the ‘fabulous secretary who doesn’t give a shit about my work … she just types up the text, she doesn’t care’ (Avital Ronell: On Writing a Dissertation, 2013).
and even its own’ (Blanchot 2003 [1969], p. xii). This notion of transgression is furthered in his concept of the limit experience (after Bataille’s Inner Experience). Blanchot writes: ‘The limit experience is the response man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically into question’17 (2003 [1969], p. 203).18 While it is an exaggeration to say that Book Two was a result of a limit experience, I find the concept of the limit-experience, as it relates to writing, very interesting. I believe it fits very comfortably alongside what I have already described as a heuristic method of writing. Bataille goes as far as to describe it as ‘a voyage to the end of the possible of man’ (Bataille 1988 [1954], p. 7).

It might seem that I am overstating it by declaring an anxiety about my right to speak to the extent that I have, except that the question of who speaks, when and about what is an important one that is closely related to power.19 We know that the right to speak is not one that everyone has—nor has it ever been20—and as such it is a deeply political matter. This is, again, why in this work I chose to write as close to myself as possible. Trusting, as Cixous has said, that: ‘all that makes the political scene—relations of power, of oppression, enslaving, exploitation—all of this begins within me’ (O’Grady 1996).

Another reason why rights of speech concern me is that I do believe there are limits. For example, I am critical of the actions of Helen Dale, who created a literary scandal when it was discovered that her book *The Hand that Signed the Paper* (1994) was written under the pseudonym Helen Demidenko in order to falsely claim Ukrainian heritage. The book won the prestigious Miles Franklin prize for nonfiction

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17 Indeed one could say that self-doubt is the subject of all philosophy.
18 Lacan and Foucault were also influenced by this concept of the limit experience.
19 This is, after all, a project about power as much as it is about Greece, longing and love.
20 As the truism goes: history is written by the victors.
in 1995 and not long afterwards it was revealed that Helen Demidenko was in fact Helen Darville (she is now known as Helen Dale). Her ‘authentic’ portrayal of Ukraine under German occupation during the Second World War turned out to be a complete fiction; the author had no ties to the country, despite her claims to the contrary. The scandal was heightened by the book’s sympathetic portrayal of the perpetrators of war crimes. What is particularly disturbing about Dale’s deception is that she dressed up in ‘folk’ clothes and even went so far as to put on what she describes as a ‘wog’ accent. In ‘Whatever happened to Helen Demidenko?’ on ABC Radio National’s All in the Mind, Lynne Malcolm asked Helen Dale if she felt trapped by the identity of Helen Demidenko she had created for the book. ‘I felt trapped by constantly having to go out and perform it,’ she replied, as if she were forced to appropriate the persona (‘Whatever happened to Helen Demidenko?’ 2006).21 ‘I can pull the wog accent, and sound like Effie and do the Ukrainian-Australian accent really well,’ Dale continued. An odd remark, really, given that the term ‘wog’—a derogatory term—was used in Australia to refer to Southern European migrants from the Mediterranean, but never for Eastern Europeans such as those from Ukraine. Furthermore, the ‘Effie’ character that Dale refers to is from the iconic television program about Greek-Australians, Acropolis Now (1989–92). Hearing this makes me wonder how well Dale did actually manage to ‘pull off’ her fake identity.

The more I listened to Helen Dale speak in this interview, the more offended I became at her lack of self-awareness. She does not seem to feel at all responsible for the consequences of her deception, nor the privilege that her ability to speak offers her. Nor does she seem to appreciate that had she framed this work as a piece of fiction rather than nonfiction it may have been read differently. It also strikes me that

21 Throughout the interview she seemed to blame the media for her actions.
because of the scandal she was able to justify her actions all too easily as subversive and somehow necessary.\textsuperscript{22} There is a danger that because of the implicit hierarchies of who has the right to speak when and about what, that anyone who transgresses these boundaries feels they are being subversive—when in fact often they are often simply reckless.\textsuperscript{21} Which brings me to the even stickier realm of censorship. Believing in limits does not mean I am not concerned with how these limits should be imposed—of greatest concern, of course, is who would set such limits, and on what grounds.\textsuperscript{24}

Although I find Helen Dale’s deception rich territory for exploration, my own interest in a fake self is greatest where it is adopted as a self-conscious device for truth telling, such as in the work of Sophie Calle. The 2003 retrospective of Calle’s work at the Pompidou Centre in Paris was titled: \textit{M’as-tu-vu(e)?}, meaning, ‘Did you see me?’ The catalogue to the exhibition contains the following definition of the word:

\begin{quote}
\textit{M’as-tu-vu} [matyvy] n. inv.--c 1800 ; allusion to the question with which actors draw attention to their success. Vain person. (fam.) show-off. \textit{Un m’as-tu-vu}: A show-off. \textit{Ce qu’elle est m’as-tu-vu!} She’s such a show-off. \textit{Ca fait m’as-tu-vu}. It’s too flashy. (Calle 2003, p 1)
\end{quote}

Even as Sophie Calle’s work engages with an obsession with herself as the subject (and indeed object) of her work, she makes fun of her desire to do so. This adds a level of depth and maturity to her work, which to me, is what makes it so appealing. This self-consciousness is precisely what is missing from Helen Dale’s thinking who does is totally uncritical about her desire for her subject—even after it

\textsuperscript{22} As if to claim that it was the misperception of her actions by the literary world that is the real scandal.
\textsuperscript{21} Perhaps reckless is not a strong enough term for it. I admit that I do not know what the right word should be in this case. Perhaps: offensive? ignorant? dangerous? unfathomable, irresponsible?
\textsuperscript{24} I am leaving this here for now, but of course there is so much more that could be said here about limits and censorship.
leads to dressing up and putting on an accent. If she had managed to more self-aware she may have written a very different kind of book.25

While I have taken the right to speak about Greece into my own hands it has not been without due consideration of how to appropriately treat the history. Greece has survived two brutal dictatorships, a Nazi occupation and a civil war, and is now in the midst of a brutal financial crisis.26 I believe that in making Greece the subject of my work I also have a responsibility to uphold. The main strategy I have adopted in Secretly in a Boat I Went has been to work through my own subjective experience, and where this was not possible, such as when I was writing about the dictatorship that happened before I was born, I kept it as close to my character’s bodily experience as possible.27 I wrote ‘Ainslie is not a Greek name’ in the first person in order to keep what I wrote about the junta close to her own impressions—close to her own body. I allowed her experience to be my experience and vice versa. I gave her voice.

25 In HhhH (2012) Laurent Binet manages to create a work that is at once historical and self-reflective. He places himself into the work as the narrator, both in order to tell the story he wishes to tell and to problematise the nature of storytelling.
26 Economist Yanis Varoufakis has aptly described the Greek financial crisis as a ‘juggernaut of human suffering’ (Yanis Varoufakis: Confessions of an erratic Marxist 2013).
27 This is not the only way to do it, or even the best way – it was simply the choice I made for this work.
**A paradoxical desire—hiding**

Sophie Calle’s work often involves acts of outrageous gall. For the series *Suite Vénitienne (Follow Me)*, she followed and photographed strangers on the street (see Fig. 13, p. 114), she later singled out one man and followed him overseas. The short text that accompanies this work reads:

> I followed strangers on the street. For the pleasure of following them, not because they particularly interested me. I photographed them without their knowledge, took note of their movements, then finally lost sight of them and forgot them … I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me … during the course of the conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. So I decided to follow him.

(Calle 2003, p. 85).

Calle follows the man to Venice, and keeps a diary describing when and where she manages to capture him. In an essay for the book documenting this artwork, the philosopher Jean Baudrillard writes about the tension between the pleasure of following and the fear of discovery—‘the unexpected about-face (a distant reminder of Orpheus and Eurydice), which risks shattering the fantastic illusion of double life’ (Calle & Baudrillard 1988 [1983], p. 84). Baudrillard claims that the act of shadowing gives the person being followed a double life. He compares *Suite Vénitienne* to a game of hide-and-seek in very similar terms to the psychoanalyst D W Winnicott, who famously said that ‘it is a joy to be hidden but a disaster not to be found’ (Winnicott, cited in Phillips 1988). There is a pleasure in the hiding, or in this case the shadowing, but only to the extent that the purpose of the hiding is achieved. As Baudrillard puts it, ‘the secret must not be broken, at the risk of the story’s falling into banality’ (1988 [1983], p. 78). At some point, however, the secret must be revealed in its entirety. Indeed, it is only at the point of revelation that these actions become works of art. This is arguably the case for all artworks. There is always the
moment when the work is put on display—for exhibition or publication, for instance—but for Calle this moment is even more exaggerated given the secrecy that surrounds the work before it is revealed to an audience.

In *Secretly in a Boat I Went* there is similar hiding and seeking, except that in this case the person I am continually shadowing is myself. I have created a double life—or should I say multiple lives? That this project will be revealed in its entirety at its conclusion is not without concern, even as that is precisely what I wish to do.

According to Adam Phillips, Winnicott implicitly compares the adult artist to the developing child. He quotes from *On Influence and Being Influenced*, where Winnicott writes:

> In the artist of all kinds one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the coexistence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found. (Winnicott cited in Phillips 1998, p. 151)

Sophie Calle actively subverts the line between public and private space. What should be a private activity for the man Calle follows in *Suite Vénitienne* becomes immediately public. This strategy of making the private public is even more pronounced than in *The Hotel* (1981), in which the artist took a job as a chambermaid in a hotel, again in Venice, and photographed people’s rooms when she entered to clean them (see Figs. 14 & 15, p. 115). She writes, ‘In the course of my cleaning duties, I examined the personal belongings of the hotel guests and observed through details lives which remained unknown to me’ (Calle 2003, p. 58). As hotel guests, we tolerate the intrusion of our private space by hotel staff—often in our absence—but our ability to do so hinges on the implicit agreement that our privacy will be respected regardless. In *The Hotel*, Calle brashly undermines these agreed terms, looking through and photographing the belongings of guests. In this way, *The Hotel* series feels even more transgressive than when she followed a stranger to Venice.
In my own case this public work (this novel²⁸ being made into a PhD thesis) is also a transgression—but into the life of my family rather than into the lives of strangers. None of my family knows exactly what I am writing about. So far I have remained oblique in my descriptions of what I have written. At a certain point I will not be able to hide it any longer.

In a conversation between the curator Hans Ulrich Olbrist, the artist Christian Boltanski and his brother Luc, a sociologist, Luc describes dressing up in the clothes of another person while studying at Harvard University. He says:

I had exchanged my apartment for the apartment of a young Harvard professor. One evening I was feeling very anxious: I opened his closet, and I put on his clothes. Everything fit me perfectly. It was a very unpleasant experience. (Obrist 2003, p. 120)

In Book Two I write about renting an apartment in Athens for a night in order to get some time to myself to write. When I rented the apartment in Asklipiou Street, I lied to both the woman whom I rented the apartment from and to my boyfriend, who I was staying with at the time. I write:

I thought about men (perhaps women too) who rent apartments for sexual liaisons. Except that there was nothing sexual about what I did. It was almost the opposite of sexual. The objective was to be completely alone (see page 194).

Yet, there I was inside her private space, rifling through her cupboards, flipping through her books, photographing her things and inspecting the medicines and vitamins in her refrigerator. Like Calle, I too took photographs. I lay on her bed and on her couch; it was skin against skin. I wondered where she was and what she was doing when she was away from her home, while I did my hair in front of her bathroom mirror. The whole encounter was cloaked in secrecy. I did not tell anyone.

²⁸ Which novel, you might be thinking? In a sense each of the three books are novels. Even this one.
about it. I even went so far as to ruffle up the bedsheets to pretend that I had slept there. But I did draw a line—I left the apartment as I had found it, I did not eat any of her food or drink any of her wine, I did not dress in her clothes or try on her shoes (if I had, they would not have fit me anyway—neither the clothes or the shoes).

Nevertheless, there was a discomfort in occupying her space as if it were mine, just as Boltanski described. In a sense I ‘wore’ the apartment as if it were my own, knowing full well that it was not. It had an incredible view of Athens—and I longed to own it myself. But why am I telling you this? Why betray myself, and divulge in this way?

In *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran*, Gohar Homayounpour, reflects on the experience of returning to Tehran from the United States to practice as a psychoanalyst. She weaves a personal narrative of her own mixed feelings of return with reflections on her practice and on belonging in general. She asks, ‘why am I telling you this story? Am I telling you this story to conceal another?’ (Homayounpour 2012, p. 39). She evokes Homer’s Odysseus (a character with an obvious resonance with this project given his quest to return home) and poses a hypothetical scenario where the experience of return for Odysseus was not as we traditionally understand it, asking:

Was Odysseus trying to hide his disappointment at his great return, to conceal how non-great a return it really was? No wonder he told and told and told us about the Odyssey in such great detail. Unfortunate Odysseus must have had a lot to hide.

(Homayounpour 2012, pp. 40–1)
A paradoxical desire—stealing

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines steal as: ‘take dishonestly or secretly’. (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2007, p. 1412). To steal something is to take something that does not belong to you. It is to make something that is not yours, your own. It is more than dressing up in someone’s jacket or longing for their apartment. It is also, in most contexts, against the law. It is a crime. While photographing someone’s possessions is not strictly theft, it does rub up against it.

In Book Two I write about a little girl I used to babysit who was caught with a pink tutu, belonging to one of her classmates, in her locker. The poor girl was devastated. To my mind she was reaching out for a life she longed for but had no access to. I think she stole that tutu because it represented something she desired much more than the tutu itself. After all, tutus are symbolically loaded objects; they immediately bring to mind ballerinas and beauty—perhaps even love, acceptance and belonging (or are those my preoccupations?). Just as Magritte’s pipe is not a pipe, *that tutu was not a tutu* (see Fig. 16, p.116). I wonder if my grandmother’s photographs, which I stashed into my bag and later into my luggage—were they my tutu? When I write about stealing another photograph from a drinks menu in a bar in Kreuzberg in Book Two, it is precisely the same kind of childish grabbing that I am engaging with.~

Usually, as we get older, we find ways of ‘getting the tutu’ in a way that more adequately fits in with social conventions—in other words, without breaking the law. We earn money so that we can buy the tutu for ourselves, for example, or perhaps we become artists or writers so that we can acquire it imaginatively. Perhaps this is what

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29 Which is interesting in the context of a project about belonging.
30 But this is tricky territory I am getting myself into now; am I really arguing that there is a quality of stealing that is important psychologically?
Nietzsche means when he writes in *Human, All Too Human*, ‘When I could not find what I needed, I had to gain it by force artificially, to counterfeit it, or create it poetically. (And what have poets ever done otherwise? And why else do we have all the art in the world?)’ (1984 [1878], p. 4). But when we are children, the desire to grab onto something is less sophisticated and we have fewer resources available in order to deal with this dilemma of not having something we desire; we are at the mercy of the adults around us, which is also usually why we get caught. At that age, before we learn what to do with our desires, fears and jealousies, we stuff them into our locker instead and pray that no one will notice. But they do notice; they *always* notice. The child who is missing the tutu notices, and it is never difficult to work out what happened. It is not until we are much, much older that we learn more sophisticated ways of stealing, hiding and lying.

It is precisely this grabbing impulse—of the tutu stuffed in the locker—that I have attempted to explore in *Secretly in a Boat I Went*. For me, it is linked to the family that I was introduced to late, the family I never felt that I was a part of, the family where I am at once both absent and present. I am missing from thousands of family photographs, yet there I am sitting at my grandparents’ dinner table. I am there at Christmas, but I spend the whole time worrying about my mother home alone. For me the urge to steal, to grab, is related to a deep shame that I cannot seem to belong. It is the feeling of not being able to ask for what I need, what I consider is mine, or should be mine by rights. It is stealing a photograph because I cannot ask for it.

Stealing might also be a way of testing the limits of what you can get away with. Adam Phillips writes, ‘when we are talking about getting away with something we are talking about the dizzying possibility of not being punished for getting what we think we want’ (2012, p. 88). In my case, after the moment of publishing I will no
longer be able to ‘get away with it’. Despite the shame, a tutu or a photograph can be returned, and even though it might feel as though the secret of what was truly desired has been revealed, it usually has not. Writing, on the other hand, cannot be taken back. As William Ong writes, a text ‘cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author’ (Ong 2002 [1982], p. 77).

While I am not suggesting we all go around robbing one another, I do want to make a case for a certain kind of stealing here. It was only in stealing parts of my novel—the draft novel Christos Tsiolkas read—and placing them elsewhere, in the book of power and love, that I came close to the experience of nonbelonging.

I recently discovered, while discussing the translation of the song lyrics of ‘Secretly in a Boat I Went’ with a native Greek speaker, that the Greek word ζούλα (zoula) does not strictly mean ‘secretly’ as it is translated. However, as there is no English equivalent, secretly is the best approximation. The Greek word means something closer to sneaking in without a ticket, without paying, or without permission. It infers that the action is against the rules, or illegal—or that the person makes it in rebellion, that they do not want to (will not) pay for the ticket even if they are able to. Since the Greek dictionary that I have been using throughout this project, does not have an entry either for ‘secretly’ or for ζούλα so I had to seek out another one. The Oxford Greek-English Learner’s Dictionary defines ζούλα as ‘on the sly’, ‘on the quiet’ (Oxford Greek-English Learner’s Dictionary 1995, p. 355). I also discovered that the Greek word μπήκα, translated as ‘I Went’ for these song lyrics, means ‘I entered’. So the translation of Ζούλα σὲ μιὰ βάρκα μπήκα—which is commonly translated as Secretly in a Boat I Went—would be better put: on the sly I snuck into the boat. Though less poetic, the inference of the Greek meaning is
actually closer to the thematic of this project.
In a boat
After the death of my grandmother, when we were packing up her house, I found a series of black-and-white photographs stashed in one of her books. I slipped them into my bag, and carried them around with me. They were taken in Athens in what looks like the early 1960s. But could it be later? Could it be the late 60’s, during the junta (that period of modern Greek history that I am so preoccupied with)?
Let me repeat that

In *Secretly in a Boat I Went* there is a desire to ‘tell the story again’, as Jeanette Winterson insists on doing in *Weight* (2005, p. xvi). To tell it and retell it, over and over in different ways, to fail at telling it and then to wonder aloud whether it is even possible to tell it. This is embodied in the work itself, its form and style: constant circling, never quite getting there, collapsing and spiralling within the work. Perhaps it is enough to say that desire itself is repetitive. After all, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, from a psychoanalytic viewpoint: ‘desire’s *raison d’être* … is not to realise itself, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire’ (1997, p. 150). Nevertheless, it took some time to realise that this cycle of attempting and failure (by way of collapse or crisis) was part of the making of this work. The work rises and falls, like the tides. Just as it succeeds, so does it fail and then later succeed again.

My writing process might be best described as a re-writing process. It involves returning over and over again to the same material, rewriting sentence by sentence. It involves crossing out and starting again. It takes a long time and is at times overwhelming as the material slips away from me. I have heard of some writers who get it out almost perfectly the first time and go back only for edits. I am not such a writer. I have to eke it out, over and over again, sentence by sentence. At times this repetitive work was disconcerting—like a loss of self, a loss of perspective—not unlike what Nicholas Royle describes as uncanny (2003). In his excellent contemporary reading of the uncanny, Royle articulates two important themes of *Secretly in a Boat I Went*: foreignness and return. He writes:

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31 *Weight* is a re-telling of the myth of Atlas and Heracles, written for a series produced by Canongate where contemporary authors retell a myth of their choice. Winterson writes in the preface: ‘My work is full of Cover Versions. I like to take stories we think we know and record them differently’ (2005, p. xiv). The refrain ‘I want to tell the story again’, used throughout *Weight*, acts both as a way of pointing out what she is doing by re-making/re-telling/re-imagining the Greek myth, and alludes to reimagining our own familiar life stories.
[The uncanny] may be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself as a foreign body … it would appear to be indissociably bound up with a sense of repetition or ‘coming back’ … the constant or eternal recurrence of the same thing, a compulsion to repeat. (2003, p. 2)

In his well-known paper ‘The Uncanny’, Freud offers a comprehensive description of the experience of the uncanny. He writes: ‘The subject of the “uncanny” belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping terror’ (2004 [1919], p. 75). But as both Freud and Royle remind us, the uncanny is not only terrifying; it is strangely familiar. It is a rupture in perception that at times borders on ecstatic (Royle 2003); it disorients and unsettles in ways that separate us from what is taken for granted as known. As Royle puts it, the uncanny is a ‘crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper … including the properness of proper names, one’s so called “own” name, but also the proper names of others, of places, institutions, and events’ (2003, p. 1). In establishing a definition of the uncanny—*das unheimlich*—Freud turns to the etymology of its opposite, *heimlich*, meaning ‘familiar’, ‘native’, ‘belonging to home’. Incidentally, Freud’s discussion of the *unheimlich* might be just as easily applied to a definition of nonbelonging. We might say, then, that to nonbelong is itself an uncanny experience and is connected to an element of the disturbing and terrifying.

Contemporary readings of the uncanny frequently engage with its unnameable, strange qualities beyond the terrifying. Anneleen Masschelein’s *The Unconcept*, for example, gives a genealogy of the uncanny in late twentieth-century theory, and makes the case that the contemporary usage of the term has gone beyond Freud’s original use of the term. Masschelein claims that the uncanny can be

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32 Of course this eternal recurrence is also a reference here to Freud’s death drive. See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1974 [1961]).

33 Perhaps this is because these days we are so well versed in strangeness, compared to when Freud was writing ‘The Uncanny’.
understood as a strategy of thinking characterised by defamiliarisation, haunting, deconstruction, slips and oscillations, in-betweens and dead ends (Masschelein 2011). She names Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Wright, as examples of writers who engage with this kind of ‘uncanny thinking’. She describes these writers as ‘mapping chaos’ (2011, p. 9).

This is consistent with Royle’s proposition that ‘the uncanny is intimately entwined in language (2003, p. 2). As Cixous herself has put it in an interview:

Language is a country in which scenes comparable to what is happening in France, in the domain of the opening and the closing of borders, are played out in a linguistic and poetic mode. There are ways of writing French that are ways of writing “good” or proper French in setting up its borders and defending at all costs French nationalism and nationality. There are, on the contrary, ways of degrammaticalising or of agrammaticalising French of working in syntax for it to be open, receptive, tolerant, intelligent language, capable of hearing the voices of the other in its own body (O’Grady 1996).

In his book *Jacques Lacan*, Sean Homer compares Lacan’s writing style to Freud’s (2005). He argues that reading Freud is pleasurable and gripping regardless of whether one agrees with his arguments or not. Reading Lacan, on the other hand, ‘the story is very different … you will find a text that is dense, convoluted, elliptical and seemingly impenetrable’ (Homer 2005, p. 8). Homer claims that Lacan’s writing is deliberately, even necessarily, disorienting; that his style is one of the ways he attempts to interrogate the discourse of the unconscious. He writes:

Lacan tries to articulate through language something that remains beyond language itself: the realm of unconscious desire. His writing is an attempt to force the reader to confront the limits of meaning and understanding and to acknowledge the profoundly disturbing prospect that behind all meaning lies non-meaning, and behind all sense lies nonsense (2005, p. 12).

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34 Cixous’ call for an agrammaticalising of language in order to open up borders seems especially relevant in Australia in 2014 during a Tony Abbott government, which has declared that it will no longer report on the number of arrivals of refugees by boat.
What both Masschelein and Homer describe here is what Barthes refers to as the ‘bliss’ of the text. He writes, ‘with the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text … you cannot speak “on” such a text, you can only speak “in” it (Barthes 1975 [1973], p. 22). These writers of bliss—such as Cixous and Lacan—immerse the reader in states of being through writing. I am very interested in these kinds of writing practices, where the form and content of the work match up in such a way.

In the context of my own writing and making, I used vignettes—‘snapshots’ both textual and photographic—in an attempt to elucidate the dislocated, fractured, split self of this work, of the subject who cannot belong anywhere.
Collapse and failure

The fragmented narratives of *Secretly in a Boat I Went* also speak to the inability or failure to represent cohesively the interests of the work. I simply was not able to write one conclusive narrative of belonging or nonbelonging. At times, this was an excruciating way of working. When asked by Anne Dufourmantelle, ‘How do the philosophical “attacks of nerves” you’ve talked about get inscribed in your own work?’ Avital Ronell responded, ‘One’s approach to problem areas is so often motored by exasperation and not at all by enchantment or the ideology of “have a nice text”’ (Ronell & Dufourmantelle 2010, p. 23). In my case, my attack of nerves has manifested as points of collapse and closure, as misfires and false starts—an inability to get off on the ‘right’ foot. *Have a nice belonging!*

Failure, as Sara Jane Bailes writes in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*: ‘can be understood not simply as the evaluative judgement of an outcome—its “disappointment”, but rather as a constituent feature of the existential condition that makes expression possible even as it forecloses it (2011, p. 1). Bailes’ work on the poetics of failure (in itself a delightful way of putting it) speaks of failure as both making the expression possible and impossible. In the preface she quotes from Beckett’s novella *Worstward Ho*, where he writes: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better’ (Beckett 1989 [1983], p. 101).

Bailes is interested in a particular type of theatre or dance after Beckett and Artaud (she cites Pina Bausch as another key influence) that uses mundane, everyday objects and experience in the work. In particular she is interested in Beckett’s idea of the existential experience of failure—the dilemma of there being, as he puts it, ‘nothing to express, nor the means to express it but there is the compulsion to express’ (Beckett cited in Bailes 2011, p. 1). Bailes adds, ‘where else but in live performance
[theatre] are we given the opportunity to rehearse the experience of that directive without the catastrophe of the event?’ (Bailes 2011, p. xvi). I would like to add—writing. Whatever else it is, writing is a way of imagining—in this context, of rehearsing. Performing and trying out.

Another artist interested in failure who is relevant to this project is the late Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader who in *Broken Fall (Organic)* and *Fall II* literally falls from a branch of a tree, and from his bicycle into a canal respectively (see Figs. 17 & 18, pp. 116–7). Much of Ader’s work was preoccupied with failure both physically (as he literally allows his body to fall), and emotionally through loss—such as in the video work, *I am Too Sad to Tell You* (see Fig. 19, p. 117) where for 3 minutes 34 seconds the artist films himself crying. In 1975, Ader died at sea while attempting to cross the Atlantic in a small sailing boat for an endurance performance work that formed part of the series *In Search of the Miraculous*. Alexander Dumbadze writes about Bas Jan Ader’s work, ‘It was not so much that Ader wanted to depict the issues as that he wanted to actualise them; authenticity, for the work of art, lay not in representing philosophical concepts but in embodying them’ (2013, p. 7). In a boat he went.

In Yves Klein’s 1960 photomontage, *Le Saut dans le Vide* (Leap into the Void), the artist is captured mid-flight as he leaps off a building in the outer suburbs of Paris (see Fig. 20, p. 118). The tarpaulin that the artist fell onto when the picture was taken has been removed from the final image, so it appears as if he will not fall at all—that he will defy gravity altogether. His chest is open and his arms are spread; it is a celebratory jump. In Ciprian Mureșan’s meticulous remake of this famous image, *Leap into the Void, after 3 Seconds* (2004), the artist instead lies flat on the ground,
defeated. Mureșan’s remake is a witty reinterpretation of Klein’s work (see Fig. 21, p. 118). It speaks to the failure of the Modernist preoccupation with progress as well as to a more existential hopelessness. Mureșan has said:

“When I made that work, there was no institution or place for art in Romania. At that time, there was no other end for a “leap into the void” but this end … I created a parallel world … which represents how the situation looked for an artist in Cluj in 2004: nobody cared about the arts (Nathan 2011).

It occurred to me during the moments of collapse in Secretly in a Boat I Went that allowing the work to fall in on itself also runs counter to the capitalist narratives of growth and success that we are so accustomed to—after all, collapse and crisis are also terms applied to the market. Just as the collapse and failure present during the making of this work can be applied to the writing (and cannabilising) of the novel, so can it be applied as part of the larger political economy within which nonbelonging exists.
The absent body

Just as this project engages with the body, it is about avoiding the body, hiding the body, not looking at the body, too. The physical body here is also an absent one. It is an overexposed body, a blending-into-the-background body.\textsuperscript{35} What appears to be in the boat of this project, is not only what is present, but also what is missing. What is hidden, cut off and dislocated.

In Book Three, the body is literally absent in ‘Don’t leave me this way,’ while in ‘Ainslie is not a Greek name (36 entries for sea)’ the reader encounters an insecure body. Throughout this story Ainslie is constantly criticising her body and worrying about her weight. She is also unable to communicate her needs to her boyfriend, Dimitris, and takes a passive role in their relationship. The absent body in Book Three is also represented in ‘The tale of the tail’, with the forced removal of Odette’s tail. Amputation is a superbly violent act—and yet, Theo finds that he would prefer to enact this violence than to live with his daughter’s tail. Theo’s insistence on removing his daughter’s tail is a metaphor for the desire to ‘cut off’ what is unwanted. It also speaks to the experience of being ‘cut off’ as a person—be it via difference, eccentricity, lineage or exile. As we know, it is not only the individual that desires to push things out of consciousness; governments and societies do also. And in this way the story of the tale is also about power. Odette has very little recourse in the story, at the scene of the operation she is gagged and then sedated. She cannot speak. But even if she could speak, what would there be to say? It is clear that her father is determined to go through with the surgery. Margot and Tom, the other members of the family, are silent too. As the other adult in the story, Margot is the only one capable of stopping Theo, but she, too, is rendered helpless by Theo’s decision.

\textsuperscript{35} Like the picture of Frida Kahlo that I used to carry around with me, which I discuss in Book Two (see fig. 22).
There are several examples of amputation in fairy tales. In *Rapunzel*, *The Handless Maiden*, *The Red Shoes* and *Cinderella*—hair, hands, feet and toes, all are chopped off. So desperate are Cinderella’s stepsisters to fit the glass slipper and marry a prince, that on the advice of their mother, one cuts off their heel and the other her toe. In *The Handless Maiden* a poor miller unwittingly agrees to give up his daughter to the devil in exchange for wealth. After a series of tricks to keep his daughter safe from the devil’s grasp, the father is finally forced to chop off her hands. Such is the agony of the unwitting bargain—and in some senses it is an unwitting bargain that Theo makes too. Although he does not cut off his daughter’s tail because he is forced to, he does feel that he has no choice. In *Brutal Loss in Fairy Tales*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that ‘psychologically, the brutal episode … is an ancient way of causing the emotive self to pay attention to a very serious message’ (1993, p. 219). The serious message here is to pay careful attention to the reasons motivating our decisions. If Theo had thought more about what really mattered to him, he would certainly have chosen the tail over his daughter’s life, which is what is so tragic about his character.

In Book Two my own absent body is represented through numerous photographs of my disembodied feet and my hands (usually holding another image). (see Fig. 23, p. 119). There is also an absent body in the made up encounters with an analyst, where I shift in my imaginary seat and clasp my imaginary hands.

Agnès Varda’s hand features prominently in her film *La Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (The Gleaners & I), a superb documentary about the tradition of gleaning that is at

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36 The direct French translation for the title is: The gleaners and the female gleaner.
37 Gleaning is the act of gathering leftover food after a harvest. In the documentary Varda makes an excellent comparison between those who glean in the fields and those people who scour rubbish bins for food. Gleaning is a tradition that has been largely phased out, but is still practiced in some parts of
once a very subtle self-portrait of the ageing artist. As well as being about authorship
the use of her hands throughout the film speaks to the ephemeral and the temporal,
providing an anchor throughout the documentary. In one scene Varda uses one hand
to film the other (as I have used one hand to photograph the other hand holding on to
what I want to capture). She says:

This is my project: to film with one hand my other hand. To enter into the horror of it.
I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal, worse, I am an animal I don’t know.
(The Gleaners & I, 2000).  

At various moments throughout the film she returns to her hands—almost as a
reprise. In one such moment, she is in a car travelling along a freeway and she begins
to film her hand capturing the trucks as they whiz past beside her (see Figs. 24 & 25,
p. 120).

The use of Varda’s hand in The Gleaners & I was a key influence for this
work. I too have approached the ‘horror’ of my own self ‘as the animal I do not
know.’

During a conversation with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Agnes Varda asks: ‘why did I
enter into the film? Why did I film my hands?’ (Obrist 2003, p. 897). Her answer (to
her own question) is: ‘I want to make films in which I exist. I want to exist within the
films I make, whether they are fictional or not’ (Obrist 2003, pp. 901–2). Placing my
hands and feet into the body of Book Two was a way of existing in the work in the
way that Varda describes. The disembodied feet come from Frida Kahlo, but I will get
to that later.

France. These days it might be considered stealing by many people (to take us back to another
important theme of this work).

This ‘animal I do not know’, must be a reference to Derrida’s writing on autobiography entitled The
Animal that Therefore I Am (2008) a collection of writings from his ten-hour lecture at the 1997 Cerisy
conference.
Art historian Mary D Garrard has argued that a defining feature of Artemesia Gentileschi’s paintings is the way she paints hands. Born in 1593, the daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, a famous Italian painter, Artemesia is recognised as the first known professional woman painter and is something of a feminist icon. Some of Gentileschi’s most famous works are her portrayals of Judith beheading Holofernes, the story told in the deuterocanonical *Book of Judith*, which I discuss in Book Two (see Fig. 26, p. 121). In the story, Judith, a young widow, beheads Holofernes, the Assyrian general who has set up camp at the gates of her city. She enters his tent at night, gets him drunk (perhaps a euphemism for seduction) and when he is asleep she cuts off his head, thereby defeating his army, who, finding their leader headless, retreat. Not surprisingly, Artemisia’s style was very similar to her father Orazio Gentileschi’s, and to this day there remains some dispute among art historians as to which Gentileschi painted some works. There is even disagreement among art historians regarding which paintings should be under dispute. In *Artemesia’s Hand*, Mary D Garrard claims that the best way to establish which works Artemesia painted is to inspect the hands. She writes:

Orazio treats female hands differently. His women are typically given light work; they have a soft touch. With very few exceptions, Orazio shows women with hands that hang, relaxed and graceful, bend forward limply or barely grasp a heavy object … Artemesia’s women have normal human hands that function as signs of female agency … Artemesia’s women exert pressure with their hands. Their fingers grasp objects firmly and make a fist. They have full rotary motion in the wrist, and their wrists break backward to show the strain of exertion, just as men’s wrists do (Garrard 2005, p. 8).

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39 Germaine Greer writes at length about Artemesia Gentileschi in her excellent book *The Obstacle Race* (2001 [1979]).

40 Speaking of power, one of the Judith and Holofernes paintings was commissioned for the Medici family!
Garrard reminds us in this paper that the vocabulary of the hand—to grasp, to apprehend, to take hold of—is one closely related to perception and understanding. So perhaps the hands of this project—as well as being a way of existing in the work—are a symbol of comprehension. Of ‘handling’ the material; arranging, placing and keeping in mind.
The boat as body

The role of the body in Secretly in a Boat I Went is influenced by conceptual performance art practices that engage the body as a medium. While this project is embedded in deeply personal stories (I have even described it as memoir) it should not be read as strictly autobiographical. This is not to disavow the importance of the autobiographical in the work; rather, it is to emphasise the importance of the body to the project—even as it is an absent body. As Paul Auster reminds us, ‘the story begins, in your body, and everything will end in the body as well’ (2012, p. 12). Writing begins with the movement of our hand (or hands) across the page or the keyboard. When the Australian playwright Hannie Rayson was a writer-in-residence at RMIT, she led a masterclass in which she described lying on the floor of her workspace and listening to the voices of her characters. She described it as pulling them into her body (2011). It could be said, broadly speaking, that all actions are bodily, since without the body we cannot do anything at all, and that writing, like its other artistic counterparts, is therefore an inherently bodily gesture. Nevertheless, there is a difference between a bodily gesture inherent in a practice or action, and engaging the body as a medium of the practice itself, such as in the work of Marina Abramović. From her earliest performances, Abramović has pioneered the notion of the body as medium, constantly underlining the significance of the body to her practice. She states this over and over again, including in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist where she said, ‘The main idea of my whole work is the body’ (Obrist 2003, p. 30).

It is no coincidence that some of the most radical performance art emerged in the early 1970’s, when deconstructionist and poststructuralist thought was radically

41 Although here I mean medium as material, it is interesting that the same word is used for someone who is said to ‘channel’ psychic or supernatural energy.
altering long-established cultural assumptions. The impact of this moment in critical theory was such that the body was never just the body again; it was permanently inscribed with meaning beyond the physical. The emergence of postmodern theory coming out of France in the lead-up to, and following, the May 1968 riots in Paris, had a profound impact on the discourse of the body, and heralded a radical departure from the traditional Cartesian mind–body split. The body became a site of political importance, particularly in regard to race, gender, sexuality and class. As Derrida reiterates throughout his work: ‘One of the gestures of deconstruction is not to naturalise what is not natural. Not to assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions or society is natural’ (Derrida, 2002).

Another way of saying this might be, as Judith Butler puts it, ‘Discourses do live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood’ (Meijer & Prins 1998, p. 282). Ultimately the body of this project, then, is a political one even as it is not explicitly so. It desires, suffers, is angry, contests, loves, wants to be loved and is afraid to die—to return to the chapters of Book Two. It is too hungry, insecure, haunted, ashamed, alone and absent. It is paradoxical. It lies and tells the truth; it pilfers and runs off with things (including its own ideas). It photographs, photocopies, gathers and collects. It is a reading, a writing and a talking body, which appropriates, quotes and sings. Above all else it is a making body. It writes up the material of its own lived experience. It is a body that has come out of the shadows and speaks out—however repetitively—about longing, loving and having nowhere to belong. It is a dislocated, out-of-place body that is located within the work via an objectification of itself.

In *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), Marina Abramović spent 12 days living in the Sean Kelly gallery in a structure built into a suspended platform on the gallery wall. The structure contained three distinct spaces—bedroom, bathroom and living room—all minimally furnished (see Figs. 27 & 28, p. 121–22). Abramović set the following conditions for the performance:

- **Duration of piece**: 12 days
- **Food**: no food
- **Water**: large quantity of pure mineral water
- **Talking**: no talking
- **Singing**: possible but unpredictable
- **Writing**: no writing
- **Reading**: no reading
- **Sleeping**: 7 hours a day
- **Standing**: unlimited
- **Sitting**: unlimited
- **Lying**: unlimited
- **Shower**: 3 times a day

Throughout the 12 days a metronome kept a steady beat. Abramović performed *The House with The Ocean View* as a purifying ritual in response to the experience of returning to New York post-9/11 and finding the city and the people changed.

Art critic RoseLee Goldberg has described this performance as ‘a staging of emotion’ (Goldberg 2002, p. 157). She writes:

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43 Abramović’s work has a ritualistic quality that reminds me of the mysticism inherent in Bataille’s notion of inner experience (not to mention the erotic).
The House with the Ocean View is without doubt one of the most important live art works in decades. Not because it is a work of extraordinary elegance, which it is, nor because it continues potent themes of Abramović’s thirty-year career, which it does, but because House, above all, is a work of visual theatre in the most powerful and heroic sense. (Goldberg 2002, p. 157)

Goldberg describes how, in such minimal settings, each of Abramović’s gestures were heightened, such that drying her hair after a shower was evocative of a figurative painting. Marina Abramović’s use of ritual, instruction and occupying spaces of emotion were an important influence on Secretly in a Boat I Went, as was her insistence on the importance of the body to her practice. ‘The deeper you go into yourself, the more universal you come out on the other side’ (1995, p. 90) she has said about her own performance work. The deeper into yourself …

There is a wonderful passage in Stigmata where Hélène Cixous writes:

Sometimes, when I go off to write, friends ask “about what?” What is the subject? I never know, of course. It is known, nevertheless, I know that it is known. I mean: id knows. (2005, p. 61).

Secretly in a Boat I Went involved a lot of unconscious work, in that it was written out of itself, something that I have described as cannibalising my own writing. In the writing and making of this project I sought to inhabit unknown parts of myself as a site of nonbelonging, it was written through a process of rewriting, rethinking, refeeling my way through the material. It was a ‘writing-into’, to use Rendle-Short’s eisegetical sense of the word.

The use of the body as a strategy for storytelling in Secretly in a Boat I Went allowed for a fluid movement between the fictional, allegorical and autobiographical aspects of the work, such that a story of a girl who grows a tail sits comfortably alongside a reflection on a stepfather, a man I call ‘My Tyrant’. It then links back to
Greece and the tyrannical rule of the 1967–74 dictatorship. In writing the bodies of each of the characters in *Secretly in a Boat I Went*, I was giving expression to my own experience of physical displacement, which is the nub of this project. In Ainslie’s story particularly, I brought the voice into the first person and sought to keep her experience of the coup close to her body. The story of Odette, on the other hand, was inspired directly by an experience I had at art school in my early twenties when I was employed at a commercial gallery in Woollahra to assist with packing artworks up for shipment. I recall feeling so distinctly out of place in that gallery that I might as well have had a tail. The director of the gallery and her assistants were impeccably dressed compared to me, and yet, I had the sense that no matter what clothes I put myself in the tip of a big hairy tail would fall just below the hem of my skirt—such was my fundamental difference. The image of the tail as a marker of difference stayed with me. I recall doing a little drawing of it in my journal, but since I have long since gotten rid of those old journals I have had to make another drawing of the tail (see Figs. 29 & 30, pp. 122–23).

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44 Woollahra is a very posh upper-class suburb in Sydney.
The handmade body – listed, photographed, archived and stitched together

A key approach to the making of *Secretly in a Boat I Went* was listing. Listing is a way of capturing or recording something systematically, of organising, categorising and prioritising. A list naturally reduces something to its most important parts. Of course one writes a list in order to make sense of (or in order not to forget) something. A dictionary is a list. So are contents, indexes and menus. Wittgenstein’s *Tactatus Logico—Philosophicus* is an entire philosophical text written as a list (2001 [1921]). And the use of lists as a method to think a problem through systematically is seen in both in philosophy and mathematics.

I have used lists not only as a way of organising my thinking, but also in order to provide instruction for how to proceed and, importantly, to set constraints. Book Two began with a list of ‘initial instructions’ (see page 139). The first three are:

1. Use instructions as a method for the exegesis.
2. Follow them.
3. Tell the truest story.45

The word *list* is a noun and a verb, aside from its definition in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a number of connected items or names written consecutively’ (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2007, p. 1615). The noun is also defined as ‘the scene of a contest’ and ‘the border or a selvedge of a piece of fabric, denoting a border or edging’.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes writes about the borders and edges of a text. He writes: ‘Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*?’ (Barthes 1975 [1973], p. 9; author’s emphasis). So it is that a list also brings us back to pleasure! From the beginning of this work I wanted the various narratives (Odette,

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45 This is a reference to Sophie Calle’s work *The Fake Marriage* (1992).
Ainslie, my own autobiographical writing) to be threaded, or shot, through the whole, as in a piece of fabric. The constant layering and reiterating of this work was also a way of weaving the work together. In *Reading philosophy as fiction*, video artist and academic Sigrid Hackenberg suggests that the practice of contemporary Continental philosophy evokes the etymology of the Indian word *Sanskrit*, meaning stitched verse, and *Sutra*, meaning a thread or line that holds things together (Sigrid Hackenberg: *Reading philosophy as fiction* 2013). *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is a tapestry of images and words that is pieced together, not unlike the way a film is cut and spliced in the editing room. I am reminded of the illicit films screened in Greece during the 1967–74 dictatorship in select cinemas. Due to the censorship at the time, cinema owners began to splice erotic images into the main narrative of feature films. These scenes would have nothing to do with the main narrative, and would create a sudden collage effect. These additions were known as τσοντα (*tsonta*), meaning gusset: ‘fabric inserted to allow ease of movement’.46 While this work is not cut up with erotic images, it is shot through with other revealing material—of a personal nature.

The verb *list* is defined as ‘(of a ship) lean over to one side’; and from the archaic meanings ‘want; like’, and ‘desire; inclination’ (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2007, p. 1615). How interesting, that contained within this word, ‘list’, are so many of the key themes of this project: desire, contestation, scenes, borders, ships.

The use of lists throughout *Secretly in a Boat I Went* connects tangibly with the idea of a vocabulary or an index that is central to this body of work, as well as to the cataloguing that is prominent in Book Two. It also fits the obsessive nature of this work and the sense in which it is a ‘note to self’. One of the questions guiding this work was: if I were to give myself a set of instructions for belonging, what would

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46 *Tsonta* remains the Greek slang word for dirty movies (Karalis 2012, p. 164).
they be? The assembling of this project was an attempt to get to the bottom of that question, through writing, photographing, listing, performing and instructing—in order to make sense, to piece together. It was an arrangement, a composition.

The use of lists in this project was also an aesthetic choice, particularly in Book Two. I used numbered lists as a way of reducing complex ideas and also as a way of structuring the imagined therapy sessions in the ‘If I went to see an analyst’ refrains. Rather than using traditional dialogue here, I numbered the exchange. This numbering as listing is also present in Sophie Calle’s work Exquisite Pain (1984–2003), where she uses photographs taken during a residency in Japan in 1984 to count down the days to a painful breakup. She writes, ‘I left on October 25, not knowing that this marked the beginning of a 92-day countdown to the end of a love affair—nothing unusual, but for me then the unhappiest moment of my whole life’ (Calle 2003, p. 353). She later stamps various photographs and memorabilia from that trip with a numbered countdown to unhappiness (see Figs. 31 & 32, pp. 123–24).

Another important strategy in the making of this work was the use of images. As with the use of lists, the photographs and images used in Books One and Two were a way of arranging my thinking. In Book One the use of my grandmother’s photographs is a way of connecting the theoretical thinking to the tenor of the other books, and of introducing poetically the creative concerns of the project, while in Book Two the placement and use of photographs form an important part of the work both aesthetically and conceptually. I have used photographs to reiterate and to say differently what had already been said in the text. In Susan Sontag’s seminal On Photography, she writes, ‘Photographed images don’t seem to be statements of the
world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can acquire and make’ (1978 [1973], p. 4).

In both Book One and Two I was interested in representing the concerns of the work through image and text, such that as well as taking photographs I also ‘took’ (as in stole) them either literally or by photographing a photograph that did not belong to me. In using pieces of the world, as Sontag puts it, I was seeking to constantly layer, amplify and recapitulate the concerns of this project.

Art critic Okwui Enwezor has argued that the ‘camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is a priori an archival object’ (2008, p. 12). In my case, the archival gesture was to reimagine the past—to re-record it against the actual events of the past. The archive (like the gallery) is the domain of the curator—the arranger and organiser par excellence. Not unlike the writer, the curator’s job is to arrange things in such a way that they enhance meaning, that they make sense together. The curator is a conductor of objects. And like the musical conductor, the curator brings the work together. Places it. Catalogues it. Locates it.

This making, arranging, photographing (even writing) brings us back to hands. In Greek, the verb I make,47 κάνω (kano), is the same as the verb I do. If you ask someone what he or she is doing, it is the same as asking what they are making. There is no emphasis on the hands in making as there is in the English verb to make. In the English usage, we only make things that involve the use of our hands. In Secretly in a Boat I Went, as I make, I do (belong). I make in search of myself, so to speak—in search of the miraculous, as Bas Jan Ader put it.

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47 As with all Greek verbs, ‘do’ and ‘make’ are conjugated according to whom the action relates to; for example, I do, you do, he/she/it does, we do and they do.
I went
After the death of my grandmother, when we were packing up her house, I found a series of black-and-white photographs stashed in one of her books. They were taken in Athens in what looks like the 1960s. I slipped them into my bag, and carried them around with me. In this photograph you can see the Acropolis just off to the right. A Greek friend once told me that all the street numbers in Athens, starting from one, increase the further away it gets from the Acropolis. In other words, everything revolves around this site, just as everything in my life seems to revolve around Greece.
No place like home

The trauma associated with migration is transgenerational. In my case, my grandfather was sent to Australia in 1929 when he was just fourteen. He was sent away from Akrata, a small village in the Peloponnese, to country New South Wales in order to work and send money back to the village. My grandfather was in his forties before he returned to Greece for the first time, by which time his three sisters had grown up and given birth to children of their own. He used to remind us how in those days boys were sent abroad to earn enough money to buy a donkey, and then returned home in a Mercedes Benz. In other words the expectation of migration was vastly different to the reality—both for better and worse.

The homeland stands for belonging in the most fundamental sense, perhaps second only to the family unit. It follows, then, that departure (forced migration, exile or banishment) from the homeland is one of the most profound losses a human being can experience. As John Berger has put it, ‘every migrant knows in his heart of hearts that it is impossible to return. Even if he is physically able to return, he does not truly return, because he himself has been so deeply changed by his emigration’ (1984, p. 67). There is a tendency for the Greek migrant to be even more ‘Greek’ than those living in Greece (this logic applies to other ethnicities too), as though living in a freeze-framed version of the country that they left. ‘For immigrants and their families, disorder and strangeness is the condition of their existence,’ writes Hanif Kureishi (2002, p. 3). For the children of migrants, this is particularly painful. They tend to be subjected to the cultural and social expectations of the decade in which their parents left their country of birth. The hangover of this dilemma is felt by the children or, as in my case, by the children’s children.
Certainly the children of immigrants are prime candidates for the nonbelonging subject, but they are not the only example. In an interview with Günter Gaus for Zur Person German intellectual Hannah Arendt expressed it this way: ‘I myself, for example, don’t believe that I have ever considered myself a German—in the sense of belonging to the people as opposed to being a citizen, if I can make that distinction’ (2003 [1964], pp. 8–9). It is quite clear, when she says this that she does not mean that she felt anything else. It is not a comment made in regard to her Jewishness. She continues, ‘I remember discussing this with [Karl] Jaspers around 1930. He said, “Of course you are German!” I said, “One can see that I am not!”’ (Arendt 2003 [1964], pp. 8–9).

I do not feel, nor have I ever felt, particularly Australian. I write about this briefly in Book Two in the listing around what does and does not make me Greek and Australian. In the end, it is for reasons of birth and therefore citizenship that I am ‘Australian’ rather than for any deep attachment to the place. Like Arendt, this is not to say that I feel I belong anywhere else, because I do not. I am no more Greek than I am Australian, although I am desirous of Greece in a way that I am not of Australia.

This feeling of being not particularly Australian—of being not, non- or un-Australian (as I put it in Book Two) feels, at times, like a betrayal (not unlike the terms in which I described it earlier with my mother). To not feel nationalistic, in a country that is very nationalistic, I have discovered, borders on treasonous. I have had many heated arguments both with friends and acquaintances about my ambivalence for Australia. I have been told many times, in no uncertain terms, that if I do not like it here I should leave. This ‘shut up or get out’ mentality makes me furious. Firstly, I have never understood why feeling dispassionate about being Australian is equated with ‘not liking it’ here. Also, why should I be denied a right to dislike or be critical
of the place I call home? In these conversations I am shocked by my reaction—my heart races and my cheeks flush with rage. Indeed each recent encounter of this kind has led to fictional revenge—in an effort to understand the intensity of my emotion I have been led to the page. The dinner party scene in ‘Ainslie is not a Greek name’ was written after one such conversation with two Italian migrants who were stumped and somewhat offended by my declaration of un-Australianness. In ‘Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance’ (1998), Australian author Brian Castor emphasises the familial disinheritance that writing can provoke. Castro writes: ‘He had never dreamed disinheritance could have been the real consequence of a few well-written words. Maybe in a will, which is always ill-written. But not like this. They, the family, were the law’ (Castro 1998). Castro does not explicitly mention disinheritance from the state in his essay, though he does allude to his alienation from Australian culture.

Curiously, being ‘un-Australian’ seems to be a unique feature of Australian identity, similar to ‘cultural cringe’ that came before it. As Judith Ireland argues, there is no such thing as ‘un-Welsh’ or ‘un-New Zealand’, for example (2005). Perhaps the kind of exile that those of us who identify as being un-Australian (by definition of not feeling Australian) suffer is cultural—one of disapproval rather than of political exile. That is to say, the citizens of our country who get locked up are not anti-nationalists; they are more likely to be refugees, the indigenous or the poor.

‘The most uncanny place,’ Adam Phillips reminds us, ‘is one’s home’. He is discussing here WG Sebald’s work *The Rings of Saturn* in Grant Gee’s documentary *Patience (After Sebald)*. He goes on:

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48 Throughout the essay he switches between first and third person. Here he refers of himself in the third person.
It appears to be the most familiar place, but actually it is the most unfamiliar place. I think that Sebald knew that only children have homes, that adults don’t have homes. And that there is something childish in the best sense, and the worst sense, about the idea of home (Patience (After Sebald), 2012).

In other words there is actually no place like home, in that the idea of home is never what home actually was to begin with. This is especially the case for the nonbelonging subject. Yet, as Gohar Homayounpour writes, ‘the most disillusioning, painful realisation of the human condition [is]: finding that one does not even belong where one is supposed to belong’ (Homayounpour 2012, p. 40).

Todd McMillan writes in the artist statement for his exhibition Ten Years of Tears: ‘my work sits somewhere between the sadness of leaving and the fear of return’ (2013), which is another apt description of the longing for elsewhere that is an inherent experience for the subject who does not belong. In the making of this work I attempted to capture the experience of groundlessness, unfamiliarity, ambivalence, loss and nostalgia both of leaving and returning. Of longing for home but there being no such place. Of the bottom falling out of the boat, of sinking, and disappearing into the deep.

49 Contrast this with the refrain throughout The Wizard of Oz (1939): ‘There’s no place like home’.
The missing

In Robert Lepage’s film *The Confessional* (1995) the central character, Pierre Lamontagne, returns to his hometown in Québec City after several years abroad for the funeral of his father. Pierre begins repainting the now empty family home. Each time he applies a coat of paint, several circular and rectangular shapes from where the pictures used to hang on the wall seep through and form slightly paler shapes. He cannot get rid of them, even when he paints the walls of the lounge room red. This image of painting over, and leaking through, act as a powerful metaphor for those absences that remain present in our lives, even after their loss; the traces that we cannot paint over or erase. Absence appears and reappears in *Secretly in a Boat I Went*. There is the absent father (who underpins the project) and the subsequent absence of Greece when I was growing up. There is the looking at the feet in order not to see the rest of the body, the whited-out Frida Kahlo, the amputated tail, and the disappearing mother exiled in grief. There are also inevitably things missing from what I have so far covered in relation to my creative work.

As I approach the end of Book One, there is still a part of me chalking up what I should have said and did not, what I ran out of time to say, and what I wish I had said earlier. As with any piece of extended writing there are pages that did not make the cut, that sit in a ‘discards’ folder on my desktop. Hélène Cixous expresses this sentiment when she writes, ‘When I’ve finished something—when I stop, or when it stops—I wonder: what have I forgotten? Naturally, I’ve always forgotten something. (It’s true, the end is like that: a labor of memory and forgetting)’ (2005, p. 62). It is tempting to believe that if only I had done things differently they would be better (for example, in the context of this thesis, if only I had more time—but I am approaching the end of my candidature. There is no more).
In *Missing Out*, Adam Phillips argues for the value of the life missed out on, fantasised about but never achieved. From the thing we think we want, to a joke or a work of art, Phillips claims, ‘No one wants to be the person who doesn’t get it’ (2012, p. 34). But, he claims, it is sometimes not getting the thing we think we want that leads to satisfaction. Could this principle relate to belonging also? To miss out on belonging seems to be a curse—and yet, isn’t it the case that to belong too much is to become xenophobic or nationalistic in the most frightening of ways? In ‘A new type of intellectual: The dissident’, Julia Kristeva argues:

> Writing is impossible without some kind of exile. How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one’s country, language, sex and identity? (1986, p. 298)

Could it be, then, that to nonbelong might in fact be a valuable, if not desirable position to occupy, particularly as it relates to one’s art practice?

In *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, Thomas Dunn argues for the political veracity of loneliness, not unlike I have done in my own case for nonbelonging. When he writes, ‘I want to claim that being present at the place of our absence is what it means to experience loneliness’ (Dunn 2008, p. 16), he could just as easily be talking about the concerns of this project. Dunn describes Shakespeare’s Cordelia, from *King Lear*, as the first ‘lonely self’ in what he describes as the pathos of disappearance, which leads him to death—the ultimate loss, the ultimate lone venture. Dunn writes, ‘Because loneliness is an experience of disappearance, it is embedded in existential paradoxes concerning the meaning of life as a death-bound experience’ (2008, p. 35).
As I approach the end of this book it is not surprising that I find myself thinking about loss and death. The same happens in the last chapter of Book Two entitled ‘I am afraid to die’—the last of Barthes’ list of functions.

Like the body, death is something I have averted my gaze from despite it being threaded throughout the work. In Eroticism Georges Bataille reminds us that the erotic is a realm inherently connected to death. He writes of the ‘little death’ of orgasm, but also links the erotic to death through procreation and the inevitable cycle of life. The response to erotic desire, Bataille argues, is ‘an end’ (1992, p. 19).

Perhaps it is enough to say that the response to all desire is an end. That would explain why the end of a book, a meal, a film, even a project can be experienced as a loss.
The wound of nonbelonging

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes turns his attention to photography, and in particular to the quality that makes one photograph more engaging than another. Barthes names that special quality its *punctum*, which he defines as ‘that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’ (2000 [1980], p. 27).

Deemed an accident, because what ‘pricks’ me is not necessarily what will prick you and also because it might come as a surprise, Barthes describes the *punctum* as like a punctuation that breaks through the scene of the image, which he refers to as the *studium*. He writes, ‘I wanted to explore [photography] not as a question (theme) but as a wound’ (2000 [1980], p. 21; my emphasis). His use of the term ‘wound’ throughout *Camera Lucida* corresponds with Hélène Cixous’ use of it in *Stigmata*, where she refers over and over again to wounds in relation to writing. ‘All literature is scary,’ she writes, ‘It celebrates the wound and repeats the lesion’ (2005 [1998], p. xii). And yet ‘wound’ is not a word immediately synonymous either with photography or writing.

Wound is a bodily word. It is used to describe a rupture of flesh and not for inanimate objects (for which puncture might be used instead, a word that incidentally sounds very similar to *punctum*). A wound has certain gravity to it. It is lasting and takes time to heal, like a bruise—the other word used by Barthes. For obvious reasons, a wound has traditionally negative connotations. In *Strangers to Ourselves* Julia Kristeva writes, ‘a secret wound, often unknown to himself, drives the foreigner to wandering’ (1991, p. 5), and this is the kind of use of wounding that we might be more familiar with as readers. By evoking the wound for the experience of photography and writing—or any artwork for that matter—both Barthes and Cixous manage to approach that ineffable yet bodily quality of being deeply affected by art.
Clarice Lispector has described as ‘the most alarmingly unsuspected regions within me’ (2011 [1977], p. xiii); or Ronell calls a ‘narcotic hit’ (Avital Ronell & Judith Butler: Freud and nonviolence, 2013). Where for instance, the hairs stand up on the back of your neck, the skin breaks out in goose bumps, or one is moved to tears—or gets high.

In the preface to the 2005 edition of Stigmata, Cixous retells an experience she had as a child in Algeria, during the Second World War (2005). Her doctor father, despite being Jewish, was mobilised as a lieutenant on the front and because of his position the young Cixous was allowed special access to a fenced garden. One day, inside the garden, two girls spat at her and called her a lying Jew. She writes:

> This scene which was too big for me has engendered all my literature. It gave me all the impossibilities, it elected me for the innumerable metaphors of cruelty, in an instant I understood everything and I understood nothing. (Cixous 2005, p. xvi)

> In my work, the scenes that were too big for me and have informed everything are the subject of this work. It is the tail that Odette grows in Book Three, as well as the loss and displacement threaded through Book Two.
Representing the wound

Of all the artists who have approached the body in pain, the most iconic is the late Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. When she was eighteen Kahlo was in a devastating traffic accident when the tram she was travelling on collided with a bus. She suffered a broken spinal column, collarbone, ribs and pelvis, as well as multiple fractures and a dislocated shoulder and foot. Even more terribly, an iron handrail from the tram came free during the accident and pierced her abdomen, permanently damaging her uterus and leaving her unable to have children. The accident left her in a state of intense pain for the rest of her life. A prolific painter, Kahlo made the self the primary subject of her work (see Fig. 33, p. 124).\(^{50}\)

In the introduction to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, Carlos Fuentes describes Kahlo as the tragic embodiment of ‘Plato’s very forthright description: The body is like a tomb that imprisons us much as the oyster is caught within the shell’ (Kahlo 1995, p. 13). Fuentes lists the following traumas suffered by Kahlo in the 29 years after the accident, including being hung head down and naked to strengthen her spinal column; being fitted with eight plaster casts, like corsets, used to support her spine; secreting fluid from her wounded back that smelled ‘like a dead dog’; and having her leg amputated after gangrene set in (Kahlo 1995, pp. 12–13).

If all of this physical pain was not enough, Kahlo also seemed to have suffered emotionally during her marriage to Diego Rivera, who was known to be a serial womaniser. Rivera even went so far as to sleep with Kahlo’s sister, leading to their brief divorce.\(^ {51}\)

\(^ {50}\) I chose this image particularly because of its representation of feet.

\(^ {51}\) The couple remarried a year later.
It is not easy to write about Frida Kahlo, particularly in regard to the pain she suffered, because she is also a woman whose body has been romanticised because of the pain she endured. Even the most well-meaning representations of her life tend to fetishise her suffering. Fuentes, Kahlo’s biographer, goes so far as to use her body as a metaphor for Mexico itself. He writes, ‘the individual, the irreplaceable, the unrepeatable woman called Frida Kahlo is broken, torn inside her own body as Mexico is torn outside’ (Kahlo 1995 p. 9). In Elaine Scarry’s excellent book *The Body in Pain* (1985), she writes about the inherent incommunicability of pain, in part since every person’s pain thresholds are so different. She writes that language is rendered hopeless in physical pain—that pain is unsharable as it cannot be denied or confirmed by the other (Scarry 1985).

If I were to choose one image to represent this project it would be a photograph of Frida Kahlo, which I photocopied from the book *Her Photos* (2010) and packed up with the rest of my things before going to Greece in late 2012 (see Fig. 22, p. 119). In Book Two it appears a number of times and I have already mentioned it above. In the image, which used to hang on my wall at home, Kahlo is perched on the arm of the sofa but her body is totally blended into the background. It is as if the top half of her has been overexposed. The lower half of her body is visible, her arms crossed over her waist, and her skirt, but her entire torso is missing—whited out.

I began writing about this image while I was in Athens working on Book Two. It came to mind while I was writing about absence. That photocopied photograph of Frida Kahlo became emblematic of all the thinking I was doing about an erotics of

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52 Consider Julie Taymor’s film *Frida* (2002), in which Salma Hayek plays a somewhat more ‘mainstream’ or ‘pretty’ looking Frida Kahlo.

53 This is a crude summary, since the book offers an in-depth reading of pain and torture.

54 I spent two significant stints in Athens while writing this thesis.
nonbelonging. It was a poignant signifier for the absence induced by existential wounding (Kahlo’s overexposed torso was my punctum). The more I wrote about the Frida photograph the more narrative I constructed around it. It seemed unlikely that the photograph had been overexposed since it was only Kahlo’s torso missing from the picture. So I imagined the artist in a dark room removing herself chemically from the image.

Months later, back in Canberra, I tracked down a copy of the book in the research library of the National Gallery of Australia. I wanted to include a reproduction of the image in Book Two, by way of illustration. To my horror the photograph I found was nothing like I had remembered it. In fact, she was not blending into the background at all. Instead Kahlo had cut her torso out of the image altogether.\textsuperscript{55} ‘The excised face is Frida Kahlo’ (Kahlo 2010, p. 245), reads the image credit. \textsuperscript{56} I felt a momentary pang of shock followed by disappointment. I felt ill; and more than that I worried about what else I had misremembered, what else I had gotten wrong. After a few minutes staring at the picture in disbelief wondering what I would do now—how I would reframe all my thinking on absence and wounding as it related to this image—I decided to photocopy the picture again, and see if I could return Frida to her blended state. I had an awkward conversation with the librarian, who offered to scan the image to a thumb drive, which of course would not work. I explained that I wanted the particular quality of the photocopy—did she mind? But I was never able to return Frida to the state of the ‘original’ copy. And as my things are still in storage I am not able to retrieve it from my belongings either. I have been back

\textsuperscript{55} I presume it was her, since the book is a collection of Kahlo’s pictures.

\textsuperscript{56} The full image credit is: Unidentified couple to the left. Guadalupe Marin to the right. The excised face is Frida Kahlo’s. The Barbizon Plaza Hotel, New York, 1933. Photo: Lucienne Bloch.
to the library a number of times since, attempting to get just the right combination of white and greys, but to no avail. I am afraid what I have will have to do.
The intractable sear

One of the most surprising features of Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* is the choice of photographs he uses to illustrate his notion of the *punctum* and *studium*. They seem mismatched to the deeply personal voice of the text and are, at least by my reading, incongruous—unsatisfying, even. Barthes’ choice of images has niggled at me from the very first time I picked up the book until now. What bothers me, in particular, is that there are no pictures of his mother, the co-subject of this excellent work—a book devoted to her. Barthes uses his mother as a way into the subject of photography. He searches among old family photographs for picture that captures ‘the truth of the face I had loved’ (2000 [1980], p. 67). He finally discovers what he is looking for in a photograph of his mother as a child standing at a garden gate with her brother. Describing the image as ‘The Garden Photograph’—but he does not include a reproduction of the photograph in the book.

I can imagine a different book, where Barthes would include photographs of his deceased mother, or at the very least, this ‘Garden Photograph’. Why doesn’t he? What does he feel he achieves in keeping this image from us? It was clearly a deliberate choice to leave it out. Nevertheless, I find it disorienting. The text at once holds me close and pushes me away. When I first reached the moment in the text where he describes this image I experienced a palpable suspense. Turning the page, I half-expected to see it, despite having already been bothered by his choice of images and knowing deep down there would be no mother photograph. Instead, I encountered (the reader encounters) a portrait of an elderly woman, a very striking image certainly, but not what I was longing for. It is a portrait of the French photographer Nadar’s 57 mother instead. A stand-in mother. The caption reads ‘Nadar: the artist’s mother (or

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57 Nadar was the pseudonym of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820–1910).
wife)’ (Barthes 2000 [1980], p. 68). A Freudian slip, perhaps, given the Oedipal devotion to his mother throughout the book? Barthes insists that he cannot reproduce The Garden Photograph for the reader, as it would be an indifferent image for us. He puts his explanation for this in brackets, as if in an aside:

(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the “ordinary”; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.) (2000 [1980], p. 73)

This is where I disagree with Barthes. Here we part ways. I wish to retaliate, to object. To say to him that of all people he should know it is impossible to predict what will or will not wound me—he has even said so himself when he defined the wound of the punctum as an accident, a surprise. Maybe he is right, maybe it would not wound me, but how could he be sure? I resent that he has kept this image to himself. That he withholds it just at the moment when I yearn for him to take me further. Just at the moment I am waiting to see how he will conclude this meditation on photography and the loss of his mother. But alas, Barthes never reveals a picture of his mother.

Since Barthes did not go further, I will attempt to tread where I wish he had taken us in Camera Lucida. I will not hold back. I will show it all (my private parts)\(^{59}\) … here I go overexposing myself again. I wonder if by doing so I will in fact reveal any more of myself than he has in Camera Lucida?

I experienced a similar punch-in-the-guts feeling that I described earlier in relation to the Frida Kahlo image in a different way when packing up my

\(^{58}\) Now of course I am going too far!

\(^{59}\) Pardon the pun.
grandmother’s house after her death. While I was sorting through all the books in her library, I encountered a room overflowing with material other than just books. It was here that she kept photographs, drawings and sketches for her paintings. Some were stuffed into books and others overflowed from the drawers of cupboards. There were old pamphlets from as far back as the 1950’s, shopping lists, love letters, postcards, subscription leaflets and various ephemera, alongside more valuable possessions such as the deed to the house that I found in one of her books.

Unlike Barthes who, in *Camera Lucida*, describes his indifference looking through family photographs, I entered into a kind of voyeuristic trance. I could not look away. I delighted in the images—how gorgeous everyone was: my father, my aunt, my grandparents. I never tired of gaping at my grandmother in particular, admiring her beauty. Here is one such photograph. *Look at her!*

[Image of the my grandmother, removed for copyright reasons]

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60 My grandmother was a painter. She attended Julian Ashton Art School, in Sydney when she was young, and spent her adult life devoted to her art practice.
I could stare at this picture for hours. It is especially intriguing for me because I am not and have never been a glamorous woman, like she was. I hid my body from a very early age. I made a deadly assumption that beautiful women were stupid and I rejected my body; I relegated my physical self to the shadows.

[image of my grandmother, removed for copyright reasons]

Now, look at her here. This time with her two children: my father and my aunt. I wonder whether my grandfather took this picture. Again, I cannot look very far away from it; I have to wrench myself away. I recall a childhood book I used to read over and over, when I was about seven years old, about a little boy and girl who stepped into a painting. If I could, I might step into this photograph. Look at my father with his rosy cheeks, and his sister, who looks a little like I did at that age. See my grandmother’s pink dress and slender waist, look at how she wears her hair.

However, it is always with mixed delight that I encounter these family photographs, especially because there are so few (if any) of me in the collection. As well as enjoying rifling through them, there is a sickening that occurs at the evidence
that I do not belong, I am not a part—a knowledge that I bury deep within and smile through because it hurts so much. In fact, it is a feeling of mortification, a deadening. Here is the tangible evidence of my absence (ironic since what makes it tangible is my absence). There are a few pictures that my mother sent my grandmother as I was growing up, but there are none taken by my grandmother, the avid photographer who catalogued both her children and her other grandchild. I was never the subject of my grandmother’s camera lens. She did not adore me. It is possible that I exaggerate here slightly; there may be one or two pictures from when I was a teenager, and there is one taken by my father’s first cousin, out on the front lawn, at Christmas. But it feels as if I am missing altogether. Once, as a teenager, with henna-red hair, I posed for an art class that my grandmother taught. But my memory has it that this was the first and only time I was the subject of her direct gaze. You should have seen me sitting there, so tall and proud.

My father, although well represented in these family photographs, had a different fear sorting though my grandmother’s pictures after her death. He was afraid that he would come across an image of her with a lover. My grandparents had an arranged marriage—my grandfather was twenty years her senior, and a typical Greek patriarch. Their relationship was tumultuous to say the least and we are fairly certain that during their marriage she had a number of affairs. But we are not sure. My father was afraid he would unwittingly discover the evidence. It is one thing to suspect something, but to find an image of it is to make the idea come alive. As Sontag writes, ‘Photographs furnish evidence … the camera record incriminates’ (1978 [1973], p. 5).

61 I do not say this now to embarrass her. I wonder how she would feel if she knew I had just told you this, given she was very modest in what she revealed about her private life and hated even to disclose her age.
There are also few pictures of me with my father. There are some from when I am a little baby, but then there is a gap. Here is a photograph of us circa 1988—look at the way that I have my hand at my mouth. Am I biting my nails? This photograph is part of my mother’s collection, where I am overrepresented rather than missing. My mother photographed me in excess. So I am overrepresented in one family, absent from the other.

Perhaps the strangest image of all from my collection of found family photographs is the one below of my paternal great-great grandfather (my grandmother’s grandfather). He was a magician who came to Australia on tour with his magic show. He left his teenage son here when he left, which is how my grandmother came to be born in Australia. My great-great grandfather changed his name to Hood, after Houdini (the pronunciation of Houdini in Greek emphasises the first syllable, the ‘hoo’ sound).
Here is a poster from one of his magic shows. See the space above his shoulders? His missing head, found below, near his feet (speaking of absence)?

In our family, there is a strong attachment to the mythology affirmed in our family albums, that of good looks, Greece, youth, elegance—and even of magic. But in all of these narratives I am left out. The experience of being absent is a sick-in-the-guts one. Could it be the case, then, that there is a third quality of photography that Barthes does not consider—indeed denies when stopping at his ‘Garden Photograph’? Is there a different kind of wound to be felt here? A wound of disappointment at the incorrect recollection of an image; the wound of being totally absent, erased, missing?

The wound that I am thinking of jabs then sears. This ‘prick’ of absence is punctum but not punctum. It is closer to the Greek word νέκρα (nekra), meaning ‘complete absence of noise or activity; deadness’ (Pring 1982, p. 128). In Greek, νέκρα is also used to describe a place that is empty of people. One might use it to describe an empty bar, much as in English we say it was ‘dead.’

Dead. Absent. Alone. At ‘sea’ …
In *Blue Nights* Joan Didion writes about the death of her daughter Quintana Roo, comparing the recollection of the loss to the time of day that the French call *l’heure bleue* (the hour of blue). She writes:

> you find yourself swimming in the colour blue: the actual light is blue, and over the course of an hour or so this blue deepens, becomes more intense even as it darkens and fades. (Didion, 2011, pp. 3–4)

The colour blue is also significant in *Secretly in a Boat I Went*, which is why I have printed Book Three—‘One part ocean, one part sea’—on pale blue paper. Blue is the colour of the ocean, the sea and the sky. It is also the colour of sadness (the ‘blues’), and as Didion writes, of loss. It is the colour one’s lips turn without enough oxygen. But if this project is an attempt at writing in to places of discomfort it has also been an attempt to rub up against the pleasures of nonbelonging. To float and bob in the vast blueness of the ocean or the sea—rather than to tread water—to feel the touch of the cool water against the skin, however choppy the waters.

> But, let me rewind here. Let me begin, again, with a story about a little girl...
THIRD MOVEMENT
To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering one must not love. But then one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is to suffer; not to love is to suffer; to suffer is to suffer.

Woody Allen

I am crying for more and more disasters, for bigger calamities, for grander failures.

Henry Miller
After the death of my grandmother, when we were packing up her house, I found a series of black-and-white photographs stashed in one of her books. I slipped them into my bag, and carried them around with me. Nearly two years after stealing them, I used a photocopier to make digital copies. If you look closely you can see the way the image has distorted a little. At first I thought to re-scan them, but the more I looked at them the more I began to enjoy the slight blurring and pixilation. I have even begun to like them more than the originals. Looking at these photographs I go back in time. I see what my grandmother saw. The pixilation reminds me of the inevitable distortion of recollection.
Conclusion

_Secretly in a Boat I Went_ explores my complicated relationship to Greece, which I have referred to in the possessive case as ‘My Greece’. Throughout the three books—‘Rising’, ‘Falling’ and ‘Falling-Rising’—Greece is a referent for the experience of nonbelonging, and represents the broader themes of desire, longing, place, absence, shame and rejection. It is a digressive, associative and poetic work. It tells the same story (sings the same song), over and over again, in slightly different ways. While the title of the work suggests some kind of departure or arrival, no destination is offered to the reader—even despite a declared desire to get to the bottom of something. The entire project could be described as an encounter without resolution. This is characterised by the use of vignettes in Book Two, the novel as a collection of short stories in Book Three, and the digressive nature of Book One. The never-quite-getting-there circular movement of the text in this sense imitates desire, just as desire is never fully realized, but remains in a permanent state of flux. The sense of there being no place to rest concretely might also be an erotic place to occupy. This project naturally resists interpretation, in the sense that Susan Sontag argues for it in her essay ‘Against Interpretation’ (Sontag, 2009 [1964]) that I referred to earlier. Without wanting to be deliberately tautological about it, perhaps the point is that there is none. This project does not seek find answers, rather it asks more and more questions.

It is something of a challenge to be writing a conclusion for a project that resists resolution. While it is tempting to tie things up neatly, in these final paragraphs, to do so would go against everything I have already argued for. To the extent that _Secretly in a Boat I Went_ is a quest, the point is not necessarily to succeed. The point is not to find home, nor to magically belong. There is simply no solution to the ‘problem’ of belonging. Rather, the point of this project is to inhabit spaces of
nonbelonging, like Cixous’ wound, and to dwell there—to write, right there. *On the sly I snuck into the boat …*

Whatever else it is, *Secretly in a Boat I Went* is an attempt to reconsider, rewrite, reimagine, redefine the condition of nonbelonging. To deconstruct some of the familiar language associated with displacement and imagine a new vocabulary. To think beyond the traditional narratives of pain in discovering one does not belong and instead to gaze lovingly at it. Indeed, from the beginning of this project I have been interested in the ways that the subject who does not belong occupies a potentially radical place in the culture (in the sense that Kristeva claims writing always contains exile). This is not in order to over-privilege the condition of nonbelonging in retaliation or as some kind of recompense, but simply to make the enquiry. Indeed, that belonging does enter into clichéd terrain is a compelling argument for its consideration.

In Book One I have sought to outline the theoretical concerns that inform the creative practice. The inspiration was to produce what I am referring to as ‘an erotics of belonging’. By adopting an erotics as a methodology I was able to invite ‘nonbelonging’ to lie with me, to whisper in its ear, undress it, seduce it … as I sought to resist neat conclusions and to engage with the subject in all its complexity and contradiction. In writing and making a ‘multiple-self’ project, the inapposite body that is the subject of this project is given a place to exist. As Theodor Adorno writes, ‘In his text, the writer sets up house … For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live’ (2005 [1951], p 87). It is located in a boat of my own composition.

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62 Forgive his gender bias here.

63 John Berger (ref?) and others have made a similar analogy.
Secretly in a Boat I Went is an ode, a love song, a stolen photograph and a cry in the dark. It is a waltz and a serenade. It is a set of instructions, a preface, a gambit and an inkling. It is a space-in-between, a missing, and a forgetting. Secretly in a Boat I Went is an unfinished beginning and end; it is every shade of blue.
After the death of my grandmother, when we were packing up her house, I found a series of black-and-white photographs stashed in one of her books. I slipped them into my bag, and carried them around with me. I didn’t tell anyone I had found them. I kept it secret. Looking at these photographs I see what she saw. I go back in time. I recognise my beloved Athens.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 12  Sophie Calle, ‘The Fake Marriage’, from True Stories, 1992.

Fig. 13  Sophie Calle, from Suite Vénitienne, 1980.
Fig. 14 Sophie Calle, ‘Room 25’ from The Hotel, 1981.

Fig. 15 Sophie Calle, from The Hotel, 1981.
Fig. 16  René Magritte, ‘The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)’, 1948.

Fig. 17  Bas Jan Ader, ‘Broken Fall (Organic)’, 1970
Fig. 18  Bas Jan Ader, 'Fall II', 1971.

Fig. 19  Bas Jan Ader, ‘I am too Sad to Tell You’, 1971.
Fig. 20  Yves Klein, ‘Le Saut dans le Vide (Leap into the Void)’, 1960.

Fig. 21  Ciprian Mureșan, ‘Leap into the Void, after 3 Seconds’, 2004.

Fig. 23 Melody Ellis, from I Rented a Hotel Room, 2013.
Fig. 24  Agnès Varda, film still, *The Gleaners & I*, 2000.

Fig. 25  Agnès Varda, film still, *The Gleaners & I*, 2000.
Fig. 26  Artemisia Gentileschi, ‘Judith Slaying Holofernes’, c. 1611–12.

Fig. 27  Marina Abramović, still from The House with the Ocean View, 2002.
Fig. 28 Marina Abramović, still from *The House with the Ocean View*, 2002.

Fig. 29 Melody Ellis, ‘Tail I’, 2014.
Fig. 30 Melody Ellis, ‘Tail II’, 2014.

Fig. 31 Sophie Calle, from Exquisite Pain, 1984–2003.
Fig. 32  Sophie Calle, from *Exquisite Pain*, (1984–2003).

Fig. 33  Frida Kahlo, ‘What the Water Gave Me’, 1938.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. ‘Acropolis’, private family collection. 8
2. ‘Market’, private family collection. 16
3. ‘Unknown Fountain’, private family collection. 36
4. ‘Stadiou Street’, private family collection. 62
5. ‘The Theatre of Herod’, private family collection. 85
6. ‘My Grandmother I’, private family collection. 101
7. ‘My Grandmother II’, private family collection. 102
8. ‘My Greece, my father and I circa 1988’, private family collection. 104
9. ‘Great-great Grandfather Hood’, private family collection. 105
10. ‘Pigeons’, private family collection. 109
11. ‘An Athenian Ruin’, private family collection. 113
15. Sophie Calle, from The Hotel, 1981, viewed 5 December 2013, 115


33. Frida Kahlo, ‘What the Water Gave Me’, 1938, viewed 9 February 2014,
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APPENDIX A—SONG LYRICS FOR ‘SECRETLY IN A BOAT I WENT’

Secretly in a boat I went
And came out at Drakou's cave.
I see three stoners
Stretched out on the sand.
It was Batis and Artemis
And lazy Stratos.
Hey you Strato, hey you Strato!
Prepare us a fine bong.
So lil’ Batis can puff
Who's been a lil’ dervish for years
And Artemis can puff too
Wherever he goes he gets back loaded.
He sends us hash from Constantinople
And all of us get high;
And dope from Persia
The mangas puff it up without any fuss.

Secretly in a boat I went
And came out at Drakou's cave.
I saw three men stoned on hashish
Stretched out on the sand.

Ζωύλα σε μια βάρκα μπήκα
Και στή σπηλιά τού Δράκου βγήκα.  
Βλέπω τρεις μαστουρομένοι
Και στήν άμμο ξαπλωμένοι.
Ηταν ο Μπάτης κι ο Αρτέμης
Και ο Στράτος ο Τεμπέλης.
Βρέ συ Στράτο, Βρέ συ Στράτο!
Φιάξε ναργιλέ αφράτο.
Na φουμάρει το Μπατάκι
Πούναι χρόνια ντερβιςάκι
Na φουμάρει κι ο Αρτέμης
Όπου πάει και μας φέρνει.
Μας στέλνει μαύρο απ τήν Πόλη
Και μαστουρια είμαστε όλοι;
Τουμπέκι απ’ τήν Περσία
Πίνει ο μάγκας με ησυχία.
Ζωύλα σε μια Βάρκα μπήκα
Και στη σπηλιά του Δράκου βγήκα.
Βλέπω τρεις μαστουρομένοι
Και στην άμμο ξαπλωμένοι.
SECRETLY IN A BOAT I WENT

(Volume 2, Books Two and Three)

A project submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy (Creative Media)

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February 2014
BOOK TWO

FALLING
## CONTENTS

Preface................................................................. 143
A note on the images............................................. 144
Initial instructions.................................................. 145

**LOVE**

I desire............................................................... 151
I suffer.............................................................. 166
I am angry.......................................................... 192

**POWER**

I contest............................................................. 214
I love............................................................... 239
I want to be loved............................................... 259
I am afraid to die............................................... 270

List of illustrations .............................................. 287
Works cited....................................................... 289
Secretly in a Boat I Went is comprised of three books—‘Rising’, ‘Falling’ and ‘Falling-Rising’—that are presented in two volumes. The inspiration was to produce what I am referring to as ‘an erotics of belonging’. It is a digressive, associative and poetic work that tells the same story (sings the same song), over and over again, in slightly different ways, as it moves between the fictional and the autobiographical, the visual and the textual, and the imaginative and the theoretical. The intention is that as a collection the three books of this project can be read in any order despite their numbering, and that they are stand-alone works.

In Volume One, I offered an outline of the theoretical concerns that inform the creative work you are about to read. Volume Two is a collection of stories some of them made up, all of them true.
A NOTE ON THE IMAGES

All of the photographs in ‘Falling’ are my own, or are part of a private family collection, except for the few credited otherwise in the list of illustrations.
INITIAL INSTRUCTIONS

1. Use instructions as a method.
2. Follow them.
3. Tell the truest story.
4. Approach the exegetical writing like a conceptual artwork.
5. Begin by putting all the theoretical thinking in one place; let it be rough.
6. Go into, not out of.
7. While in London work at the British Library. Go every day from 10 am to 6 pm.
8. Apply to be a visiting researcher at the Athens University.
9. Start with all the thinking in the autobiographical ‘essays’ in the novel: ‘My Greece’, ‘My Tyrant’, ‘My Betrayal’, ‘My Return’ and ‘My Revenge’. Then return to the tail, to fairy tale, amputation, cutting off, the evil stepfather, etc.
10. Revisit the material for the fairy tale conference in Istanbul and the autobiography conference in Portugal.
11. Go to the pictures.
12. Find a conceptual approach to the use of photographs. Is it better to use one picture (repeated) or a series? What about using a photocopier like Sebald used to do? Will the photographs be colour or black and white? Should they be consistent throughout? A book of black-and-white, for example? As opposed to a book of blue.
13. Think about how to choose the photographs. What about the ones I found while packing up my grandmother’s library—the ones taken in Athens circa
1960? **The photographs I stole.** The ones I found in a book and then stashed into my bag. Could they work? Did she even take them?

14. Write about stealing photographs.

15. Think about all the photographs we packed up after my grandmother’s death. A lifetime of photographs. Literally thousands of them. How we put them in a storage unit ‘for later’. How much I want to go through them all. How difficult it is to go through them. **How left out I am** (a different kind of prick to Barthes *punctum*). How there are barely any of me but lots of everyone else.

16. And my father too afraid to look through her pictures in case he found one he didn’t want to see (her with a lover).

17. The love letters from my grandfather, stashed in her books (along with drawings, notes to herself and more photographs).

18. Me arguing with my aunt about how much my grandfather must have loved my grandmother after finding his letters among her books.

   Me: ‘It seems he really did love her.’

   My aunt: ‘Well…’

   Me: ‘I just can’t believe the letters! So many of them.’

   My aunt: ‘Obviously you want to believe that he did love her.’

   Me: ‘Obviously you want to believe that he didn’t!’

19. If Dimitris represents Greece in the novel, and if Dad represents Greece in ‘real’ life, then **my grandmother is even more Greece than any of them.** She is the reason I feel I don’t deserve Greece. She is the seat of judgement somehow. **She is the one I was dying to be accepted by.** She was the one who constantly disappointed me, not Dad. She’s the one I wanted approval
from most of all and whom I could never get it from (remember how she seemed to like all my boyfriends more than she liked me).

20. She was the one who evoked the most shame in me. She was the one I adored above all.

21. The feeling of having the dust (and her skin!) from all my grandmother’s books all over my skin when I packed up her library. I was the only one who wanted her books. I didn’t want anything else, just her books. I remember being up to my armpits in her books and photographs: nose running, skin itching, and crying in the car afterwards—crying all the way home. Feeling her body all over mine.

22. **Do some writing about stealing photographs.**

23. What about the boxes of pictures my mother has of me as a baby (not in albums) that stop abruptly when I am about nine or ten? When My Tyrant turned up. When I got fatter and fatter to hide from him.

24. The curved edges of 70’s photographs—almost circular.

25. The pictures my mother took of my father holding me—I must be just a few months old. Before he left.

26. How my mother cut my father out of all the pictures of them together. Or did she cut herself out?

27. How my mother cuts up pictures.

28. How my mother steals pictures from me!

29. How she steals all sorts of things from me.

30. How my mother once hung photos on her bedroom wall in a straight line exactly the way I used to hang pictures in my bedroom. How angry it made me the day I saw she had done it. **How it felt like nearly the worst thing**
she had ever done to me. And her denial: ‘Oh, don’t be silly, Melody, everyone hangs pictures like that.’ Only I knew (and I knew that she knew) she had stolen this from me.

31. Write the two pieces (novel and exegesis) alongside each other now. Move between the two fluidly.

32. Alternate between the two texts. One day on each.

33. Work out which bits go into the exegesis and which sit with the novel (this will get clearer as you go).

34. **See if you can confess even more.**

35. Go to the key texts.

36. Do a kind of annotated bibliography on the key texts and theorists I have been thinking about. Start with the ‘studio’ boxes at home.

37. Read Homer’s *Odyssey*.

38. Finish *Othello*.

39. Work out which books I absolutely must take with me to Greece.

40. Keep writing every day.

41. Stay connected to the work.

42. Keep up the obsession and the immersion.

43. Consider the thinking you did on overexposure of the self at Fairview.

   Ask yourself:

   Why is this the only way to do it?

   Why this structure?

   Why music?

   Why photographs?

44. Dive in deep!
45. Go in search of pictures.

46. Mail the books you need to Greece soon so they arrive before you (this is another kind of sending postcards to self).

47. Be brave and bold.
LOVE
I desire

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
**My Greece**

I long for Greece. The feeling is a little like the desire to get close to someone I have only just met but whom I really like. In other words there is some anxiety surrounding it. It’s strange that I might describe it like that, though, because I haven’t just met Greece, and it is an altogether different experience to long for a place rather than for a person.

The first time I visited Greece was in 2006. I flew in on an around-the-world ticket but didn’t make it any further than Athens. I have returned every year since. My Greek is pretty basic. I can get around, introduce myself, order food and direct a taxi but most of the time I resort to explaining, in Greek, that I speak very little Greek at all. Sometimes I stress the ‘little’ or repeat it for emphasis. During that first visit my father came over too, so we ended up together for Christmas. I remember being struck by how decidedly un-Greek our family celebrations were compared to what we would do at home in Australia. In Canberra, my grandmother would make all of the traditional foods; we would roll back the carpets and dance to music from the village until late into the night. We would all dance, my grandfather showing off his dance skills with a handkerchief in his hand at the end of the half-circle. My grandmother would get drunk on just one or two glasses of wine, and it wasn’t uncommon for one of them to end up crying a little with nostalgia. One year my grandmother danced with a rose in between her teeth.

Yet there we were, with our long lost Athenian family, listening to American pop music. The food was laid out in a buffet style rather than in a formal sitting, and the traditional dishes were missing. Instead of dancing we played cards. There seemed to be nothing particularly ‘Greek’ about it.
Homeland stands for belonging in the most fundamental sense, perhaps second only to the family unit. I have had an uncomfortable relationship to both.

But, let me rewind here. Let me begin, again with a story about a little girl raised by her single-parent mother. About a little girl who, lying in bed at night, wondered where she had come from and why here? A story about a little girl who didn’t meet her father until she was eight years old. Whose father was the black sheep of his family, and she the black sheep of the black sheep. Let me tell you about a Greek father whose parents did not know how to place their illegitimate granddaughter, despite eventually loving her very much. About a little girl on her best behaviour with her newfound Greek family, holding her breath and hoping no one would notice her turning blue.

It is not an exaggeration to say that before I met my father I felt alien. I knew that babies weren’t delivered by storks but I did not recognise myself in my mother—either in looks or temperament. Meeting my father was the ‘a-ha’ moment. Finally I made some sense. They are strong, those Greek genes.

Just as I understood that I was like my father, I understood that this made me Greek. Practically speaking, I had no experience of Greece; it was just another place on the map and I wouldn’t go there for many, many years. At just eight years old I felt sure that I had solved the nature/nurture debate. I was living proof that nature won out.
I cannot bear to leave you

I am trying to imagine leaving you but I cannot. Sometimes I lie in bed and think, ‘Definitely tomorrow. Tomorrow I will leave you.’ But when tomorrow comes I stay.

Instead, I conceive of little ways of leaving. I rent a room in a hotel and an apartment as well, but in the evening I still return. I don’t even spend the night, which amounts more to a ritual of returning than of leaving.

I think about various ways I might perform leaving in order to make the act of leaving you easier. I consider placing a marker in a specific place and then documenting my walk away from it. I think about this ritual but I don’t actually do it. Besides, how can I perform leaving you with the keys to your apartment in my pocket?

Perhaps it would have been more effective to perform the return instead. It strikes me now as significant that in their 1988 performance The Lovers Marina Abramović and Ulay walk along the Great Wall of China towards each other, not away from each other. Even though when they meet in the middle they separate. This performance marked the end both of their romantic relationship and their artistic collaboration.

The first time I went to Athens I left a box of things with a friend because I planned to return as soon as possible. I thought I left the box because I was returning. But perhaps it was the other way around. Perhaps I returned for the box?

There are moments when I fantasise about leaving you with just the contents of my handbag (and my laptop of course), but what about my notebooks? I cannot bear to leave my writing. My luggage I could probably do without. I have begun carrying my passport with me everywhere. This is new.
If I went to see an analyst

I want to go and see an analyst but I cannot afford it. I am not sure how long I will be in Athens anyway and there seems to be no point undergoing analysis until I know. Besides, I tell myself, it’s nearly the summer holidays. Everyone will be away… These are probably just excuses. Nevertheless, they are what I tell myself.

I imagine the session instead:

1. I arrive at his practice (I have made him a he).
2. He opens the door and I go inside.
3. He looks like a nice man. Serious.
4. I like his office; he has lots of books and some interesting artworks. Some Greek icons too.
5. He invites me to sit down.
6. I feel a little shy.
7. I shift in my seat and cross my legs.
8. He is sturdy, like a rock.
9. I think: he’s probably used to this kind of awkwardness.
10. We sit opposite each other, but he says I can use the couch next time if I prefer.
11. I tell him I would.
12. I think how I would prefer to look at the ceiling while I talk, how I would prefer to feel uncomfortable away from his direct gaze.
13. He asks me to tell him about my life and what has led me to therapy.
15. I tell him I am feeling lost and scared. That I am at sea.
16. He asks why.
17. I tell him that I don’t know how I feel. That I am split in two.
18. I explain that I have come to Greece for love and that it is not working out
   the way that I expected.
19. What did you expect? he asks me.
20. Not this, I say.
21. Can you say more about that? he asks.
22. I expected to be happy, I say.
23. And you are not?
24. No.
25. I think I am beginning to hate him, I say.
26. But it’s more than that, I continue. Last night while he was sleeping I had
   murderous thoughts about him. I thought about cutting off his head! I
   wanted him dead.
27. Silence.
28. Finally he says, That is quite common, you know…
30. One always feels a degree of hatred toward the love object, he says.
32. Do you feel uncomfortable about your feelings of hatred towards this man?
   he asks.
33. Yes, I say.
34. What’s even more confusing though, I continue, is that even though I have
   begun to hate him I cannot bear to even imagine leaving him.
35. Would you like to leave him? he asks.
36. Sometimes I spend all night thinking that in the morning I will leave, that
tomorrow I will take all my things and flee. I imagine doing it while he is
out so that when he returns I am gone. I even decide that I won’t leave a
note. I will just vanish. I spend all night fantasising about it. But the next
day I don’t go anywhere. I stay. It’s very confusing.

37. You used the word flee, he says. Can you tell me more about this? What
does fleeing bring to mind for you?

38. Escape.

39. And what is it you want to escape? he asks.

40. Pain, I say.
Here I am photographing my feet again.

I have dozens, perhaps hundreds of pictures of my feet: at home, in bed, on the street, at night, during the day, with nail polish, without, showing some leg and showing none at all. Each time I turn the camera downwards, I say: ‘Here I am.’ Except I also say, ‘Here I am not’, since the urge to photograph my feet is also a way of hiding the rest of my body from view. To shut it out of mind. To scratch it from the record.

I open a yellowing copy of Roland Barthes’s seminal *The Pleasure of the Text* that I borrowed from the Athens University library. The opening paragraph links pleasure to looking away. ‘Never apologise, never explain. I shall look away, that will henceforth be my sole negation.’ I have to think about this some more.
Allow me to digress here, to look away from my feet for a moment. I am reminded of that Jesus icon I photographed on Agistri, where his face has been whited out. I took lots of photographs while I was on Agistri. Of the usual things, mostly: the exquisite blue water of the Mediterranean, my hotel and the big ferry that took us across from Piraeus. Then there was this one. As I was walking up a steep path to my hotel I came across a small shrine beside the road and this icon inside. It was placed there deliberately; I know because it was clear that someone took good care of this shrine. If it had been defaced then it would surely have been removed. No, it hadn’t been vandalised, I am certain of it. There is significance to Jesus being blotted out of this icon. I am not sure what, but I find it very beautiful. I find it even more beautiful blotted out than if it hadn’t been. I wanted to take the icon with me. To steal it away. But, although I am not religious, I discovered that I am superstitious. It didn’t feel right to steal an icon from a shrine. So I took a picture instead. Even doing that felt almost criminal.
Here is another picture from that shrine. This image looks as though it is missing something too. The light was very bright that day. I remember that it was hard to see what I was photographing. I had to just point and shoot. Notice the fresh flowers, the frankincense and the olive oil? (Didn’t I say that someone took care of this shrine?).

There is a wonderful photograph of Frida Kahlo I used to have stuck on my wall, where the top half of her body has blended into the wall due to overexposure. She is sitting with two other people on a sofa—on the arm of the sofa, in fact—and while they are fully exposed, the top half of her is missing, totally vanished. You see just her arms clasped and some of her skirt. It must have been taken just after she finally left Diego, after he did the unthinkable and had an affair with her sister. When she went to her own apartment—or have I added this detail from watching the film *Frida*?
Here is the picture, and there she is on the far right only just visible. Come to think of it, perhaps this photograph has been manipulated. Perhaps she doctored it herself. Perhaps she erased herself in a darkroom, blended herself into the background. Since she was feeling obsolete, and in pain.

My dad used to joke that when my grandfather took off his socks his feet would glow in the dark they were so white. Always protected with socks and shoes. He was not an outdoor man, my Papou. It was one of the ways he demonstrated his success as a migrant that he didn’t have to take his shoes off in nature (or at least that’s the part I add to the story). Even at picnics at The Cotta, in the middle of summer, he wore his socks and shoes.

Come to think of it my father has nice feet! They are soft like a baby’s. Statuesque. As if carved by a true artist. Not like my stumpy little things.

‘You have one Greek foot and one Egyptian foot,’ someone said to me last time I was in Athens. I was taken aback by the comment and at the same time a little embarrassed because my feet are funny-looking (there’s no other way of saying it. I have never had glamorous feet). He pointed at my feet: ‘Yes, the big toe on this foot
is smaller than the one beside it. But on the other foot, your big toe is the biggest.

See?’

I looked down at my feet. He was right. I had never really noticed, but that explained why it always had a small callus on the end of it. How could I not have noticed this about myself?

‘He’s right,’ you said. ‘We say that, here in Greece.’

Each foot a different nationality. That makes sense, I thought.

I too have a desire to hide, to blend into the background. Except in writing. In writing I wish to do the opposite of disappearing. I wish to reveal everything. I wish to confess it all, tell you what I really think. Here I go again exposing myself. Writing so close to the bone, but still looking away. There is always a slight sideways glance. Is that the only way I can do it?

I have a fantasy of owning an invisibility cloak so that I might walk around without being seen. As I write this it seems like a very strange desire to have. Why would I want to see without being seen?
Some of the ways that I am (and am not) Greek

*Things that make me Greek:*

1. My father is Greek.
2. My grandfather emigrated to Australia in 1929, where he married my grandmother who was also Greek.
3. I grew up eating Greek food.
4. We went to church for Greek Easter.
5. We listened to Greek music.
6. We would call Greece at Christmas and speak to our relatives on the telephone. I still remember the delay. You would have to wait two beats after you spoke for them to hear you, and vice versa.
7. I eat a lot of olive oil and lemon.
8. The second toe on my right foot is bigger than my big toe.

*Things that make me not Greek:*

1. I was not born in Greece.
2. I don’t speak Greek (I speak a little but not enough to count).
3. The Greek I do speak I speak with an Australian accent.
4. I never felt that I belonged in my Greek family.
5. I am treated like a foreigner in Greece.
6. I don’t dress like a Greek woman.
7. I am dramatic, but not *dramatic.*
Things that make me Australian:

1. I was born in Australia.
2. I speak with an Australian accent.
3. I travel on an Australian passport.
4. I have an Australian driver’s licence.
5. I went to an Australian school and then to an Australian university.
6. I wear thongs on the street, not just at the beach.
7. I crave sunlight and big blue skies.
8. My tastes are eclectic and are influenced by many cultures.
9. I apologise both when I bump into someone and also when they bump into me.

Things that make me not, un-, non-Australian:

1. I don’t feel particularly Australian.
2. I don’t watch sport.
3. I am not patriotic.
4. I am ashamed of our colonial history. *

* The question is: in what ways do the things I have listed here make me not Australian? Surely there are many Australians who don’t watch sport or feel particularly patriotic. I wanted to add them to the other list, of things that make me Australian, but that didn’t seem to work either. I am Australian because I was born in Australia; and I am not Greek because I was not born in Greece. That’s really what it boils down to. That is how arbitrary nationality is.
A cemetery of buried objects

When we were packing up my grandmother’s house in Torrens, after she died, my father kept disappearing into the back garden, where I discovered he was burying things that he didn’t want to keep, but couldn’t bring himself to throw away. I remember being a little uneasy about this cemetery of buried objects he was creating. I wondered about the people who would buy the house once it went on the market, and what it would be like living with these abandoned objects in their backyard. I imagined them being found by a child, or dug up by a dog. I thought about all the things buried in the world, of all the things that people bury.

The only things I have ever buried are goldfish. One or two I flushed down the toilet, and the rest I buried in pot plants. Most things I tend to throw straight into the rubbish, even very personal things. In 2005, for instance, I threw all my teenage journals straight into the garbage before moving house. I had been carrying them around for so long and I decided it was time to get rid of them. I remember wondering then if I should have done something more ritualised with them. My grandmother liked to burn things that were meaningful to her, rather than bury them.

Next time I throw away a notebook I might try burning it instead. I don’t think I could bear to bury it.
I suffer

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
A lexicon of absence

gap

hole

missing

never there

not enough

gone

vanished

covered up (black)

overexposed/saturated (white)

vast open space
‘At most, I can say that in certain photographs I endure myself’ — Barthes
Post me your burden

On 8 October 2012, I chatted to my friend Spyridon Simotas online. It was on the day that Angela Merkel was due to visit Athens, and the government had banned all protest. We began by discussing this. The following transcript starts about halfway through our conversation. He was at his office in Cyprus, where he was working as a copywriter for an advertising agency, and I was at my desk at RMIT in room 9.2.02. It was 3:11pm Australian Eastern Standard Time.

spyros: Right now there is not a viable solution, I mean they can’t figure it out.

me: Greeks, you mean?

spyros: In general.

The neo liberals say the markets will fix themselves. Let them do it.

me: You think the markets will [fix themselves]?

spyros: I don’t know.

Who are the markets?

The thing is that we don’t talk about people anymore. We don’t talk about us.

me: Yes.

Good point.

spyros: We talk about an abstract idea of ‘the market’ and ‘the economy.’

me: Yes. In Australia we even talk about “illegal immigrants.”

spyros: Oh here too. It’s their fault of course.

me: That’s right, and they are not people.
spyros: It’s easy [to blame them].

me: Never mind we created the third world!

It’s not about people.

This is a very important point.

I think it must be why as artists we make very personal work, no?

You and I,

I mean.

spyros: I guess that this is what we miss.

Personal stories.

me: It could be that the politics of today is a call to personal stories.

spyros: Personal drama.

me: A return to ‘the personal is political’.

spyros: That’s true.

me: It seems you and I are very interested in heartache.

The heartache of real life.

spyros: Exactly.

me: Yes, and I think this must be deeply political on one level.

I used to worry that it was fickle.

spyros: Do you remember that clip from Coffee and Cigarettes?

me: Which one?

spyros: The last one.

me: Remind me?

spyros: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FYLkBCJBys

The guy says at one point: ‘I feel so divorced from the world.’
me: Oh wow.

spyros: And this is how I feel almost all the time the last decade.

me: No ... really?

spyros: Just trying to avoid the crush.

me: Why?

spyros: The crush of the whole world upon me.

me: I wish I could take it away from you.

Let me take it from you.

I want you to give it to me and I will destroy it for you.

I am being serious now.

Post me your burden and I will destroy it.

I don’t want you to have this burden.

So please, place it in an envelope and post it to me.

spyros: I don’t think it’s possible.

me: Yes it is.

spyros: It’s a feeling.

me: At least give it a shot.

spyros: You can’t post a feeling.

me: Yes, you can. Of course you can!

How would you embody the feeling if you could?

Just pretend for a minute that it was possible.

What would you send me?

I am dead serious.

Now listen carefully.
I am going to send you some instructions and you should just follow them (no matter if you think it is stupid).

Do it in the name of art, and of instruction, and collaboration. Like Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth.

Ok?

Wanna take a leap?

spyros: Give me the instruction in an e-mail.

me: Ok I will. I am going to go and do it now.

spyros: I got to work now.

me: Okay, I will write it today and you can do it any time.

Bye, bye.
This is how murders happen

You’re asleep in the bedroom and I am in the bathroom plotting how to leave you. I hate you so much I could kill you. I feel murderous. I would smash this bottle over your head and leave you to bleed to death. As it is I can barely conceive of leaving, let alone of killing you, even though being with you is such hell.

I am leaving you tomorrow. I am not even going to leave a note. Instead I am going to steal all of the love letters I have ever written to you. That will be my revenge (some revenge, you might be thinking). I know exactly where they are. I will take them and burn them. Maybe then I will be free of you. I am going to flee to Berlin. It’s going to hurt. Or maybe not—perhaps it will be a relief to leave you.
I stole a photograph

I met my friend in a bar in Kreuzberg. I was early. The waiter brought me the menu inside an old photo album. I leafed through the pictures quickly to reach the list of drinks. I ordered a glass of red wine and put the album aside. Later I picked it up to have a better look. To my surprise it was full of photographs of just one couple. For some reason I expected it to be a collection of found photographs, bought at a flea market for instance, but I saw that it was once someone’s actual photo album. I wondered who they were. Could they have been relatives of the owner?

The album charted the love affair of a young German couple—I presumed they were Germans, anyway. There was text beside each picture, written in German. The first shots were of them on vacation in Vienna. Towards the end of the album there were wedding pictures and at the very end photographs of a newborn baby. I found all of the photographs very moving. At one point in the album the photographs even turned from black and white to colour as the technology changed.

[image removed for copyright reasons]
I pulled out my camera and took some photographs of the photographs. First, I chose one of each of the couple posing alone. Photographing them like this distorted their bodies. For example I don’t think that the woman’s hair was messy like it is here when in the original, or was it? I can’t remember now. In one of the pictures in this series the man is wearing his girlfriend’s handbag. But I didn’t photograph that one. I wanted the more traditional shot of him. What is it about photographing photographs? I have been doing it so much lately.

[image removed for copyright reasons]

I took another shot of the photograph of the pair on holiday in Italy. The handwritten caption beside the picture was dated 1967. They seem like the ideal couple. Look at them.
I am reminded of Jørgen Leth’s short film *The Perfect Human*, which is the subject of that wonderful documentary *The Five Obstructions* where Lars von Trier has Leth remake his short film five times, under his instruction. I looked up *The Perfect Human*. It was shot in 1967 too, the same year of the Greek military coup—that year I keep coming back to.
Later I listened to the narrator of *The Perfect Human* describing the perfect human:

Who is he? What can he do? What does he want? Why does he move like that? How does he move like that? Look at him. The Perfect Human in a room with no boundaries and with nothing, and a voice saying a few words—*this voice* saying a few words.

I felt content simply photographing the photos in the album, until I got to one of the woman on a mountain path—Vienna again?—eating a sandwich. She is not posing, or smiling like in the others. Perhaps her boyfriend had caught her off guard in this one. There was something about this photograph that made me want to keep it. To steal it. So I did. Before I stole it I wondered, again, about the likelihood of the album being important to the owners of the bar. I decided it was more likely that it was not (a convenient lie perhaps?). I also consoled myself by noticing a few other pictures missing from the album. Just as my friend arrived I shoved the picture into my notebook, glancing over at the waiter as I did so, to make sure that he wasn’t watching me. From that moment the picture was pressed up against my writing.

When I got home I pulled it out and photographed it. There is a date on the back of the picture. It reads: 30. 10. 68. That must have been the date the film was developed.
A pink tutu

In my early twenties I worked for a short time as a nanny for two young children. I would take them to school, do the shopping, pack their lunches, tuck them in at night and then go and wake them up in the morning and get them ready for school. One day when I picked the girl up from school her teacher pulled me aside and told me that she had been caught stealing a pink tutu that belonged to one of her classmates. It was found in her locker. She was about seven years old at the time and had a workaholic mother who frequently broke promises and was rarely around—they were troubled kids. The poor girl was desperate for a life she didn’t have. It seems perfectly clear to me (and very healthy) why she stole that tutu; she was reaching symbolically for something she needed. I still remember the look of shame on her face, her downcast eyes and sullen expression; it broke my heart. Perhaps it is doubly shaming to be caught with something that means more to us symbolically than it does in actuality. There is something about being caught with the thing that represents what you most desire that is so terrible. That tutu was not a tutu.
My Greece

I am possessive about Athens—about Greece in general, but about Athens in particular. If I could I might put it into my pocket, slide it into my notebook, carry it around with me. In Greek language the possessive μου (mou) comes after the noun. ‘My Greece’ becomes ‘The Greece My’. I am endlessly fascinated by the differences between Greek and English. I imagine children tussling over a toy. ‘The toy my!’ one might exclaim, snatching it from the other.

In a Greek language class I took some years ago the students, mostly Greek-Australians, competed with one another over Greece. All of us had a connection to Greece in some way—either by blood or by marriage. We had nothing else in common. While they boasted about ‘that Summer we went to Poros’ (or Hydra, or Santorini), I played down my own connection to Greece. Which is to say, that was my style of competition. I remember that they were all emphatic about how the ‘real’ Greece was to be found outside of Athens. In retaliation, when I spoke about Greece I spoke only of Athens.

When I think about it I have been doing this my whole life, secretly retaliating. It seems to have started in the playground, where I desperately wanted to prove that I could be the kind of girl that all the boys wanted to kiss but could still climb a tree higher or burp louder than they could. No, it started even before that—with my mother. But we’ll get to that later.

I find myself realising in the most obvious way that I am neither the first nor the last to long for Greece. And yet I feel that my desire is different. Why? Because I am half Greek? What does that mean anyway, to be half something? Over the years I have thought a lot about my relationship to Greece. I remember hearing once that people tend to identify more with their ancestry where it is exotic. Certainly I identify
strongly with Greece and yet I have an equal part of Welsh blood funnelling through my body. Perhaps it is because Wales is my mother’s lineage, while Greece is my father’s. Who am I kidding—of course that’s the reason.
Instructions for sending your burden

1. On Saturday morning, after your coffee and breakfast (or usual morning ritual) read through these instructions. Don’t read them until then. There should be some element of surprise to following these instructions.

2. Go into your bedroom, or somewhere else private. There should be no music. You will need a notepad and a pen.

3. Let yourself be like a kid again, when you had a big imagination. Suspend your disbelief for a moment. Can you do this? Let yourself be imaginative. Sit wherever you feel most comfortable. On the floor might be good.

4. Are you a kid now? Wait until you can say yes without feeling like a total dick.

5. Okay, now conjure up your burden. Evoke the feeling of being ‘divorced from life’, ‘the crush of the whole world on you’. How might you describe it? What does it look like? Is it big, or oddly small? What texture is it? What colour is it? Does it smell bad? Get specific. Get very specific. Start with the idea of it being on your shoulders. Is it like a cloak? Does it wrap around you? Or weigh on you like a heavy weight? Maybe it’s like a beam of light, but from a magnifying glass. Maybe it is hot. How heavy is it? You might find it is like what Milan Kundera described so beautifully as the unbearable lightness of being. Maybe your burden is nightmarishly light. What is it? Describe it. You could use images or words. Use your notebook now. Be fast. Write/draw a list of the first things that come to mind. Don’t be precious. Don’t look for sense or good handwriting.

6. Try to be curious. Invite your burden to sit with you so you can do its
portrait.

7. If your burden is hiding, try to sit long enough for it to appear again. Or do this exercise again later. In this case, it doesn’t have to be a Saturday.

8. Go through the list you made and circle the words/images that portray your burden the very best. Scratch out the ones that aren’t quite right.

9. Got it?

10. Now I want you to send me your burden.

11. First you will need to find an object, something tangible that will represent the burden as you have drawn/written it. Be lateral about this. Is it a piece of paper, a drawing—or should it be a rock? If it is cold, send me something cold. You get the point. This is about association, like the dream world. It could be that what you send looks nothing like your burden but it is at the same time precisely your burden. Try to find something in your environment (bedroom, garden, street…).

12. Be poetic now if you want.

13. Put your burden somewhere in your room, away from your bed. Sleep with it there until Monday. Feel it away from you on the other side of the room. Be curious about it. Just before sleep, when you are lying in bed, think about your burden sitting there on the windowsill or wherever you have put it. Consider all the time you have spent with your burden and get ready to say goodbye.

14. What size envelope will you need to mail your burden to me? Get one.

15. On Monday place your burden inside the envelope and address it to:

   Melody Ellis
   PO Box 5509
Kingston
ACT 2604
Australia

16. Send me your burden (don’t worry, it won’t become my burden. I will lay it to rest for you).
I rented an apartment
A fragment

I have lost track of the world

I have no idea what you are talking about

Say it isn’t true
Dark spots

I never talk to my father about why he left my mother. I don’t even know the specifics of how they met or even how long they were together. I never ask my father and he never tells. It’s a dark spot. My mother speaks about it only rarely. Mostly she says how she had never known real pain until he left her.

When I was born, my mother was 27, and my father just 23. I think they were together for less than a year before she got pregnant. She says that he had asked her to marry him and she said no. She said she was against marriage, because of what it had done to her parents.

She said that my father told her he wanted to leave her while she was still pregnant, but she begged him to stay until I was born, which he agreed to do. So my father stayed while she was pregnant and for six months after I was born. Then one day, she said, they were sitting in the park across the road from our house and he told her he was leaving. And just like that she discovered true pain.

I wonder what else happened. I know that she has a scar on her left arm from where she put it through a pane of glass during one of their fights. I know that before I was born, when my mother was still pregnant, they used to visit my father’s parents. My mother says that my grandmother told her the whole family history while I was in her womb. I also know that just after I was born my grandfather held me in his hands and commented on the length of my neck. Did he say I was going to be tall?
Alfred Hitchcock in Athens

I found some postcards of stills from Alfred Hitchcock films at a kiosk in Monastiraki. They were littered among the standard postcards featuring the Acropolis, sunsets over aqua waters, whitewashed houses, and shepherds with their donkeys. They were 1 euro each, and I bought five.

Sitting by the sea in Aegina one day I pulled out the postcards and wrote to myself. I wrote to tell myself I was thinking of me, that I hoped I was well and that my trip home hadn’t been too exhausting.

I have always been interested in what it would be like to experience myself as other. When I was a child I would run my finger along my forearm and see if I could isolate the feeling of my skin being touched from the feeling of touching my skin. I decided that I couldn’t, but it didn’t stop me conducting the experiment over and over again just to be sure.
I addressed the Hitchcock postcards to myself and dropped them into a postbox at Syntagma Square. I wondered what it would be like receiving the cards. I hoped to be caught by surprise even though I knew they were coming. What would it be like seeing my handwriting addressed to myself? I wondered what story the mailman might invent about who they were from. A lover, perhaps? I doubt they would think anything at all, but somehow it was part of the delight.
I am angry

[image removed for copyright reasons]
I wasn’t there

When my grandmother died, I was in Istanbul (of all places) for a conference on fairy tales at Istanbul University.

The morning before I was due to present, she passed away. It’s so strange the way that history repeats itself. Everyone else in our small family was there in the room with her when she died, but not me. I couldn’t help thinking how typical it was that I was missing (and how painful too).

She had been in and out of hospital a few times before I went but we didn’t think she was going to die. At least, I didn’t. I told her before I left that I didn’t feel comfortable leaving when she had been so sick. She told me not to be silly, but I shouldn’t have listened to her.

It was the strangest feeling being so far away. I sent my apologies to the conference organisers, and spent the afternoon with a friend who had come to visit me from the UK. We went down to the Bosphorus, where we ate fish sandwiches for lunch—my friend had read in her guidebook that this was the thing to do. I remember they were delicious, even though I was sick with grief and not very hungry. It felt as if there were a chasm deep inside my chest. The pain would come in waves and rip the carpet out from underneath me. I recognised the feeling; I had had it before—after break-ups, usually. I had always associated it with men, but now I knew … ‘Oh, this is what grief feels like,’ I remember thinking.

The last time I saw my grandmother, my father and I had gone to see her together. We drank tea at the dining room table. She was still at home then; she had just returned from the hospital. I recall her being visibly jumpy from all the steroids she was taking. As we were leaving, she asked me if I could put out the rubbish for her; it must have been bin night. I went around the back of the house and wheeled it
up to the street, and then got into my car. My grandmother waved from the balcony as I pulled out of her driveway. There was a moment, just a flash, when I thought to rush back inside and tell her how much I loved her. But for some reason I didn’t. I told myself I was being dramatic and that I would be seeing her in a month, when I returned from overseas. Of course, in retrospect I wish I had stopped the car and gone back inside the house. I wish I had said goodbye. Not goodbye—how could I have known then that she would shortly be in intensive care? I just wish that I had held that moment a little longer. I wish I had hit pause and taken some more time instead of just carrying on as usual, instead of just driving away. I wish I had stopped the car and gone back inside. Why didn’t I do that?
The copy of Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* that I checked out of the library is heavily underlined. On page 10, the following passage has a large exclamation point beside it. In the margin is written: ‘interesting’ and ‘Dad’. The passage reads:

> Using a camera appeases the anxiety which the work-driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures.

I imagine the father of the reader that underlined this text as an aloof man in a beige cardigan and sensible shoes. I imagine him constantly taking family photographs, but being terrible at conversation. I imagine this reader complaining, *Daaaaaad*, as he says, ‘Come on, girls—smile,’ gesturing wildly with his hands for his two awkward teenagers to stand closer together so that he can get them into the frame.

I like to underline passages of text too, but never a library book.
I remembered it all wrong

I applied to use the National Gallery of Australia’s research library. While I was there I would double-check some of my art sources. In particular I wanted to get hold of that image of Frida Kahlo. The blended-into-the-background one.

Imagine my surprise when I found the book but discovered that I had remembered the image wrongly. That Frida was not blending into the background in the picture at all—she had cut herself out of it!

It wasn’t taken around the time she left Diego, either. It was taken in New York when they were still well and truly together. I had constructed a whole imagined narrative around the wrong image. I took another copy, and attempted to return Frida to the blended state that I had remembered her in.
The distance of love

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
If I went to see an analyst

I want to go and see an analyst but I cannot afford it. I am not sure how long I will be in Berlin anyway. I doubt it will be more than another week. So there is no point.

I imagine the session instead:

1. I arrive at his practice (I have made him a he again—is this significant?).
2. He has wild grey hair and small round glasses. Like Marx, I think.
3. He opens the door and invites me inside.
4. His office is austere, but nevertheless I like it.
5. He gestures for me to take a seat.
6. There are two armchairs facing each other and no desk. It is not clear which seat is his and which should be mine.
7. I sit on the one to the left.
8. I watch his expression as I sit, but I cannot tell what he is thinking.
9. Is this the right seat? I ask, getting up again. Or did I take yours?
10. You can sit in any seat you like, he says.
11. This does not reassure me.
12. I sit back down and put my bag on the floor beside me. I am still worried about the chair.
13. I am a little concerned that I have taken the seat that you usually sit in, I say.
14. That seems to worry you quite a lot, he says.
15. It does, I say.
16. And what if you had sat in my seat? he asks. Would it be a problem?
17. Yes.
18. And can you say why?
19. Then you might think that I think that I am the analyst—not you.
20. And why does that worry you?
21. Because then you might think that I don’t need you. Or, that I think I don’t need you …
22. Do you need me? he asks.
23. Well, obviously I know that I can’t do this by myself, I say, with a nervous laugh.
24. He doesn’t say anything.
25. I shift in my seat and cross my legs. I feel uncomfortable.
26. Well, don’t worry, he says. This is the seat that I usually sit in, so you don’t have to worry. Now, why don’t you tell me what brought you here?
27. I feel embarrassed for making such a big deal out of the chair now.
28. I find myself worrying a lot about what other people think, I say. Again I laugh nervously.
29. Silence.
30. Particularly about my relationship, I add.
31. Again, silence.
Autobiography is not dead. We are.

I rented an apartment just for one night. Not to sleep in, as I already have somewhere to stay. I am staying with you. I didn’t tell you that I had rented somewhere. I pretended to go to the university, like every other morning, but instead I went to the apartment. I unpacked my laptop and my books and I spent the day writing.

I thought about those stories you hear about people losing their jobs and pretending that they are going to work each day, when really they have nowhere to go. Except that I did have somewhere to go. I had an apartment on the top floor of a place in Asklipiou Street, from 10am on Tuesday until 12pm on Wednesday. I thought about men (perhaps women too) who rent apartments for sexual liaisons. Except that there was nothing sexual about what I did. It was almost the opposite of sexual. The objective was to be completely alone.

I didn’t tell the woman I rented the apartment from that I wouldn’t sleep there either. It felt like too much trouble to explain, so instead I pretended. I hung a clean towel over the bathroom door as if I had used it, and ruffled up the bed covers.

It was obvious that the woman who rented me the apartment usually lives there. The fridge and kitchen cupboards were full of food. There was even some medicine in the fridge. I could tell that a dog lived there with her too. There were two bowls of water on the terrace and traces of its hair on the couch. I figured she must rent it intermittently for extra cash. I wondered where she went on those nights.

There were numerous ashtrays laid out around the house. My host was obviously a smoker. She was an actor too. It said so in her profile on the website where I arranged the rental, and was confirmed by the numerous books she owned on theatre and cinema.
I liked her apartment very much, especially the view. I went to the supermarket and bought taramasalata, crackers, pomegranate juice, red wine and Brie cheese. On the way back I took a picture of the spiral staircase, although I didn’t use it. I took the lift instead. I took the photograph from the top of the stairs looking down. Now that I think of it, I wish I had thought to take one from the bottom looking up too. I made coffee and poured myself a glass of wine. I would have both. The instructions left by my host requested that guests remove their shoes inside. So I did.

I realised that I could never rent my place to a stranger. I would worry that they would pry. Like I did. I looked in her cupboards, scoured her bookshelves, and photographed whatever took my fancy.

There was a postcard on one of her bookshelves that said: ‘Cinema is not dead. We are.’ The quote is a reference to Barthes’ death of the author (I am so often reminded of him in Athens). I decided to appropriate this sentence, but to replace ‘cinema’ with ‘autobiography’. ‘Autobiography is not dead. We are.’ It’s the ‘We are’ that I like the most. One of the burdens of postmodernism has been the feeling that everything that can be done has already been done, and although it could be argued that we have found ways past this dilemma now, its legacy still casts a mighty shadow. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but certainly at its worst it is debilitating. Even revolution or social change feel passé (in this context, ‘dead’). The postcard sentence appeals to me because it suggests that it is we who are ‘dead’, not revolution (or autobiography, or cinema). The ‘we are’ suggests that it is our own lack of imagination or feeling of limitation that creates the death.

Could this little mantra also help me to approach some of the trouble with writing a thing as clichéd as an autobiography? What a vain and silly thing to want to do! How does one write about the self, anyway?
A friend recently told me that she was reading Sylvia Plath’s diaries. She said that there were passages where Plath writes how much she loves such-and-such a person, but then later contradicts herself when she says that she can only love strangers: people who do kind things for her, in the supermarket for example. My friend said that she has begun to think that perhaps she needs to become a stranger to herself in order to love herself. She seemed to be saying that she felt she could love the stranger within her. I, on the other hand, find the feeling of the stranger within me deeply unsettling. I said so to my friend.

I felt a little guilty when I left the apartment that evening. I left some things on the dining room table since I would return in the morning before checking out at 12pm. I began to worry you would catch me coming from the apartment rather than from the university. Traveling the wrong direction on the metro, or walking along the wrong street. What would I say if you asked me what I was doing and why I was coming from here and not there?

I felt guilty for lying too. It’s one thing to lie to a boyfriend. Perhaps this could be understood (note that I say perhaps), but why had I gone to the trouble of lying to the woman who rented me the apartment? Why not just say I had a deadline coming up and I needed somewhere to write? If for nothing else, to save her from washing the unused sheets and towels? For the environment.

Did I lie in order to keep it secret for myself?

I thought about lying generally. About all the things I lie about and why. The strangest thing is that it seems as if the things I lie about in my ‘real’ life are precisely what I want to make work about in my creative life. Why?
The next day, I arrived early. I spent an hour or so writing and then I left the keys inside with a note to say thank you, and pulled the door closed behind me. I took a bus to the university and continued my day writing.
I endure myself
[image removed for copyright reasons]
Greece that way

In early 2010, I met a friend for dinner in Carlton, the ‘little Italy’ of Melbourne. We sat down at the pizzeria, and printed on the paper placemat in front of me was a map of Italy. Off to the right, in the middle of what would be the Ionian sea, was an arrow with the text: Greece that way. I immediately slipped the placemat into my bag. When I got home I cut the arrow free from the rest of the map and stuck it on my wall. I have thought about getting it tattooed onto my skin, so that my body could be like a confused compass always pointing towards an idea of Greece.
I stole a photograph (or two)

My grandmother took these pictures of my grandfather, and later I took a picture of them with my mobile phone. What is it about photographing photographs? The first time I recall doing this was after an argument over some photographs I borrowed from my grandmother. It was over 10 years ago now. I was at art school in Sydney but was visiting my grandmother in Canberra. Her house was full of photographs, mostly ones that she had taken and developed herself, like these ones of my grandfather. While I was there I came across some black-and-white pictures of my aunt, which my grandmother had taken in the late 70’s, just after my cousin was born. They were just lying there on the buffet. In these pictures my aunt is lying bare-breasted on a bed and my cousin, just months old, is climbing over her. I asked my grandmother if I could borrow the photographs to paint them, and she agreed. I wanted to paint them as Madonna and child.

A day or two later, after I had returned to Sydney, I received a frantic telephone call from my grandmother asking me to return the pictures straight away. She and my aunt had had a terrible fight about my taking them. I mailed them back to her immediately, but to this day I regret that I did not make a photocopy of them and paint them anyway. A few months or so later, visiting my grandmother again, I came
across piles of family photographs on the coffee table in the lounge room. Including these ones of my grandfather, and also some of my aunt. I immediately pulled out my mobile phone and took a picture of the pictures. I made sure no one saw me do it. I wouldn’t be returning these photographs.
Call him Uncle Fred

Since my father’s sister and my mother were friends when I was little, I met both my aunt and my cousin before I met my father. At least, before I was formally introduced to him, anyway. Apparently he used to come to my birthday parties each year, but I didn’t know who he was then.

I adored my cousin. He was two years older than me and was more like a brother to me. Whenever we played make-believe he wanted to be the Princess, which suited me just fine because I had no desire to be a girl. I was happy being the cheeky sidekick who was so strong she could carry her cousin and his friends on her back around the playground, or who could sneak down the stairs at night and retrieve goodies from the kitchen. Once I brought back liqueur chocolates that I found on the very top shelf of the cupboard. We bit into them and then spat them into our hands quickly when the alcohol flooded our little mouths.

I was never caught sneaking into the kitchen, but the moment my cousin tried to follow me a stair would creak and my mother would get up to check on us. We would run back to my bedroom, and dive under the covers giggling and spluttering under the covers. Laughing our heads off.

I knew that when my cousin spoke about going to his grandparent’s house that they were my grandparents too, even though I hadn’t met them yet. When my mother told me that my father would be coming to the house to meet me I remember asking my cousin for his advise. ‘What should I call him?’ I asked. ‘Just call him Uncle Fred,’ my cousin replied casually. ‘That’s what I call him.’

So for the first months after meeting my father I called him Uncle Fred.
Tea for two

My grandparents had an arranged marriage. When they first met my grandmother was still a teenager. My grandfather was twenty years older than her and by then he had been in Australia for many years—he was in the army. When he visited the family house the two would sit opposite each other drinking tea—he in his army uniform, she in her school uniform.

My grandmother often said that when she married my grandfather she didn’t even know how to boil an egg.
Happy endings

During the years I spent in psychoanalysis I always dreaded the end of a session. My analyst asked me once what I thought that might be about.

‘Fear of death, I suppose,’ I said casually.

The end of a conversation, a meal, a day, even the end of a story, is clearly a kind of death. I have noticed that I am uncomfortable writing happy endings. In every story I have written so far I have laboured over how to end it unhappily (it has felt like a duty to end it unhappily). How will I end this story, I wonder?

I cannot stand the idea of tying everything off neatly at the end of the story. It seems like taking the easy way out—and it feels oddly capitalist somehow—and I find myself resisting it. Yet, at the same time I have wanted to finish the work in such a way that it is satisfying to read.

Does that mean I think happiness and satisfaction are easy ways out? I worry about what it might mean for my personal life if I can’t write happy endings, if I am uncomfortable with endings in general.
Black-and-white Freud

[image removed for copyright reasons]

[image removed for copyright reasons]
POWER
I contest

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
My Tyrant

My Tyrant was rather ordinary as tyrants go. He wore the banal uniform of a stepfather, rather than that of a king or dictator. Some time in 1987 he sublet my mother’s house for the year or so that we lived in Newcastle. When we returned, instead of leaving, My Tyrant insinuated himself into my mother’s bed. I was nine years old, and had two missing front teeth. He looked a little like John Travolta. They share a similar lip shape and a receding hairline.

I resisted My Tyrant’s occupation of our house and his inane torture methods as if my life depended on it. I went into battle every day of every one of the next seven years that he lived with us. He was a man who enjoyed tormenting women, who enjoyed tormenting me. There is a key difference between someone who is tough or cruel and a tyrant. Not all of those who are tough are tyrannical. To become a tyrant, a person must transgress a boundary. Normal rules go out the window. Tyrants are excessive and often violent. They are impossible to oppose. One’s voice is immediately silenced in the face of the tyrant.

The story goes that I disliked My Tyrant immediately, that I even threw some of his clothes out on the street.

‘She’s just jealous,’ he insisted, meaning that I was jealous that he was taking my mother away from me. He often spoke about me as if I were not standing right beside him. But his favourite game of all was to let me know, again and again, that he was the one with the power. That no matter what I did, or said, his word would always be stronger than mine. It was mostly with language that he tortured me. So that if I asked him permission to go to the park, to eat something after school, or to watch television he would say yes and then later deny it when my mother asked what I was doing and I explained I had permission.
‘I didn’t give you permission,’ he would grin. And what was a child’s word over an adult’s? In our household it was nothing.

The language of tyranny is beyond sense.

‘You have to remember, darling, that our relationship is much harder because of you,’ my mother would frequently remind me. If My Tyrant was the ruler, my mother was in every way his collaborator. I was intelligent enough to understand that objectively the statement was true—it must have been more difficult for their relationship with me around—nevertheless it was a cruel thing to say.
Spilt milk

In Neni Panourgiá’s book *Dangerous Citizens*, she asks various Greek citizens about their memories of the day the 1967 coup broke. For example where they were, whom they were with, what they were wearing. One man recalls sitting at the kitchen table with his parents, and his father getting up with such force that his drink spilled on the floor. He says, ‘So for me, the memory of how the junta happened is that of spilled milk on the kitchen floor.’
My Greece

In 2011, I co-curated an exhibition for ReMap3. ReMap is a contemporary art festival that runs alongside the Athens Biennale. It takes place in the Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio (KM) area of downtown Athens, which is reminiscent of an urban slum. KM is renowned for its numerous brothels and a drug culture so rife that people shoot up openly on the streets. During ReMap, local and international art galleries, as well as independent curators, utilise the many abandoned buildings and empty plots of land in the area for exhibitions and performances, transforming the area into a veritable hub of artistic output.

It was on this trip that I was first confronted with the severity of the austerity measures that were being implemented in order to pay back the massive debt to the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. I found Athens radically different from the year before, when I had last visited. There was a marked feeling of despair and hopelessness reflected in people’s faces.

At the same time as the economy had slumped, there had been a sharp increase in refugees, many of whom now lived in squats in the KM area. Greece has always been a gateway into Europe but recently, since Italy and France had stepped up their border patrols, it had become almost impossible for people to move on. In the past, some seeking asylum stayed on in Greece, but others continued into other parts of Europe. Now they were stuck. And yet there was no work, and resources were scarce. People seemed to do what they could for money, including selling imitation designer handbags on the street or scavenging in suburban dumpsters for pieces of metal that could be sold for just a few euros at the scrap-metal yards.

There had also been an increase in racist rhetoric from far-right factions, such as the fascist Golden Dawn political party.
We were told that a shot of heroin in the KM area could be bought for just seven euros. Every day we saw dozens of people shooting up on the street, just metres from our exhibition site. We saw junkies shoot up into their arms, thighs, hands and even their penis or eyes. It was heartbreaking. We named one guy ‘Shoot Em Up Larry’ due to the number of times we saw him hit up in a day. There was a whole street of people nodding off on cardboard boxes salvaged from the rubbish and laid out as makeshift beds. More than once, someone passed out in front of our site and we had to check they were still breathing.

A large armoured police van was parked just two blocks away from where people were shooting up openly. Occasionally a police car would drive down the street flashing its lights, but that seemed to be about it. Among all of this the locals of KM continued to go about their lives as normal, as best they could. The ballsy women in the Chinese grocery store across from us shooed junkies from the front of their store with brightly coloured fly swats.

The last week of that trip I took a boat to Aegina, where I spent a few days swimming in the Mediterranean and soaking up the sun. I needed a break from Athens, if only an aesthetic one.
A short inventory of power

1. The power of being moved by art, language or literature.
2. The misuses of power.
3. The power you have over me when I am obsessed with you.
4. The power I have over you when I am ambivalent towards you.
5. The power of resistance—I cannot; I will not; I do not want to; you cannot force me; I oppose you; this is too difficult; I cannot concentrate; no!
On overexposure

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
Overheard in the British Library cafeteria

Waiter: ‘Can I take these for you?’

Customer: ‘Only if you are being paid more than £9 an hour. Otherwise, you can throw them on the floor.’

Silence.

Customer: ‘Do you get paid more than £9 an hour?’

Waiter says something that I cannot hear.

Customer: ‘Then throw them on the floor!’
Who’s afraid of losing their cool?

There are a few subjects about which I have no sense of humour—indeed, that I risk being a fundamentalist over. When they come up in conversation I have learned to bite my tongue, change the subject, smile politely and walk away. Since the European economic crisis escalated in 2010, I have had to add Greece to that list. I cannot bear to hear people make generalisations about the Greeks and the crisis (as well as being possessive of Greece, I am also overprotective). At a family gathering recently a relative said, not exactly to me but in my direction, ‘Do you think Greece just needs another dictatorship, some leadership?’ Imagine how quickly I had to turn and walk away.

Since 2008 we have barely stopped hearing about all the things Greek people did wrong. How they fudged their books to get into the European Union, how they don’t pay enough taxes, how they have exorbitant pensions and essentially how they were too greedy or, worse, lazy. What we rarely hear is how dramatically inflation rose when Greece joined the EU in 2002, how Greek wages are notoriously low compared to those in the rest of Europe, how before Greece joined the EU there was very little personal debt, how expensive everything got after they joined the Euro zone and yet how people’s wages stayed the same. How with the EU came the German and French banks and fast easy access to credit at precisely the same time that people were feeling poorer. How people had to take on two or three jobs (before unemployment rose to one in four). This is not to suggest that nobody did anything wrong—or that there was no corruption or mismanagement. The crisis was a long time brewing. But it frightens me how limited the conversation is about Greece’s financial woes.
Why do I bite my tongue? Why am I so afraid of losing my cool? Could it be that since I cannot always speak for those things I am so passionate about that I exact my revenge in writing?
Significant life events

I began psychoanalysis at the age of 21 and continued with the same therapist for over a decade. In many ways it was psychoanalysis that led me to writing. It taught me to bear my own thoughts, and was the beginning of me speaking my mind.

I still recall feeling very uneasy in those initial sessions while I recounted a summary of my life up until then. It felt very important to give an accurate portrayal of my life, but at the same time I worried that what I told my analyst would likely contradict the perspective of those close to me. I remember being unduly concerned about my version of events. I was worried about the ‘authenticity’ of my story, which was doubly confusing for a Fine Arts student well versed in the problematic of authenticity. I worried whether my life story could and should be trusted.

And yet I needed my analyst not only to believe me, but to be on my side. It troubled me that she would hypothetically be just as capable of loving and believing in my mother or My Tyrant if they were her patients. It caused me a great deal of anxiety that there was no such thing as an objective truth and that my analyst might just as easily believe a contradictory version of events. I wanted to believe she would see through inconsistency, my own included, but My Tyrant’s in particular. What did it mean, I wondered, if she might care for him just as much as she cared for me? I even went so far as to imagine that if he went to see her, she would see what a monster he was and kick him out of her office.

Over a decade later, I moved cities and found myself sitting opposite a new analyst and telling my life story again. Catching her up so that we could begin the ‘real’ work.

The experience was just as awkward, although this time for different reasons. I think the strangest feeling was the sensation that I was telling the events as I recalled
telling them, rather than telling them as I recalled experiencing them. My life traumas felt reduced to a story—a story that was getting more and more fuzzy.

There is also something terribly disconcerting about giving a brief account of your significant life events in a 50-minute session—one naturally privileges the worse events, or at least I did.
My grandmother I and II

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
My Tyrant

The evil step-parent appears as a common character in literature and even more commonly in fairy tales. A step-parent enters the story through marriage—or, in other words, sex—usually stealing away the affections of the naïve birth parent and actively undermining the position of the child in the household. In stereotypical fairy-tale fashion My Tyrant came after me the moment he arrived in our house.

‘I am going to turn everyone against you and no one will ever believe anything you say,‘ he said, true to form. He then set out about proving that he could do such a thing. It goes without saying that he succeeded. Or, if they believed me there was nothing they could do to save me. I was stuck with My Tyrant and his blind collaborator.

The object of the evil step-parent’s desire is fortune and, by association, power. It is never for a ‘true’ marriage. Their primary ambition is always for wealth and power. Most often the child stands to get in the way of this desire to ‘take over’. The child acts as an uncomfortable reminder of the step-parent’s deception and so they seek to systematically cast the child out, frequently to the woods or the forest, where they are supposed to perish but are rescued and come back renewed to overthrow the evil character.

The evil step-parent narrative is usually a gendered one. Where the father (king) is hoodwinked by the evil ambitions of the stepmother, he usually ‘wakes up’ moments before she succeeds in realising her plan. The evil step-parent is almost always a woman and she is always punished at the end of the story. Claudius is one of the few examples of the evil stepfather figure, but Gertrude still doesn’t get away with having fallen for Claudius’s ways. She ends up dead also.
There were no riches to be had in our household. We lived in public housing and my mother scraped by on a meagre single-parent benefit. What My Tyrant was after was beyond riches. Before his relationship with my mother, he had been close to my father. They met at art school, where they became close friends. Evidence of their friendship still exists in photographs and home movies collected by my grandmother (note that both my mother and I are noticeably absent in these pictures). Look, there he is laughing at a picnic at The Cotta. There he is eating my grandmother’s food and looking so relaxed, smiling and laughing with my father.

I suspect that like Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith’s thriller *The Talented Mr Ripley*, it wasn’t enough for My Tyrant to be friends with my father. Instead, he wanted to wipe him off the map. To scratch him out, erase and replace him. He killed my father off by taking up with my mother and becoming the ‘father’ of our household, father of me.

Neither of my parents managed to rescue me from My Tyrant; they are both cast as hopelessly naïve in this story. My mother was his collaborator and my father was rendered helpless by the situation. One brave high-school teacher attempted to rescue me once but my mother threatened to call the Education Department and have her sacked from her job. The well-meaning teacher apologised to me profusely and dropped me home to my mother and the gleeful tyrant. In the end My Tyrant remained unchallenged until he left my mother for another woman. But by then I had long since packed my bags and fled.

The very last words My Tyrant spoke to me, before finally exiting my life stage-left, were: ‘You’ll see, your father and I will be friends again.’ Strange parting words, really. He didn’t stop there either. I was living with my father at the time and sometimes the phone would begin to ring but if I picked it up whoever it was would
hang up. A few days later my father approached me and asked if I would mind very much if he gave My Tyrant music lessons.

So even after he left my mother My Tyrant continued to find ways of making his presence known to me. Just last year he even turned up at my grandmother’s wake. I saw him arrive and the blood rushed to my feet. I walked over to him immediately, interrupted his conversation with two other people, and asked him to leave. I still remember he looked surprised that he wasn’t welcome. In staying true to Tyrant form, perhaps he actually felt injustice had been dealt out to him.
Returning Frida

I go back to the library to re-copy that picture of Frida—the one where her head has been cut out, the one I remembered incorrectly. I run it through the photocopier, but keep getting a clear image of the original. It drives me crazy. I run off six copies, adjusting the contrast and brightness, to no avail.

I end up photocopying a section of Stigmata by Hélène Cixous instead, by way of consolation. As I do so, I accidentally capture my wrist in the far corner of the page. So I begin capturing my hand deliberately—this way and that. I am wearing a wooden bracelet with brightly painted sections that match my nail polish. Neither of these come out on the black-and-white copier.

I remember when I was a teenager, and my friends and I first got access to photocopiers, we would photocopy our bodies. Hands, faces, arms—some boys would even drop their pants and sit on the copier. I think I still have copies somewhere of my teenage face pressed to the glass of the photocopier, eyes closed, cheek squashed, like my hand is squashed now between the plate of glass and Cixous’ words.
A little panic

I am at the library writing when I text you. You do not reply and at first I don’t think anything of it. I text again, I have been reading a book on infidelity and suddenly I have the desire to tell you how much I love you. Still you don’t answer. This time it bothers me. I begin looking at my phone every few moments, since it is on silent.

I imagine you with another woman, but who? I console myself by thinking that you have probably just left your phone at home. This is followed quickly by the thought that you never forget your phone. I leave the reading room to call you. No answer, but your phone is not switched off. I call three times. What if you have been mugged? I decide it is probably something more mundane than that, and I go back to my desk to work. I am so distracted that I cannot concentrate. I try calling you again. Still no answer.

I struggle through the next hour, still checking my phone every few minutes. I even begin to worry that you have left me and that you will never take my calls again. But why would you leave me now? What could have happened between this morning and now? Maybe you looked through my luggage and read my journals? Maybe you saw the passage I wrote about wanting you dead. What would you think of me if you read my journals?

I cannot relax. I am overwhelmed with anxiety. I wait for you to text me that you are okay, that everything is okay. I cannot concentrate. I decide that there is no other choice but to return home and see if you are there. What if you are gone when I get there? What if your luggage can’t be found?

I pack up my things and leave the library. As I reach the overground you call me. You have been in the basement of a music store looking for records. There was no reception. ‘What’s up, baby?’ you ask. ‘Everything okay?’
I feel unbelievably foolish.
A sailor went to sea, sea, sea

[image removed for copyright reasons]

[image removed for copyright reasons]
See how I run

On 6 December 2008, a fifteen-year-old student named Alexandros Grigoropoulos was shot dead by police in Exarchia, an inner suburb of Athens renowned for its anarchist activity. Riots broke out across Greece in retaliation, and every year on the anniversary of his death there are mass protests.

I was in Athens for the 2012 commemoration and found myself at Syntagma Square just as the protest was beginning. Everything was in lockdown. There was an enormous metal gate blocking access to Syntagma Square on all sides and the shops were all barricaded up; nothing was open.

As I walked past one big blue police van, I saw a young officer gently strapping gas canisters around the neck of another—it was almost a tender moment—and I recall doing a double take when I realised what it was that he was draping over the other man’s neck.

There were armoured policemen everywhere—many of them so young and handsome—wearing padded uniforms with arm- and leg-guards, bulletproof vests, and helmets with plastic visors. Each police officer had a machine gun strapped to their chest along with canisters of tear gas, and each carried a large plastic shield. They looked like something out Robocop, like modern warriors, and there were hundreds of them lining the streets on both sides of Eleftheriou Venizelou Avenue.

The closer I got to Omonia Square, the more police there were. I felt curious and a little scared as I dared myself to continue further—to see what I could see.

When I reached the square I saw small congregations of young protesters milling around. There was a distinct sense of anticipation as everyone waited for something to happen—protesters, police, onlookers and me. We were all waiting for the fight to break out. It was obvious that it was just a matter of time.
Eventually, a police van drove past and one of the protesters threw a bottle of water at its windshield. Moments later there was a loud bang as smoke began to fill the air—another loud bang—and people were running and screaming in all directions. I ran too. My body filled with adrenaline as I wondered which direction to go. I knew that the riots would extend all the way up to Exarchia Square, so there weren’t that many options. In the end I found myself following the crowd underground into the metro. Like rats piling into the drains, we ran down, down, down.

Even as I ran it occurred to me that I wasn’t thinking clearly. That running underground was not very wise. What if someone let off a tear gas canister under here? Then there really would be no escape. But by then it was too late, I was already halfway down.

As I approached the platform I was relieved to see a train approaching. I didn’t bother to see which direction it was going, I just jumped on and prayed it would move out quickly. The tear gas was stinging my eyes and my heart was thumping hard. As the train left Omonia station I breathed a sigh of relief. I got off at the next stop, where I went to a bar and ordered a beer.

I pulled out my notebook and wrote about the experience of running—of fear shot through my bloodstream. I wrote about how lucky I was to have flirted with conflict without being in any real danger. I thought about the people who live through civil wars and who experience armed conflict where there is genuinely nowhere to run—no way out.
The too muchness

I have stopped writing again. I cannot seem to focus my thoughts clearly enough to put them down. The feeling is uncomfortable. I am restless. It’s like an itch that I cannot scratch. It reminds me of when I watched Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves* on DVD all those years ago. I remember having to pause it all the time. There were always excuses (going to the bathroom, making a cup of tea). But even as I paused it, I knew I was taking a break from the painful content of the film. Short pauses throughout in order to protect myself. Which is one of the reasons that the cinema is a better way to view film. There is no escaping, unless you leave altogether.
A whisper, a shout

‘You exaggerate, Melody,’ my mother has been saying to me for years. She means that I distort my childhood, and that I make it out to be worse than it really was. I can’t help thinking that I am often telling myself to exaggerate things in my writing, to gather up an idea and to amplify it. To make one or two words into one thousand. To take a drop of something and transform it into an ocean. Not in order to lie about it, but to get to the truth or to the bottom of it.

My mother is yet to read anything that I have written. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I have kept my writing locked away from her (like the diary I once had with the miniature padlock on the side), for fear of what she might find loitering between the lines, for fear of betrayal. In *The Art of The Novel*, Milan Kundera defines betrayal as ‘breaking ranks’. I was never able to openly break ranks with my mother because I didn’t want to abandon her (and what is betrayal if not the ultimate abandonment?). I didn’t want to expose my terrible disunity. So, instead, I have hidden my words from her — words that I am afraid will defy her.

It interests me that in breaking my silence (breaking ranks) I become my own sort of tyrant and tell my own version of events. So, you see, I am also a tyrant in this story. I am a tyrant narrator who tells this story just as I wish to.
I love

[image removed for copyright reasons]
Here is where the heart is

I rented a room in a hotel this time. It cost around the same price as the apartment, but this time I wanted to be waited on. I wanted to check in, to give my passport to reception. Perhaps I should have taken it even further. I could have arrived with lots of luggage, or worn a wig. Instead I have just one bag with me. I will spend the day writing again.

I was given a room on the sixth floor—number 603. I went up to my room and set up my laptop and notebooks. At 12.30pm I went to the rooftop bar for lunch. The view was breathtaking. There was a small aqua pool and, in the distance, a view of the Acropolis.

I ordered spaghetti with fresh tomato and basil, despite the heat. It was just how my grandmother used to make it (with grated tomato and a little olive oil, but nothing else). I found it very comforting. I had an espresso afterwards and returned to my room to write, while French tourists lay by the pool in the hot sun.

I went out to buy some bottled water, since the water in the minibar was four times the cost of water I could get at the street side kiosks. On the way back I passed a cart selling religious paraphernalia, including frankincense and the little charcoal circles used to burn it on. There was a box of laminated cards featuring Orthodox saints. I bought two: Mary and St George. They were 50 cents each. Across from my hotel was a stationery store. I bought a dark blue notebook.

The hotel was in Omonia, near to the meat market. In 2008, I took an Australian boy I was dating there. He nearly fainted from the sight of butchers chopping meat in the open and animal blood everywhere. I fell in love with him almost immediately, but that’s another story. Omonia has always been known for its markets. But now it is even better known for heroin. It is an area of Athens in decay.
The next two suburbs over are even worse. In Kerameikos and Metaxourgio things have gotten even worse, especially since the crisis. It is a version of hell. It is where the unimaginable is every day. Where junkies shoot up on the street openly. Where there is constant wheeling and dealing. Where everything is being traded and there is nothing that cannot be bought. Where there are human faeces on the pavement and hundreds of brothels full of women who work like sex slaves for barely any money.

I have spent a reasonable amount of time in this area of Athens because it also happens to be where many of the contemporary art projects take place, on account of the cheaper real estate. A few years ago, pre-crisis, people thought that it was on the brink of gentrification. They believed that the art scene would turn the area around.

When I went out for water I was reminded that I was just streets away from desperation. I found myself thinking about luxury and privilege, my own of course. My mother is a very frugal woman. She rarely eats out, and she saves as much money as she can. She always accuses me of being indulgent. I tend to spend everything I have. I have always been like that. I don’t have much, but what I have I spend. I decided to make this visit to the hotel all about luxury (at least about the luxury available to me).

Back in my room I pulled out my blue notebook and wrote on the cover: *Here is where the heart is.* I put on my swimming costume and went up to the pool. I took one of the fresh towels supplied by the hotel and draped it over my sunbed. I stepped into the cool fresh water of the pool and enjoyed the cold water against my skin. After a swim I lay in the sun, my head resting on a soft pillow. Then I went back to my room, took a warm bath in the white marble bathtub, and kept writing.

By 5pm I began to feel restless. I considered staying the night but decided that it should be against the rules given that I didn’t sleep over when I rented the
apartment. To stay the night would be to tell, and I didn’t want to tell anyone. I decided that for now it didn’t make sense to stay. *Not staying* was important to the project.

The next day I returned in time for breakfast. I slunk past reception and hoped that the receptionist didn’t notice me coming in, or that if he did see me he would think I had gone out early in the morning without him noticing. I went up to my room and left my things, and then I went to the restaurant for the buffet breakfast that was included in the cost of the room. After breakfast I spent the remaining hour and a half before check-out time writing. At 11.45am I gathered my things, rustled the bed linen so it looked as if I had spent the night, and pulled the door of room 603 closed behind me.
A shining knight

My father, the handsome Greek who rode up on his beat-up Fiat and spirited me away for weekends.

   My father, the musician.

   My father, with a deep voice, whom I could hear breathing in the next room at night. Not snoring, just breathing.

   My father, who was so desperate and terrified the night he nursed me through a fever.

   My father, who packed up his life in Sydney and followed us back to Canberra (that was when I knew he loved me).

   My father, who bought me fruit poppers and muesli bars for school. Things my mother would never buy. Too much sugar for her liking.

   My father, who could only cook two meals then, so we would alternate between pasta one night and steamed vegetables with rice the next.

   My father, who learned to cook a traditional lentil dish, φακες (fakes), which made us laugh because it sounds rude.
Secret recipes

My grandmother was very secretive about her recipes. If you asked her how she had prepared one of her delicious dishes she would get very vague.

‘Oh sweetie, I don’t have a recipe for it. It’s a bit of this and a bit of that,’ she would say. ‘You will have to come and watch me make it sometime.’

But some time never came.
Speaking of absence

[image removed for copyright reasons]

[image removed for copyright reasons]
I am too hungry

One of the biggest insults my mother can give a person is that they are fat. Even the way she says the word demonstrates her disgust. I remember when she told me that she had seen My Tyrant at her local newsagent.

‘He looked so fat, Melody,’ she said gleefully. I bristled. Of course, whenever she says it about others it also feels directed at me.

‘You don’t seem to have any trouble attracting men, even though you are overweight,’ she said to me when I got together with my last boyfriend. ‘Does he mind that you are fat?’ I have learned not to bite (pardon the pun) and instead to say nothing.

When I was a teenager I had to ask permission to eat after school and she would usually make me wait until dinner anyway, in case I got fat. ‘How will you ever be successful if you can’t even control your own weight, Melody?’

She was frequently going on juice fasts and she would stash sweets around the house. I always thought she was hiding them from me. But she still stashes them now and I haven’t lived with her for over 17 years. It turns out that as well as worrying about my weight she was worried about her own, though I didn’t realise it at the time. I thought she did these things because I was the one with the problem. I was too hungry. I also felt that she wanted to be thinner and more beautiful than me. So I let her. I had no desire to be beautiful. I wanted to hide my body from the world, but especially from men. I felt very strongly that life would be much easier for me if I were a man. For me the way to do that was to not concern myself at all with how I looked. I thought women were stupid, mostly because they were so preoccupied with how they looked, and I didn’t want to be counted among them. I found a great deal of comfort in food, perhaps even more so since it was banned for me. But food was
always accompanied with a great sense of shame. I was ashamed for being out of control around food. For sneaking down the stairs at night to stuff my face.
There is an oil spill on our street shaped like a love heart

[image removed for copyright reasons]
1967 Military Coup

Late at night on 21 April 1967 a group of right-wing colonels in the Greek army seized power by military coup. Tanks rolled into the centre of Athens along Stadiou Street and set up in front of the palace—the same building that now houses parliament. Hundreds of Greek citizens were arrested, including the Prime Minister, Giorgos Papandreou, as well as those identified as having left-wing sympathies. Bookshops were raided and libraries seized. The Greek constitution was suspended and it was ruled that anyone could be arrested at any time, without warrant. Those arrested were frequently tortured. Torture and exile became everyday occurrences. For the next seven years Greece was under the rule of its second dictatorship (unless you count the Ottomans and the Nazis—and then it was the fourth).
My Tyrant

‘Off with his head!’ screams The Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*. She is an exemplary tyrant; her rule is senseless, and her way of resolving conflict too.

I resisted My Tyrant’s rule and the injustice of his inane threats from day one. Sometimes, when I fought especially hard, My Tyrant would lose his temper and get violent. It was like watching a fuse burst. He would move to strike me and pause just before he made contact with my face, holding a shaking fist close to my cheekbone, his own face hot and angry. He never actually hit me; they were just threats, but still he was terrifying. Once he picked up a pan with the boiling water in it and threw it towards me so that it just passed by me. There were no bruises to show for the pain he inflicted on me. No evidence of the war that I fought with him all of those years. This is not to suggest for a moment that I would have preferred that he had hit me, because I would not. But the weird thing about psychological violence is that there is no concrete evidence of it. As well as being monstrous My Tyrant was frequently kind. He shined my shoes for school and made my breakfast most mornings. He packed my lunch and helped me with my homework. I spent years trying to work out if he really was as cruel as I thought he was or if I was just imagining it. And I usually blamed myself for provoking him.

One of the paradoxes of living under tyrannical rule is that resistance is hopeless and yet there is nothing to do *but resist*. There is no way to oppose the madness of a tyranny. It is mad precisely because there is nothing reasonable about it. Its boundaries shift moment to moment and there is no predicting what a tyrannical leader is capable of. Yet, at the same time what is one to do in the face of such terror but to resist? Especially when not resisting feels like collaboration, or surrender. But since resistance is dangerous, you may find yourself resisting and not resisting all at
once. I spent seven years living under the rule of My Tyrant and then one day it was over. Just like that he left my mother and was gone. What happens to the brave resistance fighter once the oppressive force finally collapses? Once it keels over or self-combusts? What happens then? What happens when the force that you have spent your life defining yourself in opposition to is removed from your life as if it never even existed?
Suitcase rocks

The story goes that on one trip to Greece, my grandmother collected rocks on the beach at Akrata—to paint on. Big sea rocks, heavy rocks. When they were leaving she smuggled them into my grandfather’s suitcase because she knew that when they got to the airport, if their luggage was overweight he wouldn’t question the weight of his own bags.
**King Constantine**

In early 2010, around the same time that I was beginning this project, my aunt told me about a documentary she had seen about the former King of Greece, King Constantine II. She told me how after the 1967 military coup, he went into exile and ended up waiting tables in Paris. I could not get the image of a king waiting tables out of my mind—I was hooked.

I do not know whether I remembered the conversation incorrectly, or whether the documentary that my aunt saw got it wrong. But in all my research I have not found anything to suggest that he went to Paris or that he waited tables. The story gets more and more interesting, and led to my obsession with Greece in the late 1960s.

In 1964, following the death of his father, Constantine II was crowned King of Greece. He was just 24 years old, not quite a boy king like King Louis XIV, but still awfully young. Constantine was ambitious from the outset. At age 20, he won a gold medal in rowing at the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome. It was the first Greek gold medal to be won in a modern Olympic Games. He involved himself heavily in state affairs from the beginning of his reign.

King Constantine II is considered partially responsible for the 1967 coup—for swearing the Colonels into Parliament, and thereby legitimising the regime. Following an unsuccessful counter-coup, Constantine and his family fled to Rome. When the junta finally fell, in 1974, a referendum was held on whether or not to reinstate the monarchy. Greeks voted, overwhelmingly, ‘no’, and the former King was stripped of his Greek citizenship altogether. He was denied even visitation rights to Greece. In seven years he went from king, to exile, to banished.

The Greek royal family had Danish roots. There was a lot of discussion in the media at the time about how he wasn’t really ‘Greek’ since he didn’t have a Greek
last name (rather a twist on Juliet’s cry: ‘What’s in a name?’). In fact, he didn’t have a Danish surname either. His name was King Constantine II of the Hellenes.

Again, the image of a king without citizenship struck me. That a person can be stripped of their citizenship speaks to the legality of citizenship. Citizenship in this context, and perhaps always, is more about passports than it is about the things that make a person ‘Greek’ or ‘Australian’. In this sense King Constantine is a reminder of the arbitrariness of citizenship, which in the end is completely removed from a relationship to place, landscape or home. I am not an apologist for King Constantine II, and this is not a story about the terrible things that happened to him, but I do find him fascinating.
Misunderstood, misinterpreted, mistranslated

While transcribing part of a lecture on Walter Benjamin that Avital Ronell gave at the European Graduate School, I came across the ‘transcript’ tab on YouTube. I wondered why I have never used this function before since I am so often transcribing online lectures. I do it slowly, the long way: word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence, double-checking, rewriting, listening very carefully.

As I read through the transcript, however, it became apparent that it has been done using voice recognition software—not with a human ear.

Ronell’s words: ‘Where a text lands and how it transmutes is another, though related, question.’ The transcript: ‘Where it exists plans and how it runs means is another all related question.’ The transcript is essentially meaningless. It is gobbledygook.

I thought about all the conversations I have misunderstood, misinterpreted or even mistranslated (when listening to Greek conversations). I thought of all those times I have sat opposite a loved one talking but not communicating, knowing that even as we sat there together, we were having two different conversations. I thought of my mother, and how often she has misheard me:

‘Can I have a glass of wine, mum?’

‘What? You got a fine?’
If I went to see an analyst

I want to go and see an analyst but I can’t afford it. Besides, I will not be in London for long enough to start a course of therapy.

I imagine the session instead:

1. I arrive at her office (on this occasion I have made her a she).
2. This time I pretend that she has been my therapist for some time so that we can skip the introductory session and get straight to the point.
3. Hello, she says, opening the door and welcoming me inside.
4. She is intelligent and stylish. I like her.
5. I lie on the couch, and look out the window at a tree tussling with the wind.
6. She sits behind me, legs crossed.
7. I don’t know where to start today, I say.
8. Silence.
9. I am in a horrible mood, I say.
10. Did something happen? she asks.
11. It’s silly really … the arm on my glasses broke the other day and I wanted to get them fixed. So today, while I was at the library writing, I decided I would go out for some lunch and look for an optometrist where I could get them fixed. I set off looking for Kings Cross, where I hoped I could both eat something and get my glasses fixed.
12. And did you?
13. No. There were plenty of places to eat but nothing that I felt like. I wanted something Vietnamese. Finally I settled on a sandwich. I couldn’t decide
whether to eat in or take away. I ended up taking it with me, but then I didn’t know where to eat it. So I ate it while walking, which was also unsatisfying. At one stage I went into a park, but all the seats were taken. I felt really uncomfortable. An eccentric woman came around with a map asking people for directions. I walked away before she could ask me. I thought, Jesus, that’s what I am like … the crazy person in the park.

14. Do you know Kings Cross very well?

15. No.

16. So had you considered the possibility that you wouldn’t find what you were looking for?

17. I didn’t really think about it. I guess I didn’t realise it would upset me not to find it. I think I thought I would just go and see what happened.

18. What do you think it is about not getting what you want that upsets you so much? she asks.

19. Well, surely we all like to get what we want … I say.

20. Yes, but what do you think it is that upsets you so much?

21. I am not sure, I say.

22. Try to think about it, she says.

23. I suppose it has something to do with being in control. I don’t like to be out of control, I say.
I want to be loved

[image removed for copyright reasons]
My Athens

Coffee drinking, chain-smoking
Late-night dinners
Heartbreaking light
Pale blue horizons
Dusty green olive trees
60’s apartment complexes with tiny lifts
Marble everywhere
Classical foyers
Cheese pitas
Narrow streets
Rubbish piled high
Overhanging street lights
The sound of your voice
In ruins
Too good to be true

My mother never said a bad word about my father when I was growing up. I admire her for that. She also encouraged me to be in contact with my grandparents. One evening, when I was very little, perhaps six or seven years old, she suggested I give my grandmother a call. I didn’t want to but she talked me into it. I remember sitting on the floor in the lounge room.

‘Hello?’ my grandmother answered.

‘Hello, it’s me,’ I said.

‘Hello, sweetheart.’ Her voice was so warm that any apprehension I had melted away. ‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

‘I have been drawing. I think we are going to have dinner soon,’ I said.

‘Why don’t you come over here for dinner instead?’

‘Okay.’

‘Put me on to your mother.’

I was dumbfounded and excited. It felt too good to be true.

‘Muuuuuuuuuum,’ I called out.

When my mother got on the phone my grandmother must have realised she had mistaken my voice for that of her other grandchild, her daughter’s son. She didn’t know what to do so she hung up. The phone went dead.
The weight of love

[image removed for copyright reasons]

[image removed for copyright reasons]
[image removed for copyright reasons]
Unspeakable Israel

The dining room table was the centre of activity at my grandparents’ house. It was at that table we drank cups of hot tea and talked. It was at that table we laughed and cried, read newspapers, soaked up the sun and admired the view out towards the Woden Valley. Although it was usual for us to broach controversial subjects with one another, even over breakfast, there was one topic that we avoided at all costs—Israel. It was the only subject that we could not discuss calmly. One, or all, of us would end up losing our temper. While we would certainly get worked up over other topics, this was the one where we would practically resort to insulting one another. Where faces would flush, voices would rise, and hands would thump on tables. It made us all so angry, and so hurt.

I suspect that we are not the only family who are passionate about the political conflict in Israel. It is a subject that is difficult not to feel polarised over. To have an opinion about Israel is usually to have a strongly felt one. But in our family it is unusually extreme, especially given none of us has a personal stake in the conflict. We do not come from Jewish ancestry.

My father’s uncompromising support of the Israeli regime confounds me. I have never understood it. Not only because it is not in line with my own position, but because it seems out of step with his other beliefs. To my ear he is not even moderate—he is an apologist for Israel (although I know he would not like me saying so). Indeed it was only during conversations about Israel that I ever saw my grandmother squint her eyes in hatred at my father, who was usually the object of her unreserved adoration. Sometimes they would go for days without talking to one another after an argument where she raged against, and he defended, Israel.
I have always instinctively felt that my father’s support of Israel was displaced. That it had something to do with my grandfather. Not because my grandfather supported Israel too, but because he felt guilty about his own behaviour as a teenager. I felt that he sided with Israel (his father) because he regretted that he (Palestine) was a teenage delinquent. I felt that he was hard on Palestine as a way of being hard on himself. Similarly, my grandmother railed so passionately against Israel as a way of standing up for the innocent part of her that was never protected from her sadistic father.

What interests me is that, in our household at least, Israel has stood for more than the political conflict. It seems to have stood for the ways in which we each see ourselves in relation to oppression—particularly to the oppressor. I am convinced by the logic of this, although I do not say it to belittle the political seriousness of the Israel–Palestine conflict, or to suggest that in the end all our political passions are simply projections of our own childhood experiences. They are not. But I do think that when people lose their cool so easily—as we all do—then very often there is something else going on too. Certainly in my family those of us who would get the most upset and angry during these arguments experienced oppression as children, which scarred us deeply. My father by his father, my grandmother by her father also, and me by My Tyrant.

In the most recent argument about Israel with my father and aunt, the first since my grandmother’s death, I was the only remaining critic of the Israeli regime in our family. At some point my father turned to me and said, ‘Just because the Palestinians are not as powerful as the Israelis doesn’t make them less complicit in the conflict.’ He then went on to compare the situation between Israel and Palestine to a
scene of domestic violence where the woman being beaten may still be duplicitous in the violence.

Hours later, I could not shirk his remark. I realised that if I was going to accuse my father of having displaced anger, I had to accept that my own emotions might be displaced too. I found myself wondering in what ways I have been complicit in my own abuse. I thought about the ways that I had provoked My Tyrant, some times actively. I wanted to find out how violent he might get, even how violent I might make him. I wanted to see how far he would go. That’s what can happen when you are engaged in warfare.

I saw a documentary many years ago about the wife of a conservative Israeli politician, who was doing humanitarian work in Gaza. The husband was a senior politician and an advocate of building in the occupied territories. Each day his wife went out to work in direct opposition to his policies, yet they shared a bed. I could never do that. I know that about myself. I could not share my bed with a man whom I disagreed with so fundamentally. I am afraid I would cut his head off in his sleep.

Perhaps my grandmother felt this way about my grandfather. A recurring subject of her paintings was the Old Testament story of Judith beheading Holofernes (off with his head!).
I rented a hotel room

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
My Tyrant

A few months ago, eighteen years after he finally exited my life, I saw My Tyrant in a café in Canberra. I was staring off into the distance when I recognised him sitting across the other side of the room. Was it My Tyrant? Could it be? It looked like My Tyrant. I sat staring—squinting almost—at the man who once tortured me. He looked so normal, so average, and it occurred to me that there must be all kinds of tyrants walking among us. I imagined him ordering a drink from the waitress and how she would have smiled at him, just as she smiled at anybody else. She may have even have asked him, ‘How are you today?’ or said, ‘Have a great day,’ without any knowledge of the crimes he once committed in my family, and presumably in others since. I thought about war criminals then—especially those who go into hiding and live whole new lives without anyone ever knowing who they really are. I thought about this as I left the café and walked to my car. I thought about how he meant nothing to me anymore.
A shopping list

When I was packing up my grandmother’s library I flicked through every one of the hundreds of books before adding them to one of the three piles: keep/ maybe keep/ charity. She had a habit of stashing things in books. I found all kinds of photographs, love letters, sketches, notes and receipts. I even found the deed to the house. Out of one book fell a shopping list written on the back of an envelope, which I kept.

Somehow I find her handwriting so comforting.

honey
milk
tomatoes
onions
parsley
potatoes
garlic
eggs
vegeta
salt
I am afraid to die

[image removed for copyright reasons]
Three psychiatrist jokes

The First

Two psychiatrists are at lunch. One of them says to the other, ‘I was having dinner with my mother the other day and I made the most incredible Freudian slip. I meant to say, “Pass me the salt,” but I said, “You fucked up my life, you bitch!”’

The Second

A man goes to psychiatrist wearing nothing but Cling Wrap. The psychiatrist says to him, ‘I can see your nuts, clearly.’

The Third

A Freudian slip is when you say one thing and mean your mother.
**Here you are**

I hate being photographed. *Oh God, is that me?* I have often wondered when confronted with my own image. On occasion I have even failed to recognise myself altogether—as when you catch yourself reflected in a mirror and for a brief moment see yourself as a stranger—as an object.

It comforts me that both Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida describe feeling uncomfortable with their own image. In the documentary *Derrida*, Derrida describes this discomfort as ‘the difficult rapport that I have with my image’. Throughout the documentary he keeps reiterating, ‘I am not really like this.’

*I am not really like this*—they are precisely the words I might want to say about my own image captured in photographs. But what am I usually like? Is it the same with writing? Am I like the words here in this book? Will you read me the way I am? I wonder if we are ever what we are like, even in the most intimate encounters with one another. There is always a slippage.

In mid 2013, while I was in Athens, my supervisor and I continued our regular meetings on Skype. She began a ritual of taking a screenshot of us during each meeting and sending it to me afterwards. When I opened the first email with the Skype portrait attached, I momentarily misread her words, ‘Here you are’ as *Here you exist* rather than there you go.
My Greece

[image removed for copyright reasons]
9.8 kilos

When I left you I took everything with me. I arrived in Berlin with too much luggage and decided to mail some of it home. I went to the post office for a quote. For €59 I could send 10kg. I used a set of kitchen scales from the house where I was staying to weigh the box.

Inside I put:

- 13 notebooks, all full.
- 1 print-out of *Four Quartets* by TS Eliot.
- 1 wooden clipboard.
- Several tax receipts.
- Various pages torn from a magazine, including a recipe for carrot cake.
- 1 iPod cord.
- 2 birthday cards, one from my aunt and another from a friend.
- 1 David Bowie postcard I bought in London.
- 1 exhibition catalogue.
- 2 posters for a play that my cousin wrote, which I saw in Athens.
- 1 A4 accordion file with various papers inside, including my birth certificate.
- 1 pair of leather sandals.
- 1 Sony headphones.
- 2 laminated religious icons bought when I rented a hotel room in Athens.
- 12 books.
- 1 shawl.
- 1 bag for washing delicates.
- 1 purse with foreign coins (mostly Turkish).
- 1 pile of note cards held together with an elastic band.
1 small cardboard box full of jewellery.

1 shell necklace.

1 small stone stolen from the Acropolis.

1 small blue dice.

1 Freud finger puppet.

1 heart-shaped rattle from Mexico that used to hang from the rear view mirror of my car.

2 singlets.

1 striped T-shirt.

1 cotton dress.

When I got to the post office the parcel weighed 10.0016kg. So I took out the dress.

The final weight of my parcel was 9.8000kg.
I am afraid you will disappoint me

I am afraid that in my love for you I idealise you (I nearly wrote idolise, and perhaps that is the better term). I am afraid that you won’t live up to my expectations, which is to say I am probably afraid that I won’t live up to yours either. I am afraid that we are good at distance but will be hopeless in proximity. I am afraid that I will abandon myself and end up in ruins. And yet paradoxically this is what I desire most—to give everything up for love.
**Death is like a light switch**

When I was a child I thought a lot about death. I remember wondering what death would be like and deciding that the only reason I could even think about death was because I was alive, which meant that when I was dead, no matter what the experience was like I would not be able to think about it anymore. Somehow that was a comforting thought for me. I thought that life was just like a light switch; it was either on or off (there was no in-between). That dying would be like a switch being flicked; the light would simply go out. And that would be that. There was nothing to be afraid of because fear could only be felt when you were alive, when the switch was on. Perhaps that is why I have always loved the short story ‘Light is like Water’ by Gabriel Garcia Márquez. In it two young children take literally the remark of an adult that: ‘Light is like water, you turn the tap and out it comes.’ Every Wednesday evening following this comment—while their parents are out—the children close the doors and windows, break a light globe and go diving to the bottom of the light—until one evening they fill the apartment with too much light and drown.
People say the stupidest things to children

‘Hello?’

‘Who is this?’

‘This is Melody, Elias’ daughter.’

‘I didn’t know Elias had a daughter.’

Silence.
To see what she could see, see, see

[Image removed for copyright reasons]
Another encounter with absence

[image removed for copyright reasons]

[image removed for copyright reasons]
I lost a toy boat

‘This is going to sound a little silly,’ I said to the security guard at the National Library of Australia, ‘but I was here yesterday and I think I may have left a small toy boat inside the main reading room.’

The guard stared at me blankly.

‘Maybe someone handed it in?’ I ventured. ‘It was a small wooden boat … green … with a little white sail.’

She was already shaking her head before even looking for it, which bothered me. I stood there waiting for her to change her mind and produce it for me. People around me, who overheard my request, smiled politely.

‘You could try inside at the information desk,’ she said in a thick Baltic accent.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and went inside to try my luck. I walked up to the counter and leaned forward.

‘This is going to sound a little silly,’ I said for the second time. ‘But I was here yesterday and I think I may have left a small toy boat here accidentally.’

The man tilted his head to the side and clicked his tongue. ‘I am sorry, Madam—if it had been found, it would be at the security desk,’ he said.

‘I thought so, but they suggested I ask here too … it’s just … it has sentimental value,’ I said.

‘I am sorry,’ he said.
If I went to see an analyst

I want to go and see an analyst but I cannot afford it. It looks as if I will be in Canberra long enough to begin therapy, so it is not a question of time anymore.

I imagine the session instead:

1. I arrive at his practice. He works from home in a leafy suburb of Canberra.
2. There are two cars parked in the driveway. I wonder who the other car belongs to, and whether he is married.
3. I walk down the path to the converted garage in his back garden, which he uses for his practice. There is a small pond with goldfish and lilies.
4. I knock on the door.
5. He invites me inside.
6. I recall how in vampire films the vampire must always request permission to enter a house.
7. I lay down on the couch with my hands clasped and stare up at the ceiling.
8. What are you thinking about? he asks.
9. I was thinking about vampires. When you invited me to come inside it reminded me of how vampires must always seek permission before entering someone’s home.
10. And what do you think?
11. I am just wondering what it means, why it came to mind.
12. Any ideas? he asks.
13. I used to think that I would be in therapy all of my life, I say, changing
the subject.

14. Why?

15. I am afraid of endings.


17. I think I might be afraid of the end of almost everything, I add.

18. Of death, he says.

19. It’s absurd really, isn’t it? I say.

20. Why?

21. Doesn’t it strike you as a little obvious?

22. You’d rather be unique?

23. It feels rather clichéd to be lying on your couch and telling you I am afraid to die, I say.


‘The excised subject is Frida Kahlo’
Spyros, I got your burden. It made me cry.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Roland Barthes, photographer unknown, viewed 10 February 2014, <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-sw4bG9IA8-g/TqAAoIyYSQI/AAAAAAAF1s/KnieB0ot4Ho/s1600/RolandBarthesSmoking.jpeg>.


4. Francesca Rendle-Short, screen shot of Skype conversation, personal correspondence, 12 August 2013.

5. Francesca Rendle-Short, screen shot of Skype conversation, personal correspondence, 30 May 2013.


7. Sigmund Freud, archival footage, date and author unknown, (digital photograph taken by Melody Ellis while watching the television series, Masters of Sex, on a laptop, ABC iview, December 2013).

8. Sigmund Freud, archival footage, date and author unknown, (digital photograph taken by Melody Ellis while watching the television series, Masters of Sex, on a laptop, ABC iview,
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*The Perfect Human* 1967, short film, directed by Jørgen Leth, Denmark.


BOOK THREE

RISING–FALLING
CONTENTS

ONE PART OCEAN, ONE PART SEA

Ocean—Ο Ὀκεανός
Don’t leave me this way......................................................... 295
An incomplete list of lies told..................................................... 297
The tale of the tail................................................................... 299

Sea—Η Θάλασσα
Ainslie is not a Greek name (36 entries for sea).......................... 323
Once, in a story....................................................................... 375

[Note to the reader: Book Three is printed on pale blue paper]
If I were to tell you the story of my life, it would be best told like a dream. Like in a dream, all of the people in it would be like parts of myself; even you. It would move in and out of time and would be full of stories—some of them made up, all of them true. If I were to tell you the story of my life, it would be one part ocean and one part sea. To be specific, it would start out ocean (Australia) and end up sea (Greece). There would be no other way of telling it.
OCEAN—Ο ΩΚΕΑΝΟΣ
Don’t leave me this way
When I woke up this morning I couldn’t find myself. I was missing. I did a quick check under the duvet to see that I wasn’t curled up at the foot of the bed. Then I looked in the dresser, behind the shower curtain, and under the kitchen table. I even went down to the shed, just in case I had woken up in the middle of the night and decided to do some woodwork, which has been known to happen.

I went back to the house and checked the mirror. Still no luck. Where my face should have been, there was nothing. Just bathroom-pink tiles reflected back at me. Where could I have gone, I wondered? The last time I went missing, I was gone for days. I had to call the police on myself, which was awkward. It took a long time for them to consider taking the report. The woman thought I was pulling her leg.

This time, this morning, I simply waited for myself to return. Like a loyal dog awaiting the return of its owner, or a lover the object of its affection. I sat and waited for myself to come back. I got bored and restless, then angry and frustrated. I’d have bitten my nails if I could.

Finally I fell asleep and when I woke I was relieved to find that I had returned. I begged myself not to do that to me again, not to leave me like that. I asked myself what I was supposed to do without myself. Then, by way of reconciliation, I made myself breakfast. I went all out: eggs, bacon, coffee and orange juice.

When I had finished eating, I thanked myself for a delightful meal. I took a shower and got ready for work promising myself I would try never to abandon myself again.
An incomplete list of lies told
I lied to my doctor about not smoking.

I lied about eating the last piece of chocolate.

I lied about my age, and probably my weight too.

I lied about not caring what you thought of me.

I lied about the reason I was late.

I lied about my occupation to a taxi driver once.

I lied about my parents being married.

I lied about how long I planned to stay in the country.

I lied about what I was doing behind the demountable.

I lied that it wasn’t my fault.

I lied about having a lover when I didn’t;

and about not having one, when I did.

I lied about what I wanted.

I lied about telling the truth.

I lied about how much it mattered.

I even lied about you.
The tale of the tail
On a little island a few miles from here, a few months ago, there was a young girl named Odette who overnight grew a tail. You might expect a girl who woke with a tail to be shocked when discovering it. You might expect her to scream or at the very least to give it a little tug to double-check it was definitely coming out of her own body and that it was not a prank played by a younger brother. But the strange thing about that morning is that Odette didn’t react at all. Not at first. Instead, she sat up in bed, glanced out the window at the now blossoming almond tree and padded down the corridor to the bathroom, where she took off her robe and stepped into the shower. It wasn’t until she was under the water that she reached around and pulled the hairy mass of it in front of her. *I am being punished,* she thought. Odette turned off the faucet and stepped onto the bathmat, her bushy tail heavy with water.

Before then, Odette had been by most accounts an ordinary teenager. Preoccupied with the things that all teenagers tend to be preoccupied with. Now and then, when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she would puff out her chest a little and think how pretty she was. The rest of the time she scolded herself for her too-big thighs and too-small breasts. Her mother, Margot, called Odette her ‘little swan’, and just like a swan, Odette loved water. When she wasn’t studying for her exams or climbing trees, Odette could be found scouring the seashore for shells and kicking around in the waves with Zeffir, the family dog.

Just as some people enjoy a disproportionate serving of good looks, Odette’s island home was endowed with more than the usual amount of beauty. There was not one feature of it that was out of place, and everywhere your eye rested seemed more magnificent than the last. You could walk around it in little more than a day and there were fewer than one thousand inhabitants in total, all of whom resided on the east
coast, close to the main port. Most of the villagers had known one another since birth and could recite whole family histories of their neighbours, which was disconcerting for those who ended up living next door to the boy who bullied them at school, or to their childhood sweetheart, who in the end married someone else. Nevertheless, the island’s residents ignored the inevitable consequences of living in a small place and considered themselves lucky to have been born somewhere so truly beautiful.

It was said that throughout the entire history of the island there had been only one native who had chosen to settle elsewhere and he was crazy so it didn’t count. He was an artist and claimed that the natural beauty of the island distracted him from his work. To the bemusement of the island’s loyal inhabitants the painter set off for a life somewhere where he could, as he put it, ‘live among the muckiness of life’.

The baker shook his head and laughed. ‘Too much turpentine,’ he said. ‘Not enough sense,’ agreed the priest.

On the day of the tail, Odette complained of a sore stomach to get out of going to school. She wore loose clothes around the house and avoided her mother and father as much as possible. It was her brother she was really worried about. It was more or less easy to hide from her parents, but siblings have a way of noticing everything. All day she worried. What if I grow fur all over my body and turn into an ugly beast? Who will ever love me then?

Later that day, while trying to distract herself reading, Odette heard the gate open and looked up to see the village entrepreneur, George, arriving with a bag of fresh pistachios and a bottle of gin. ‘King George’, people had come to call him, out of a mixture of respect and ridicule. His face was a mishmash of contrasting characteristics, as though someone had served up a plate of mezzedes without any
consideration of which item should be put next to the other. He had a salami nose and
a baba ganoush complexion, his freckles like bits of eggplant. Even cleanly shaven
and wearing his best suit, George was an ugly man, and Odette felt sorry for him. He
smiled awkwardly at her and her tail prickled.

George had made an appointment with Odette’s father, Theo, on the pretence of
business, remaining deliberately vague about the details. He had brought what he
hoped were appropriate gifts for a marriage proposal. There was something
otherworldly about the girl, but nevertheless George felt sure that Odette’s family was
the best in the village to form an alliance with. He hoped that after speaking with
Theo today his son, Will, would be engaged to Odette. Once inside Theo’s office
George came right to the point.

‘I confess that there is something of a more personal nature that I wish to
discuss with you today,’ he began. ‘You know that I admire your family very much.
In fact I wish to propose that we marry your daughter to my son.’

Theo was pleased with the proposal, but being a bargaining man by nature it
was a matter of principle for him to enter into even the most menial exchange with the
objective of getting the most possible.

‘Well, George,’ Theo began, rising from his chair. ‘Let me start by thanking
you for the visit. You’ll understand of course, that your son is not Odette’s only
suitor, but I will certainly consider your proposal carefully.’ He paused again. ‘Which
reminds me…’ Theo continued, shuffling papers around on his table to make his
guest wait even longer.

‘What?’ George enquired, a little too eagerly.
Theo correctly ascertained from this reaction that he had already gained the upper hand in this negotiation and stood to do very well from it if he could keep his footing.

‘It’s nothing,’ Theo lied, feigning indifference and stepping away from his desk.

‘It’s just that I was reminded that with all this talk of marriage I really must not get carried away and forget to have the house painted. I have always dreamt of having Odette’s wedding reception here in our very own courtyard. I really must remember not to settle on a match until I have the house done up. But never mind, that is my problem, not yours.’ He cleared his throat.

‘Now, forgive the digression. Thank you, once again, for your visit, George. As always, it was a pleasure to seeing you. And pistachios, especially fresh, have always been a weakness of mine. You really couldn’t have chosen better.’ He walked George to the door and bade him farewell.

First thing the following morning, a team of tradesmen arrived on Theo’s doorstep ready to paint the house. Sitting at the kitchen table drinking his coffee and reading the paper, Theo was thrilled that George had taken the bait. He rang him immediately.

‘George, I am ashamed for even mentioning the house now that you have gone to such trouble and expense!’ he lied.

‘Please don’t apologise, my friend. This is what family do for one another,’ George replied.

He couldn’t have responded better if he’d read from a script, and Theo immediately invited George and his son to dinner the following Thursday in order to announce the engagement.
In just a few days Odette’s tail began to feel as natural as any of her other limbs. In fact it caused decidedly less shame than her nonexistent bust or blushing cheeks. Bit by bit, day by day, Odette found that she was less and less able to hide her feelings from herself. If she was angry, cold; liked someone, didn’t; felt shy, lonely, lost, nervous, you name it, her tail would make it apparent. She snarled at the grocery store owner who delighted in making ambiguous advances at young girls, and let out a howl for the old alcoholic who survived the war but couldn’t survive the loss of his wife.

Odette did her best to conceal her tail. She went into hiding and avoided spending time with her friends and family. Margot suspected something was wrong with her daughter but put it down to hormones or teenage love, until she noticed there was far more hair on Odette’s bath towels and sheets than usual. Worried that her daughter had inherited Theo’s hairy gene, Margot went to console her. It didn’t take long for Odette to tell her mother the truth and to pull the tail out for her to see. Margot let out a scream and clamped her hand across her mouth in shock. Being a devout Christian, Margot felt that a tail was not exactly a positive omen. Wings maybe, but tails—definitely not.

By far the worst reaction to the tail was from Theo. In the days following its revelation, not so much as a ‘Hello’ or ‘Goodbye’ passed his lips, let alone a ‘Can you pass the salt?’ or ‘Make sure you are home before dark’. Theo went into a self-imposed exile. He spoke to no one except George, whom he rang only to postpone dinner. This was no time to discuss an engagement. He had a family crisis on his hands.
In the following weeks Theo barely left his study, attempting to bury himself in work, though he could think of nothing but the tail. His daughter’s beastly appendage bothered him so much that he even stopped sleeping. He made Odette and her brother promise that until he worked out what to do they would keep the tail a secret.

‘It is essential that we keep this to ourselves,’ he emphasised. ‘No one else should know about the tail,’ he said, glaring at Odette’s younger brother, Tom, who hoped he might grow a tail of his own. And so, while Theo brooded, the rest of them did their best to pretend things were as they ever had been. But it was Margot who couldn’t bear keeping the news to herself. She feared for Odette’s soul and so she went straight to the church to consult the priest, not considering him to count when it came to telling secrets.

The priest told his wife—how could he resist such a devilish story—and she told her friend, who told her husband, and by morning, the news had spread through the village. No one was quite sure if it was true or not, and many people got the story wrong altogether.

‘Did you hear about Theo’s daughter, Odette? Well, apparently she’s growing horns,’ said the butcher in hushed tones.

‘A tail, you idiot!’ corrected his wife.

Whether people believed it to be true or not they all agreed it made for exciting gossip. When George heard the news he went to see Theo immediately. Being in most regards a sensible man, George wasn’t interested in entertaining gossip—he simply wanted the truth. The visit came as a surprise to Theo, because until then he had no idea that the news had gotten out. Indeed, he hadn’t left the house in days.
'I take it you know why I am here,’ George began, the moment Theo opened the front door. Theo could see immediately that he was distressed but he did not link it to the tail.

‘Please, take a seat, my friend. Can I offer you a drink?’

‘No, thank you, this won’t take long. I have just come to ask if it is true.’

‘If what is true, my good man?’

‘The tail. Is it true?’

Theo was completely unprepared for such a question. His stomach lurched and he willed himself not to react.

‘My dear friend, are you asking me whether my daughter has grown a tail? I expected better from you than to believe such nonsense. Are you not a modern man? Do you truly believe such things possible?’

George laughed in relief and Theo joined him, equally relieved that his answer seemed to have been satisfactory.

‘My goodness, how I let myself get carried away,’ George said. ‘Nevertheless, it doesn’t look good and we must put a stop to the rumours. I am afraid I cannot marry my son to a woman of scandal. What shall we do?’

‘Leave it to me, my friend. Leave it to me.’

Theo was furious. He hated to be caught off guard like this. He knew that whatever upper hand he might have had with George in their marriage negotiations was now lost, even if he had alleviated the man’s concern. His face stood to attention, stiff and deliberate. Something had to be done, but what?

That night, after Theo tossed and turned for hours, Margot finally spoke up.

‘Theo, you’re keeping me awake. Do you want me to make you some hot milk?’
Theo rolled over again, but said nothing.

‘For goodness’ sake.’ Margot sat up and switched on the light.

‘She’s just going through a change, that’s all. Helen was telling me only today about a cousin of a friend of hers, who—’

Before she could finish her sentence, Theo got up and left the room. He swore at the creaking floorboards as he thumped down the stairs and into the kitchen, where he poured himself a double whisky. Upstairs Margot cursed him for being so insensitive and then crossed herself twice and kissed the icon beside her bed for forgiveness.

Just going through puberty indeed, Theo thought. He opened the doors to the courtyard and wandered out into the warm lemon-scented night. He paced up and down, troubled by his daughter’s tail. Nothing seemed to shake his dread that night. Not the several glasses of alcohol, not the expensive cigar, or even the delicious cheese pie that Margot had baked earlier. Pacing up and down the courtyard, Theo set his mind to finding a solution to the problem of the tail, and it occurred to him that just as surely as it had appeared it could surely disappear. There was nothing else to it. The tail must come off. He raced back through the house, drained another glass of whisky and flew out into the night, the moon illuminating his white singlet perfectly. Across the street, Maria, the town busybody, noticed him leaving in his pyjamas at such an hour and guessed incorrectly that he was having an affair.

Theo headed towards the port, the moon lighting his way. Arriving at the doctor’s house, he knocked three times. There was no answer, and after another two knocks Theo concluded that Phillip must be on a house call. In fact, the doctor was drowning his sorrows in the bar—but that’s another story.
The tail must come off. It must come off. He repeated the mantra to himself all the way home.

Climbing back into bed, he was finally able to seek out sleep, feeling greatly reassured that things that disappeared quickly were easily forgotten about.

When Theo woke the following morning he got up, dressed, and went to find Phillip. The doctor welcomed him into his office as Theo explained the situation.

‘The thing is,’ Theo began, ‘I worry that George will retract his marriage proposal if he finds out the truth. I mean, would you marry your son to a monster with a tail?’

Phillip agreed that the reasons for removing the tail outweighed the risks of operating. He opened his diary and the two men agreed the amputation would take place at 4 o’clock the following Thursday.

George was generally a practical man, but nevertheless he was prone to worry. Although he was satisfied that the tail rumours were unfounded he was anxious to marry his son as soon as possible and was getting frustrated by Theo’s delays. The only thing capable of calming his nerves in such moments of stress was hunting—not for game, but for treasure. So, he retrieved his underwater metal detector and made his way down to the port, where he waded out into the clear blue water, in his wetsuit and flippers. He walked slowly towards the horizon until the water reached just above his waist. From the shore it appeared that he was walking on the moon and not out to sea. The cold of the water seeped in through his waxy canvas pants. He felt his penis shrivel in response, and caught himself wondering how it could be possible to make love in cold water. He thought of all the stories he’d heard of the sirens that seduce sailors at sea and wondered how they managed it. What might a siren look like, he wondered. Didn’t they say that each man’s siren was different to the last? He pictured
his with milky white skin and dark red hair, braided with shells. He imagined her swimming over to him, unbuttoning his fly and sliding her hand into his pants. The fantasy made him suddenly unwell as he was struck by how lonely he was. The thought made him nauseous and he considered going back in to land, but instead he switched on his metal detector and began moving it slowly back and forth through the water. From left to right, right to left.

‘Found your marbles yet, George?’ came a cry from the shore. He didn’t bother turning around to see who had said it. He knew people thought he was crazy. What was a rich man like him doing searching for treasure? The truth was that he didn’t know exactly what he was searching for himself. He didn’t have the stomach for shooting birds or deer, and somehow or other going underwater metal detecting calmed him. He got a thrill out of the variety of objects to be found on the sea floor. So far he had found all number of strange metallic objects: an imitation diamond ring, a metal teapot, some old coins, a compass and a woman’s necklace with an anchor pendant on it, which he placed under his pillow for good luck.

Before George lost his wife he had been an arrogant man, he knew that. People were right when they said that he behaved as if he had won the sun in a game of cards. He had had everything. But when his wife died rather suddenly of pneumonia his life fell to pieces. He had never experienced any kind of hardship before then and he didn’t have the emotional resources to deal with the loss. Instead he was swallowed up in grief and neglected everything, from his appearance to his work. Fortunately, being a man of considerable wealth, he didn’t have to worry about money—otherwise he would have surely been destitute.
It was approaching dusk when the doctor rang the doorbell to the house on the hill. He was late, and Theo had begun to worry that he had changed his mind. He was sure they had agreed on four o’clock and it was nearly six by the time Phillip finally arrived. Theo greeted him at the door with relief and led him into the kitchen, where he offered him a drink. He didn’t mention the time, since the poor man looked rather unwell. He was pale and sweating. Theo opened a fresh bottle of whisky and placed it on the hardwood table along with two small glasses. Phillip picked up the glass in front of him and held it in his hand. ‘Nice glass,’ he remarked, not knowing what to say to Theo given the circumstances.

‘They were a gift,’ replied Theo.

The two men exchanged awkward glances while Theo filled their glasses with the syrupy amber liquid, and held his up in a toast.

‘To health,’ he said.

‘And family,’ added the doctor.

Sitting at the table with Phillip, Theo asked himself once more if they were doing the right thing, and once again he felt sure that there was no other choice but to amputate the tail. He regretted having to make such a decision but felt it was a mark of character to be able to do so. There was no point in being sentimental about it; sometimes one must go against others’ wishes for the greater good. He felt sure his family would understand that some day. Phillip kept glancing at his watch and shifting in his seat as if he had somewhere else he needed to be.

Upstairs in her bedroom Odette was tied to an armchair, scared and exhausted after hours of crying and trying to break free. Theo hadn’t meant to leave her there for so long but once he had tied her up he felt he couldn’t just let her go. The rest of the family had scattered throughout the house and garden. Margot had locked herself in
the spare room, where she was praying to God for an intervention. Tom had climbed the big old oak tree behind the house. He was the most disturbed by his father’s actions, but being the youngest was also the most helpless.

A rich sunset-pink flooded the kitchen, where Theo and Phillip sat together in silence. The doctor looked at his watch again and downed the last of his whisky.

‘Shall we?’ he asked, getting up from the table.

Theo led Phillip up the stairs to Odette’s bedroom.

‘Odette, you remember Phillip?’ he said to his daughter, without looking her directly in the eye. Phillip was shocked to find that his friend had tied his daughter up.

‘There is no need to be scared, my darling—he is an excellent doctor,’ Theo said. ‘Acclaimed, you might even say,’ he added.

Theo patted Phillip on the back and took a deep breath. Phillip began laying his tools on the bedside table and removed a syringe from his case, which he filled with clear liquid from a small vial.

‘This won’t hurt a bit, my little doll,’ Phillip said. ‘In no time, this whole ordeal will be over and you will wake without that unpleasant appendage,’ he reassured her with a smile.

‘Your father is right,’ he said. ‘You are in good hands. I have done this plenty of times before—not with a tail of course—but I have removed men’s legs and that is a much, much harder task.’

He wiped some alcohol on the inside of her arm in preparation for the injection. Odette began to cry as he inserted the syringe into her slender arm but moments later the tears stopped and her small body went limp as the sedative took effect. Her head collapsed forward towards her chest.
The two men untied Odette from the armchair and carried her over to the bed, which was covered in thick blue plastic in preparation for the operation. Theo asked the doctor to leave the room while he undressed his daughter. He wished that Margot had been more cooperative so she could have been there to help him. He wished she hadn’t stopped talking to him, hadn’t refused to cook for him, and most of all that she hadn’t abandoned their marital bed when he needed her the most. After all, undressing a child was a job suited to a mother, not to a father. Theo removed Odette’s clothes carefully and rolled her over so that she lay face down on the plastic sheet. He rested her head gently on a pillow and covered her naked body with a thick cotton blanket in which he had cut a hole the size of a large orange. He threaded her tail through the hole and called Phillip back into the room. *God strike me down for this,* he thought, taking another deep breath, *God strike me down.*

In less than an hour the operation was over. Phillip handed the disembodied tail to Theo then left the room to wash his hands clean of the blood. Theo looked down at the hairy mass of tail and thought he might be sick.

‘What will you do with it?’ the doctor asked, returning to the room and packing up his things.

‘Bury it in the garden, I suppose,’ replied Theo, stunned that he had left this unpleasant detail out of his plan. For all these days it had been the removal that he was most concerned with. It hadn’t occurred to him what would be done with the tail once it was actually gone. Besides, he had assumed that Phillip would take care of that. Would he have left an amputated limb for a family to dispose of? It didn’t seem right. Nevertheless, the doctor made it clear he wanted nothing more to do with the tail.
‘She is going to need plenty of rest when she wakes up,’ Phillip said. ‘The surgery went as well as I had hoped but amputations are always difficult and she will require close observation until the wound heals completely.’ The doctor left Theo some painkillers and said he would return in the morning to check in on Odette. He gave Theo a parting embrace and wished him a good night’s rest. With that he was gone.

Theo turned his attention to Odette. He rolled the tail up in the bloody blanket, removed the plastic sheet from the bed, and turned his daughter over to check on the doctor’s work. Where the base of the tail had been was now covered by a square of white gauze taped neatly to her body. Theo dressed his daughter’s still limp body, in her favourite pyjamas, and repositioned her on her side. He covered her with a thick quilt and kissed her on the forehead, switching off the light as he left the room.

A burial seemed like the most obvious solution for the tail. But where could he bury it without being noticed? He didn’t want it in the garden. He could just imagine Zeffir digging it up like one of his many bones. It made the most sense to take it out to sea. He pulled a large suitcase off the chest of drawers where Margot kept them, and shut the roll of bloody sheets into the case. He turned off the light and carried the case downstairs.

Theo called out to the dog and together they headed down the hill towards the port. He thought he saw Maria pull the curtain back and peer out onto the street, so he quickly moved into the shadows. He wondered what story she would concoct at the sight of him leaving home with a large suitcase and the family dog. Would she imagine he was abandoning his family? He hoped that if she had seen him she would be satisfied by the idea of such a scandal and that she wouldn’t go over to their house.
looking for Margot. The last thing any of them needed right now was her snooping around.

At the port, Theo saw there were far too many people around to get into his boat unnoticed, and so he snuck around to the next inlet, where he borrowed one of the many small fishing boats laying on the coast. Theo placed the suitcase with the tail inside into the hull of the wooden boat, and dragged it down to the water’s edge, where he called out to Zeffir to jump in. The old dog stood stubbornly on the sand and finally Theo had to lift him into the boat himself. ‘C’mon, you old thing,’ he said, heaving Zeffir into the hull. Theo pushed the small boat out a little further, climbed on board, and positioned the oars for his secret journey out to sea. Only metres from the shore Zeffir jumped out of the boat and swam back to land, leaving Theo to dispose of the tail alone.

Theo continued out past a rocky outcrop, where he was satisfied he could dump the case without it ever being found. The moon shone brightly in the clear night sky, giving the dark water a silvery gleam. As he sat bobbing on the water, Theo became painfully aware of how completely alone he was in all of this. Not even his dog would stick around to support him. He missed Margot desperately and regretted that they hadn’t found a way to collaborate during this unusual family crisis. In the twelve years they had been married this was the first time they had slept apart. They had had their fair share of fights, but she had never shut him out like this before. Though the humiliation of the tail was about to be over, he could not shirk the distinct and terrible feeling that nothing would be as it had been before.

Holding the case in his hands he suddenly worried that it wasn’t heavy enough to remain on the sea floor once it had sunk. Theo knew this was not the time for shortcuts so he opened it up and added his shoes, his belt, the coins in his pockets and
a coil of rope that was lying in the boat’s hull—anything for a little extra weight. Closing it back up Theo threw the unwanted suitcase overboard. Small bubbles rushed to the surface of the water as the case sank down, down, down into the dark. Once it was gone he sat for a moment admiring the tiny yellow lights lining the coast. He took a deep breath and began the short journey back to land, confident that the matter of the tail was over once and for all. He pulled the wooden boat back up to its place on the beach and made his way to the local pub. On the way he stole a pair of shoes from the front of someone’s house. They were a little big, but they would do. He was determined now that the tail was taken care of to eat, drink, smoke and argue with his friends like normal—like none of the events of that day had happened.

Following a hearty meal, several beers, a few games of cards with Christoph, and an argument with Jim about the rising price of fish, Theo stumbled home. For the first night since he discovered the tail he slept soundly. But in the spare room across the hall, Margot lay wide awake, clutching a picture of Odette in one hand and her bible in the other.

When the doctor returned the next morning to check on Odette, he was alarmed to discover that she hadn’t woken since the operation. Theo was still in bed and Margot refused to rouse him so Phillip had to put up with her scowls alone. He told Margot that he would return the next day, but if the child developed a temperature in the meantime, they should send for him immediately. He tried to reassure her that this kind of thing was not out of the ordinary, but Phillip was a terrible actor and concern was written all over his face. After he left, Margot lit a candle blessed by the priest, which she only used on very special occasions. Not being the kind of woman who enjoyed sitting still, she went straight to the kitchen to cook. She baked pies, roasted
meats, and complicated sweets. She placed the elaborate platters of food one by one in her daughter’s room as offerings to the saints. Not one morsel of the delicious food passed her own lips, since she had made the decision to fast until her daughter woke.

During the following weeks, the house on the hill had the feeling of having only barely survived a natural disaster. Odette remained comatose and Theo was an outcast in his own home. Even the dog no longer followed him around and instead kept watch outside Odette’s bedroom. Every morning, Margot gave her daughter a sponge bath and tended to the wound, which wasn’t healing. In fact, each day it looked as fresh as the last. Margot applied various salves and natural remedies but nothing seemed to work. Though she was grateful that no infection was present she was anxious for the wound to heal. She bypassed Phillip, and went straight to the priest for advice on the wound. The priest was not as forthcoming as Margot would have liked, and instead suggested that she stop fasting immediately and eat something herself. He urged her to get a good night’s sleep, however difficult that might be under the circumstances. All of this she disregarded politely, returning home to bake. She was exhausted, but she could not – and would not – rest until her daughter was well again.

To survive the hostile home environment, Theo attempted to immerse himself in work. Papers were filed, bookshelves were organised, lists were written and budgets were balanced. Margot forbade him from visiting Odette’s room, and as a gesture of peace he didn’t argue with her. Besides, he found it difficult to see his daughter in a coma anyway. Phillip visited daily and kept Theo up to date on the girl’s condition—as yet unchanged. The doctor explained that, more than likely, Odette’s body had gone into a coma in order to recuperate and that she would recover any day now. In
fact, he was beginning to fear for Odette’s life, but he dared not say anything until he was sure.

Theo took the doctor’s advice not to worry, which he managed quite well during the daylight hours. Although he was sleeping again, Theo was having unbearable nightmares and woke up feeling less rested than before he had gone to sleep. The dreams varied, but only slightly. In each of them the tail appeared. In one, he cut it up into little pieces and fed it to the dog, and in another he dreamed that Margot had retrieved it from the sea and was sleeping with it in her bed. Being a sensible man, Theo disregarded the dreams, though it didn’t stop him taking a trip out to where he thought he had dropped the case into the sea, half expecting to find it bobbing on the surface of the water. Once out there, he realised how ridiculous he was being. There was no way he could locate exactly where he had dropped it. So he returned to shore and spent the afternoon at the pub picking fights with whomever was stupid enough to take his bait. People in the village knew that Odette was sick and they suspected why, though no one dared speak of it. When they saw Theo going out to sea they knew he was worried about his daughter and because of that they allowed him to speak rudely to them that day. Christoph even let him win every game of cards they played.

After Odette had been in a coma for over a week, Theo realised he had to find a way to tell George. He could no longer casually put off the dinner he had promised. So he made his way to George’ house on the other side of the village. It wasn’t easy for him to make such a visit, partly because he didn’t want to talk about Odette, but also because many years ago when they were teenagers still, Theo had been in love with the woman George had eventually made his wife. Theo would follow Poppy around and the whole village knew he loved her. So when Poppy married George all eyes
were on Theo. The memory still caused him some humiliation and he didn’t fancy being reminded of it. When Poppy died, he had felt secretly a little relieved that his humiliation was over. Nevertheless, Theo felt he owed George an explanation—perhaps even an apology for not telling him about Odette sooner. So he forged ahead.

George’ house had sweeping views of the ocean and was in good taste. It was definitely big, but it wasn’t showy.

Theo wiped his feet on the mat before knocking.

‘My dear friend, what a surprise! Please come in,’ George said.

‘I just realised I have come empty handed,’ Theo said, stepping through the front door.

‘Never mind such formalities—I have plenty of food and drink inside,’ George said as he led Theo into the dining area, where they sat down at a big wooden table. Theo scolded himself again for not thinking to bring something. What a fool. It was only going to make this more difficult.

‘What can I do for you?’

‘I have come to offer my apologies,’ Theo said.

George raised his eyebrows.

‘I suppose you know by now that Odette is unwell. Well, I am afraid she is in a coma and it is relatively serious. We have no reason to expect she won’t come out of it, but nevertheless Phillip has been on constant call, and we are all praying for her.’

‘My goodness, I am sorry to hear that!’ replied George. ‘But why are you apologising to me? Shouldn’t it be me offering my condolences to you?’

‘Well,’ Theo looked at the table. ‘I feel I should have said something sooner. And also because we will have to call off the engagement until she recovers.’
‘Of course.’
‘I am sorry,’ Theo stuttered. ‘I am not feeling myself.’

George interrupted him before he could go any further.

‘My good man, there is simply no need to apologise to me. Perhaps it is your wife that you should be having this conversation with, not me. You seem to me to be understandably anxious for your daughter’s recovery. You should go home and be with your family. When Odette wakes we will speak again. But there is no hurry, let me assure you.’

This time it was Theo’s eyebrows that rose. What had he expected? Perhaps he had hoped George would be angry with him. Perhaps he felt he deserved to be punished. After all, this entire wretched situation was his fault.

Theo left George’s house in a terrible rage. He stormed home, tore off his suit and stepped into his pajamas. He went into the kitchen, where he opened a beer and looked for something to quash his mood. He ripped open a packet of cheese with his teeth and rifled through the cupboards for some bread to go with it. He forged his knife into the some tomato relish, licking the metal afterwards.

Margot was the first to finally consider that Odette wasn’t going to recover from the surgery. It struck her very clearly one morning that not only were they all lying to themselves about her daughter’s worsening health, but that they had been lying to one another also. Due to their inability to endure the thought that Odette might not recover, they had each kept an optimistic bedside vigil—even the doctor had deluded himself. Margot could see that now. No, the trauma of the amputation had simply been too much for her daughter’s poor little body to suffer.

If Margot had been upset with herself before for not doing enough to stop her husband from carrying out the stupid operation in the first place, then now it was
simply unbearable. Margot began to prepare herself, as much as such a thing was possible, for the very real possibility of Odette’s death. She went into immediate mourning, wearing only black and refusing all food. She spent the next few days knelt in prayer. On the few occasions that she left her daughter’s side, Margot appeared as a ghostly figure—pallid and exhausted. For the first time in his life, Tom was afraid to go near either of his parents. He packed a torch, some cheese sandwiches, a pillow, a sleeping bag and a few of his favourite comics into a bag, and escaped up into the tree house.

As Margot feared, the wound on her daughter’s body continued to worsen until finally, late one night, with her mother and the doctor by her side, Odette took her very last breath. They all cried that night, but Margot’s wails were the loudest and could be heard right across the other side of the island. Theo didn’t know what to do with his own grief, let alone what to do with Margot’s, so he locked himself in his study and let her cry alone. Tom climbed down from the tree house and slept in his own bed—with the door closed and a pillow wrapped tightly around his head in an attempt to block out the noise.

After Odette’s death Margot busied herself with the funeral preparations. On the morning after the funeral she packed two bags, one for herself and one for her son. That afternoon Margot left her husband and the house on the hill for good. She simply could not find a way to reconcile with her husband and knew that there was no other option than to leave.

Margot and Tom were only the second and third inhabitants ever to leave their island home, but this time no one in the village remarked on the departures. The story goes that they found another island on the other side of the world to call home. Where
the water went the opposite way down the drain and the moon shone back to front.

But how would I know?
SEA—Η ΘΑΛΑΣΣΑ
Ainslie is not a Greek name (36 entries for sea)
I had never been to Greece before. I hadn’t even left home yet, let alone Australia. I had just finished my undergraduate studies in journalism at The University of Sydney. My parents had bought me the ticket as a reward for my hard work. It was expected that after I graduated I would take a holiday to Greece before returning home to marry. It was December 1966 and I was just 20 years old.

I spent most of the trip nauseated. After less than a day into the journey I was sick of the boat and the boat was sick of me. I seemed to be the only single woman on board and I was stuck having to make small talk with people I had nothing in common with. At meal times I had to share a table with families and couples who looked sorry for me. Countless women told me how brave I was for traveling alone. Was someone meeting me in Athens at least, they wanted to know? They were shocked to hear that I planned to make my way to my family’s village alone. I didn’t feel sorry for myself at all. When I wasn’t sick with the motion of the ship I spent my time filling my journal with pages of anticipation as I sailed further and further from home.

When we finally reached the Aegean Sea, the captain made an announcement and I rushed out onto the deck to see what I could see.

We had been traveling so long that arriving at Piraeus port felt like arriving on the moon. There were dozens of other large boats like ours lining the port, and a smell of gasoline fused with excitement. People pushed their way closer to the exits, eager to disembark, and to greet loved ones.

The travel agent had arranged my accommodation as part of the ticket price.
She had given me a map of the port and marked my hotel with an X. I had the map in a wallet along with my ticket and passport. I dragged my heavy suitcase across the busy main road. I passed a man roasting chestnuts at a wooden cart on the street corner. He tipped his hat to me. ‘Γεια σου, κουκλά μου. Hello doll,’ he called out. ‘Γεια σας. Hello.’ I said, and blushed with pride. It was something of a revelation to speak Greek with people other than my parents. My mother insisted on speaking Greek to my brother and me throughout our childhood so that we wouldn’t lose the language. But still, my Greek was more like what you would call ‘kitchen Greek’. My sentences were a mish-mash of Greek and English words—Grenglish.

I spent my first night on Greek soil in a small hotel near Piraeus Port. It was called something typical like The Acropolis. The hotel was a dive and did not live up to its namesake. The next morning I took another boat to Crete, to where my father’s family lived. I arrived at the port in Chania and took a bus from there to the village, where I asked directions from the man in the local kiosk. I dragged my suitcase up the steep hill to the family house. There was a magnificent view from the road of pale blue water. The air was cold but I was sweating. I regretted packing so many things.

I still don’t know whether my father forgot to write, or whether the letter hadn’t yet arrived, but it was clear that my family wasn’t expecting me. This made for a rather uncomfortable family reunion.

‘Γεια σας, ειμαι Εινσλι. Η κόρη του Άλεξς. Hello, I am Ainslie. Alexis’s daughter,’ I explained to an ancient-looking woman at the front door.

‘Ποια? Who?’

‘Του Άλεξς, από την Αυστραλία. Alexis, from Australia.’

Over and over, I tried to explain myself to the woman but she held her post as if guarding the gates of Troy.
Finally, my father’s older sister, Evangelia, heard the commotion and came to the door. She looked at me all squinty-eyed and understood immediately who I was.

She threw open the door and pulled me into her arms, overjoyed to see me.

From what my father had told me, they had been very close as children.

‘Look at you, just like your father! Quick, come inside. You must be hungry.’

She said to me in English.

I was led down a dark corridor into their kitchen.

‘Take a seat, my little doll. Look at you, such beautiful leather you have,’ she said, patting my face affectionately.

‘Skin?’ I ventured.

‘Yes, skin. Such beautiful skin!’ she said.

I had brought with me presents from home, photographs and gifts, which I began to unpack.

‘Not now, sweetheart, let me feed you first.’

Everything in my aunt Evangelia’s house centred on food. Every day, she cooked for the extended family and even for the local doctor, who was an old family friend. At any given meal there would be up to twenty people.

She would get up in the morning and prepare dozens of complicated dishes as effortlessly as if she were folding sheets. My male cousins were treated like gods, but reminded me more of little emperors, bossing even their older sisters around. At mealtimes, without even looking up my cousin Kostas would say into his plate of food, ‘Salt,’ and his sister would rush and get it for him. ‘Bread’, ‘Wine’, ‘Oil’—the same. I remember thinking if my brother had tried something like that I would have hit him around the head.
I tried to help in the kitchen and around the house. Occasionally my aunt would let me chop lettuce or do something else minor, but I wasn’t allowed to do any of the more difficult chores.

On Christmas night, we played cards and my cousins teased me for having a terrible poker face. Then on New Year’s Day we exchanged gifts and cut the traditional vassilopita—a cake baked with a coin inside for good luck. A slice of cake is cut for every relative, both present and absent, and the person whose slice has the coin is said to have good luck for the rest of the year. I got the coin.

‘Lucky you,’ Evangelia said, squeezing my cheek. The next day, I headed back to Athens. I told my aunt that I was going to meet a friend and continue on to London. In truth, there was no friend. I don’t know why I lied about it.

I took a taxi from Piraeus to Monistiraki, where I rented a room in a hotel with a view of the Acropolis. The small amount of money I had saved for the trip was enough to get by on. Things cost surprisingly little.

Athens was such a lively city. It was a dream come true: the food, the ruins, the marble everywhere (even the pavements), the sound of the language, the stray dogs, the people in cafés drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, the Greek alphabet, which gave me an unexpected thrill, and, of course, the history. I had never been in such an ancient place. But it was the light that really impressed me. It was so different from the light in Australia. It was a much sharper light, on the bluer end of the spectrum, less caramel. It was exhilarating to be in a place so different to home, where even the moon shone back to front.
‘Where are you from?’ the hotelier asked me.

‘Australia.’

‘Oh, Australia! I have a cousin in Australia.’

‘And you? Where are you from?’ I asked.

‘I am from the Black Sea.’

‘I haven’t been there, but I am sure it is beautiful,’ I said.

‘Do you know why they call it the Black Sea?’ he asked me.

‘No—is it because the water is black?’ I teased.

‘In not so ancient times, the Black Sea was nicknamed the hospitable sea by seafaring Greeks. It was a euphemism for what was considered a difficult sea to navigate.’

I met you that very first week. You were working as a waiter in the café I liked so much, the one with the orange chairs. At some point you came over and introduced yourself to me. I remember thinking how serious you seemed despite the boyish glint in your eyes.

‘What’s your name, little girl?’ you asked me in English.

‘Little? The only person who calls me “little” is my father, and from him it’s endearing,’ I said.

‘You didn’t tell me your name,’ you persisted.

‘Με λένε Εινσλίη. I’m Ainslie,’ I replied.

‘You speak Greek!’

‘Not very well,’ I said, this time in English.
‘I am Dimitris.’

‘Hello, Dimitris.’

‘Hello, Ainslie—nice to meet you.’

I tried not to pay any attention to your advances and returned to my book.

‘I always wanted a girlfriend who had a name starting with A,’ you called out to me from across the bar a little later.

‘Oh, really? Why is that?’

You walked over to my table and this time you sat down, rolling a cigarette.

‘So I could call her Aggie,’ you said. ‘From now on I am going to call you Aggie.’

‘From now on?’

‘Yes, didn’t you hear? We are about to fall in love.’

I was stunned by your confidence.

‘For all you know I could be married, or engaged,’ I said.

‘You’re not married, I can tell these things,’ you winked. ‘Besides, you are not wearing a ring!’

‘Oh yes, of course. No ring,’ I smiled.

‘I want you to meet me in the market tomorrow. We will buy some food and then I will cook for you,’ you said.

‘Just like that?’

‘Just like that.’

‘How am I supposed to know if I can trust you?’

‘You can trust me.’

‘Just because you say so?’

‘Adonis, am I trustworthy?’ you called out to the other waiter behind the bar.
‘Not in a million years,’ Adonis replied, and you burst out laughing.

You laughed so much tears came to your eyes, and perhaps that was why I finally agreed.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I will meet you tomorrow.’

‘Wonderful,’ you grinned. ‘You won’t regret it.’

4. Calm ~ Μποννάτσα

The next day we met at the market in Kolonaki. The light was doing its thing and there was a strong smell of roasting meat coming from the souvlaki stand—smoke everywhere.

You rushed over to me and kissed me on each cheek.

‘Come with me,’ you said, taking me by the hand.

You filled a satchel with olives, tomatoes, parsley, dill, spring onions, dried figs and more. As we were leaving we passed a fish stand.

‘Have you ever eaten fish from the sea?’ you asked me.

I shook my head, my mouth full of fruit. You called to the vendor and pointed at two medium-sized fish. His cart was beautifully decorated and the fish were displayed on two large mounds of ice as if jumping through waves—I’d never seen such an elegant display. The vendor wrapped them in waxy paper and you stashed them into your bag with the rest of our shopping.

‘You’re going to love the fish from the sea,’ you said. ‘It’s less salty.’

I climbed onto the back of your scooter—sidesaddle like I’d seen other Greek women do it—and clung to your waist.

‘I still haven’t been to the beach here. Will you take me?’ I yelled into the gushing wind.
‘Sure.’

‘I miss the ocean,’ I said.

‘There’s no ocean here, baby,’ you said. ‘Just sea.’

Having grown up with the ocean I hadn’t really thought of the difference, and so I laughed.

We headed to your apartment, where you began to prepare lunch. Your house was intriguing; it was not at all what I had expected. It was full of books and records and framed theatre posters.

‘You’re an actor?’ I asked.

‘A director,’ you said.

‘And these are productions you have put on?’

‘Most of them,’ you replied.

‘Nice curtains,’ I joked.

‘You like them?’

‘No, I think they’re awful!’

‘Well you wouldn’t be the first to hate them. My friends tease me too, but they have no taste. Like you, I am afraid to say.’

‘What are you making?’ I asked.

‘We will begin with egg and lemon soup. Do you know it?’

‘Avgolemono. It’s my favourite.’

‘Followed by baked fish.’

‘Wonderful!’

‘Where did you learn to cook like this?’

‘I was a … what do you call it? A mummy’s boy?’

‘Oh yes, I can imagine.’ I said.
‘In order to spend time with her I practically lived in the kitchen, where I fell in
love with cooking.’

You filled my glass with ouzo and I sat watching you cook.

‘Could you help me for a moment?’ you asked.

‘Of course,’ I replied.

‘I need you to pour this broth very slowly into the bowl while I whisk these
eggs.’

You whisked and I poured.

‘You’ve done this before,’ you said.

‘Yes the women in my family make a “dtst dtst dtst” sound with their mouths
when they do this bit. It is supposed to stop it from curdling.’

‘It’s exciting, no? If you get it wrong it’s a disaster. Like love. It is not easy
getting the egg and lemon to sit well together, you know.’

Everything about you interested me. You said that you thought the Acropolis needed
to be destroyed. ‘Blown up’ were your words. You insisted that Greeks would not
free themselves of the past while the Acropolis dominated the physical and imaginary
landscape. I thought about the things that loomed large in my own life, my mother in
particular.

‘You’re right,’ I said after we finished eating.

‘About the fish?’

‘No. I don’t regret it.’

You threw down your napkin, and grabbed my hand.

‘Kiss me,’ you said, and pulled me into your lap.

‘I am a little nervous,’ I confessed.
‘Don’t be. I like you.’

5. Put out to ~ Ρίχνω στη θάλασσα

‘I have a love story for you,’ you announced. We were in my hotel room, and I was getting dressed.

‘It’s about a man and a woman who move in together,’ you said, helping me with the zip of my dress. The balcony doors were open and there was a cool breeze.

‘Move in with me,’ you said.

‘Does this mean you love me?’ I asked.

‘Just pack your things. I want you to come home with me.’

So I moved into your apartment. I only had a few bags so I bought three little goldfish for the occasion. Two of them died almost immediately. The smallest was the first to go. Its gills swelled up and it lay at the bottom of the tank in what looked like agony. I cried, and you teased me.

‘Haven’t you ever lost a pet?’ I asked.

‘I lost a dog once,’ you replied. ‘But a fish is not a dog. It’s not the same thing.’

7. Power ~ Ναυτική δύναμις

Whenever you scolded me for not doing this or that correctly I imagined your mother in the room with us, nodding in approval at her perfect son. Your mother was a constant presence in our relationship, even though I had only met her once.
8. Green ~ Γαλαζοπράσινη

You had the most extraordinary eyes. Powerful eyes. Deity eyes, that transfixed me. The feeling of being looked at by you was palpable. It lifted me out of the fog of myself. It was like exquisite pain relief. But it was also excruciating, because it was completely out of my control.

9. Scape ~ Θαλασσογραφία

‘What are these?’ you asked, poking at my thighs.

‘Varicose veins.’

‘Aren’t you too young for these?’

‘I’ve had them since I was a teenager,’ I said.

‘You should be too young for those.’

‘I should be, but I’m not…’

10. On the open ~ Στα ανοιχτά

I didn’t hide my body from you as I had from other men. Instead I walked around our apartment in all my plumpness. My thighs like the columns of the Acropolis—all the better to squeeze you with.

Meeting you was quite literally like stepping into my own personal fairy tale. It felt too good to be true. To receive attention from you was like being adored by the sun. Except that just as it would come, it would also vanish. Some days you paid me barely any attention at all, you came home late and it felt as if there were a vast ocean between us. I hated those days.
11. Urchin ~ Οχινός

Our local bakery made the best cheese pitas in the neighbourhood. After I went there with you one day the woman who worked there treated me differently. She stared unashamedly at my bare left hand where presumably she thought a wedding ring would have been. She would address me in English even as I persisted in my heavily accented Greek. I made a performance out of my niceness, but it didn’t seem to help.

‘A bag?’ she would ask, after packing up my things.

‘Όχι, ευχαριστώ πολύ. No, thank you very much,’ I would respond stubbornly.

12. Breeze ~ Μπάτης

The following evening you arrived home, late as usual, but with armfuls of food: fresh tomatoes, eggplants, cheese and olives. I loved how you would do that.

‘I am going to cook, and then we’re going to visit Spyros and Eleni,’ you yelled out from the kitchen.

I heard the cork pop on a bottle of wine and the sound of you pouring it. I put my notebook down and came into the kitchen to join you.

‘Did I tell you that I am writing again?’ I asked.

‘No, but I can tell.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘Because you’re always happier when you write.’

‘I am, aren’t I?’ I paused, then added, ‘I don’t know if it will be any good.’

You didn’t say anything and I regretted saying it. You weren’t one to reassure me.

I poured myself a glass of wine.

In the kitchen you wore a short ruffled apron and a tea towel slung over your left shoulder. You cut into a tomato and it bled onto the chopping board. I remember
thinking that eventually my heart would bleed like that too if I let myself love you any more than I already did.

After dinner we walked to the party. I wore a short green woollen dress with white stockings and platform boots. It was cold and I felt underdressed. I was also struggling with my shoes on the steep marble pathway.

‘Why do you always wear those impractical shoes?’ you asked.

‘You’d prefer me not to make an effort?’

‘I am just saying, you call yourself a feminist and then . . . ’ you trailed off.

‘And then?’

‘Aggie, please, I don’t want to fight.’

‘Jesus, you started it.’

I broke free from your arm and walked a few paces ahead of you.

‘Come back.’ You laughed, which made me even more furious.

‘You treat me like a fucking child, Dimitris.’

‘We’re here, baby,’ you said and pulled me into your arms. ‘I don’t think you’re a child. I think you’re a beautiful koala.’

I rolled my eyes and you hit the buzzer. Spyros’ voice came over the intercom.

‘Koalas are fat,’ I said as we stepped into the elevator. ‘And lazy.’

You squeezed my waist and gave me a kiss.

We took a tiny elevator to the top floor where Spyros and his wife Eleni lived.

‘Welcome!’ Spyros said. ‘Come inside—Eleni is in the kitchen cooking and I am just about to change the music.’ We followed Spyros into the lounge room where a group of people sat on the couch and spilled onto the floor. The room was filled with cigarette smoke. Everyone stopped talking and turned to greet you. You kissed all the women on each cheek and made yourself at home without introducing
me. I wondered how many other women you had brought along to gatherings like this.

One woman in the group was particularly attractive. She dominated the attention of everyone, men and women. I wondered what it would be like to be so beautiful and to know it. She was Italian. She was visiting the university where Spyros worked.

‘Anyway, as I was about to ask, does anyone have any pot?’

You pulled a tin from your coat pocket and smiled at her.

‘To be honest with you, all I live for is sex and marijuana,’ she said casually. Her pronunciation of ‘honest’ began with a strong ‘h’ sound like for ‘heart’. That was enough for me. I got up and went outside, where Spyros was smoking a cigarette.

‘Look at your view!’ I said admiring the view of Mount Lycabettus.

‘It’s nice, no?’

‘If I could I would put that mountain into my luggage and take her home with me.’

‘Him, you would take him home.’ He laughed. ‘The noun is masculine. It’s O Lycabettus.’

‘Well, it is a she for me regardless.’ I said.

‘No, it is definitely masculine. That’s why you like him so much.’ Spyros winked at me and then disappeared inside.

Moments later you joined me.

‘You really should give her a go, you know,’ you said, without explaining who you meant.

‘Your new girlfriend, you mean?’

‘I only have eyes for you, doll.’
‘You do not.’

‘You should give everyone here a go. Who knows, they might surprise you.’

I finished my drink and returned to the lounge room, where a heated conversation was taking place about America and the rumours that the CIA had funded all kinds of cultural activity, just after the Second World War, including the Abstract Expressionists. An avid anti-American, it was one of your favourite topics.

You said, ‘When you think about it, it’s brilliant. Not only is it a form of backward censorship, but it also achieves more than one aim. On the one hand, they finally get to have their own modern art movement, and at the same time it was the death of representation in painting. It was the death of meaning, of politics full stop. I take my hat off to the bastards. Now pass me that joint!’

Spyros sat next to me. I could smell his aftershave; it smelled good.

‘You speak Greek?’ he asked me.

‘A little. My parents are Greek.’

‘Is that what brought you here?’

‘I guess so. It was always assumed I would come here for a holiday after I finished university, and here I am.’

‘How are you enjoying it so far?’

‘I love it. I wish I could stay.’

‘There are quite a lot of Greeks in Australia, no?’

‘Yes, there are.’

‘Australia seems so far away.’

‘It is far away.’ I laughed. ‘It’s like traveling to the moon…actually, to tell you the truth, I have mixed feelings about Australia. I mean, I don’t feel like I belong there fully. I am not especially proud of being Australian or anything.’
‘I am very proud to be Italian,’ the Italian contested. Everyone laughed and I felt stupid. I hadn’t realised that anyone was listening to us.

‘I agree with Ainslie,’ you said, coming to my rescue.

‘I am all for destroying our cultural identities. In fact I am always saying we should blow up that Acropolis of ours. What good is it to us now?’

‘Oh, Dimitris…’ Eleni sighed. ‘You’re so goddamn dramatic.’

‘No, but really. I am serious. Apart from being very beautiful, and it is beautiful, what good is it? I think it has castrated us creatively. We cannot live up to its monumental symbolism.’

‘Dimitris tells me that you are a writer,’ Spyros turned to me.

‘Yes—I studied journalism but so far I haven’t published anything.’

‘Well, I am putting together a collection of new Greek writing for the university. I wonder if you would like to put something in it?’

‘Do I qualify as Greek?’

‘Why not?’

‘I might need some help with the translation—I couldn’t write it all in Greek.’

‘Fine. I might need help with some English translations too—so we can help each other. What do you say?’

‘I would be delighted.’

13. Captain ~ Καπετάνιος

On the bus home one afternoon we sat beside a couple who looked about my parents’ age. They seemed so in love. The woman was sitting on her husband’s lap and they were both giggling like children.
'I am laughing because it has been a while,’ the woman said, clapping her hand around her mouth.

I wondered whether she meant a while since she had sat on his lap or a while since he had touched her like that. She looked over at you and I tried to imagine what she was thinking about us. Did she think that we were in love too?

14. By the ~ Παραθαλάσσιος
Sometimes you teased me relentlessly and we would fight. You seemed to know exactly how to get at me. I was too sensitive, you claimed. One night, in the midst of a petty argument, you even put your index finger in your mouth and pulled on your cheek, in imitation of a fish caught on a hook.

15. Loving ~ Θαλάσσοχαρής
‘Squeeze my thighs, baby, like you are making meatballs,’ you begged me.

‘Like this?’ I asked, grabbing on to your hairy thighs and kneading them as best I could.

‘Exactly like that,’ you replied.

16. Beyond the ~ Υπερπόντιος
Late at night on 21 April, on one of the rare nights that we had gone to bed early, a group of right-wing colonels seized power by military coup. While we were sleeping, tanks rolled into the centre of Athens, setting up on street corners throughout the city. And just like that, everything changed.
17. Fight ~ Ναυμαχία

It was only after I felt you get out of the bed that I realised our telephone had been ringing for a long time. I considered staying in bed but the thought of coffee was what finally got me up. You were standing naked in the hallway. I collected your jeans and a T-shirt off the floor, delivering them to you on my way to the kitchen, where I emptied the used coffee beans from the percolator and made a fresh pot. Your voice rose sharply as you stepped into your jeans and I wondered who you were speaking to. You sounded angry.

The coffee pot gurgled, and I filled two small cups with the brown liquid as the aroma wafted through the apartment, lodging itself into those floral curtains you liked so much. I took a cup over to you, placing it on the phone table. Everything okay? I whispered, but you just frowned and reached for your cigarettes. I left you and your frown and wandered into the lounge room, where I opened my notebook and began writing.

Two cups of coffee and a piece of toast later you hung up the telephone. You were going to meet Spyros in Exarchia, you told me. And then you said it, as if it were nothing special: ‘A dictatorship happened.’

You were halfway through rolling a cigarette and you paused to lick the paper and make the final roll.

‘I can’t believe I slept through it. You know, there were hundreds of arrests overnight. I really have to go, Aggie. You stay inside until I get back, okay? Promise me you won’t go anywhere?’

Before I could answer, you rushed about getting dressed, kissed me goodbye, grabbed your pouch of tobacco and left. Just like that you left me there alone.

The kitchen tap dripped.
The truth is I had no idea what a coup was. I knew what the word meant, but what is the meaning of a word without an experience of it? I waited for over an hour until I couldn’t bear to stay inside for a moment longer without seeing for myself.

I grabbed my bag and pulled the wooden door closed behind me. As I approached the entrance to our apartment building I remembered my passport and went back for it—just in case. Halfway back up the marble stairs the light timed out and I was plunged into blackness. The shock of it made me fall forward, catching my weight on my hands with a slap. My palms stung and I scolded myself for being so jumpy. I knew about that light and how quickly it timed out, and yet in that state of anxiety I had let it frighten me. Back inside the flat I left a note: Gone to the store, back soon.

Outside, the streets were abandoned, except for a few people staring from balconies and huddled on street corners. A row of tanks rolled slowly down the street towards Messogion Avenue. Everything was in lockdown. There were armoured police everywhere. An old man pushed a cart of κουλόρια—sweet bread, down the empty street, like something out of a dream.

It was like being transported to a war zone, but what did I know of wars? I was born almost exactly nine months after the end of the Second World War. My parents used to joke that if the Americans hadn’t dropped a bomb on Hiroshima I would never have been born. It was the excitement of the war ending that led to my conception, and a few months later to their marriage.

The men in uniform were all about my age or younger. I tried not to look at their handsome faces as I slunk past them. A businessman pulled up in a taxi beside
me with a briefcase and wind-swept hair. He nearly knocked me over, he was in such a hurry.

I walked past the taverna to our local store. If I had been the gambling type I would have placed the biggest bet I could have, I was in that kind of mood. Instead I intended to spend all the money in my wallet. I felt like splashing out, being extravagant. I hunted the aisles, even searching through the array of kitsch souvenirs beside the counter. The young shopkeeper smiled at me with such warmth that I let myself imagine him wrapping his strong arms around my waist and whispering, ‘Everything will be just fine, I promise.’ I could practically feel the warmth of his breath on my neck. Instead he rung up the till and I blushed. Neither of us spoke of the coup, of the tanks, the too-loud radio, the quiet streets or the distinct feeling of trepidation in the air. I felt nauseated. A small transistor radio perched on the shelf behind him broadcast military music. At the back of the store, through a narrow doorway, an elderly couple were arguing.

I returned to the flat with coffee, two bottles of wine, savoury biscuits, cigarettes, fresh bread, three different cheeses, dried figs, fresh tomatoes and a set of emerald-green plastic worry beads. I opened a bottle of wine, poured a glass and ran a bath.

The kitchen tap continued to drip.

19. Command of the ~ Θαλασσοκρατορία

You didn’t return home until late that night and I barely slept as I waited for the sound of your key in the front door. I imagined you in the arms of another woman. Isn’t it odd that I imagined you with another woman rather than in danger? Even then I was so afraid you would change your mind and leave me. I knew that deep down I had
made you my excuse to stay in Athens. Your body was Greece and I tied myself to you like a mast. I couldn’t sleep, so I got up to heat some milk. As I placed the pot on the stove you came in.

‘I am making some hot milk—do you want some?’ I asked, as if you had been home all along. You walked straight to the shower without answering and I scolded myself for being so accommodating. Why didn’t I come into the bathroom to ask you where you had been and why you hadn’t come home earlier, or at least called to tell me not to worry? I wished I could be more assertive with you.

I heard the faucet turn off and you went straight to bed. I tried to read but couldn’t concentrate, changed my clothes a few times, put on a Nina Simone record and then turned it off, stood in front of the bathroom mirror criticising my body, and finally made up a bed on the couch and sought out sleep.

The next morning you left home earlier than usual. I heard you leave but pretended to be asleep. I made coffee and tried to write but couldn’t. Not long afterwards I heard a loud thud, like the sound of a wet towel flung against a hard surface. On the other side of the balcony door was a small bird, a little bigger than a sparrow, lying dead on the balcony floor. I opened the door and bundled the little creature into my hands. The glass wasn’t very thick and it didn’t make sense that it could have died on impact like that. I took it over to one of the neglected pot plants on our balcony and buried it. The death of that little bird really unsettled me. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I too was flying towards an illusion, destined to hit a glass wall. That was when the tears started.
20. Feel all at ~ Ἀνακατωσούρα

I had to get out of the house so I went to see Maria. Making friends is sometimes like falling in love, only better, because there is less anxiety about it. It’s so much easier than romantic love, and yet there is still a wonderful intensity and excitement about it. It was like that when I met Maria. From our first meeting we spoke every day and met in person at least four times a week.

‘I think men love differently than women,’ I said, the moment Maria opened the door that day.

‘Come in honey, tell me everything,’ she replied.

‘Why do they get to be so confident?’ I whined.

‘Men? Oh honey, you are asking the wrong questions. But why don’t you pour us each a drink and I will bring out some olives.’

‘What are the right questions then?’ I asked.

‘Well, to begin with, there is no point in trying to understand men. Or trying to imitate them.’

‘I am so sick of being a woman. I wish I was a man.’

Maria laughed, her fantastic German laugh and reached for her cigarettes.

‘Maybe you are homesick?’

‘For Australia?’

‘Yes, why not?’

‘I guess so.’

‘You don’t wish you were a man—you just wish you didn’t feel so vulnerable.’

‘Sometimes Dimitris still pats me on the head as if I am not the serious intellectual that he is,’ I said.
'I never talk to Carlos about my work. Never.’

‘You know, he’s like a different person since…’ My voice trailed off. I didn’t know how to put it, even to Maria.

‘Oh honey, no one is themselves right now.’

21. Board ~ Ακτή

I wanted to cook for you for a change. To make a reconciliatory dinner, so on the way home I stopped at a corner store where I bought some groceries and a bottle of retsina to drink with our food. When I got home you weren’t there. I waited for hours. Seated, like a cliché, at our kitchen table with dinner on the stove and candles lit, making my way through the bottle of strong fortified wine. The fabric of my dress was itchy and the lining was a little too tight at the waist. I was overdressed and desperate. Eventually I stumbled to bed, too drunk to worry about you any more.

I was still passed out when you finally came home. You came in and turned the light on, which woke me. I was still fully clothed.

‘I thought you might be here fucking some other guy,’ you said, walking out of the room and leaving the light on. Moments later the sound of one of your records blared from the lounge room.

You screamed, ‘Aggie, come here!’ walking into the bedroom and dragging me by the arm into the lounge room. I felt disorientated and had a headache from all the wine. I just wanted to be left alone to sleep.

‘Wake up! I want to dance with you,’ you said, pouring tsiporo into a glass.

‘For God’s sake, Dimitris, what has gotten into you? Where have you been? What time is it?’
I sat on the couch watching you dance around; you stopped only to throw back more alcohol.

‘I am going back to bed,’ I said.

You didn’t say anything.

This time it was you who slept on the couch.

22. Dog ~ Θαλασσόλικος

I had had a terrible day and on top of that it was close to the deadline for the anthology and I was anxious about what I had written. When you arrived home I was in bed, close to tears.

‘What’s wrong?’ you asked, worried. I burst into tears and began to cry so hard that I could barely breathe.

‘Did something happen? For God’s sake, should I be worried? Has someone hurt you?’

I kept trying to speak but my breathing was still too irregular.

‘I think that all of my ideas are stupid,’ I said finally.

‘Oh Jesus, is that all?’ you said, getting up from the bed and walking over to the wardrobe to change.

‘What do you mean, is that all?’

‘Why would you think such a thing about yourself?’

‘Don’t you ever think that your ideas are stupid?’

‘Never. I am telling you, it’s that fucking Anglo upbringing of yours. I am serious, Aggie, you think too much.’

‘I hate it when people say that. I have a brain, so I think.’

‘You have to learn how to stop,’ you said.
‘Now shut up and listen,’ I said, adjusting the sheet around my waist and propping myself up to look you in the eye.

‘This is serious. I am having trouble finishing the story for Spyros’s anthology.’

‘Okay. And?’

‘I want it to be good. I want it to be original.’

‘Don’t be silly, Aggie, originality was such a modernist pursuit. We’re beyond that now. Modernism is dying. You better catch up.’

‘Oh, come off it. What’s next then?’

‘Revolution!’

‘And sometimes I am afraid that you will leave me,’ I said, changing the subject. ‘Do you even still love me?’ I asked.

‘Oh, come on, don’t start that now. Do you want me to tell you everything is going to be fine? Well, I can’t. You’re not the only one afraid, Aggie. Some people have something really serious to be afraid of. You don’t know how lucky you are.’

I grabbed the sheet and pulled it over my head, curling up on the bed in a foetal position. I wanted to hide from you but there was nowhere to go.

‘But I do love you, Aggie May,’ you said.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

23. **Front ~ Προβλήτα**

That weekend we borrowed a friend’s car and drove out of Athens, for my birthday. I was relieved that we would have some time away from everything and hoped we could finally talk about how awful the last few weeks had been. There was a little
village a few hours out of Athens where our friends had a house. They had given us
the keys and told us we could stay as long as we liked.

You placed your hand on my thigh as you drove and I felt happier than I had
felt since before the coup. I drank in the olive-green, dusty landscape. When we got
just outside the city I noticed a roadblock ahead. You slowed down in approach and a
young soldier waved us to the side of the road and asked for our identification papers.
He asked where we were going and why, which made you angry.

‘What difference does it make where we are going?’ you replied.
The officer had a Peloponnesian accent and you began teasing him that people from the
Peloponnesian were good at following orders. You used a precise combination of insult
and humour, so that he wasn’t quite sure if you were complimenting him or not. It
made me nervous, and my stomach churned.

The young officer made a performance out of his authority. He took your
identity card and my passport and kept them for far longer than seemed necessary. At
one stage he held your identity card up to the light, as if to check if it was fake.

Over forty minutes later I began to worry you would lose your temper. You
could barely sit still and were smoking one cigarette after the next, literally putting
out one, and lighting another.

Finally he wandered back to our car and waved us through. In the meantime a
row of cars had banked up behind us.

‘What a little fucker,’ you fumed as we drove away.

I reached out and placed my hand at the scruff of your neck to calm you.

‘We should still be there before dark,’ I said.

‘I did my military service with guys just like that. They get such a fucking
hard-on for even a scrap of power. Could you hear his accent? He’s just a village boy
with a big job in the city now … it makes me so angry. I wanted to kick that fucking hick in the teeth,’ you said frowning.

I put my feet up on the dashboard and stared out the window.

24. Girt – περιβρέχομενος απο θάλασσα

The night you were arrested we’d had Carlos and Maria over for dinner. While you were cooking Maria and I sat outside on the balcony smoking.

‘How was your weekend away?’ Maria asked me.

‘It was great, Maz, things felt almost normal there.’

‘And did you discuss what you will do?’ Maria asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, will you stay in Athens? Ainslie, everyone’s trying to get out now. There have been so many arrests already. Police are picking up people for almost no reason at all.’

‘I don’t know…I haven’t really thought about it,’ I said, dying to change the subject. I hadn’t considered leaving for even a moment. I was determined to make Athens my home.

‘Carlos and I are have decided to go to Germany.’

‘What? When?’

‘You won’t believe this, but the same day as the coup I found out I was pregnant.’

I was devastated but trying hard to hide it.

‘Oh, that’s wonderful news! I know you both really wanted this. I am so happy for you.’

‘Are you crying?’
'Jesus Christ, Maz, I am so sorry. I am really happy for you—it’s just that I don’t know what I’ll do without a friend like you here.'

As usual you drank too much and when our friends left, just before curfew, you went on and on about all the people leaving who were getting out of Greece. It worried you, because it meant that things were as serious as they seemed.

The buzzer sounded and we assumed it was Carlos and Maria returning for something.

'Πες μου. Tell me.'

'Security Police,' came the unexpected reply.

'Shit, Aggie, hide the dope,' you said, buzzing them in. You looked scared; I had never seen you like that before.

I raced into the bedroom and grabbed your tin. I didn’t know what to do with it, so I put it down my underpants. They weren’t looking for dope. They were coming for you and we both knew it. As I emerged from the bathroom, three men in uniform came through the door.

'Identification papers please,' the first one asked.

You reached into your back pocket and I went to our bedroom for my passport. But they didn’t seem interested in me—it was as if I wasn’t even there. I held onto my passport and listened closely to what they said. My Greek wasn’t strong enough to understand everything.

'We are here under orders to search your apartment,' the main officer said to you. 'Do you agree?'

'Do I have a choice?' you asked.

'We can do this the easy way or the hard way,' he replied.

'Do you have a warrant?'
‘Like I said, we can do this the easy way or the hard way.’

It happened so quickly. They swarmed through our apartment, inspecting every piece of furniture, upturning every drawer and removing all the clothes from our closet, turning out every pocket as they went. They went through our books, shaking them in case anything was hidden inside them, and scattered all my papers over the floor. They tapped on the walls and the floor and even broke up the ice in the refrigerator. They opened up pillows, and went through the bin beside the toilet where we put our used toilet paper. The trio went through everything as if robbers searching for gold. They seized books, records, photographs, my journals and my typewriter.

‘Make sure you get the thick books, lads. Every thick book is a Communist one,’ yelled the one in charge from the bedroom.

‘Why have you got so many books?’ the chubby one asked you.

‘I don’t know how to answer that question,’ you said.

After they were done searching you were told you had to go with them to the station. They made no attempt to clean anything up, leaving our apartment in complete chaos.

‘Can I at least give her a kiss?’ you asked.

‘Quickly.’

You pulled me close to you and kissed me on the lips. ‘Call Carlos,’ you whispered. ‘And don’t worry. Everything will be fine.’

They marched you out the door and I watched as they shoved you in to the lift. I closed the door and vomited on the floor from the shock. I tried the telephone but the line was dead. I pulled the whisky out from our liquor cabinet and took three or four shots in a row. I wanted to drink myself numb. The tap continued to drip. I drank and drank from that bottle as if it were my mother’s teat.
If I was at sea before you were arrested then afterwards I was drowning. I have never been so scared in my life. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t think. I just lay on the parquet floor stunned, and exhausted. I left everything in a mess and collapsed into bed. I was so angry with them for taking you. The next few days I had recurring dreams where I would I murdered someone and I kept dreaming that I missed a train. I tried to call Carlos but the phone was still dead. I tried to call home, too, to let them know I was okay but the few times I rang there was no answer. I spent more money than I could afford to send a telegram. Three days after your arrest you still hadn’t returned and I was worried. I had heard that the families of some detainees would visit them with food and clean clothing. When I could no longer stand it I went to the Special Interrogation Section of the Military Police, where they were keeping people like you who were arrested on suspicion of anti-government sentiments. I lined up to see you. I waited for hours. Finally I was led into a small room where there were three men in uniform drinking coffee. I stood near the door waiting for them to acknowledge me. Finally one of them turned to me.

‘You asked to speak to Dimitris Kouvelis.’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s your relationship to him?’

‘He’s my brother,’ I lied.

‘Your brother? Then why do you have an English accent?’

‘It’s Australian. I grew up in Australia.’

‘Take a seat, we’ll see what we can do.’

Eventually you were brought in and I rushed over to you and wrapped my arms around your neck.
‘I told them you are my brother,’ I whispered into your ear. You didn’t say a word and just stared directly ahead of you at the wall.

What had I done? My only consolation was that you were still alive.

26. Shore ~ παραλία

That evening, while Maria was visiting the buzzer sounded. I was telling her about the stupid lie I had told to see you.

‘Nat? Yes?’

‘Security Police.’

‘Jesus, Maria, it’s the police!’

‘Don’t panic, honey, it’s going to be okay,’ she said, getting up and coming to my side.

‘I’m scared.’

‘Of course you are. But don’t panic.’

They kept it short this time.

‘We’d like you to come with us to the station. We have a few questions for you.’

‘Hang on a moment,’ I said.

Maria took the shawl from her own shoulders and wrapped it around me, kissing me on the cheek.

‘I’ll lock everything up here and I’ll speak to you soon,’ she said. She pressed her fingers into the flesh of my arms and her eyes told me again not to panic. I forced a smile and followed the men out the door.

A black car was waiting for us at the entrance to the apartment block. There was a distinct feeling of menace about the whole thing. We all knew that what they
were doing was illegal: they were arresting people without sufficient justification. Under martial law it was perfectly sanctioned. They were like kids in a lollyshop. There was a demented excitement to their manner. Meanwhile, I was sick with terror but I sat up tall, pretending to be brave as I tried to hide the chattering of my teeth.

At the station my name, date of birth, address and occupation were all recorded by a chain-smoking secretary with a cardigan draped over her shoulders and a Brigitte Bardot bob. I was told I must hand in my keys, wallet, watch, jewellery, shawl, and even my glasses, which I explained I needed for long vision. Without my glasses, I felt handicapped. She escorted me to a room on the second floor. She opened the door and pushed me inside, like a child sent to the principal’s office.

27. Gull – Γλάρος

My interrogator was a handsome man with short greying hair. He sat behind a small desk smoking a cigarette and speaking rapidly into the telephone; his desk was a sea of papers and empty coffee cups. Behind him were piles of papers waiting to be filed and on the desk in front of him were a blank notebook and a stinking ashtray that needed emptying. In his chubby hands he held a biro, which he tapped rhythmically against the palm of his left hand. He motioned to me to take a seat on the dark green vinyl chair opposite him and obediently I took my place. The room was small and the paint on the pale blue walls was peeling away at the ceiling, revealing concrete below. In the corner, a large fan blew hot air loudly around the room. There was a framed portrait of Papadopoulos, and a map of Greece hanging on the wall behind him—beneath a wall-clock with a loud tick. I wondered how many portraits of the General had been framed since the coup. Hundreds? Thousands?

Finally he hung up the phone and focused his attention on me.
'So, Ainslie is it? You speak Greek, is that right?’ He pronounced my name *Enslie*, with a sharp ‘e’.

‘A little, but I’d prefer if we spoke in English, if it’s okay.’

‘Your parents are both Greek, correct?’ he asked in English.

‘Yes.’

‘But Enslie is not a Greek name,’ he said.

‘No, it’s Scottish. I think there’s been a mistake. I’m not sure why I have been brought here.’

‘We’ll come to that in a moment. If you could please begin by stating your full name and date of birth.’

‘I already gave my details to the woman downstairs,’ I said.

‘Yes, but I am asking you to give them to me. Is that a problem?’

‘My name is Ainslie Poulos. My date of birth is the tenth of July, 1946.’

As well as my name he asked for my occupation and address, and the details of both my parents in Australia. All of which he recorded in small concise script onto a fresh pad of paper in front of him. Despite his concentration he had to start over a number of times. The smallest error would have him tear the sheet off his pad, scrunch the paper into a ball, and throw it onto the floor.

‘Let’s start again, shall we? Your full name?’ I couldn’t tell if he was toying with me or if he was a complete imbecile. After several false starts and a mound of discarded paper he came directly to the point.

‘We know what you’ve been up to.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Don’t play games with me, my dear.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ I replied.
'You are a journalist, no?’ he persisted.

‘No. I studied journalism but I don’t practice it,’ I replied.

‘And you didn’t come here for work?’

‘No, I came here for a holiday, and to visit family.’

‘You’re lying,’ he yelled. ‘Do you know what we do to liars here? Don’t think that just because you hold a foreign passport that you are safe. Don’t think that you can’t just disappear.’ This time he addressed me in Greek. He got up from his desk and walked behind me. He smelt like stale tobacco. He brought his face close to mine and licked the side of my face.

‘You’re a lying cunt and I am going to see to it you are punished,’ he said, before spitting into a metal bin and leaving the room, slamming the door behind him.

A few minutes later he returned.

‘Now look here, it’s no trivial matter what you’ve been up to. We know everything. Unless you own up I cannot guarantee your protection.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking about—I haven’t been up to anything,’ I said.

He slapped me hard across the face.

‘What do you know about the Patriotic Front?’

‘Nothing.’

He yanked my hair back so that my face was parallel to the ceiling.

‘You know, I can be lenient if I want to. But if you continue to play it like this you are going to have a very difficult time here.’ He let go of my hair and resumed his place behind the desk. His voice was calm again.

‘Here in Greece we have right people and wrong people. You really have become mixed up with the wrong people, Enslie.’ I could hear him breathing through
his mouth, and the slow tick of the old wall clock. Finally, the door opened and it was
time for a break. A young officer whom I hadn’t seen before escorted me out of the
room.

It’s strange because when I think back to that time it feels very silent, but I
know it wasn’t. I know I heard people screaming but it’s as if I couldn’t hear it. What
I do remember hearing was the squeak of the young man’s perfectly polished shoes
on the linoleum floor.

28. Manship ~ Ναυτική τέχνη
The cell I was put into was tiny and I was to share it with three other women. It was
empty, without bed, chair, toilet or basin. The floor was uneven and cracked in parts.
It stank. The waste from the toilet outside seemed to have overflowed and was
seeping into our cell. There was no light and almost no air. To say I felt
claustrophobic would be to understate it. I sat on the filthy wet cement floor and
hugged my knees. I was so tired I felt that I might actually manage to sleep, if it
weren’t for the cold. As I sat there I tried to imagine myself at the sea. Somewhere
full of fresh air, warm sunlight and glistening water.

I thought about my family, and the day that I left for Greece. My father had
written his sister’s address and telephone number on the back of an envelope with a
few hundred US dollars in it for me. ‘Don’t tell your mother,’ he whispered. Most of
his family still lived in the small village in Crete where he had grown up before taking
the boat—in the opposite direction than I would be taking—to Australia.

Crete remained the island of my father’s yearnings. He constantly reminded us
of its significance not only for Greece, but for the world. After all, he liked to gloat, as
my mother rolled her hazel eyes, it was the place Zeus was born. My mother’s family
was from Sparta, which he liked to add explained why she was so tough. She was a nuggety little woman with a naturally severe expression despite being very soft under it all. She knew what she wanted and was in the habit of getting it. I learned from a very young age not to contradict my mother.

On the day of my departure we all piled into the car and drove to Circular Quay, which was a big deal because my father loved that car more than he loved anything else he owned. He endlessly tended to it, and rarely took it into the city for fear of it getting scratched or stolen.

‘Ελευθέρα Ainslie, quickly or we’ll be late,’ my mother screamed from the driveway, as I made some last minute changes to my luggage.

That day my father wore a suit and drove 10 kilometres below the speed limit.

‘You drive like an old woman, Alexis,’ my mother scolded him. My brother and I shook our heads in the back seat. We knew that he drove slowly for her, because she hated cars and traffic; they put her nerves on edge. I knew it must have been one of my mother’s fierce looks that ensured my brother came to see me off; he was shy and hated goodbyes. My father was holding back tears when he hugged me goodbye. My mother slapped him affectionately for being so soft.

I walked up the stairs of the ship with a lump in my throat and on the brink of tears. There I was in my brand new dress with matching gloves, free to be anyone I wanted. Yet somehow I was scared. A few weeks before the voyage I had begun to have the most unsettling feeling that something terrible would happen to me on the trip. I thought if I didn’t die on the boat something bad would happen to me in Greece. Maybe this was it. Maybe I would die here after all.
29. Man ~ Ναύτης

Eventually I was returned to the interrogation floor, this time to the man who made my arrest. I thought his name was Spanos but I heard him addressed by at least three different names while I was there. I later learned that they each swapped names as a tactic to discredit witness statements should anyone testify against them later.

‘Come in,’ Spanos ordered. ‘Take a seat.’

His office was almost identical to the last room I was held in except there was a single bed in the room, like a hospital bed.

‘I believe that you met with Giorgos yesterday. Let me tell you from the outset that I am not as nice as he is. He has a different method to me, you see. I prefer to be a little more, how shall we say, scientific?’

I said nothing.

He opened a folder containing dozens of photographs and passed them to me.

‘Do you know any of these people?’

‘No, I have never seen any of them,’ I said.

‘They say they know you.’

‘That’s impossible,’ I replied.

‘Do you know what I am referring to when I say that I prefer the scientific method?’

30. Monster ~ Κήτος

The next morning I was sent back to Giorgos, the storyteller.

He said, ‘I hear you spent some time with Spanos last night. Well, you’ve been sent back to me, so I can only guess that you are still not cooperating.’ He swiveled in his chair and looked up at the ceiling before looking directly at me.
‘Do you know that once, not even that long ago, Greece didn’t have potatoes, Enslie? He began. I shook my head and stared at the ground.

‘It’s hard to believe, isn’t it? These days Greeks use potatoes in so many dishes. We bake them, boil them, fry them...I am sure you have eaten many delicious potatoes since you have been in Greece. Am I right? But it was one man who was responsible for the production of potatoes in Greece. His name was Ioannis Kapodistrias and he was the first head of state following the Turkish occupation. Our first leader after the revolution. When Greeks first saw a potato they were not interested in eating them. They were covered in soil and they looked dirty. Well, Kapodistrias, being a very intelligent man, understood the mentality of the Greek. So he had a shipment of potatoes unloaded publicly and placed into a big barn under armed guard. Seeing the potatoes so carefully guarded people began to believe that they must be very valuable and gradually they began to steal them. This of course was all part of Kapodistrias’s genius plan. He had already instructed the guards to allow whoever came to steal the potatoes to take them freely, and to pretend not to notice them. You see, Enslie? Leadership is about understanding the mentality of the people. Papadopoulos understands that Greece is like a sick patient that needs to be bandaged and cared for. At the moment only a few people understand the value of what we are doing. But one day, Enslie, everyone will recognise the work we are doing now, and just as they now look back on Kapodistrias as a modernising figure, they will remember us for saving Greece from disaster, from the Communists and the degenerates. History will be our judge, Enslie, you’ll see. It’s amazing, no? The potatoes? I bet you think I am joking with you, but I am not. I am serious. Before then there were no potatoes. Aren’t you going to say anything?’

I shook my head again.
‘That’s okay, Enslie. We have plenty of time. In fact, I have something I’d like to show you.’ He pressed on the intercom beside the telephone.

Moments later the young man I met the day before entered the room with a large cardboard box. Giorgos took the box from the boy and from it he retrieved dozens of my journals and began to flick through them. I could see that someone had been through them already and bookmarked pages.

‘Do you read the papers, Enslie?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Do you know what the Ta Nea said about the collection of short stories you were published in?’

‘No,’ I lied.

‘Let me read it to you,’ he said, and out of the mess of papers he lifted a newspaper clipping.

‘They said, and I quote, “This collection of short stories is a striking indictment against conservatives everywhere; it is a call to change.”’

I said nothing.

‘A striking indictment!’ Giorgos repeated. ‘They’re strong words, wouldn’t you say?’

‘They are not my words,’ I said.

‘They are not your words,’ he parroted.

Giorgos stubbed out his cigarette and sighed heavily.

‘Surely I don’t have to explain to an educated woman like yourself how fragile a new government like ours is. Papadopoulos is trying to bring change to Greece. Important change. He is a revolutionary! We cannot afford for a common communist
like you to interfere with these changes. And that, my dear, is why you are here. That’s why all of you are here.’

He thumped his hand down on to the table, berating me like a child. Then he abruptly changed the subject.

‘What’s it like being a writer?’ he asked, in all earnestness. But before I could answer he was off again. ‘You know, it’s funny, I always thought that one day I would write a novel.’

I smiled meekly as he continued.

‘If I hadn’t stayed in the army, who knows, I might have gone abroad and studied. The Generals liked me though, you see? They saw promise in me—but then I was that kind of kid. They would have recognised my promise even in a cooking school,’ he laughed. There was only one window in his office and it was up high, so I couldn’t see outside. The overhead fan blew hot claustrophobic air around the room. I craved a shower and some clean clothes.

‘Do you like to cook, Enslie? My wife does all the cooking in our house, of course. But to tell you the truth I make one or two dishes better than she does.’

His banal stories were stifling.

‘Are you crying?’ he asked.

‘I want to go home and take a shower,’ I said, of all things.

‘You’re crying because you want a bath?’

He sighed and picked up the phone.

‘Δέλει να κάνει μπάνιο. She wants a bath,’ he said to someone on the other end.
‘The thing is, Enslie, you should know that we Greeks don’t like tears. They may elicit sympathy where you are from, but here they will not. If you are sick of this, why not simply confess?’

He lit another cigarette and looked at me like I was a curiosity in a museum.

There was a knock at the door and woman dressed in a nurse’s tunic entered.

‘Mrs Poulos?’

I nodded.

‘Come with me, please.’

She took me to an empty concrete room. Placed on a metal stool was a bucket of water, a bar of soap and a sea sponge. The water was freezing cold and there was barely enough in it to get wet.

‘Ευχαριστώ πολύ, Thank you very much,’ I said, emphatically.

She glared at me like Medusa and I felt myself turn to stone. She closed the door and locked it from the outside.

Beginning with my face, I bathed as best I could with what I had. I washed under my arms, between my legs and with the remaining water I cleaned my grubby feet. Then I got back into my dirty clothes. Without knocking, Medusa opened the door and took me back to my interrogator.

‘Feel any better?’ he asked.

‘A little.’

‘You see how kind I am to you?’ he said. ‘You know, I could get in a lot of trouble for giving you such soft treatment. What are you going to give to me now?’

‘I’d like to speak to someone from my embassy.’

He smiled.
‘What’s the English expression? Give them an inch and they take a mile? One thing at a time, okay, Enslie? We Greeks have a way of doing things.’ He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair.

‘You should be grateful I let you take a bath. Have you changed your mind yet? Are you ready to cooperate? I told you that if you were good that things in here could be much better for you. I could have you moved to a cell with a bed. But I can’t promise anything if you don’t cooperate. I am being pressured from above to make progress with you. So, what do you say?’

I didn’t say a word. He lost his temper and threw me onto the ground.

‘Πέτα τή απ’ τό παράθυρο; καρφί δέν μού καίγεται! Throw her out the window for all I care!’ he said to one of the officers as he stormed out of the room.

A while later he burst back through the door. He had calmed down.

‘Now, where was I?’ he began, running his hand through his greasy hair. ‘Oh yes, I was telling you about how when I was young I was singled out by the army as having great potential. Potential is something I have always had a lot of, which is how I got to where I am today. Not like my brother. He is twenty-seven and still unmarried. Our mother dotes on him, but there comes a time when she won’t be able to anymore, if you see what I am saying.’

I nodded, sweeping a piece of damp hair behind my ear, desperately wishing to get away from him.

The telephone rang, interrupting his monologue for a moment.

‘So then, let’s get back to it, shall we?’

I shifted in my seat, looking right past him to the portrait of Papadopoulos. I wondered what it must be like for his wife and family to live with such a man.
‘During my military service I served in the navy. I was based on one of the islands, on Poros. Have you been? It really is very beautiful—like all the islands here in Greece. Anyway, we were stationed on the island and then we would go out to sea for training.’

He paused. ‘Have you ever noticed how many cats there are in Greece?’

I didn’t reply, but he was content to continue.

‘So, do you?’

‘Do I what?’

‘Know why there are so many cats?’ he asked.

I shook my head.

‘It makes sense when you think about it. You see, seamen like to have cats around to keep away the rats. And, as you know, there are many fishermen in Greece! Actually, it is not just the fishermen who use cats. We would use them on the naval ships also. When I was in my first year in the navy there was a cat on our boat that I liked very much. She was white but with the most unusual aqua eyes. They were bright and clear like jewels. I named her Dimitra. I don’t know why, exactly—who can say why we do the things that we do? She was a funny little thing. She had the temperament of a stray even though she was fed well by those of us who liked cats. Still, she didn’t trust anyone and she was not at all sentimental. She never let anyone get close enough to touch her. If she was sleeping, the slightest movement would make her eyelids roll open.

‘It was so strange. She was on the ship with me for months and never paid me any attention. Then, all of a sudden she took a liking to me. I couldn’t work out what triggered it. But she took to sleeping in my room and later at the end of my bed. I’d get to my quarters at night and she would be waiting at my door. Or she would slip in
as I was opening the door. She had a purr louder than a jackhammer. She was really something. Do you know what happened to that cat, Enslie? My fellow officers got hold of her one afternoon when I was on duty, and they drowned her. They left her wet dead body under the covers of my bed. Do you know what I learned from that lesson? I learned about jealousy. They were jealous of me, and when a man is jealous of another he will punish them. Which reminds me of a joke my father used to tell. Let me tell it to you:

_A man is visited by an angel, who offers him a wish._

_“I don’t mean to be ungrateful,” says the man, “but what is the catch?”_

_The angel looks confused._

_“There is no catch”, he replies. “You can have one wish, anything you like.”_

_But the man doesn’t believe him._

_“Come on, there must be a catch,” he says._

_It goes on like this for a while, the man insisting there must be a catch and the angel insisting there isn’t, until finally the angel says, “Okay, listen, you can have anything you like, but whatever you ask for, your neighbour will receive double.”_

_The man points to his left eye and says, “See this eye? Take it out.”_
31. Sick ~ Navría

Giorgos busied himself moving papers around his desk. He barely spoke that morning. Then all of a sudden he sprung up, his exuberance back.

‘Do you like Fats Waller?’ he asked. ‘For a black he is actually pretty good. I love American music,’ he admitted. ‘I bet that surprises you.’

He pulled a record out of his briefcase.

‘In the army we didn’t have record players but there was one guy called Yanni who was clever at making things. He spent weeks making a record player out of found materials. The sound wasn’t fantastic, but it worked. And we would smuggle records onto the boat. Technology is amazing, isn’t it? To think that grooves on a piece of plastic can make music,’ he exclaimed.

He placed the record on the turntable and adjusted the levels.

‘You’ve been reading my mail…’ he sang along, and did a little dance.

‘Dance with me!’ he said.

He pulled me from my seat and pushed me up against him. I was like a floppy toy in his arms. He moved me this way and that, like a cat with a half-dead bird. He smelt of tobacco and his body odor had a sourness to it. There was a fresh stain on his shirt from his lunch.

The music came to a stop but he still held me in his arms. He pulled me closer and his breathing got heavier. I tried to pull away from him. Then he placed his head on my shoulder tenderly. I did everything I could not to recoil.

‘Today we have a visitor coming,’ he said, stroking my face and gazing at me lovingly for a moment, before breaking free and returning to his desk.

‘You should know that I love women Enslie. Even though most of them cannot be trusted … I love them. The thing you have to know about me is that I am
proud of being Greek. Greece is the best country in the world. There is no doubt about it. The best country. And being Greek means that I have an obligation to our heritage. We are the birthplace of civilization, for God’s sake. People are stupid. You have to know this. No, really, we are not all equal. That’s the trouble with you communists. You give people more credit than they deserve. We are living in dangerous times…”

32. Sickness ~ Ναυτία

The door opened and two officers entered. I thought I recognised one of them from the night of your arrest. He was the chubby one who asked why we had so many books. I noticed he frowned at Giorgos.

‘English, right?’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘Αλλά μιλάς Ελληνικά? But you speak Greek?’

‘Λίγο. A little,’ I replied.

‘She speaks a little!’ he said to the other men.

‘So which is it, pretty girl—are you Greek or not?’ he laughed. He walked over to me and took my chin in his hand.

‘You look so pretty I could just eat you up. But you stink. I can smell your filthy communist cunt from here. It smells worse than a dead rat.’

The two men laughed.

I sat as still as I could and kept my gaze on the floor.

‘What do you know about the Patriotic Front?’ the other officer asked me.

‘Nothing,’ I replied.

‘We don’t believe you.’ He said.

‘We know that you work as a courier distributing anti-government leaflets.’
‘Isn’t that right? I bet while your boyfriend was locked up you fucked as many men as you could. Isn’t that right, you filthy whore? I bet you’d enjoy it if we all fucked you now, wouldn’t you? Tell me, do you like it rough? I bet you do. Would you like it if I tied you up and came in your mouth? How about I stick my cock in so far I make you puke?’

‘That’s enough, Vassilis,’ Giorgos said.

Vassilis glared at his colleague. ‘Can I speak to you outside, please, General?’

He and Giorgos left the room.

The one remaining stared at my breasts and I adjusted the collar of my dress.

The door opened and the two men returned, taking their places opposite me.

Giorgos remained silent as Vassilis continued.

‘What brought you to Greece?’

‘I came to visit family.’

‘Whereabouts?’

‘My father’s family is from Crete.’

‘Which part of Crete?’

‘From a village near Chania.’

‘And have you been there yet?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Were you alone when you went there?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Did you travel alone when you went to Crete?’

‘I have been twice. Once alone and once with Dimitris.’

He leafed through my file.

‘What did you do there when you went with Dimitris?’
‘We visited my family.’

‘You’re lying, aren’t you?’

‘No, I am not.’

‘I don’t think you went to Crete to visit family at all. I think you went to see some members of the Patriotic Front.’

‘We went for a holiday, and to see my family.’

‘So why have they told me otherwise?’

‘I’d like to speak to someone from my embassy please.’

‘Oh, so now you wish to play the foreigner card? Is that it? You want to be Australian now, do you?’

I stared at the floor.

‘Do you? Can’t say I blame you. It’s typical of a communist like you to have no courage. You want to run to the skirts of your embassy. Anyway, you mean nothing to us. Your so-called boyfriend has already given us everything we need. It didn’t take much for him to sing. That’s the thing about you lefties. You have no backbone. You will see what will happen to him; don’t think that we are finished yet. Come on, boys.’

The two men left, leaving me alone with the storyteller.

33. Side ~ Παραθαλάσσιος

Just as suddenly as I had been arrested, I was released. An officer I hadn’t seen before came to my cell.

‘Πάμε. Let’s go,’ he said.

‘What about Dimitris?’ I asked in English.

‘I don’t know anything about Dimitris, but you are free to go.’
'And my notebooks?' I enquired.

'Just you,' he said.

There I was standing outside in the soft autumn light as if the last few days were only a dream. I didn’t have enough money with me for a taxi, so I set out for home on foot. I arrived at our apartment block close to an hour later and took the elevator up to the fourth floor. I let myself into our apartment and opened the curtains and the verandah door, collapsing on to the couch. The flat smelled terrible. The refrigerator door had been left slightly ajar and there was water all over the linoleum floor. I poured a drink and switched on the power to heat the water. Even though I knew that nothing like that would happen to me again— that my foreign passport had protected me— I was too scared to remain in Athens alone. I was finally ready to leave Greece, and I wanted to go as quickly as possible.

34. Worthiness ~ Πλοϊμότης

The next morning I cleaned the house and calmly packed up my things. I swept and mopped the floor, aired the flat, put out the rubbish and emptied the fridge, as if we were going away on vacation. I left my parents’ address and telephone number on the bench, along with a short note for you. I slipped my keys through the gap under the door and hailed a taxi on the street.

'Πάω στόν Πειραιά. I am going to Piraeus,' I said to the driver. And just like that I took off for the main port of Athens, where I boarded a boat to Venice. I would wait there before returning home in case I heard from you.
35. Worthy ~ Πλόμος

Once I left Athens everything was fixed in my mind in terms of befores and afters. Everything became before or after Greece; before or after the coup; before or after you were arrested, and I fled; before or after chaos; before or after you.

This kind of thinking became the referent for the rest of my life without you. I waited and waited in Venice, until it was finally time to give up and go home; to continue on with my life. For a long time I hoped you would turn up on my doorstep in Sydney. But by the time the coup finally collapsed in 1974 I was already married and pregnant with my first child. By then it was too late.

The horrible truth of it is that by then I had killed you off in my imagination in order to be with someone else. Isn’t that what we do to all our ex-lovers, kill them off? It is enough to say that I was happy, but that I never forgot you. I never forgot those months together in Greece, and I always longed to return to you—no matter that it was impossible.

36. Weed ~ Φύκια

On one of those nights before you were arrested, when we were still together and I believed there would be endless nights like it ahead, I was lying beside you, stroking your hair.

‘Tell me a story,’ you said.

‘What kind of story?’

‘Any, just pick one and tell it to me.’

‘How about a nursery rhyme?’

‘Tell me.’
‘A sailor went to sea, sea, sea. To see what he could see, see, see. But all that he could see, see, see was the bottom of the deep blue sea, sea, sea…’ I recited.

‘Is that it?’

‘Yup, that’s it.’

‘Tell it to me again?’ you asked.
Once, in a story
Once, in a story, I made you laugh.

Once, in a story, you told me you loved me. Once, in a story, you held my hand and led me to a forest where you had laid out a picnic on a tartan rug. Once, in a story, we made love. Once, in a story, I read aloud to you. Once, in a story, you made me tea. Once, in a story, I missed you.

Once, in a story, I sang to you.

_A song._

In a story, once.