VOLUME I: CREATIVE PROJECT

Enough

A novel submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the candidate 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; and any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

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Enough
Jeremy (1991) SATURDAY

They are playing the danger game.

Jeremy sits on the scarred wood of the chair in the kitchen and watches the dreamy doze of his father across the room. That afternoon Mrs Daly had visited at home and drank tea out of a dusty cup. She had told the Reillys that Jeremy had a gift. Louise’s quick eyes had looked around greedily, but it wasn’t a real gift, not like those his parents used to buy on treat day or the sewing box Louise still has from their last birthday. Mrs Daly said he could get a scholarship. Afterwards his parents had argued about it until Jeremy’s father stopped talking about rich men and the money they owed him for his lost job.

Jeremy’s mum heaves his father into the bedroom and his dad’s sobbing quiets. His rasps and sighs sound like the quiet breaths and squelches of the jellyfish Jeremy stood on by mistake last summer. Louise had gathered arms of yellow flowers at the beach and claimed that a man gave them to her. His dad had said they were just filthy old weeds and his mother had told Louise she was a terrific liar.

Last summer is when Lou was held back at school, when his twin sister – his shining, buoyant sister – turned away from Jeremy. She stopped protecting him in the
schoolyard. She joined the calls of ‘faggot’ when he wept. She stopped making up wondrous stories of many-headed monsters defeated by gypsy children and began telling lies instead.

Jeremy doesn’t play the danger game. He lets his body fold in on itself. He keeps his eyes downcast on the fading moulting blooms of the rose carpet.

In the yard, Alice frowns and Louise beams. Alice doesn’t like the game and Lou rarely loses it, but Alice plays just the same. His sisters have eaten dirt and fish food. They have swum into the deepest part of the river, where the current might take them. Lou cut her thigh with the rusted part of a razor. Sometimes Jeremy is the target of the danger game but it is hard for his sisters to think of anything worse than the injuries he already gets at school. Louise needs the game. It makes her eyes shine. She becomes crafty, pragmatic, inventive.

Now she’s yelling in pig Latin at Alice, who’s counting back from ten for the game. ‘Nougheway’. Alice stops at seven.

Jeremy thinks that the danger game has made Lou good at telling lies. Jeremy knows her real life but he is still confused when Louise tells him about events that couldn’t possibly have happened. She may not have done what she claims but it is not unlikely that at some point she will. Her dares are astounding to him. He both believes and does not believe many of the crazy acts she has actually carried out.

Louise says that she invented the game but Jeremy wonders, since the rules are so deadly simple and the rituals so long-standing, if the game invented itself.

Jeremy leans forward towards the book on his knees. He glimpses Alice’s leap from the tree outside. After she lands, Alice touches the raw, soft bark of the trunk and wipes at the blood from her split lip. Louise claps her hands.

‘Why don’t you play, fuckwit?’ Lou calls to him, inside.

Alice says, ‘I’m sick of this.’ and chews at her nails. ‘I wanna go out.’

‘One more turn.’
He moves into the hall to spy, sits on the carpet and rocks. He sees through the grimy window to the darkening sky. The territory of the danger game – the banned, the not allowed, the illegal and the horrifying – frightens him. He wants to go unnoticed. He wants to go down to the station and stand at the pedestrian crossing and watch the people get on and off the trains. He goes into his parents’ room instead.

The curtain at the window is drawn but there is a large wound in it and Jeremy can see the thin outlines of his sisters’ bodies hovering in the night. The room smells of urine and stale bodies. Jeremy’s mother is leaning over the bed, hand resting on her chin. In the bed his father groans and turns.

He says, ‘They tried to sack me before. He goes, “you’re putting in mate, I know you are, but it’s not enough.” And I say to him, “What about the managers who get twice what I do? I seen them sit for two fucking hours on the same chair, talking on the phone with blank bits of paper ahead of them. And he says, “Well, they’ve got a lot of responsibilities.” And I say to him, “And we don’t? And that’s good enough is it?” And he puts his hand on my shoulder like he’s my fucking boyfriend. I told him. I told him, “There’s a union, you know that” and then he gets up and shuts the door quick smart.’

Jeremy’s Mum says: ‘Okay.’

‘Fuckers shut the whole factory down.’

‘I know, Shaun.’

Jeremy sags against the wall. It is his fault. Mrs Daly has upset him. She had looked hard at the piles of bills and the swollen feet of his mother.

His mum takes the bottle out of his father’s hand and murmurs, ‘It’s two years.’

His dad sob the sob of the jellyfish once again and then he’s sick onto the dying roses of the carpet. ‘I’m sorry, Chelsea girl.’

His mother lets the bottle fall to the floor. She doesn’t throw it. She lets gravity take the bottle from her and the wine spills, gleaming before it sinks into the floor. ‘I’ll help clean up.’
‘Married a prize, didn’t you?’ His dad’s voice is thick.

She shifts up onto her knees and folds washing, stacking it on the shelf inside the wardrobe. ‘You’ll drown in your vomit one night.’

Jeremy sees his father’s head hang, the sag of his neck, spit gather in the corner of his mouth. ‘What?’

‘Do you want tea?’

‘Yeah.’ His father turns his face into the pillow, lays his cheek carefully on the pale cotton.

His Mum says, mostly into the wardrobe, ‘I came from nothing and now I’ve got nothing but don’t expect me to be pleased.’

His dad’s sobs become snores while outside Alice is saying in her clear voice, ‘I win the game.’

Jeremy goes outside to warn them, to let them know that his dad will rave to the tired house all night; that this evening is one of those when it is better not to be home. His mother’s face shows nothing. His mother’s love is too taxed.

In the garden Lou tells one of her tremendous, enviable lies. ‘The danger game is not a winning game.’
The bottlebrush tree waved against the flat, scissored streets of the city the morning I woke with Jon. We were not meant to wake together. I had a student teacher coming in to learn the cruelty of fifteen-year-old boys, and last night’s wine hurt in my throat. When I saw Jon’s shoes at the end of the bed, cast big in the light of the morning sun, I put my hand over my mouth in an ugly parody of a silent movie actress.

I met Jon almost a year ago, in one of those fierce, tearing nights at a Collingwood pub, when jugs of beer make you raw and earnest, and you believe everything you say. Jon wore sneakers and tweed pants and was recognisably hopeless. I saw his broad palms and narrow wrists and the book he clutched to his side in soft protection. He put his hand on my back when we walked up Princes Street and then I knew. I was used to being unloved and Jon had a wife, some slow, certain-faced woman I had seen getting out of a car one day, so I could already tell how much fear and distance was breathing between us. I teetered forward, waiting for him to ask me up and he said, ‘Shall we?’ I thought he was brave then, even gallant. I climbed the cramped steps to what he called his studio, which was a tiny peach-coloured room, with a dusty easel and a barred window, and paused in the doorway. There was no bed, just a greying armchair and thin plastic yoga mats laid on the floor.

It was a beginning and there was a blankness in me that was attracted to the pedestrian drama of an affair: the reassuring parameters of its disappointments, the ordinariness of its false starts.

Jon illustrated children’s books. He hated politics, he liked to watch world news, he had read all the great Russian novelists, he usually came before I did and he felt I was reminding him of something he had once lost.
After we had been sleeping together for a few weeks he said, ‘Mary’s an absolute survivor and I admire her for that,’ and I realised he was letting me know that the two of them would also survive me.

We didn’t talk about the future. He spent three months in London with his wife and I tried not to sound pleased when he rang. We played at ordinary domestic rituals. I once made spaghetti but he was running late and ate so quickly that he burned his tongue. I wiped the sauce off his chin as he ran out the door since he was meant to have been watching football with an old friend. He read to me before he left at night. His voice was pleasing: smooth and light. I listened to the rhythms, the catches and pauses in his voice and tried to predict when it would all end. I had feigned emotional immunity for so long it was difficult to recognise an honest feeling. Recently we were losing pleasure in each other’s bodies and pretending not to notice. I was comfort for Jon and he was a distraction, an amiable, easy regret for me. It was an ugly but unabashed exchange, a deal.

We saw each other every week or two, during which there was desire but also terror — I shuffled him out of my flat in the early hours of the morning, looked the other way if I saw people we both knew at Coles, wore secret bruises on my hips with slyness beneath my work clothes — and I had thought I was better equipped for these useless jolts between terror and comfort, than love.

I looked down through the window at one of Australia’s ridiculous native plants, pasted over the lanes and tarmac of Brunswick, shaking in the wind. I fixed my eyes on the shoes. The phone was ringing. Jon’s face was buried in one of his hands, a picture-posed tableau of despair. The crumpled bed-sheet had left tiny red lines, the imprint of a seam, on his arm. His fingers were
lying loose off the side of the bed. My alarm clock glowed sullenly. Quarter-
past seven.

When our evasions were kinder we had joked about finding organisational skills we’d never before summoned. He got home when he said he would, even if it meant doing the maths to establish whether there was time to have sex again before he left, or wiping himself clean with a face cloth in the bathroom so that the sharp smell of me was replaced by the tepid drift of rose-fragranced soap. I joked about watching the clock as he thrust inside me but this was too much: I was meant to accept his circumstances but not parody them, to wish for a different future without actually expressing it.

I picked up the phone, ‘Too early,’ and hoped I hadn’t forgotten an excursion. Silence. My bare feet landed on the splayed back of Anna Karenina. The title page had fallen out and there were small pencil drawings across it: wombats with tea-party paraphernalia looked perkily at a river. Jon’s sketches.

‘Hello.’

An automated voice message, the captured ghost-sound of a person, asked if I would accept the charges.

I knew at almost exactly the same moment she began sobbing. ‘Lou?’

‘Alice. It’s no good. It’s all coming apart.’ I could hear cars hoot and the sway of a train pulling out. I hadn’t seen my sister, who lived in Sydney, in six months since she’d borrowed eight-hundred dollars for drug counselling and had nothing to show for it but her remaining purchases: a store of exotic goods, expensive cheeses and a flimsy metal scooter. She had told me on the phone she went to the chemist every day with her methadone prescription but then she said a lot of things.

‘What’s no good?’ Thick silence on the line. ‘Where are you?’
Jon stirred. Through the gauzy piece of fabric that covered the side window I saw my neighbours in the flats opposite lying on the carpet watching cartoons. Spoons idled in bowls of porridge on their polished wood dining table.

‘I had this dream. Dad was in it. And then on George Street I thought I saw someone.’

‘What?’ If I could see the neighbours, they could probably see me. I was naked, hunched forward off the bed in a crouch poised for combat. Ludicrous. I pulled a corner of the sheet across my breasts and huddled my back against the wall.

‘Come on, this silence is expensive.’ It was becoming hard to remember speaking to Louise without this shapeless fear descending — the dark fog of it settling around me, seeping into my skin and hair.

‘Dad was talking to me, he knew who I was, and he said he had a surprise and that Jeremy was alive in an underground castle and we could visit him. And Dad had this red suit. In the dream.’

I should put the phone down. I could hear the agitation beneath her carefulness.

‘You’re mixing things up with real life.’ Her crying was repetitive, strangely mechanical, unremitting and tinny like those toy dolls engineered to sound like babies that cry when they want to be fed. ‘Who did you see?’ I had a sudden longing, brief and mildly disingenuous, for Louise’s chaos to be mine even though I knew her confusion was also fraudulent, endlessly assumed.

‘Michael. That boy from the school.’ I watched two-degrees removed through the neighbours’ window, as the host for the cartoon channel clutched her stomach and pretended to laugh as behind her, on a smaller screen, a cat
got hit hard on the head with an axe. There were tiny red hearts on her dress. Her teeth were too white.

‘I don’t have time. What do you want?’ I used my teaching voice, clipped and firm. She was going to ask me for money.

‘Michael Grieves. On the street. Going into Chinatown I think it was. They had a TV show on a prison program interviewing this guy that looked a bit like him, too. But that was before.’

All I could remember of my brother’s childhood torturer was vicious scabs on pale knees and the way he moved, thickly, with a gait too awkward to be a proper swagger, the too-big jumble of early adolescence. If Louise saw Michael Grieves, he would be a grown man. I tried to imagine his face but the picture I summoned up was faded like wallpaper in the sun. Michael’s distinguishing features were erased, his outline general, his expression robbed of malice.

‘Sleep it off,’ I said.

‘I’m not high.’ I knew she was. ‘Please don’t be a cunt, Alice.’ I pulled out the phone at the plug.

I switched over the radio. I preferred the incessant list of loss that was the news on Radio National to talkback, which made me despair of people. Jon and I argued once about this. He said, ‘Who are you to judge what’s important for other people to talk about?’ and I said, ‘There’s a war on and this woman is talking about her chickens, her fucking chickens for fuck’s sake and permits for coops in the outer suburbs.’

Jon had always been more expansive, more magnanimous about other people’s lives because he didn’t care what kind of mess they made of them.

In the glare of the sun his eyes were puffy. His mouth drooped down.

I thought of letting him sleep so that the horror, when he got up, would be his own. I sprayed deodorant everywhere, stepped into yesterday’s
skirt and picked up my keys. My bedroom felt like a box; a small cell with a low ceiling. After I packed up my books and papers, I put my hand on Jon’s shoulder and said, ‘Alright.’ He jerked awake.

‘God fuck, what time is it?’

Already he was reaching for his watch, tripping as he grabbed for his pants.

I ran down the stairs fast so that I wouldn’t have to listen to him call his wife.

When I got to work the school was teeming with kids and the sun burned heavily on the playground swings. I taught in a school that had a name. I’d been at a professional development session last year on ‘the gifted child, the learning challenged child’ where fewer integration and special needs staff was repackaged to us as a teaching opportunity. Another teacher, rather matronly and slow moving, had asked if I was from the school with ‘all those commission kids’ as if they were a mutant scientific aberration, a special strain of childhood.

I had grown up in an old-style housing commission place just when the suburb was changing. There was no community I remember belonging to back then, just parents who tended gardens or built new window frames to hide the monolithic, clear structure, the architectural sameness that spelled public housing. I realised recently that my mother’s unerring instinct for the bottom line, as much a habit for her as the red elastic bands she kept round her wrists to tie back her hair, was not caused by being famously poor in a poor suburb but having married a man who had once thought he was meant for greater things. Her realism, her grimly practical thinking, kept shame at bay while my father was inventing things to patent that he swore could make them thousands, or getting beer on tick at the local shop.
I nodded my head to the two brothers who were puffing on cigarettes next to the not-so-temporary mobile classroom that had been erected three years ago, and wished I could join them. The Thomas boys were poor and rude. Ben was a punk and went straight to the principal’s office with each new piercing. He wrote gentle sentences in sloping handwriting and was called a fag by the other kids.

Hamish was fair and battered with bruises. To questions he’d often just hiss ‘Cunt’ and then look slightly surprised at himself. There was nothing like teaching high school to remind you of the pure, determined torture of children. When I started teaching I saw an earnest girl with intricate braids lean over to one of the shy girls who sat next to the door and say, ‘I’m going to set you on fire.’

When I taught history to Ben in year seven he thought the Vietnam War was not worth learning about.

‘Miss,’ he tried to explain to me, ‘it’s not new that everyone’s got bombs. People don’t wanna hear about it. We know. I get to explode people on the computer.’

History was about newness to Ben. He wanted to be astonished by something, to gawk at the wretched bodies of holocaust victims, to see the number of ways human beings could die, to be stilled and open-mouthed at the misery we can inflict on one another.

It was the same for lots of these boys: they hated the state, they loathed the cops and they couldn’t care less what the government was doing, some kind of reciprocal adolescent rightness for the fact that the government wasn’t too interested in them either.

I was late. Outside class my students were lined up in jagged rows near the door.

When I’d taught the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the Greek students
said his grandfather wept on the anniversary of the Russian Revolution and thought that the failure of Communism meant history was over. They’d tried to say any foreign words in heavy accents like the spies in early Bond films, dragging out Glasnost until it sounded like a Scottish toast.

‘Perestroika’s like the end of the world, right?’
‘No, that’s apocalypse.’
‘Where everyone got nuclear rays.’
‘Chernobyl?’
‘Oh.’

Now the neat girls at the front were folding paper into cubes to make ‘pick a boxes’ and a few of the boys chucked a footy between the sections in the back row.

‘Sit down. I will start naming people. Nicholas.’

I asked them to take out worksheets on the Cold War and tried to teach past their impervious faces – defining terms and wishing I’d thought to organise a video. I wrote Cuban Missile Crisis, Communism, the West on the blackboard with a skittering hand.

I handed back their creative responses to reading they’d done on the gold rush and the Depression.

Selena Papas, in the back row waved her hand in the air until I couldn’t ignore it.

‘Miss, Miss. Why do we have to do this?’
‘Do, what, Selena?’
‘Why do we have to do the Cold War?’
‘Well, it’s an important part of history.’ That wouldn’t do. ‘With the USSR as it was then, and the United States, there were two major superpowers competing. We had the arms race, the space race. There was an escalation that many thought would end in nuclear war.’
‘So?’
‘And there was a lot of hope that in the wake of the Cold War, that arms spending would go down and that there’d be a more peaceful time.’

Selena sat forward on the edge of her chair. The other kids were enjoying her eagerness, her recent transformation from teacher’s pet to anti-authoritarian. She was wearing blue mascara and chewed gum.
‘But it didn’t.’
‘Go on, Selena.’
‘It’s not more peaceful. Now America’s on its own and there’s still war.’

Ben said ‘That’s because America’s the best. They can.’

I moved from the board into the small knot of kids clustered near the window.

‘My country’s the fucken’ best not America.’ The Greeks, the Turkish kids, the Vietnamese raised their voices. No one laid claim to Australia.

I shouted. ‘Alright. Calm down. Obviously, some of the people who thought that the end of the Cold War would mean a less militarised world were wrong.’ They ignored me. They defended their countries in the name of Eurovision, of sport, of food.


‘They’re the biggest,’ Ben said, bewildered at the riot he had begun.

‘They don’t have the largest population or land mass. What else? Theo?’

‘They won that war...The Cold War and now everyone’s afraid of them?’

‘Possibly. Any other ideas?’

‘They’ve got the biggest army.’
‘Cluster bombs. Cool.’

‘There are different aspects to an army. America has more nuclear weapons and many conventional weapons. Selena, do you agree? Why can America start wars?’

Ben had another go. ‘They know they’re right so their army believes what they’re doing.’ He waited. ‘Morale.’

Selena looked at me. ‘Because they have the most money.’ The bell rang.

I met the student teacher in the staff room before the afternoon classes. She was nervous, with bitten nails and tiny bird bones. She was dressed in a pinstriped suit skirt and wearing fashionable, oddly framed glasses. There were streaks of blonde cut through her black hair and she had applied smudgy shiny grape lipstick. I was relieved she wasn’t eighteen.

I introduced myself to her, ‘Justine? I’m Alice.’

She looked around and I felt that she was disappointed. When she showed me her lesson plans for the unit, a study of apartheid South Africa for a unit on modern history, I asked how she was finding teaching.

‘Okay. Good.’ She looked down. ‘I guess I’ll get better at it. How d’you remember their names? I want to tell them off but I don’t know what to call them.’

The faint smell of the perfume she was wearing, along with the memory of Jon’s visit made me feel nauseous. I injected optimism into my voice. ‘I can help with that. When I started two of them swapped names for the whole of first term. What brings you to this illustrious career?’

‘I was general admin at a uni. Funding cuts. So here I am.’

‘Year tens can be difficult. For the first lesson they’ll probably be painful but you’ll survive.’ I hated the boarding-school cheer in my voice.
'Everyone keeps telling me different things.'

'Like what?'

'One of the other teachers said, “Remember some of them are just horrible little shits” and Tom told me, “They’re great kids. Use multi-media.”’

I laughed. ‘Tom thinks multi-media’s always the solution. You can’t use a DVD in the first class. They’ll sense your fear.’

‘Hopefully I’ll get a nice easy private school next time.’

‘Yeah, where Daddy always owns a racehorse and you can threaten them with corporal punishment.’

She didn’t laugh. ‘Are you going to apply here when you finish?’

‘Teaching’s kind of putting me off teaching.’ She grinned, then looked aghast. ‘Tom said there won’t be anything because you might become a middle school next year.’

‘What?’

Our enrolments had been dropping steadily. Since I started teaching there had frequently been rumours of funding cuts or streaming our older kids into one of the bigger state or Catholic schools in the next suburb. But Tom, our principal, had just given a rousing speech to the parents at open day about the unique community of the school.

‘I’ve probably got it wrong. He said something like, “We won’t be needing more staff. If anything—”’ she broke off and imitated a gesture I knew must be Tom’s, a patting of the air that suggested the desirable outcome would be fewer staff or no staff at all.

Our shoes squeaked on the floor of the corridor. Locker doors slammed.

In the classroom I wrote up her name on the board. Already the boys were switching chairs and throwing paper planes. I picked a note up off the
floor. ‘You cunts are sluts.’ Justine’s hands shook as she picked up the whiteboard marker.

They settled. ‘This is Miss Avery. She’s going to be taking you for the next week so I trust you’ll give her a taste of what teaching’s all about.’ There were a few uneasy giggles.

She looked over their heads. ‘Good afternoon.’

‘Miss, have you got a boyfriend?’

‘Are you a lesbian?’

‘Why is your hair like that?’

Sam, one of my gentlest students, called out, ‘Shut up youse.’

I stood up. ‘Behave or detentions all round.’

Sam squinted. ‘How come? You never give detentions.’

Nam, who had been in Australia eighteen months asked, ‘What’s “all round”? ’

‘For everyone. For each of you.’ I smiled helplessly at Justine. ‘Like drinks all round.’

I sat down near the front of the classroom and watched her spend too long in the circle of safety around the white-board. Jon would have spoken to his wife by now. Justine bit her nails.

She cleared her throat and stared back at the doleful eyes of the students. She wrote ‘Population Registration Act: 1991’ on the board.

1991, the year the first Gulf War was waged under the first Bush presidency; the Soviet Union finally collapsed; the Birmingham 6 were freed; Rodney King was beaten by police; Sonic the hedgehog was created.

In 1991 Freddie Mercury dies of AIDS, Alexis Indris Sontana, who posed as a self-taught orphan from Utah and enrolled at Princeton University, is exposed as a fraud, Joh Bjelke-Peterson is tried for perjury, there is a Royal
Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody and New South Wales has a general strike. All history.

And in 1991 my brother died.
In the morning, Jeremy wipes the sticky brine from his eyes and listens. Sleep has
spread through his eyelashes like a web. There is a moment of panic when he tries to
open his eyes and feels resistance. His heart thuds in his chest – are his eyelids stitched
together? His fat, dreamy fingers tug away at the small shards and then he can see the
poster his mum put on his bedroom wall. The poster is no good. It is too young for
him. It weeps at the edges, the corners fold forward where the bluetac doesn’t reach.

Through the wall he hears Louise, in the room next door, letting out
her great sigh. Jeremy listens to her nasal horsey snore regular and jagged on
every out breath. Alice is thrashing in the same bed. Alice will be switching
her head against the headboard and twitching her limbs, in a lolling,
consciousless effort to get away from the resounding sounds of Louise. Water
gushing in the gulley trap mixes into his mother filling the kettle. He knows
she will shake tea into the old pot, which is a shiny pink, the polished skin
coming off in patches to the metal deep below.

Jeremy cannot feel his dad in the house. Usually, of a morning, there is
a sense of him. Noting specific, not a pin in a map, but a low cloud, a
heaviness in the air like a change of weather. His mum pours the water into
the teapot. Outside the rain subsides. His mother zips up her jacket. Alice falls
out of bed in a single wrench. Quite often, perhaps once a week, his sister
wakes by falling. He hears her scramble and realign, feels the pause of her
recognition: she is on the floor. It’s morning. Lou snores on. His mother
swings open the door to his sisters’ room.

‘It’s eight o clock. Jesus, Alice, get off the floor.’ Lou’s laugh catches in
her throat, still half a snore.

‘Jeremy.’ His door opens. She switches on the light. ‘Get up. Mrs Daly
has to talk to you about the test.’
He puts his feet onto the dull carpet, waits for the sounds, the slow ebb of regret from his father who must be somewhere in the house and then he slides back into bed.

When he wakes again his father is telling his mum, ‘I thought you wouldn’t do houses.’

Jeremy stands in the bedroom doorway and watches them.

‘I was doing offices but there’s not enough. And it’s too far to go every day for what they give me.’

‘You don’t even keep this place clean, why should you be picking up other people’s rubbish?’

‘Christ, I’m not your slave, Shaun Reilly.’

His father hesitates, brushes his hands across the table.

His mum pulls on her gloves. ‘You could pick up after yourself.’

His father spoons sugar into his tea and his hand shakes. ‘You know Mum was a domestic servant before she married. Live in. Hated it. Said they treated her like they owned her. We come here, I’m married, now you’re doing it.’

‘It won’t be anyone round here.’

‘I thought we agreed only offices.’

‘There’s something going at the meatworks.’

‘The meatworks?’ His mouth’s a curl.

‘Jean told me. Not slaughtering. Her husband’s there. You could get a lift. Only an hour up the freeway.’

‘I was considered to be a skilled technician when I worked for LendCorp, did you know that?’

‘Yes. And I also know how much it costs to feed two children.’

‘They should’ve given us what we’re owed.’
His mother puts toast on the table. ‘Do you remember what you did last night?’

There’s a bolt of terror like electricity through Jeremy’s blood. She can see him and he’s forgotten what he’s done.

But she’s talking to his father.

‘I had a bit too much.’ His dad slurps the tea, turns pages on last week’s newspaper.

‘Fool yourself if you like, if you can, but don’t try and fool me.’

When his mother leaves she shuts the door tight behind her so it reverberates back and trembles in its frame.

‘I don’t want you picking up the shit for fucking men whose wives are too lazy to do it themselves,’ his father says then, but softly, to himself and the paper.

Jeremy has to go to the toilet. He’s desperate. But he can’t get across the hall without seeing his dad. If he does, his dad will ruffle his head and make some jokes. And then there will be appeals to being boys and his dad will say, again, how his boy is special but does he really want to go to a toff school? And his mum will turn away. His dad will be clumsy, a giant, unsure what to do with his big body.

So he tries to hold it in.

Alice opens his door. ‘Get up, Jeremy. She’s pissed off.’

He pulls his shorts over his undies. It’s a cold day but the boys make fun of his jeans. They all pretend to have owned and discarded the jeans and tell Jeremy that he must have got the jeans from the op-shop. And then they pretend to admire the jeans, to like them, to want to know where they’ve come from. The jeans are too small anyway. They expose his pale, lumpy ankles to the wind. The jeans came from Fossey’s a few winters ago.
In the kitchen, Lou reaches for tea and the plastic charm bracelets on her wrist jingle. Louise doesn’t worry about looking like the other kids. The other kids try to look like her. She can’t pass maths but he sees the way adults’ gazes are drawn to her on the street. She is admired.

‘Where did you get those?’ The lines on his mum’s face – he thinks of them as her fury lines – deepen and run down from her mouth to her chin.

Lou looks back coolly. ‘From Sarah.’

‘Alice’s friend Sarah?’ Alice ducks her head to the tea. His mother shakes her head.

‘No, my friend Sarah.’

‘Alice?’

‘I think it’s another Sarah.’

Lou shakes out her wrist for inspection, and the pink and green bracelets send his stomach lurching. They look like food, lollies, and he has to shit.

‘Please just don’t get caught.’ Lou smiles. She thinks she is invincible.

‘You’ve got no shame, Louise Reilly. Taking charity from other people. Does her Mum know you’re getting pissy two-buck bits of jewellery from her?’

His dad doesn’t know about the danger game. He’s edgy, this morning, urgently snuffling for an argument, an excuse, a chance to prove why he passed out in his own sick last night.

‘Was a present.’ Lou always has the winning card. She remembers. She keeps track of time. ‘For my birthday’ she adds. His father is bewildered. The world’s too complex. His daughter’s had another birthday. His children are mysteries. They are getting older, moving swiftly away from him and his incapacity to distinguish between the past and the present. His mother’s mouth is a straight line. Louise’s birthday was six months ago, same as his.
His father asserts what he does know. ‘Big test today, eh?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That teacher says you’re gonna ace it.’

‘Dunno.’

‘Being clever is not the most important thing’ says his mum, catching up her bag.

‘You should know.’ His dad laughs in painful scratches.

Some of the shit Jeremy has been holding in squeezes out in liquid onto his shorts. He rushes back into his room. There is a stain, about the size of a fifty-cent piece on his shorts. It’s a dull brown colour. He smells. He picks up his jeans and goes into the bathroom. He sits on the toilet but now nothing comes. He will have to wear the jeans again today.

Alice (2005) Chapter Three

The next time I met Jon we went somewhere in the middle of the day. I stopped at the park on my way, a small square of bright emerald grass with a dirty pond, sandwiched between high-rise flats, a garish nursery spilling peonies, agapanthus and ferns, and a service station that made a decent profit in porn. I hoped I wouldn’t see anyone I knew. I watched the deep shadows cast by the sun and felt the wind turn cold. I felt released because none of the gutted strangers here would ask me what was wrong.
I wondered why I felt bereft. I tried to remember if I even liked Jon anymore. I thought of my mother, delighted that she’d picked up a clever phrase, telling me, ‘You get what you settle for.’

Louise had been ringing at strange hours with nonsense that poured out of her like joy. She said she could get me a cheap TV that wasn’t hot and that she thought most of the graffiti in Redfern, where she lived, was a kind of poetry. The week lurched on. In her last call she added that she had been breached by Centrelink and was in danger of losing her flat. She was collecting articles about house fires. She wanted to go looking for our mother. She asked how she could access files from Community Services. It was a madness and her hopefulness deflated me.

I decided to go to Sydney.

Jon was waiting in a café where people in business suits talked on their phones about the market like it was a natural disaster: unpredictable, dangerous but possible to get something out of. He was brown, as though he’d been on holiday. When he took my hand I had to grind my teeth hard. I concentrated on the coffee ring on the tablecloth and promised myself I would do washing when I got home. I couldn’t work out if I was angry or just bored.

‘It’s not as if you love me.’ He opened his arms in an arc, a sad gesture of a forty-year-old man who would like to be a dejected lover in a suave French film.

I didn’t love him but I said, ‘How would that make a difference? I don’t have licence to.’

He frowned, ‘It’s not about licence. I’m not selling a car.’

I said grimly, ‘Are you sure because I need one? I’m going to see Lou tomorrow. There’s another thing you don’t know about me.’

‘Don’t bullshit me.’
'Aah, no, I actually am.'
'I mean, have some integrity about this, Alice.'

We sat quietly and listened to the conversational hysterias and lulls around us. I remembered how white and vulnerable the flesh on his inner arm was, his sharp bones, the way his little toe nail curved inwards on itself. I didn’t want this conversation to use the old grab bag of excuses and tidy phrases.

'Sydney’s a stupid place to drive to.'
I shrugged.
Jon said, ‘She knows.’
I nodded.
He said, ‘Listen, you’re fantastic.’

I put my arms on the table and leaned over. ‘I don’t want to live with you. I don’t want to make you tea because you’re in a bad mood or help you choose photographs to draw from. I don’t want calls at lunchtime saying you’ll pick up the steak and do I know your unlikeable friend is coming over for dinner.’

He took back his hand and said, ‘Is that what you expect?’
‘That’s what I’ll get. Isn’t that what you do with her?’

He recoiled and I was pleased. He said, ‘You have no idea what I do with her.’

I said, ‘Would you rather it if I was miserable.’

All the time I was ruining it, taking out my precious coins to pay for the coffee I didn’t drink, flashforwarding to the relief I’d feel when I told friends how sensible I’d been, I was also imagining him coming home with me, putting his hand on the back of my neck, touching my breasts.
After checking the cost of flights at such late notice, I eventually borrowed a
car from my oldest friend, Sarah. We had survived high school together. She
resisted my humourlessness and the assortment of tired regrets I had
accumulated didn’t interest her. Sarah lived in Spotswood in a two-bedroom
house with a low white fence and a trellis for roses. Her house was near the
station, en route to Scienceworks. I had taken my class on an excursion there
last term and the plump woman in her forties who was helping me find my
way round leaned over and said, ‘I hate children.’ The kids I was supervising
were flushed with excitement, madly dashing up and down, trying out the
sports games, testing their times against one another, colliding, asking me if
we were visiting the planetarium.

The sight of Sarah’s washing pegged on the line, her open face as she
rushed to meet me, was painful. I ran up the path clutching my bag,
sunglasses slipping off my head, and stubbed my toe.

She chucked me her keys and shrugged, ‘It’ll probably conk out and
smoke as many cigarettes as you want but the ashtray doesn’t work.’

We had formed a punk rock band together at sixteen even though we
couldn’t play any instruments, and she was married and divorced before I
graduated from university. For five years we hardly spoke. She’d lived in the
hills with her husband in a rented mudbrick house slouched low to the
ground and sent me occasional elegantly written letters about nothing. A few
weeks before she left him she wrote me a postcard. FUCK I’M BORED. The
card had a kitsch photo of a housewife in a grainy-grey pinafore standing at
the head of a table. Sarah had sketched in an anxious wrinkle and shaded a
zombie pallor on the woman’s face; a tiny thought balloon wafted above her
high ponytail: Was that the last of the Valium?

Years ago at a dinner party when we drank too much gin Sarah had
told me she had disliked most of my lovers. ‘Dripping the existential angst of
the middle-classes. They grow up good-looking with parents who rarely touch them and think it’s the greatest tragedy since Chernobyl. Private schools, quick minds, therapy, full employment. It’s astonishing, this despair they have with life.’

Sarah’s uncle died of lung-disease because he worked in the mines but she remained undespairing. I lit a smoke before I thought about it. I sat on the steps. The grass on her lawn was freshly cut. I gestured to put the cigarette out but she waved me away. ‘What’s life if you can’t kill yourself, eh?’

Her gingham-checked dress hoicked up near her knees as she crouched down. Her flesh was tanned and bulging, an advertisement for good health. There was a lightness to her that meant I often felt stricken by comparison, appalled by her capacity for forgiveness.

I nodded. ‘Those roses are a terrible colour.’
‘American beauty. Same as the film.’
‘It’s too much. Vaguely pornographic. Why aren’t you at work?’ I stood up, hoping she wouldn’t ask about Louise.
‘RDO.’
‘Thanks, Sarah.’
‘Are you still helping a certain middle-aged man break the marriage vows he made under God’s watchful eye?’
I grinned. ‘As best I can.’
‘Is it alright?’
‘Fuck knows.’
She scuffed her sandals against the brick path. ‘What’s Lou done this time?’
‘She wants to find Mum.’
‘Now?’
‘She thought she saw a boy from Jeremy’s school. She thinks Mum knows what happened to him that day. She says.’ I felt dry-mouthed – a tethered shell. I avoided the invitation in Sarah’s gaze.

The constant dull drone of a whipper-snipper from the next house was giving me a headache.

‘Be kind to yourself, Miss Alice,’ She put her arms around me. I inhaled the smell of her skin, her coconut moisturiser.

I cleared chewing gum wrappers and slips of paper off the sticky vinyl seat and got into the car. Sarah tapped on the roof. ‘Are you seeing your dad?’

I scabbled around but the lever to unwind the window was broken. I shook my head.

She leant down. ‘Don’t crash but if it dies quietly on the road I’ll be secretly relieved.’

I waved jauntily and stalled. There was a sticker on the outside of the car that read: ‘If you’re not outraged you’re not paying attention’. One of those slogans that had survived the seventies. It bothered me. I couldn’t guess whether Sarah had put it there or if it was a benefaction from the car’s last owners. I stripped apart and reconstructed the phrase in my mind. Was it only that I was not paying attention or had I outlasted outrage?

I had already turned onto Sydney Road when I changed my mind and turned the car around, back to the Western suburbs. After I parked the car I climbed the stairs and stood on the slice of concrete that inhabited the centre of my father’s building. The only communal space in these flats was outdoors on the second floor, where beer bottles hugged close together and empty potplants bred cigarettes. The door to the laundry and shared bathroom had come off the hinges again and mouldy towels hung in the shape of forgotten bodies on the silver hooks nailed abattoir-height into the walls. Around me, windows were dimmed behind plastic curtains patterned in mutant-sized
bright blue flowers, although I caught a half-glimpse of a neighbour’s kitchen through a jammed blind, stained with nicotine. A hotplate was plugged into the wall and there was a pornographic picture, faded by steam and time, the calendar set to the month of May. Each time I visited my father I looked for a new woman’s spread legs, a different-shaped vagina but it had been May at this neighbour’s house for a very long time.

When I went upstairs one of the tenants took my photo and explained he was collecting evidence and that he would call the police if it happened again.

‘I’ve been to Singapore.’ Diane, my father’s neighbour, was seated at the cheap plastic ex-cafe table and smoking Holidays.

‘Right,’ I said, edging forward.

‘But I couldn’t stay. Too many people. And they didn’t like my dress.’

‘Oh.’ I almost said I’m sorry.

‘I’ve been having an affair,’ she winked, ‘but don’t mention it to your father. He can be old-fashioned.’ My father was afraid of Diane, who lived next-door to him, because she thought he was pinching her underwear out of the laundry room.

‘Something in the air,’ I said. I told her I was having an affair too and lit my own cigarette. I was only half-surprised by my revelation. Who would Diane have to tell about the tired intrigue of my sex life, and who would believe her if she did? The people in these bedsits largely seemed not to exist. They became visible only occasionally in the papers as welfare-cheats, bludgers or warnings to the working poor of how much lower it was possible to fall. Sometimes there was a lucky war veteran who got interviewed on Today Tonight and then there would be an appeal, because no serviceman of our country should have to live like that.

Diane leaned in. ‘With a very wealthy man. He wants to marry me.
He’s going to give me a ring on the weekend. He said I could go shopping but I go, “you choose.”

I couldn’t help it. I asked, ‘Did he go to Singapore?’ She said when, and then looked crafty.

‘No I didn’t need a man to rain on my parade there I can tell you.’ Her face darkened. ‘Men are useless. Give years of your life to them and then they put you inside.’

I could believe she had been in prison. There was something in her skin that looked used: discarded and put back on wrong. When she moved she had the slow motions of a person used to counting time. Diane frightened me because she was what Louise could become. Her leaden sentences fell like echoey voice-overs. Her lies had no design, no ascertainable logic. They reeked of longing and fear, yet they were more compelling than truths, their intricacy and detail a kind of art.

The first time she told me she was getting married it was to the month-of-May man and the fleshy folds of her neck reddened in excitement or irritation. You could imagine a dangerous youth for her, an adolescence of cheap high-heeled shoes and skirt-lengths that wouldn’t pass the test in a church school.

She said the man knew there was an age-gap but they could share a place and it would be cheaper. And, she told me, it’s no good for people to be on their own.

I tried to count the cigarette butts loose in the puddle of water on the ground, but I couldn’t hold back my laughter, which was just my way of dealing with terror. She let her bare feet sink into the water and her fleshy arms close tight on the sides of her chair. I could hear the decades she had spent nursing in her voice, brisk and authoritative. ‘Think what you like but these things happen.’
I was glad that she left angry because my giggles were on the borderline of sobs and I could only dishonour her if I wept.

Jake, short as a jockey, tattooed and thick-waisted, who stood at Dad’s open door last Christmas, giving boxing lessons to the air, hovering at the periphery of a ruined family, says that Diane really was a nurse and that she had a car accident that left her with one leg shorter than the other.

Sometimes I dreamed about Diane in the emergency ward of casualty, proud in her uniform, no-nonsense to the drunks and drug-fried and when I woke I conjured up empathy for her, a sly substitution of the emotions I could not bring myself to feel for my father.

‘They want to stop smokers getting elective surgery,’ I told her.

‘Of course they do. Fucking do-gooders and Christians. I’d like to shit in their backyards.’

I tried. I said, ‘What do you think about the nurses’ strike?’ but Diane was moving away and scuffed loosely at the concrete and muttered, ‘Oh well, nurses’, as if we were talking about witchcraft or gamblers, some social group that had its own impenetrable and unexpected logic.

My father opened the door, his heavy sunken body silhouetted in the light. I put my clinking shopping bags down and he pretended not to look inside.

The flat smelled of craft glue and treated wood. Laid out on the card table was a game of patience, which my father finished as I put my things down.

‘I’m making a city.’

‘Huh?’

‘A miniature. To scale.’

‘Which city?’

‘I don’t know.’
'Sounds good.'
'I’m inventing it. Designing my own.'
There was a silence.
'You got here alright then?'
I nodded. 'I’ve got a car.'
He shuffled the cards with thick fingers. 'Stay for a game?'
'I can’t.' I unpacked some of the groceries I’d bought, wincing at the garish colours on the packets, the lime greens and fleshy pinks of the brand names.
'Probably want a drink after that trip.'
I said, 'What trip?' but I took out the beer bottles. He got two glasses with shaky hands and I wiped the grime off the rim before pouring.
He waited for me to sip before he began, a tiny victory for a man stricken with fear if he accidentally woke sober in the night.
'Thought you might bring that sister of yours.' He was jovial, man-about-town, upbeat.
'No you didn’t.'
'She used to beg me to help her with maths.'
I didn’t reply.
'Your mum couldn’t add up to save her life.'
I gave myself thirty minutes and I planned next week’s lesson in the silence. My father showed me some of the buildings he was making in his tiny city.
He had made me a wooden copy of a Barbie bus the year I turned twelve because he’d seen me looking at it in shop windows when I was a little kid. He’d worked on it in secretly in the evenings after work, treated it, painted it pink, installed crude home-made campervan furniture inside. I’d only ever wanted the mass-produced Mattel real thing, a shop-bought
present, and even that was too young for me, so I’d pretended to lose the Barbie bus, leaving it outside in winter to rot and fade.

I got ready to leave.

‘Louise is beautiful,’ he told me. ‘I bet the boys all want a piece of her.’

‘She can’t bear you,’ I told him and we sat in silence and listened to the football results floating upstairs from someone walking with a portable radio on the street. He settled into the couch and kept his eyes on the beer. In five minutes he would be asleep.

He asked, ‘Is she happy, though?’ and I said, ‘She’s fucked’ and then I waited. He asked what my students thought of having a woman teacher and I told him that most teachers are women and that’s why it’s so badly-paid and then he started about his lost job again and imagine being somewhere for all those years. Then I went into the kitchen and washed the dishes, slamming them hard against the sink.

Before I left he asked, ‘What about your brother?’ as if for the first time. I couldn’t believe he did not remember, that each time the news was fresh. I knew again, more bitterly, why I only came once a year, why Louise would not come at all: the sum of my father’s wrecked life.

I said, at the door, ‘Still dead’ and my father said, ‘What?’ and then, ‘oh’ and I saw his eyes slip to the alcohol on the table and I watched the same memory flutter across his face and I promised myself this visit would be my last.

I drove fast, holding the steering wheel with one hand and resting my elbow out the window. I smoked cigarettes until my lips were cracked and my throat resisted. The reaching trees and shimmering road gave way to the old sore tooth of memory. There was Louise eating nothing but grass for a whole day when she wanted to be a horse. Jeremy and Louise copying Charlie
Chaplin’s walk. She had pretended to swallow a piece of gravel for the
danger game but we knew the tiny stone was tucked into her cheek. Her face
was stiff and bunched. I really had touched a lit cigarette to my tongue to win
the game and Lou couldn’t hide her glee and horror. Jeremy had hidden in
the big kitchen cupboard while I turned on the tap and let the water run over
my stuck out hanging tongue like I was a dog in summer.

The roadhouse I pulled into was crammed with truck-drivers and had
a dining room full of Elvis Presley memorabilia. There were Elvis pictures,
Elvis cups. Mirrors where you could see your reflection imposed upon the
painted Elvis’s hair and glasses. It was disturbing. The place was called
‘Nick’s place’. The couple behind the counter were Chinese. Why did they
choose a Greek name, or had they just inherited it with the business?

There was a story about volunteer fire fighters on tv and we all
watched unmoved. I rifled through the sexist rubbish stickers that tourists
and long-distance drivers are meant to want. Behind baseball caps and coffee
mugs, there was a dusty plastic box, a magic kit.

I picked it up. Jeremy loved magic when he was little. He tried to make
card tricks scientific, to expose the logic of the games we play. As a teenager
Lou used to go to junk shops, dress-up hire places, the unvisited magic stores
in arcades and look.

Jeremy owned a game called ‘do you want to be a DETECTIVE?’
complete with pencil stubs and illegible observation records on scraps of
paper and a false moustache and wig, that my sister has kept. For a while,
eyery few months, Louise compared the contents of the rectangular
cardboard box with their ragged instructions and counted the missing pieces
in a belated, ritual inventory. I could imagine her peering through the cracked
magnifying glass, narrowing her sight line to the telescoped tunnel of the toy,
as if she could inhabit my brother’s gaze. I remembered the magnifying glass
as a cheap tinny thing with shattered fault lines along its plastic lens, incapable of making any mystery clearer.
He shifts in the pool of sweat on his chair and tries to breathe slowly, as if the rhythms can remove the stink of him, the crawling beads that weep onto his seat. He writes what he can remember: the population of world cities, their latitude and longitude, the breeding habits of certain mammals, the rules of complex arithmetic: long division, fractions. Behind him Michael Grieves, whose dad works in the butcher’s shop where Jeremy’s mother buys the cheapest meat at the end of the day, is whispering what he is going to do to Jeremy at lunchtime.

Mrs Daly gives out the worksheets and then tells Jeremy to sit up front with her. Every week now, she calls him out of his seat for extension activities while the other kids scrawl and mutter and groan. When he writes he lets the shape of the letters calm him and he keeps his head bowed and his gaze on the wood of the desk. He finishes and doesn’t look up. He goes over the letters many times in pencil, scoring them in. If he takes a while to put his books back in his bag after the bell rings then he may be able to travel to the library through empty corridors. Michael asks to go to the toilet and on the way out he feigns a trip on Jeremy’s bag and kicks hard at Jeremy’s leg.

Jeremy doesn’t look up. He concentrates on not pissing himself. He reads the swear words carved into the desk. He jolts when the bell rings. He knows what Mrs Daly writes on his report each term: ‘Jeremy has some difficulty in social interaction’, ‘Jeremy should try harder to relate to the other children’, ‘Jeremy’s ability to interact with the class-group could be improved’.

Sometimes Jeremy calculates the remaining days, months and years of school. Other times he tries to rationalise the misery: if his bag is thrown into the creek on Wednesday, then he will be left alone on Thursday, if the boys pull down his pants and laugh at his penis on Monday then Tuesday will pass by with only a few kicks and
cruelties. He doesn’t believe himself when he does this. He understands the law of probabilities and because the pain and humiliation seems utterly random he realises that each and every day chance begins again, that, like a gambler with each throw of the dice, there is just as much chance he will be beaten as not beaten the day after a more savage attack.

Mrs Daly prods him, with false jolliness, ‘Hurry up slowpoke the bell’s gone.’

In the hall, Michael takes his hand and leads him out to the asphalt near the basketball ring.

‘Hey, here’s nothing’ he tells the boys in the circle. ‘Watch this’. Michael kicks at Jeremy’s groin and Jeremy doesn’t speak.

‘Are you nothing? Are you a fucking deaf man?’ Michael stands on Jeremy’s foot.

Through the blur, Jeremy sees an older girl coming. She is beaming. Kathryn Mackenzie who he has known since he was a toddler. Her eyes go wide and she runs into the lunchroom.

‘So, right, his Dad is on our street last night and he fucken’ pisses all down his pants. He’s, like, calling out and he’s crying, saying this guy’s name’.

Jeremy knows the challenge before the boys even think of it: Can they make him wee his pants? Can they get him to cry

The longest word in the English language, according to the dictionary, is pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis. With sums you do brackets first then division, multiplication, addition, subtraction. He tries to think of the highest mountain in the world, the largest sea, all the pieces of information that stretch beyond this playground into the other side of the world, into another language, one foreign to the heavy stunted bodies of the boys who are weighted lead, drawn like magnets to the invisible circle of fear and uselessness that he carries with him.

It might take all lunchtime, they may go hungry, but they do it in the end by shoving possum shit and a snail shell into his mouth and forcing it down his throat.
Before the first period of the afternoon he walks out of school. Past the orange plastic seats lined near the tuckshop and the whirr and whiz of a cricket ball in the playground. Over the fresh tanbark at the base of the girls’ swings. The school was built next to the old tip and behind it, still, is the dump where the tip used to be, which has been levelled by bulldozers with sand. And this is Jeremy’s world.

He ducks through foliage, old gum trees twisted into painful shapes, and pushes aside the sticky vines that are beginning to take over so that the sky looks like a mossy carpet with specks of grey. He steps over the rotting logs that have fallen across the secret through-line he’s found. And then he’s at the bombsite and he runs down.

It’s not really where a bomb went off, just a crater in the ground where the tip was once. You can still find old treasures and junk close to the surface if you dig, even with the new soil the trucks brought and spread on top. It’s a hollow the size of a swimming pool, about four feet deep. He’s measured it. The hole has been there since he can remember. It’s mysterious, all that remains from when a spaceship crash-landed, or a plane. Or some long-forgotten trench from a war.

Louise made up a story about the creatures that live in the hole: they are green-skinned and have tiny pairs of wings, hundreds all over them. They come from a planet in the next galaxy where you eat fire to stay alive and you grow younger every day until you die as a baby. There are no boys and girls, or men and women, and creatures are made by grinding seedpods in new life machines.

Jeremy knows how far the world goes. He’s nearly finished his project on the solar system. He wrote about black holes and the big bang theory and he’s building a model, almost to scale, with different size rocks for planets suspended with string. He’s tried to make himself stupider with this assignment: he’s tried to colour outside the lines and misspell scientific words because it’s only since his dad got sick and Mrs Daly has been making an example of him, pushing him up grades and asking him to read his
work out loud in assembly that they hate him. And since they’ve hated him, since he’s felt the great wave of their hate building up, he can’t move properly, or breathe. He watches the way he pours milk on his cereal or holds his pen.

The world goes on forever. Sometimes this fact is comforting, sometimes it terrifies him and he has to hold onto his breath and count the seconds to remain calm, as he has always planned to if he gets caught in quicksand.

For Jeremy this place is not about outer space but travel through time. He is building a time machine, searching for parts in the soft earth with his magnifying glass, tunnelling out like the men in the Great Escape. It’s a kid’s game: to pretend to go faster than the speed of light. Sometimes Kathryn plays with him. She likes to go back in time but he wants to be in the future. There he lives in a cave with lots of friends, underground, and catches the railroad beneath the earth to travel to other worlds. Everyone is blind below the earth, like pit-ponies, from living so long without light, but it’s beautiful. To see each other they plug into receptors and pick up electronic charges others send out. You can look like whatever you want, in this future, even if it’s not a human shape, even if you appear as a great lake or a magician or a sunset or a ghost.

Today he takes out the magnifying glass and catches the sun in it until the leaves beneath it begin to brown and frazzle in the heat. He’s going forward two hundred years. There is a race of people who are living on an undiscovered planet after nuclear war. They grow fruit and vegetables in the mountains. Because of the altitude they are often dizzy but they have harnessed the way the brain changes under this pressure to destroy cruelty in themselves. They do not know how to hit or to punish. They stay close to the ground and are so pale they are nearly transparent: they look as if they are made of glass and they are very warm, even hot, to the touch. He feels what they feel, a hum of energy moving between them all. They are allergic to alcohol because of a long-standing defective gene that is passed down, and try to stay away from it, to avoid even seeing it, because although it makes them ill, sometimes terminally, it calls to them and whimpers and they do not know how to block this
sound. They welcome Jeremy but they will not let him stay with them and he knows pretty soon he won’t manage to hear them at all.

Jeremy burrows into the cool earth and talks to the people of the future.

Kathryn Mackenzie crashes through the thick trees into the clearing. ‘What are you doing? Can I’ve a go?’

‘Nothing.’

‘We’re not meant to go here.’

Jeremy sees earthworms pushing forward in a stupid and angry way, waving their blind heads. ‘So?’

‘You were talking to yourself.’

‘To the beings.’

She whispers, the freckles like blotches against her white nose, her fingers stubby. ‘Where are you now?’

‘In two hundred years.’

‘You wouldn’t even be alive.’

‘It’s another kind of time.’

She wrinkles her nose, peels off her shoes and socks and gets into the hole. ‘Did you go in the time machine?’

Then his hands strike against an object. The car is golden and has wheels that don’t turn. It’s bigger than Jeremy’s hands, a racing car with black trim round the sides and a bonnet that has the number one printed on it inside a star. The windscreen is cracked and the windows are permanently wound down.

It’s a talisman, a protection, like the magnifying glass. Talisman is one of the words he learnt from the magazines about war at the corner shop.

The owner had let him stay and turn all the pages without buying anything. The soldiers wear crosses or keepsakes around their necks or they carry bibles or photos in their pockets and this is meant to keep them safe. Alice had snorted when she caught him looking. ‘You’d be mincemeat in a
war,’ she says. ‘You’d get blown to bits. Choppetty chop.’ She had looked at the man behind the counter, who was skinny and had a tattoo on the back of his neck. ‘He thinks it’s the golf war.’ He only had before he’d seen it written down in the paper or the bombing on TV, in bright colours against the night, like a celebration, like fireworks.

‘Sports invasion,’ the man behind the counter said then and Jeremy had known he couldn’t come back.

He scrapes the dirt off the car. ‘Look.’
Kathryn shrugs. ‘That’s for little kids.’
He hears a scramble in the bushes and it’s Michael with some of the older boys.

‘What makes you think you’re allowed to be here? This is where we go.’ They are a blur to Jeremy. They move from foot to foot in anticipation.

Jeremy feels the bulk of his heart in his chest, the racing lightness of the beats, the heavy bulk of his hands hanging like hams on his wrists.

‘Want this?’ he offers it to them in a small way, trying to make his movement inconspicuous, finite and inoffensive. The car teeters on his upheld palm but the surface is dull copper now, not gold.

‘Giss a go.’ Michael takes it.

Kathryn puts her shoes back on. ‘I’m telling.’

They copy her, put their hands on their hips and jut them out, tilt their heads.
‘Oooh-oooh. I’m tel—ling.’ Her feet stamp solidly in the mud as she races back to school.

‘He’s got snot up his nose and it’s all dried.’ Michael peers right at Jeremy’s face.

‘Wipe your nose. You’re filthy.’

Jeremy rubs the back of his hand over his nose and they laugh.

‘I hope you didn’t nick this because we’d have to set the coppers on ya.’

‘Yeah, that’s why it’s so broken. His Dad couldn’t pay for it. Yeah he just done and dug it up at the tip instead.’
'You get presents from the tip.'

Jeremy fixes his eyes on an empty icy-pole packet teetering on the edge of the bunker. There are still rivulets of red on the sticky paper. He runs through the times tables in his head. Two-times, three-times, four-times. The people from the future wave goodbye very slowly as if they are swimming in air. He doesn’t remember how long it’s been since he really believed in them, how long since they brought him comfort. There’s a grinding. He’s clenching the talisman too tight and the magnifying glass breaks in his hand so that there are thin lines running through the lens.

Kathryn’s back with Louise following her. Louise does a handstand right near the big depression in the earth, arching her back, nearly tipping right over and when the boys look at her she says, ‘What?’

‘Do it again.’

She takes a pen from behind her ear and pretends to smoke it, puffing out air the way Alice would. ‘Youse look like a bunch of poofers’ she tells them. ‘Didn’tcha hear the bell?’

Following the boys back to school Lou flings berries at their backs. ‘Stupid fucks’ she says. He doesn’t know if he’s included.

In the afternoon library session Jeremy reads about Harry Houdini. He finds books about daring adventures and fantastic survivors. His reading tells him that there must be a way for him to evaporate that is not fictitious or magical, a scientific conclusion that can make possible his disappearance.
If you dream of him at all then it will be in the morning, while you are still in the thick hold of sleep, the sway and grab of it. You remember him as a series of slides – not pictures or photographs but projected images – colourful, unmoving, wide-screen still lifes of the dead.

You see him in the newsprint faces of the unloved that decorate your wall. You see him in the shuttered windows of the terrace across the road, his ungainly frame breathing near the flyscreen wire and lolling through your bedroom window. He sears and burns in campfires, in the smell of woodheaters, in the burning rubbish bins that someone else lit to stay warm. He is six. He is keeping a notebook to record the possums he has watched and named. He is eight and polishing his school shoes on the front step because the other kids tell him he smells like shit. He is ten and there is a small cut on his cheek and he is smiling without teeth. He is ten.

You can feel your body returning to you, sweating and swollen, taking back its rightful shape against the star-bursting rushing pulse of the drugs. Your feet are pushing against the point of your shoes. There’s mascara spread like vegemite across your palms and the earth is no longer sliding towards you. It’s raining. Your skin prickles.

You feel habit-fried, pulled out, stillborn. You count what you can remember with reverence. Your eyes were golden. You were fierce, you were forgotten, you were perfect. You feel over-large, painted on, drag-queen mysteries and great boasts in your sequin skirt. Faux-prostitution. You know the drug’s glugged out of you, poured through your body back into the earth, like some Zen meditation mantra, hissed back away, deflating you. You eye the shape your legs make in the dust when you stamp. You thought there was a crowd, a gigantic, moving mass. Not reassuring, this.

You are out the other end. You’re sinking. You want coffee. Coffee in a tacky mug, squat and white, maybe even with ‘Café Latte’ or ‘Onion Soup’ in brown, certain
letters across one side.

You are leaking, haemorrhaging, split at the sides. You dreamed that men with brown skin and older faces loved you, that you cupped a foot, hot like a stone, in your hand and it was wonderful. You saw pillars of red take over the sky like the Canberra bushfires, a bloody, rippling sunrise spreading its guts across the pallid morning mist. Astonishment, small gifts like peace.

You can see the arrangement of people, swarms or particles, heaving and shifting, streaked faces and torn clothes like car crash victims in the beginnings of the day.

The sun is up already, ungenerous. The Sydney skyline hangs like a show curtain, a second skin on the horizon. Cars go by too fast. Bronzed figures are heavy on the expressway, hands open, wrists and arms wide arcs. They hold gestures of welcome or surrender.

Your mother’s closing the door again, your father puts his hands over his eyes. You know what they are telling you. You know it again. It’s the dead one they remember. It’s the dead one they love.

When you wake it’s to the hiss of tyres. Cars swing easily into the tunnel of the Expressway. The lines on the road have been freshly repainted and glow yellow in neat dashes, a line of tiny stitches breaking up the road. The rain is a relief. Sandstone is smooth and cool against your back. Damp creeps into your shoes. All around are low-rise buildings and the golden plaque next to you on the wall announces the Kormac building. It houses two banks, an architecture firm, legal offices and the headquarters of a couple of corporations with anonymous-sounding titles: Knox Industries. Hailey-Morgan Propriety Limited. When you were small you used to read the abbreviation Pty Ltd as pity limited. Not a bad suffix for big business. Underneath your jeans your skin is ruberry.
A woman walks into the square, which is blank and open: thick slabs of red stone bordered by cactuses growing in beds of white pebbles. She is wearing brown boots and carrying an umbrella, black with tiny brown spots, so muted and discreet they appear like a disease across the surface. She puts down her briefcase, takes her identification from the tag around her neck and swipes in. The security door beeps and lights in the foyer flick on. You see a giddying glimpse of brown leather couches and a painting of a colonial house in a large paddock with grass the colour of piss. What time is it?

The sting of cheap detergent wafts towards you, the stale drift of bleach. The cleaner mops the mud away from the foyer area in slow gentle strokes. He’s a lean man in his fifties and you think he looks kind.

Glitter stings your cheeks. You have to move. Everything will be opening soon. You scrabble in your damp pocket, amongst tissue flecks and pale lolly wrappers. No dope.

‘Alright, love?’ He’s younger than you thought, blond not grey and holding his cigarette gingerly in front of him.

You stare ahead at the dirty linen of the sky, the faint exhaust fumes ghosting the traffic, the pink rinse edging the clouds.

‘Yeah.’

He chucks the cigarette onto the ground still burning. ‘You can’t stay. They’ve got their own security.’

‘I’m waiting for someone.’

The shrug is negligible. When he turns away, you reach for the dog-end of the cigarette. It’s burning strangely, dampened by the puddle it landed in, but not ruined. You suck in the tobacco; feel its sour warmth.

The cleaner picks wrappers and drink bottles out of the low shrubs bordering the next office building. He snaps them with a pair of long pincers that remind you of the metal claws that reach for pink plush teddy bears or
rabbits behind the glass in lucky dip games at arcades. When you visited the arcade with Alice once she cried because she wanted a giant pink plastic dog and only got some furry dice with stick-on white dots that soon fell off so that eventually you could never roll more than three. When the man handed them over you could see that this gift was a familiar disappointment for customers. His stoic grin was terse. He looked around for mothers. You stole a candy cane and chewed it until the sugary peppermint and the excitement made you vomit.

Now you shake out your hair, feeling your way to being in your body again. Last night wasps were living there, burrowing neatly against your scalp and later your hair was golden and fell behind you like a silk coat. The memories nestle into you shamefully; make themselves at home beneath your skin. It’s cold. You don’t have any money. It’s Monday.

You could walk home away from the great Sydney fakery: the domain, the gardens, the harbour and the bridge, the opera house. But the thought of enforcement orders piling up in your mailbox – the accumulation of small steps before eviction – makes you ill.

As you are leaving you see two men clatter across from the parking lot. They trigger central locking on their cars in swift identical gestures. You see them swing back and aim holding their keys high and focusing on an invisible through line like shooters.

The older man is wearing an old-fashioned suit in dark grey, with a red and blue waistcoat with gold buttons. You imagine him drawing a fat fob watch out of his pocket, skittering about like the tardy white rabbit. You don’t want to think about this story. Or Alice. You make Alice into a jigsaw puzzle, a mosaic. You remove and erase the frozen features of your sister, knowing and fitful, and redraw them: A mouth of wonder, eyes that glitter.

‘I think you’ve missed something, Brian,’ the older man calls out.
The cleaner’s turn is agonisingly slow. He puts down his tools and plastic sack of rubbish.

The man in the waistcoat gestures at you. ‘The trash that lands on our doorstep.’ He unclips his phone from his belt.

You stand, dizzy. ‘Fuck off.’

His companion puts down his thin black briefcase and raises a soft palm. ‘I’ll handle this, James. Go up.’ He is in his mid-thirties, with smooth plastery skin. His hair is full and brown. His breath smells of eucalyptus lollies. He has a polished, inhuman quality as if he were made and not born. Only his fingernails are ragged, short and chewed. There’s a silver band on his left hand.

The older executive hunches forward, guarding his paunch then ambles away, his heaviness tipping him forward on his feet and strangely your heart moves for him, clearly the junior of the two, perhaps even a clerk.

‘Oh dear.’ A grin. ‘I’m David. And you’re a PR nightmare. We can’t keep you,’ he smiles again, ‘But then again removing you might be difficult.’ He speaks in the singsong patter of sitcom, even pausing to allow enough time to elapse for track laughter. ‘A conundrum.’ Your throat is dry. He’s trying too hard. He has the thirst to talk of a man wholly alone, impelled with the uninhibited zeal of a Mormon.

‘You look like you could do with a cup of coffee, eh?’

_Angerday. Danger._

You stare at the boot black night of his shoes.

‘See, we’re not all monsters. Just the overwhelming majority.’ The grin is gappy. His lips are plump and pale, fishy.

‘I’m going.’ You move towards the road. He follows.
He speaks to you as if you are on a tour of the building. ‘We do small stuff here. Large personal loans. Business investments. Shares. Speculation, which is—’

‘I know what that is. Stocks, bonds, commodities, currencies, derivatives.’ You clasp your hands into fists inside your pockets. Speculation is gambling with better odds and more money than the Pokies or Scratch tickets, predicting what other investors will do, what the market will support. It’s a bet on other people’s hopes.

‘So you see why you are a problem,’ he has hold of your arm now, ‘You don’t inspire...’ he flicks his fingers in imitation of quotation marks, ‘credit confidence.’ He lets go of you and pulls out a card. ‘Security. Integrity. Dynamism. Our logo. I never thought marketing got that right. Dynamism sounds a bit risky.’

He’s a nutter. You realise you have been dreaming of Jeremy and the memory stings your skin. Jeremy was drowning in the sea, his pale arms short and plump as a baby’s flailing and churning in the dark water. You had been too busy trying to catch the inky seahorses that floated past to notice him. And when you did you knew it was play, a joke, right up until he changed colour and became transparent; a huge child jellyfish melting into the water. In your dreams Jeremy can be younger but never older.

David cocks his head to the side. ‘I bet you can do all sorts of things.’

You think: Hetay Angerday amegay.

Sometimes the only way to manage the daily percolating drip of fear, the corrosive dread of debt and humiliation is to embrace another sort of terror, to put oneself in danger.

‘Come on, there’s a café round the corner.’
It is there that you see the article in the paper, buried in the soft news pages towards the back. You went with him because it was stupid and he was appalling and there was nowhere else to go.

You are at one of those cafes with zany wallpaper, cramped tables and airy, thin staff. The window sills are pale candy pink and there are geraniums and fleshy camellias in the courtyard.

He waits until the waitress, wearing a short black skirt, white ballet shoes and a striped tie, has put the coffees down.

‘Can I?’ He puts his hand on your back. ‘Do you mind? What’s your name?’

When you edge away he begins whispering, ‘I want you to let me touch your back. Just your back.’ His voice is a high murmur, a dull toneless hum. The sound of him conjures up the calming noise of whitegoods: air conditioners, washing machines, fridges.

You sit on a rigid iron chair, the wind blowing against your shirt through the gappy back, and the seat leaving tiny heart-shaped impressions against the skin of your legs. The black coffee is bitter and warm.

‘Don’t you have a job?’ You are bolder now that there are other people around.

The lines down his palm are like rivers on a map. You imagine them pushing over their borders and washing away his skin.

He says, ‘And then I am going to touch your legs. And put my hand into your pants.’ The table is clear glass, rippled, with an orange ceramic sugar bowl in the centre. He grasps your wrist. You watch your own legs drowsily through the glass, their loose soft-focus drift, the way the swirls and gathers of glass make them alien and ghostly, as though you were looking at them underwater. His skin is facelift smooth. He breathes quickly.

‘Are you on the game?’ A pause. ‘As they say.’
On the cover of the *Sydney Morning Herald* is the word CHEATS. Almost an anagram for hates. One letter too many.

You say, ‘Not really.’ You consider being motherless in a fashionable way. He might give you some money. He strokes the inside of your arm.

‘My mum’s sick.’

‘Oh?’

‘Bone cancer.’

He stops stroking. ‘Sshh.’

You lift your skirt to show him the pink mass of scars across your thighs and down behind your knees, the slash and pulp of it. He takes his hand off your wrist.

‘Christ.’

‘They tried transfusions, some of my tissue. Bone marrow.’ He is not listening, which is important. If he pays attention he’ll see the lack of sense in it, the gaps in your story.

‘Aah. *Shit.*’ He ruffles inside his wallet, turns the pages of the paper rapidly, finds motions that distance himself from you, that render you strangers at the same table. He doesn’t want to fuck you.

It is then you see the photograph of Michael Grieves, grinning forlornly. He is a heavy man in boxing gloves. The caption reads: ‘Lifesaver and local volunteer Michael Grieves dies after years of work with young offenders.’

Sometimes you think the beating from Michael Grieves was all that happened: your brother’s death comes back to that moment. On these days it’s easier to unwind, to unravel all the way back to the beginning like a spool of wool or a ball of string. Other times it’s a bowerbird’s nest of random scraps, hopelessly entangled borrowings so deeply embedded in other stories they won’t ever be undone.

You say, ‘She’s dying.’
David scrapes his chair against the brick paving and puts his hand in your lap. ‘God.’

His fingers bruise against your thigh. ‘I’m just after a screw you filthy bitch.’

You read the sheet of newsprint walking home with the shade cast by the trees curling across the page. It’s not much of a story, buried alongside with celebrity gossip and the horoscopes. He had slipped on a wet concrete step in the shower block and died in hospital. There’s a picture.

It’s a gusty, easy day now, exhilarating.

The journalist strains the facts to create an account of triumph over adversity. He knew tough times. He had served a year in jail for joyriding and after his release married a Christian and spent years as a prison volunteer running a boxing program.

According to the only evidence you have, Michael Grieves was a sad man. His smile in the photo in the paper looks prearranged: his cheeks bunch uncertainly, his eyes slide towards someone out of the frame of the camera.

You would like to go to his funeral and see the garish flowers and the sober funeral director. He went to Jeremy’s funeral and Alice spat on him. He had not moved away but stood, sweating, watching the spit trickle onto the ground. Alice might be a frigid smug bitch now but she was vicious then.

It has been both your abiding fantasy and nightmare to find Michael Grieves and that he would know the truth about the day Jeremy died. His answers would be whole and sharp and shameful. They would hum in the right key: recognition.

But Michael Grieves is only a poor boy that got sold a bad promise like millions of other people: that if you do good in your life then you will eventually be rewarded. He’s a sucker. Just like the paper says he is.
Endings can be a relief, even if they are not the ones you have hoped for.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand.’
The woman at the government office is pudgy, with bobbed shaggy brown hair and oddly rounded pale green eyes. There’s a touch of the kindergarten teacher about her, with her deep-blue knitted cardigan and pleated skirt, but her mouth is tugged down with melancholy. Underneath the smooth paint of the lemon walls you see the cracked brown tile and sense the dank smell of the primary school the building once used to be.

‘I want to see the records from after my brother died. I want a copy.’

You’ve been waiting in the hush of the white corridor looking at the grey of the thick carpet and the framed photographs of flower arrangements and green plants for too long.

‘Louise Reilly, right? Let’s look you up. Shall we?’ She clatters into a computer; smile fading at the entries.

‘Okay. Your benefits have been suspended. Failure to attend scheduled activity. It’s a breach.’ She leaned back in the cool leather of her chair and swings in towards the pine desk. On it is a photo of her with a non-descript husband and perhaps a sister, ominously beautiful with slanted cheekbones and thin wrists.

You thought you’d remember everything about that day but you don’t. Mostly you remember how the wet grass felt against your feet in the backyard and then the way your dress stuck to you in melting layers after you’d gone back inside the house and how deeply it held, a plastic bandage burning. The smell. Your dad rolling you over and over in the dirt to put out the flames, saying he didn’t know Jeremy was home. You remember when they took out the stretcher with a sheet pulled over a shape and opened the doors to the
ambulance you were in and then someone said, ‘Not in with her.’ You were crying and still you thought you could hear him singing.

You thought he had finally done it, your dad, after the feverish threats and promises, that he’d set the house alight. You knew this even though he kept asking ‘How did it catch fire?’

The counsellor opens a drawer and removes some pamphlets. ‘This isn’t my area. You’ll need to go to the regular office and wait in line for an appointment.’

‘Miranda,’ you like to use their names, it puts them off balance and hers is on a bulky nametag pinned on her shirt as well as on the door, ‘I don’t want to talk to you about my benefits. I want to get the notes from the interview after my mother left, after the fire. I want to see the social worker’s report from then.’

‘Let me see. I don’t know what this is about. I’ve got a disability entry and a methadone PBS record and, oh, a sheriff’s enforcement notice and your housing situation we don’t deal with here, that’s already in the Tribunal now.’

You try to speak in simple sentences. ‘This is not about now. The social worker’s name was Janice Gray. I want the paperwork. I am trying to find my mother.’

Miranda looks sadly at her feet. You see pretty strappy leather sandals and peeling pink nailpolish. Her toes are yellow and they look cold.

She speaks gently. ‘Is this your birth mother? We have a process for that, there’s new legislation.’ She squints slowly at the computer screen. ‘Umm… there’s nothing in your file.’

Your file probably says you’re a junkie and in debt. Your file says you got a warning for assault and for shoplifting.

You got glass in your feet the day he died and that hurt more than the burns at first. You thought you could hear him inside the house. Twins are
meant to be connected. You used to tie yourselves together with strips from old pillowcases and pretend to be Siamese twins doing shows in the circus, landing in a grotesque tumble of hands and feet.

‘It’s from 1991,’ you tell her.

‘A lot of people we see here think social workers are the enemy. But I’m someone you can trust if you want to talk.’ Her eyes flutter rapidly past the face of her watch. ‘We could have a cup of tea.’

‘The file is from 1991, which is when my mother left. I’m not adopted. She left. Chelsea Reilly. There was a house-fire and there was an interview to see if we could stay with our dad. That’s what I want.’

The counsellor sighs. Over her shoulder, through the dirty third-floor window Sydney hums, the terraces of Surry Hills glow, with flowerpots hanging off balconies and bamboo blinds. The streets are cramped and dainty and European tables, laid with white linen cloths and shining wine glasses, are scattered across the footpath.

‘I think we were still on paper in ’91.’

Blackness rushes towards you. She’s a patronising filthy cunt. ‘Can I get that?’

‘What?’

‘Can I have the fucking paper file then?’

‘It won’t be kept here at the Sydney local office. Why did you think it would be here?’

There are bees under your skin. You want to fall onto the carpet and breathe in the thick fibres, the synthetic-false smell, inhale the institutional vapour of old times.

‘I thought you could tell me where it might be.’

She shrugs, pleased. ‘If a file’s not active it might have been shredded. Privacy concerns. I think you’d be better of concentrating on the housing issues.’ Her cuffs are dirty and her pale lipstick has smudged across her teeth.
‘I think you’d be better off concentrating on not being a useless monstrous bitch.’

She breathes in sharply. ‘Calm down.’

‘Fuck calm.’ But you’re crying. ‘I want the file.’ The box of tissues she hands you has a lurid pattern of tiny bunches of blue flowers. You cover your eyes. ‘Can you try again? Please?’

When she leans forward you try to see the password she punches back into her keyboard but she’s too fast, her fingers skim across the keys quickly.

Before you leave you memorise the employee number on her security pass just in case.

In movies when people leave there are careful rituals and portentous glances for those left behind to chew over. Mothers hold their kids too long and say ‘I love you’. They behave atypically, a little off centre, just enough to be noticed later. Or they agonise, they stare at photographs and look for signs.

She went four days after the fire, before you were out of hospital, before the funeral, before the investigation. She didn’t organise anything, she didn’t see anyone except for the police and Community Services staff. She made a complaint with the union against her boss at the cleaning service and she smashed a vase in one of the offices and your father had to pay for the damage, which he did palely, not used to being the one asked to take responsibility and cowed by it.

You know she once smelled of Sorbeline cream and she used to sing songs by Peter, Paul and Mary and Joan Baez when she peeled potatoes, heavily and thickly, scraping the peeler down rapidly as if she was brushing off a rug. She said the TV on in a cold house was like an old friend and she didn’t want you to have a dog as a pet because she grew up in the country with farm dogs.
At school you said that she was a spy and had to go into deep cover. Later you said she had killed herself.

You’d like to know what she’s become.

They’ve taken off the electricity and the gas in your flat so you wait in the dark with your limbs chilled. They’ll freeze you out. You lie on the mattress under the sleeping bag smoking the rollie you’ve made from the ends of other cigarettes. It smells synthetic, mildly toxic. Mrs T who lives across the hall said the Sheriff’s office came twice today with the enforcement orders to recover your property. It’s worth enjoying. What would they take? She had Susie in her arms and the boy grabbing onto her legs. She must be on prescription painkillers because she’s always smiling. She makes him school lunches in brown paper bags, onioney, with oil leaving small blotchy stains on the paper. She sweeps the corridor on your floor.

You’d like to get through the night without ringing Alice. You edge into the faded circle of light cast by the streetlight and go through what they’ve left. There’s a pale blue letter, typed with your full name and a court date, a leaflet with a list of your rights as a public housing tenant and an offer of a one-off consultation with a financial advisor.

You put two pairs of socks on and eat cereal dry from the packet, tugging it off the roof of your mouth and your gums with a finger. You take out the cask wine bladder and suck out the remaining thimble-full of alcohol. You should have gone back to the restaurant after the trial and asked for another chance. You shouldn’t have had a taste the other night. It will be funny again in the morning.

You find an old paper lining the kitchen drawer and do the crossword because it’s not smart to sleep like this with the vomit hesitating in your throat.
Once when you and Alice and Jeremy all had to walk five miles in the rain because the bus was cancelled, your mother played a game with you and now it’s become a habit. You passed the walk by listing all the things you would eat and drink and do when you got back. The list climbed into the impossible: you’d have a gallon of popcorn and seventeen Calypso icypoles; Jeremy wanted a microscope for his experiments but you all said that wasn’t part of the game, school stuff. Even what he hungered for was wrong, then.

So you still list all the things you’d have if you were rich. Central Heating. A spa. Cheese sandwiches and a small sports car.

And then you dream of numbers on a page, growing rapidly, expanding like a stain on paper, hugely tumbling. It isn’t until the deluge lifts that you remember what one of the leaflets said. You have a right to see the information government departments hold about you. Freedom of information. If those files with the interviews still exist you can get them. They have to give them to you.

When you do call Alice, Jeremy’s magnifying glass is in the pocket of your jeans, pushed in deep, pressed warm against your flesh. It feels electric, alive. You pat your pocket. Be kind. Your neck aches and the thud of blood in your head beats out remorse. Your sister already thinks you are obsessed, hems you off when you start talking about your mother. So you’ll tell her you think you can find Michael Grieves, though he’s as dead as Jeremy, to get her attention, to make her interested.

You snarl back at the fat dog behind the wire fence while the phone rings and huddle into the phone box.
We have high hopes for you, Jeremy.’ He sees them ascending into the sky, brightly coloured kites, invisibly tethered to the earth, propelled by gusts of wind. He sees washing flapping loose on the line, other people’s ideas ballooning on the horizon.

The hopes are not his; they belong to someone else.

Mrs Daly hovers over him in the last class. He must take the exam for the school down the road. He sometimes sees the boys in their uniforms at the shopping complex, buying milkshakes and making jokes about music and girls. The boys seem huge to him: oversized, gigantic. He is terrified of passing the exam, of being accepted. These boys have parents who are accountants and lawyers, who drive smooth cars when they drop their children off in the morning. He will be unbearable to them. The rubbish gathering on his front porch and the step littered with broken glass will repulse them. He will get a name. He knows this just as well as he knows his times tables, the spelling of long words.

Mrs Daly says, ‘If you do not take the exam, how will you get out of here?’

He bows his head. He wants to leave. He dreams about being an explorer, about seeing all the countries on the earth, about the languages he could speak and the journeys he would make. But Mrs Daly makes it seem as though he is on some tiny island, placing a foot forward on a bridge that leads into the future, to a place he can’t see. If he leaves, she suggests, he will not be able to come back.
He hears his father’s voice – strained and flat – ‘I wouldn’t get a big head. You’re just as good as the next kid. No better, no worse.’ His father still thinks he is worth more, deserves more, ought not to be who he is. He tells Jeremy about the research he’s doing into exotic fish at the library, and he circles good buys in the Trading Post. He draws designs for mansions on scarp paper, even plans out their gardens, cleans car parts in the garage.

His mother wants him to go to the new school. ‘Might as well give it a go. It’s a free kick.’

If he gets the scholarship, the boys at his old school will call him a snob, his sisters will loathe him and his new classmates will make fun of his house, his second-hand uniform, his puny body.

Mrs Daly sighs and shifts her heavy frame to a chair. ‘You are a very bright boy, Jeremy. You could do something with your mind.’

‘I just remember things.’

‘Well, hurry up.’ She stands and gathers the class textbooks and locks them in the cupboard.

‘What? Have you got a pen? Who’s taking you?’

Something flickers in Jeremy’s cursed memory. His dad is meant to meet him, to walk him there and wait for him outside.

‘I’m walking.’

Mrs Daly pulls at her sweaty T-shirt and turns off the lights and the fan in the room.

He bends to tie his shoelaces, which come off in abrupt stumps in his hands. He knots them tightly. He takes the ends, which are damp and speckled with soil, and hides them in his palm.

‘The other boys will have their parents there.’ She opens the door for him. ‘But don’t let that put you off. They don’t go in.’ Mrs Daly advances towards him. Jeremy realises that she is going to shake his hand and he will
not be able to hide the broken laces. She presses her fat hand against his and nods decisively.

‘Alright. Don’t get panicked and don’t forget to read the questions.’

He walks outside into the empty playground. The fading light at the end of the day makes the school he has spent years in seem softer, looser. He leans forward over the drinking trough and turns the tap on. He ducks his head rapidly and thumps it against the wall. He recognises the stout shape of Michael Grieves out of the corner of his eye. Jeremy drinks furtively and gulps the water until it makes him feel sick. He cranes his head in. Michael Grieves is bent forward touching his penis. He is jerking off in the boys’ toilet with the door open. Jeremy straightens up but not quickly enough. Michael rushes forward with a flushed, worried face.

‘You’re a fucking pervert watching me.’

Michael doesn’t seem that tall without his group of friends. He is edgy. He shakes his arms out in gestures of anger that do not seem entirely real.

Jeremy turns away.

‘You’re nothing and you didn’t see nothing. Right?’

Michael dances after him. Jeremy says, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about’ firmly, because this is important, because he cannot imagine what Michael might do to keep the piece of information Jeremy now knows from getting out.

‘Yeah?’ Michael’s zip is half undone. Jeremy walks quickly. He sees Louise at the edge of the school fence. He breaks into a trot.

‘Psycho.’ Michael yells but Jeremy feels out of his force-field, feels lighter, feels good to be moving away.

Lou shifts from foot to foot and tears her chocolate hair back into a rubber band. She looks up and down the street.
'Play the danger game, Jeremy. Lie down on the pedestrian crossing.' Jeremy checks in his pocket for the sharpened pencils Mrs Daly has given him. He smells honey-suckle in the air. He shakes his head limply.

‘Okay, I’m taking you there but I’m not waiting.’ Louise begins to walk off. Jeremy’s chest expands. He is going to the exam with his sister Lou, who no longer plays with him, who does not wish to be his double, his mirror, his twin.

He says, ‘Yup.’ They walk up to the freeway, Louise plucking leaves and flowers and tearing them into small pieces as they go. She skips. She jumps over the cracks on the footpath. She takes newspapers out of people’s letterboxes and puts them back in the red postbox. She tries to test him on maths but does not know the answers and calls out ‘wrong, wrong, wrong’ periodically.

Jeremy trails behind her, trying to rehearse solutions to problems in his mind. Halfway to the school Lou tells him that his dad is really mad today, that he will not leave the couch.

‘Alice says she wants to kill him.’

‘Mum does?’

‘Alice says that he’s wasted years of Mum’s life.’

‘Are you gonna go home?’

Louise pauses. ‘I could kill him.’ Jeremy remembers the magazines in the library that contain details of real crimes and court-cases and defendants who got off for legal reasons on technicalities.

‘How?’

‘He sleeps all day, doesn’t he?’

‘Not always.’ Jeremy falls behind again. ‘You’d get caught.’

‘I wagged this afternoon and Mum goes’ Louise draws herself up, prepares her body for the mimics that she does so well, ‘This time I’ve had it. I’ve had
it.’ Jeremy laughs at the imitation at Lou’s lively rollicking copy of their broken mother’s voice.

‘Yeah. That’s what she always says.’ His mother is full of warnings of final chances and last times. The same moments keep happening.

‘Alice is a bitch, anyway.’ They walk in silence over the bridge watching the cars flash by underneath. ‘We’re better.’ Louise spits down at the road.

Jeremy would like to touch his sister – to move closer towards this new intimacy of hers, this kindness that will expire by the time he returns home.

She says, ‘What about poison?’

‘Nah.’

‘Or, ‘bang’, a bullet just like that?’

‘You don’t have a gun. You don’t know how to use one.’

‘I could learn. I’m a good learner.’ Louise is losing interest. She sees the wrought iron gates of the school and stiffens her posture. She scowls down the hill.

Jeremy tells her she’d have to suffocate their dad because then there would be no way of proving it. His heart hammers as they arrive. He still has the shoelaces tucked in his palm. He stuffs them in his pocket. There are lights on at the school. There are rose bushes sitting in circular patches of earth on the grounds. The school looks false, like a trick photograph. In the heat it seems flat. It has no depth. It is a cheap television-set backdrop. Lou stops at the gates.

‘I don’t know why they think you’re so clever. You’re quite dumb.’ Jeremy turns towards her. He thinks she is afraid to go in. There are other boys spilling out of cars, all different ages. There are parents drinking cups of tea in a room with pale green couches and paintings on the walls.
Sweat pours down his legs. His shorts feel too tight at the waist. Lou
leaves. He cannot know what it might mean to succeed at this test. If he
passes, if they want him, this tidy school with its stiff blazers and lawns
where sprinklers tick like clocks in steady time, he cannot guess whether his
parents will be pleased or afraid.

He walks away.
At Central station I watched a seagull chase a scrap of plastic gumleaf, which a tourist had dropped, across the bare feet of an old man who slept propped against the wall. The muddy paper tag on the souvenir read, ‘Welcome to Oz-tralia.’ The gull gulped and gagged.

I sat on a bench outside the station and watched pale-faced tourists get on and off buses. A toddler still in nappies heaved around near my feet, merrily peeling a banana and then throwing chunks of it as close to my toes as he dared. Louise was late.

I had circled around Chinatown and behind the University of Technology. The women walking into the university looked colourful and brazen, wearing skirts with uneven hemlines and dangling bold costume jewellery. In a glass display case, built into the brick of a wall, were a woman’s bleached bones in front of a canvas of ghostly, luminous spheres, huge pale oranges of light. I tried to save the images in my mind.

I wanted something tangible to focus on, a real phantom, not the haunting that was dissolving my sister, hollowing her out, taking her apart cell by cell. Louise slipped between the past and the future but the present was wafer-thin for her, compressed to a sliver by the twin blocks of before and sometime.

The air felt too warm. My armpits were sweaty and my shirt stuck to my back. Buses drove on, to Canberra and Brisbane. I hated the disguise of Sydney, the gleaming glare of it, the heady holidayers at the plastic shimmering harbour from Circular Quay; the modern art museum with images on blazing white walls; the prim botanical gardens, the opera house shaped like a pristine shell, or a dropped handkerchief. Still, I liked watching the muscular brown bodies of the surf girls at Manly and the teeming swarm of Bondi, orange peel and chip wrappers tangled together on the streets in accidental intimacy.

Louise had been living here four years. I tried the flat but her home phone was disconnected. When I turned my mobile on there were increasingly shrill messages
from Jon on it, which I deleted rapidly, although I caught the start of the final one where he said, ‘I am beginning to get really annoyed with you’ in a falsely friendly voice. I had worn the wrong shoes, pointy-toed and too tight, and my feet were throbbing. If I went looking for Lou she would accuse me of being suspicious.

I ran back to feed the meter and realised I had left my backpack on the bench. It was gone when I returned. I asked at the office and a fat train worker pointed to the sign above him that said I shouldn’t leave my property unattended.

‘This is Sydney,’ he told me, ‘you’ve got to be more careful.’ I nodded my head and tried to look as if I came from some tiny town where the neighbours all left their cars and front doors unlocked.

He handed me the bag and inclined his head. ‘Okay, silly girl, what do you say?’

I grabbed the straps firmly and shovelled the backpack towards me. ‘Fuck off.’ He blinked and looked over his shoulder for a witness, someone to be outraged with. I walked down the street singing fuck off fuck off fuck off and felt better.

On the way Sarah’s car began juddering and letting out blasts of dirty steam through the exhaust pipe so I left it parked awkwardly in a lot rimmed with barbed wire and shadowed on either side by office buildings: one a mustard-yellow postmodern collision with silver struts and protruding red sills that made me think of children’s furniture and the aura of a fast-food restaurant; the other, a squat art deco low-rise.

Walking to Louise’s flat I gave two bucks to a busker because the song’s melody was jubilant and there was no school and no Jon and my body sang back.

As I veered through Newtown I passed a Thai takeaway and a fruit store selling magnificently expensive mangos, their skins cool and fleshy. The local pub had been renovated and some men in suits were gathered in the afternoon sun in the tables outside, toasting each other with dripping glasses of beer.

The public housing flat bordering Redfern and Darlington that Louise rented at subsidised rates was in a cramped greyish building of subdued repetition, each level an
exact replica of the previous one. I tried to remember which floor her place was on. I’d been here a year ago, seen food rotting in her kitchen, abandoned half-jumpers from when she was knitting compulsively, left carelessly on couches and slung over the backs of chairs. She had danced to music from the eighties while she was talking to me. We got drunk and she showed her male neighbour her breasts.

In the park next door a stringy white man prowled and sold drugs. Two teenage Aboriginal boys loped after a battered can of Sprite, kicking it forwards across the concrete.

The security door was closed and a sign taped across smashed glass read: ‘This is a residential dwelling. Only invited guests will be tolerated. Loiterers will be prosecuted. We will pursue wrongdoers to the full extent of the law.’ I knocked at the first door at the top of the stairs but she didn’t answer.

I walked back past the block and the Aboriginal Legal Service and three divvy vans. One of the constables wound down his window and put his radio in his lap. ‘Hold onto your purse, Lady.’

The papers had been full of letters about how the Redfern flats were an eyesore, a disgrace, a breeding ground, though the authors never said for what, just left it ominously implied as though they were talking about animals, contamination and quarantine. Successive governments promised to demolish them, to make them invisible in the same way homeless people were driven from the city when the Olympics came. The block was prime real estate now and developers nursed their interests and plans for luxury dwellings quietly.

Squeezed into a tiny patch of land, stigmatised, humiliated and starving, the deprivation of the Aboriginal Community in Redfern had become too public an embarrassment for the government, a living monument to distress as distasteful to the affluent as a failed skyscraper or experimental unpopular public art.

I’d taught a unit on architecture and history to the year-elevens where the Redfern district, its activism and oppression, were an optional topic. I thought I was
trying to show the relationship between control of space and physical marginalisation and notions of community, exclusion and boundaries. I wanted to talk about the struggles for land rights and the vote. I got thirteen essays on laneways in Melbourne, several of them identical, perhaps copied from the same source.

A man had been shot dead in his sleep the year my brother died. He was a black man who lived in public housing. He was not the suspect the police had been looking for.

I bought a drink from the supermarket. One of the giant murals stretching across the wall near the train station read: 100, 000 years is a long, long time. 100, 000 years is on my mind.

There were still traces of the bicentenary protests, the rage against Expo ’88, a time when surviving meant resisting.

At the squat where Louise had once stayed there was a lingering smell of cooked meat or greasy chips, stained newspaper on the veranda, but the windows were boarded up and the narrow balcony was packed with detritus: a rake, a sodden chair with splintered wood covered in glistening rainbow stickers. I climbed the steps and knocked.

A man in his fifties stuck his eye in the crack of the barely open door and stared. He was enormously fat, his eyes bloodshot. There were crumbs on his faded purple sarong. The house smelled of dope. A sweet rotting decay hovered over the chewed carpet.

‘Is Lou around?’
‘Eh?’

I cleared my throat. ‘Louise?’
‘Nup.’

‘She stayed here last year.’

His eyes glared dully. ‘No fucking LOU-EESE here.’
In the darkness behind him a woman shifted in choppy, short movements. I had a blurred impression of a purple fringe, a cheerful freckled face before she called out, ‘Hurry up and shut the door, Gary.’ I smoked a cigarette outside holding the tobacco in my lungs for as long as I could, trying on sour expressions when I exhaled.

Near Glebe Point Road I stopped at the house Louise lived in when she arrived in Sydney, the junk house. The letterbox was still painted red and the thin barred windows showed slices of the same cramped home where Lou stayed when she was pretending she was trying to get off smack. I could remember a tumble of faceless people hanging around, Lou vomiting onto the pale pink tendrils of her bedspread, the smells of fat and sour milk in the kitchen. Her bedroom was a tiny cubby at the back of the house, filled with light that poured through a small, high window that looked over a tangled luscious garden and a huge rusting hills hoist that stretched out bare in the garden like a reprisal reminding us how far we’d strayed from the suburban Australian dream. Louise would lie on the sea green mattress in her room and refuse to come out while I sat stupidly in the lounge with the others that lived there, anonymous and interchangeable, women called Skye who made Laksa and stitched needlepoints of pictures they claimed came to them in their dreams, tangled-haired boys who quoted Bob Dylan to each other – ‘Eeverybody must get stoned’ – and slept without taking off their boots. I’d put money in the cracked china apple that accumulated dust and insects in the laundry and slam the metal back gate behind me, relieved.

I crushed some of the limp magnolias hanging over the low fence and concentrated on the stickiness in my palm, to subdue the ache.

Inside I heard a baby wail. The front door was already open. A voice called out hello down the echoing corridor. I wiped off my hands, tossed the fading stems back into the garden.

‘What are you doing?’ The woman frowned at me. I knew her, even without the black bat eye-make up and the sullen, drifting addict’s gaze. She helped Lou get into the methadone program and let her paste up collages of broken glass and strange objects
across her back fence.

I couldn’t remember if Katrina and Lou were friends any more, if they still smoked together in the afternoons or if she was another casualty of Lou’s silent misery, the dark she trailed with her.

Katrina seemed suddenly old. She was heavier. She had firm wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and her breasts were leaking milk onto the floral smock she was wearing. Behind her a man cradled a baby. She looked vague and sweet-faced and very tired.

‘Sorry, Katrina. I was meant to be meeting Louise at Central.’ Silence. She didn’t appear to be looking at me. ‘I’m Alice, Lou’s sister.’

‘Oh, hi.’ She frowned.

‘I don’t know if you see her anymore.’

She waved forward the man in the darkness behind her. ‘Did she tell you she was here?’

‘No, I was walking past. I’ve lost her number.’ I lied without thinking. Katrina flattened her mouth knowingly.

‘Lou wouldn’t come here. Maybe Abercrombie Street?’ Katrina turned back and held out her arms for the baby. Over her shoulder she said, ‘Give her my love.’ She paused. ‘That’ll piss her off. She’s probably angry with me.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘We’re clean here. Your sister’s a bit of a fool.’

I swung the gate closed after me.

I found the car and got in. The needle showed the petrol gauge was low. I picked at the vinyl upholstery and poked through the glove box. When my mobile rang I picked it up without thinking.

‘For God’s sake, Alice. Fucking hell. I have been ringing you all fucking day.’ Jon sounded wrong when he swore. He used to be in advertising and he sounded as though he was trying to speak in the language of a teenage boy, as if he’d practised for
the call. I straightened out the contents of the glove box in my lap and sorted through 
bits of paper. Sarah had written: ‘good cheese, soap, CDs’ on a scrap of envelope.

‘I’m in Sydney. And you have given up on me, remember?’ At our last meeting he 
had asked, ‘Is there anything at all going on in this numb soul of yours?’ and told me to 
find someone else to self-destruct with. I still wanted to see the dreamy flicker of his 
eyelids as he slept and bury my face in the warmth of his neck but I couldn’t be certain 
it wasn’t the promise of pain that pulled me back in, back under: the sucking undertow 
of the ocean. The truth sliced into me: he loved someone else. Our moments, the 
drinking of tea, the listening to rain on my roof, his rambling accounts of the lives of 
Russian authors, were not the main game.

‘We were having a good time, weren’t we?’ he asked.

I said, ‘My numb soul can’t tell. Too numb.’

He sighed heavily into the phone.

‘Don’t you ever wonder, Alice, why you enjoy, no thrive, when things are 
confused? And then as soon, as soon as it’s difficult, a decision has to be made, or it’s 
fucking, I don’t know, meaningful or needs some’ he trailed off.

‘She’s your wife’ I told him.

‘I am aware of that, yes.’

I said, ‘I think you’re unhappy with me because you believe if I loved you 
unreservedly then it would be easier to decide.’ Even to me it sounded like a Mills and 
Boon line. She realised she loved him unreservedly.

‘I’ve decided. I’d always decided. It’s not that.’

I put my feet up on dashboard. ‘Well then.’

‘I miss you. I don’t want to give it up.’

‘Do you think if you keep going she won’t find out?’

‘She doesn’t know what she wants. Well she doesn’t know it’s a thing. We 
should talk properly. I can’t do it like this. Shit. Other phone’s ringing.’ He hung up 
and I stuffed Sarah’s junk back in the glove-box and slammed it shut.
When Louise finally called me it was late afternoon. I had been dozing with my head on the steering wheel of the car and I woke to the taste of onion and processed cheese in my mouth from the takeaway lunch I’d eaten earlier. Her voice sounded giddy and embarrassed. The excuses accumulated. She was staying out of the city and was too scared to get on the train because she hated sniffer dogs. It was daylight saving or it wasn’t. She couldn’t remember. She had lost her place in the Centrelink queue because she didn’t have enough identity points. She said she was at the Sandringham.

The streets of Newtown were slick and taut with unease. Footpaths and gutters seemed to shift or contract under the weight of the summer rain that trickled on the verandas of shops and the tin roof of the local high school. I sucked in deep breaths through my nostrils and lifted my chin. The smell of wet wool, Turkish bread and rubber drifted towards me. Clusters of homeless men near the train station watched their cardboard signs soak, impassive.

On King Street I drove past violet espresso bars and small circles of teenagers who hovered drinking absurd combinations of juice. No one would get scurvy in Newtown if they had money – I read juice bar chalkboards advertising watermelon, pineapple, peppermint, ginger and basil for rejuvenation, health, relaxation, energy and wholesomeness.

Eventually the old Newtown — once inner city slums housing the working poor who bought the Tribune in the 1950s — reasserted itself. A transvestite clacked past, Afro hairdressers’ open windows released gusty smells of hair oil and the scent of old men.

Schoolgirls walked home with achingly certain steps, their dresses faded and short, their faces open and knowing.

I waited for Lou in the Sandringham, listening to the dingding ritual of the Pokies out the back. There was a couple at the table next to me. The woman was dressed like a 1950s housewife but she also wore gumboots. Her
companion had suit pants and a jacket but no shirt. His jacket was pinned together across his midriff with a set of badges that were peculiarly open-minded — one for the Anzacs, one with a great marijuana leaf and another that appeared to be a rainbow. I forced down another sip of beer and squinted to see if I could make out the image on the third badge.

The woman said, ‘And I said to her, I said, ‘listen love: I don’t think you can do it. I just don’t. I said, nothing to go crying about, I’m not giving you the rat’s arse it’s just I don’t think you can.’ The man nodded slowly to some other voice. The woman added, ‘I told her: you’ve had your fun and when will it be time for mine?’

There were two more women behind me wearing sodden straw hats with paper flowers held on with wire. One of them said urgently ‘Sex? You’ve got to be joking. What would I want with sex.’ Her voice rose.

From the darkened corner a man muttered to himself, ‘Who’d wanna fuck that?’

I heard footsteps and then Lou was seated opposite me. She was lean and brown, except for the paler ribbons of scar tissue that crossed her arms under the plastic glitter bangles she shook around. All her black hair was gone, mowed loose and short, shaved at the sides with a long floppy fringe. Her jeans were baggy and her T-shirt was dotted with tiny strawberries with intricately drawn seeds and green tops. Her nails were jagged and dirty. She jigged her feet on the blackened floor. I hugged her. She pulled papers out of her plastic bag.

‘What’s all this? A plan to beat the casino?’

‘I did have one of those books. Do you remember? Some mathematician. Crock of shit. If you can beat the casino legally why do you need the royalties from publishing the fucker? Nah. Centrelink stuff. Get me a drink?’
'Where have you been?’

‘Is this a fucking interrogation? Yes I was late. I’ve been waiting in queues all day. You’re here just to fuck me up.’ She shook out her wrists. The bracelets clattered. ‘Sorry. Sorry. I need a drink.’

I brought back pints from the bar and slopped amber liquid over the table. She slurped and grinned. ‘Alice you are my lovely saviour.’

‘Lovely me. Do you have a place to live?’

‘Well I’m trying to get the paperwork sorted and I need you to sign.’ She slid the last page in a form across the table. There were boxes for me to fill in my date of birth, tax number, address and occupation. The header and footer listed the Department of Community Services.

‘Where’s the rest of it?’

‘That’s all you need to do.’

‘I’m not signing a form that doesn’t say what it’s for.’

She shrugged. ‘Fine. I’ll find it.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Do you ever miss the danger game?’

I put my hand over my eyes and rubbed viciously. My head hurt. I imagined that she had brought lists of trauma, collations of accidental death and injury from all over the world.

‘No, I’m an adult. Are you broke, Louise?’

Her lips were stained purple from red wine.

‘What were the rules?’

‘I don’t care.’

‘The rules were you had to do it in ten seconds and you had to do it on your own. And it ended with the code-word.’ Her neck was so straight it looked held in place by an invisible brace.

‘Please don’t do this again. What does that have to do with anything?’
'I was just thinking about it. There's this job going, where you walk on stilts to advertise the festival. Sort of like the circus. It was on the job board. I could do that.'

'Can you walk on stilts?'
'I could learn.'
'Uh-huh. Why am I here?'
She leaned forward, a few stray strands of long hair twisting toward her drink. 'I told you I saw that kid, Michael Grieves.'
'How do you know it was him?'
'I was walking behind him and I called out his name and he looked.'
'I don't believe you.'

She played with her bracelets. At the top of the papers was a picture of a sculpture, a cheap glossy postcard miniature. The background was electric blue framing a woman's torso made from glass or plastic, even clay. The woman was facing forward, but, like a half-peeled orange, or a bandaid flapping in dirty water, this woman was unravelling. Above her breasts there was only one arm, her other arm invisible, undeclared. There was a diagonal curve, a clean line, instead of a neck. She had no head.

'Well, what did you say then?'
'He raced off.'
'What would you have said?'
'Ask him what they did to him.'
I tried to see if there were needle marks on her arms but she was cunning.

She leaned forward. 'Where did Jeremy go the night he disappeared?'

The carpet was green with luscious black swirls that began to spin and mutate if you stared at them for too long. Lou wore white plastic sandals one size too small and her toes bunched hugely over the end of the sole. I slid the
car keys into my pocket and shouldered my bag. The excavation of memory, an exorcism for her, felt like drowning for me.

I said, ‘He went to the river. He went back to school. He went to the station. What difference does it make?’ but I knew. She thought the answer might free her of burden, the way confession is meant to, that this knowledge would make her well and whole.

‘It makes a difference to me. How he died. You know, if he meant it.’ She held a cigarette of mine and roasted it in the flame of the cigarette lighter, dug out some dope.

And I have thought this too. Did he want to die or did he just not know the kerosene was on the floor? Was he making himself a cup of tea on the stove? Did he think there’d just be some supercool explosion, like a rocket blasting? Did he want Dad to be stuck in the house? Did he believe Mum would save him or that I would? How did he even get inside?

‘How about I lend you fifty bucks and then we go to Centrelink.’

She kicked my shin. ‘Eerie stone Alice, all statue. Don’t fake it with me.’

‘Well none of this seems to be making you happy.’

‘Coming from you, Alice, that diagnosis means very little. You are unhappiness at home in its loungeroom.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I want to come to Melbourne. Sydney’s shit.’

Her eyes gleamed blackly. She was my sister but I didn’t know her. She could have been intoxicated with joy or reeling with fear and I wouldn’t see it.

I said, ‘Are you using?’

She looked at the table, forlorn. It was a terrific performance. ‘Not really.’
I drank the lukewarm beer left in the glass on the table in front of me and stood up.

She put her papers down fussily, ‘Settle, settle, settle.’

I thought of the collages she used to make with broken glass. ‘I saw your friend Katrina. She had a kid.’

‘So?’

‘So nothing.’

‘What if I looked for Mum?’

‘For what?’

‘You look like shit, Alice. You’re a hunched over old woman with a sour little face.’

I told her, ‘She’s probably not even in Melbourne.’

‘She smashed up shit at work before she left. That was the last thing. Not us.’

‘She didn’t do anything like that.’

‘She fucking well did.’

‘You’re a fantasist Louise.’ We sat back in the sullen silence. A few tables down the older women had put down their stubby complimentary pencils and tatts forms and were watching us with glee.

‘Let’s go.’

She smiled, resigned. ‘I am, alas, evicted.’

A boy came towards our table. He was about sixteen, with a blue baseball cap and a rash of pimples across his chin. ‘Got any grass mate?’ Louise ignored him.

His whisper was gravelly and adolescent. ‘Give us some and I’ll get it back to ya.’ Louise sat gracefully, her throat exposed and her eyes flickering
towards the ceiling. The boy turned to go. He jolted back and tipped her glass onto the table. ‘Right, fuck off then.’

When the barman walked towards us, he backed out calling, ‘I know her. She sells. She fucked me brother. Cocksucking bitch.’

The barman looked back at Louise. From his angle he couldn’t see the tissue of scar that ran down the back of her neck to her shoulder. When we stood outside in the light I could imagine her circling around the Cross eating leftovers from the bins and cleaning syringes with homemade solution, I could see it in detail, as if it were already happening.

‘Fine. Get in the car.’ She touched the skin on her forearms absentmindedly, soothingly and rolled her joint.

The thing about Lou was that she was burned.

Before we left I drove to one of the fast Centrelinks, in a wealthy suburb of Sydney, where it wouldn’t take all day for her to speak to someone and I waited in line with her. We hardly spoke; shuffling our feet across the pale blue of the carpet, stretching our ankles the way runners might before a big race. Rain whispered past the windows. We were like gamblers — time had no meaning for us — we would wait in the queue until someone saw us or we were sent home. I watched Lou’s profile in the darkened window. She was in pieces, because the blinds broke up her reflection and the tinted glass distorted us. Like the windows of government cars or limousines, it made us seem more important than we were. One piece of Louise in the window took off her bright sunglasses, ran her finger across her eyebrows, then put them back on.

A gaunt man kicked a glass bottle on the footpath outside. He walked with the gait of my dead brother, hands clasped behind his back, neck tilted
towards the mysteries of the ground. The sky escaped him. The wind didn’t move him. His legs swung to a rhythm that bled inside his head.

The dust on the Venetian blinds bothered me. I had helped Mum take a wet cloth to the blinds of the institutions she cleaned and summer sweat would trickle down between my flat breasts. When we went to a house, sometimes the owners would offer my mother ‘a glass of lemonade for your daughter.’ Before I learned shame I would often request lollies or demand drinks from the few dedicated or desperate corporate execs hanging around in the evenings at the offices we vacuumed. I shamed them too, and just as well, since they drank hard and worked hard to be kept away from overweight mothers with little girls scraping through their waste-bins and wearing their poverty like a badly stitched second skin.

I studied the faint, dustless imprint of fingers on the Venetian blinds here. They were low-down enough to belong to a child with marks fat enough to belong to a wide-palmed adult. I was pleased to have found a tiny gap in the flat, certain world of Centrelink, but the fingerprints also bothered me. How did they get there?

Louise placed her hands in the pockets of the pants that sagged limply off her hips. Yesterday’s clothes clung softly to her. She had failed activity tests; she had not kept up the client end of the bargain. Welfare offices, like the school I taught at, thrived on euphemisms. Mutual Obligation. Job Networks. Jobsearch Training.

Lou scanned the faces behind the desk. There was a tired man with silver hair and a wide-lipped woman with severely framed glasses who typed quickly and frowned then smiled as though her day was comprised of endless expectations and disappointments.

A woman I once taught with — we were friends in a way, she had a guttural laugh and the kids never knew what to do with her — had worked at
Centrelink in a previous life. She had said, ‘If first year psychology was rats and stats, unemployment was all junkies and jobsnobs’ and I’d never been able to speak to her in the same way since.

My sister was twenty-four and regretted more than she could remember.

She talked to me in a rapid monologue about the plans she had to find Michael Grieves and speak to him and she listed the mad circularity of her predicament. She couldn’t prove to the office where she lived because she’d been evicted but she needed an address for correspondence and she couldn’t be paid because she’d been evicted for having no money but she had been cut off because her circumstances had changed and she hadn’t notified anyone and she couldn’t collect rent assistance without a lease. Her voice grew higher. She began to sound cheerful. She became wryly amused, flexible, a moment in a black comedy.

I wondered what Louise might have wished for when she was a child. She would have wanted to be beautiful when she grew up, the way girls are encouraged to, and now she was. She might have hoped to have many boyfriends back then, or to be able to afford brand-name jeans. She would have wanted to be clever, because cleverness seemed the certain way out of all that had come before.

When she still lived in Melbourne she was working at a bottle shop. She had Levi jeans and slept with boys and was sick afterwards. At eighteen her calves ached and the manager pinched her arse. Once I came in and the manager said, ‘Serve that woman even if she doesn’t swallow,’ and I had seen Lou not knowing whether to be coy or embarrassed and which would keep her the job.
The thought of what my sister might once have wanted for herself was almost unbearable. I fixed my eyes on the bright, hard white of the Centrelink wall.

A poster on the wall warned us not too try to hard to get well: the pharmaceutical benefits scheme could only be kept intact if people only took the medicine they really truly needed. The work-for-the-dole poster showed a young woman beaming in an army uniform with the word ‘opportunity’ lettered like a sash across her chest.

While Louise showed her forms to a thin young man at the counter, someone at the end of the line with a wrenched face smoothly toppled the rubber plant next to the window where the fingerprints hung in the dust. The plant landed quietly and earth and stones tipped soundlessly onto the carpet. The gesture was filmic. A security guard rushed out but the man had already made his exit.

‘Computer’s frozen. Just be a few ticks.’ The thin man chewed on his pencil and turned a page in the newspaper he kept behind the counter. Louise leaned in.

‘Ruin’ she said.

He shifted in irritation. ‘What?’

‘You’re missing five down. The cryptic crossword.’ We all stared at the clue. Damaged urn in disrepair. ‘Ruin.’
At the railway line he counts the number of goods trains passing through. He watches the disguised signals – the lights – that tell the train drivers it is safe to keep going. He wonders if these signals are centrally controlled and if the drivers really pay attention to them. The railway crossing is overgrown. Men used to open and close the gates when Jeremy was young but now they ding down automatically. Is there a trigger in the tracks when the trains are approaching or is it done with computers? It occurs to Jeremy that his father may be very, very angry when he returns home.

He sits near the tracks and presses his nose forward and tries to get a sense of the passengers in the train as it passes by. It is difficult. His own landscape is pressed onto them in the dark reflections of the window, and the faces he can distinguish bob and float in the embankment and the weeds where he sits. He is ten. He cannot think of being thirty-eight. He cannot conceive of himself at his father’s age. Another goods train passes and hoots into the empty dark. The train rocks on the rails in an even hum. The boom gates lift and the bells stop ringing. Jeremy creeps onto the railway tracks and feels the warm rails. He sees paddle pop sticks and plastic bags wedged in the tracks. He takes off his shoes and stands right up close. If another train comes he will hear the signal.

He touches the black rocks that line the railway track. They are smooth and dull. He feels a cold wind through his T-shirt. He chucks a rock into the air and fails to catch it. Some of the boys in Alice’s class come down here. They graffiti their tags onto the trains in giant, incomprehensible letters. His father may have come to collect him. The school would ripple with his father’s awkwardness. Would they have read out his name on a role?
He tries to remember the types of rock that he has heard about. All he can think of is sedimentary but the train rocks are not sedimentary rocks. The magazines in the library say you can suffocate someone by putting a pillow over their face or a plastic bag over their head, but Louise does not know this. There is smoke rising from the factory behind the railway yard and sparrows pick in the long grass on the other side of the tracks. Jeremy wonders if drivers have special rail maps that show the routes of trains all around the suburb and the state. When you are on a train you can trick yourself into thinking that you are static and the world is moving not the train. Jeremy looks at the clouds in the sky and tries to balance his vision so that the clouds are still and the moon, the whole sky, is lurching around them.

He picks up the black rocks and takes them to the side of the tracks. He lays them out in order of size. He wishes he could load them into his bag for school. There is one rock that is white underneath. He fingers it. The white isn’t chalk, isn’t bird shit. It is on the wrong side of the rock to be paint. He throws the rock away and it bounces quite high and skitters back onto the railway tracks. He looks away and tries to find the rock when he looks again but it has blended in. The line of broken glass near the path reminds him of his father. He thinks of being at the beach with Louise. Sand is broken down rock. Glass will become smooth in the sea, its edges lose their sharpness, but syringes stay the same and his mother will not let him pick them up from the shore.

If he could get onto the train then he wouldn’t return home. He would be vanished. He wouldn’t see the set of his mother’s face or the disguised relief of his father who hates him. He doesn’t have a ticket. He doesn’t have any money. He is ten and when you are ten you cannot be a magician.

The boom gates begin screaming again and he hears the dull murmur of a train. It is very difficult to stop a train suddenly, even if you slam on the
brakes. He wants Louise to tell her old stories about silver trains that move so fast you cannot see them, that travel under-water, under land and crash into countries and islands that haven’t been found before. Trains like liquid that change shape and have passengers that can see the future and the past all at the same time.

He heaves his rocks – there are nine of them, the tenth is lost now – into his arms and cradles their slight warmth and sniffs the smell of the heat, the smell of bakeries, and he takes them back up the embankment towards home.

Alice (2005)  Chapter Nine

I walked to the train station in the rain, taking choppy steps on the slippery footpaths. I held my umbrella low to avoid making eye contact with the others rushing to work.

I’d left twenty dollars in my wallet next to the bed for Louise, who had stayed up late, sorting through her notes, rustling like a small animal. She was now on a rubbery Lilo on the hall floor, her face buried in the pillow, only the short uneven clumps of her hair, glossy and thick spilling out from under the blue-spotted cotton sheet. Her wrists were so thin. There was a stale packet of green tea and a box of cornflakes on the bench but no milk in the fridge. My heart fluttered when I left the money but twenty dollars wouldn’t buy much of anything Lou might hunger for.

We’d arrived in Melbourne in the early hours of the morning. She’d spent the trip singing with the radio and chewing through Sarah’s ancient box
of mints that had been wedged on the floor near the back seat. With a couple of shots of gin at a stopover in Albury Louise had told me how it was all possible, she was going to get a great job, she could just tell, she felt the time was right, she could be different in another city. And still my heart leapt for her, though I thought I knew better. Still I thought she might be on the verge of some discovery.

If she found our mother she said she would forget the stories she knew about housefires and could stop having nightmares. This certainty unnerved me. She believed it. My long-dead brother, my father’s inability to hold a job, these seemed elements of a much bigger pattern of deprivation and despair, that couldn’t be understood by looking back but by looking around.

I told myself I wasn’t involved.

Before I woke I had been dreaming about the installation I’d seen in Sydney, the yellowed bones and fleshless body. My brother had become a ventriloquist’s doll in a coffin, mouthing advice to me that I couldn’t interpret. His face was plastic with deep-set eyes with fake lashes and a sudden gash for a mouth.

When Alice and Jeremy were born, Mum fed me the sugar lumps from her tea tray at the hospital. Louise came first. Jeremy was born much smaller than her. Often one twin dominates, even in the womb, and absorbs more of the nutrients. The hospital had smelled of antiseptic, floor cleaner. My father, who was driving a forklift at the factory back then, sat on the hospital bench in grey overalls begging a God he didn’t believe in for things to go right and then shouting at him for being a fraud. I had recognised the Lord’s Prayer from my grandmother’s training. She’d minded me Saturdays, a stiff white-haired woman who’d taught me to cross my ankles like a lady and to sip the huge mugs of Irish Breakfast tea holding the handle and not the cup. I wasn’t
meant to be learning the prayer because Mum hated the church, but my dad’s mother let me play with the china Jesus and lamb and use her best crayons if I recited the words with her.

She’d come to live with us for a while much later, after the fire, after our mother had left. I thought if Louise did find our mother somewhere I’d have to feel sorry for her, and I didn’t want to.

At work I marked essays through lunch and had to take the geography teacher’s Social Studies classes because he hated them and he’d stood in for me while I’d been away. I had a fax on the desk about updating the teaching materials on values. The poster that hung behind the door listed tolerance, diversity, initiative, caring, trying, and giving everyone a ‘fair go’ as good values, and provided examples. There was also a report in my pigeonhole attached to the union notice titled ‘Some comments on viability and flexibility in under performing low-retention secondary school programs with diminishing enrolments.’ It was awash with jargon, an early draft from some public servant that I guessed someone had leaked, and the author’s initials, M.F, were pencilled quite small at the top of the page.

The year eights were meant to be discussing stereotypes. Twenty-five faces watched me sullenly. My student-teacher was working with the older kids. I caught a glimpse of her, shoulders hunched as if against a blaze of wind.

Nick talked about Aborigines and told the class with the sure smile of one who knew he spoke the truth, ‘All they do, Miss, all they do, is drink.’

‘They sell drugs,’ a new girl added. ‘And riot.’ The rest of the class stirred. They were keen on riots and said they were fantastic. They assured me that the kids who had burned down their schools were fantastic too. I knew I should rein them in but since I had left the Sandringham Hotel in
Sydney I couldn’t get the Whitlams lyrics, ‘God drinks down at the Sandringham these days’ out of my mind. It rolled through obsessively.

‘Who knows what a stereotype is?’ I didn’t tell them I’d been to Redfern and seen a wall of cops at the train station, hands on their batons, a heavy line of blue. I asked them about police violence and Aboriginal deaths in custody and racism in Australia. We had four Aboriginal students in the school, none in my classes.

I pulled several of the tables together. ‘Push your chairs back carefully. We’re going to play a game.’ I pointed to the four corners of the room. ‘Each of these corners is an area. I want you to run to the first corner if you can say yes to the following statement.’ They huddled together in the centre of the room. ‘If you are wearing white.’ They all shifted into the first area; white was part of the school uniform. ‘And move on to section two if you are a girl.’ Half of them ran on. ‘And go to the next corner if you have ever felt unfairly treated.’ They grinned at each other and pressed forward together. ‘Move on if you have ever been picked on.’ It was mostly the female students that walked forward. They stared at each other. ‘If you wish you weren’t in school right now,’ only a handful had the courage to change corners. ‘Keep going quickly, try not to stop and think. Go to the next station if you think that you have experienced racism or you think you have been racist.’ There was a dead stop, a staring down, then a flurry. Bella, who had crooked teeth and dirty white-blonde hair down her back, tripped over.

‘Ah shit. Are you hurt?’

She got back on her feet. ‘That’s cool, Miss Reilly.’

I put my hands to my cheeks to cool them. As the bell rang Nick said to me, ‘Can we do that every social studies?’
‘Not a chance.’ I was smiling even though it felt like a daggy exercise from one of those ancient textbooks on group dynamics for social workers or building rapport amongst executives.

After the bell rang I read some of their exercises on empathy. Bella had written: ‘I understand the Aborigines because now I live in houses like them. Dad takes junk’, she has crossed it out and written, ‘drugs’. ‘I watched TV and then the Services took me away and now my sister isn’t with me but where I stay is the same as theirs and maybe they could come and have a riot too in the place where I am.’

Unsigned in cramped boys’ handwriting I read: ‘They are fucked. They should get used to it.’

I sat for a while in the classroom in the hazy puddle of sun that spread over the plastic desks. Did my anonymous student think Aboriginals should get used to it because things weren’t going to be any different or because they deserved it?

The realism, the blank resignation, of the sentiment appalled me. But was I any different? I thought it was a rigged game, a shitty system. But I lacked the courage or the hopefulness to imagine any alternative. I stuck doggedly, out of habit and history, to the few expectations I still had left. The seventies slogan from the sticker on Sarah’s car taunted me. I wasn’t outraged or paying attention. For all Louise’s slipperiness, her evasions and her brittleness, at least she remained defiant.

Usually the trick with yard duty was to dim your peripheral vision and keep your eyes firmly to the front so that whatever the kids were doing has been stopped or been hidden by the time you arrive.

Our principal was ragged because a couple of people were away on stress leave and our emergency teacher had already left for the day. I walked
past walls covered in graffitied posters for safe sex, and complex concept maps with ballooning circles that intersected to show the multiple career choices that were meant to be available to my students. I hadn’t eaten and my skin felt tight.

We’d had complaints that some of our ex-students were chroming by the gate. The eighteen or nineteen year olds who sniffed in old car parks or closed youth-centres were harmless – hollowed out by boredom. These were the same boys who cut down a bunch of trees in the main street last summer. I swung between a searing sorrow for them and rigid irritation. Why was their despair at the system so passive, so self-hating? Why did they stop themselves like magnets at the gateway to our school to draw in the ones who might still get by, who might finish, might get out?

I didn’t ask myself what I thought getting out meant.

The playground was flat, punctuated by a few ti-trees and some patches of scrubby grass. The younger girls swung on the bars and played elastics or marbles. The older ones smoked and talked under the shelter of the big oak tree. The boys played basketball on the asphalt and leaped into the air when they got an unlikely shot through the broken ring, or sat in the woodwork room, with their backs to the door, where they were not allowed between classes.

There were a couple of aerosol cans near the gate but no chromers. Year-sevens jumped the faded hopscotch lines and wheeled around with wiry, lithe bodies. The Thomas boys crouched at the edge of the school leaning into the wire-cage fence with their heads nestled together sharing a single set of earphones.

Melissa, queen of the year-seven girls, kept a locker full of other students’ things and wore eyeliner ringed like texta. A small mob of Greek kids trailed behind her.

Sam, a big easy boy repeating year ten, was in the woodwork room. His parents had moved into the area from a tiny country town a few years ago, but his father was killed in an industrial accident a couple of months later. Half the school
came to his funeral and parents who couldn’t buy a sports uniform or new editions of textbooks poured in money to buy flowers. I hadn’t seen his mother at the parent-teacher interviews this year.

‘You’re not allowed in here after the bell’s gone.’

‘I’m not doing nothing,’ He was sanding the same coffee table they all made year after year. His maroon and grey jumper was faintly ridiculous on a sixteen year old. His hair ran over his collar, dyed black and green.

In my head I said ‘anything’. I crossed my arms. ‘It’s a school rule.’ I started again. ‘If I make exceptions I’ll have half your class in here, some of them stoned, playing with saws and sanders.’

Sam had his hands on the table he was building. He was trying to be happy: solidifying the small rituals, building things he hoped would stay solid. I realised that it was moments like these when I hated teaching – the pettiness of it, the control, the arbitrary, needless rules.

‘Why don’t you lock the fucking room then?’ I felt a stab of anxiety. I remembered that Max who took woodwork and the apprenticeship stream for the final-year students probably was meant to lock the door at lunch.

Sam turned his back to me.

‘What’s going on? Is there a problem with the other kids in your class?’

‘I want to make my table. Me mum’s gonna use it.’

‘You’ve done a good job.’

‘You reckon?’

I had no idea. ‘Can’t you finish it next week?’

‘ Might be leaving, Miss.’

In the time I’d taught Sam I’d seen him with a broken nose from trying to fight a group of kids at the bus stop who’d been calling out ‘go back to where you came from’. He read science fiction at the local library and handed in stories about mind control and cloning instead of history essays.
‘Where will you go? You’ve only got a couple of years left.’ I sat on the bench and looked at the curled wood shavings on the ground, which turned in on themselves like apple skins.

He looked at me as if I was absolutely vacant.

‘Just work. Me Mum’s real sick. Same thing I’d do anyway.’

I chewed my nails. I’d seen it before – plenty of boys leave at the end of year ten. I told myself I was used to it. And why should they stay? Most of the time I didn’t do much for any of them but give them bits of history – tastes of old struggle. But I wanted Sam to be different.

‘You don’t have to leave right now,’ I said, ‘why don’t you hang on?’

‘Yeah.’ He meant no. ‘I’m sick of school. I don’t wanna finish just so I can get a job and tell people what to do all day.’

He must have thought that was what I did. ‘How’s your brother?’

‘Living with some really rich guy. Daytona at home in the living room and a glass shower. He says she’s putting it on, Mum is, and that she just wants another man to come and rescue her.’

Even to me, Daytona and a glass shower didn’t seem a bad deal. ‘See how you go. But talk to me about it before you decide.’

‘Yeah, Miss.’

It was the end of the day when Tom, the principal, called out to me. He rubbed at his eyes behind his glasses. Tom was a careful man in his early sixties. He was slender, with a clipped beard and a habit of wearing pinstriped suits, and getting uproariously drunk at the Christmas party each year. When he hired me, it was just after his application to be the head teacher at a private school was unsuccessful, and there were private bets amongst the teachers on how soon he’d retire.

‘Alice? Were you supervising at lunch?’

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‘I was only on duty for the second half.’

‘Where were you?’

‘I checked the gates. It was fine. I guess they had a day off.’

‘One of the girls fell off the monkey bars and hit her face. Her mother came down to the school. We couldn’t find you.’

‘I was in the woodwork room. One of my students is about to drop out.’

‘Even if we can’t prevent accidents, Alice, the point of duty is to make sure someone’s there. You’re supposed to keep moving when you’re supervising.’

He was right. I had spent too long with Sam. I’d only been at the school four years. I had trouble controlling my classes. I told Tom I couldn’t be everywhere at once.

‘Was it a male student in the woodwork room?’

‘Oh come off it. He was upset.’

‘I don’t like it any more than you do but we have to cover ourselves. It’s a really bad idea to be with a male student alone.’

‘It’s ridiculous to think—’

‘It’s not about what I think, it’s how does it look.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘That’s the way the Department sees things. It’s for your own protection.’

‘Yeah.’ I felt thick, rebuffed.

I found the drawings taped up in newspaper under the junk mail when I got home. Jon’s jerky piecemeal handwriting gave him away. I sorted through reports that houses in my area had sold for record prices, and pictures of three-inch angry termites in an extermination company’s brochure. There was
an ad for steam cleaning that questioned, ‘Does your carpet look like this?’ above a photo of a spoiled square of off-white pile. Indeed my carpet had a dank smell, a residue that might have come from the detritus of many tramping feet and bong spills of those who’d rented before me.

I gathered up the leaflets with their coaxing and admonishing, their alternate engendering of ambition and fear in potential purchasers and I took the collection of drawings upstairs. Last year’s news blurred away. My hands were smudged with black ink.

There was white wine left in the bottle so I sat on the balcony and poured a glass. The sky was a pallid blue. The light was golden, drowsy. I smelled sausages in the air. The giant lavender pot I kept had attracted bees. I wanted to be the sort of person who would make lavender jam, or marinate their own olives in jars and grow tomatoes or design their own cards at Christmas. I was seized briefly with the urge to immerse myself in domesticity. I had already succumbed to frivolity and at least I would be productive not just bored. I felt a giddy lightness, a sense of falling into happiness just with the sun and the empty flat and the hungriness growing in me.

Then I read the report from school before I opened the package from Jon. The options were carefully worded, hedging, and listed in a neutral order, but this was from the office of the Minister for Education. The least viable option was for our school to retain a full program and staff and continue fully funded. I was on a contract, the most expendable teacher if staff were cut. Someone, probably Maria the union rep at school, had scribbled questions across the page. There wasn’t any detail about what would happen to us if funding was reduced. Louise didn’t know that I had recently begun paying my father’s rent. My savings were disappearing.
I knew Louise was already changing, or changing back. There had been a glitter to her eyes on the way home – flashes of green gleamed almost silver – and she held herself with a terse determination. I didn’t think our mother would ever be found. She’d have changed her name, erased her history. They were in debt when she went and she hadn’t even waited for the funeral, which had been delayed for the autopsy. I’d begun to wonder, without telling Lou, if she had already been planning to leave before Jeremy died. It was the absences that made room for the conspiracies. Louise and I had been locked together once in a tangle against the world but often the world had divided us against each other too.

Still I loved Louise. I wanted to believe in her.

If I shut one eye and scowled through the sun bouncing off the glass doors I could see the cardboard edges of a school project my brother made about the solar system, jammed behind an expensive book on architecture I’d never read. I told myself I kept Jeremy’s project within sight to remind me that hoping could become terminal, a disease.

I tore open the bundle from Jon and out fell the drawings and his note, which had “sorry I fucked things up”, scribbled over and over. I was half expecting more of his usual fare: he was commissioned to draw limp watercolours with intricate borders and attractive, unthreatening woodland creatures for some authors, and bold, impudent, cartoony kids with mismatched socks and crooked smiles for others.

Jon had asked me once to test out some of his sketches for a young-adult book on my students and I kept pretending to forget because I could hear the glee in their voices – ‘these pictures are gay’, ‘fuck the spaceships, where’s the guns’ – as they demolished his eager nostalgic representations of what it meant to be young.

But the first drawing was charcoal. I was seated, looking out the
window, one hand supporting my chin. My eyes were blank not wondrous. My eyebrows frowned fiercely. I leaned forward and my toes were squat and splayed on the ground. Something about my jaw suggested I was preparing for an attack. I listened to the clock on my wall, each tick a tiny death, and patted the creased paper wrapping.

Jon had disappointed me. His gift was hardly an insight and his conclusions insubstantial – I was unhappy. I should do yoga. The beauty of the natural world didn’t please me. Any bright six-year-old could tell you that.

Then I realised that Louise was clutching onto my back. She was the size of a tiny, tame monkey but her features were intricately rendered: Louise’s come-fuck-me stare the monkey’s backward glance. Her clinging hands had broken nails. A syringe and a bookmark were tucked into her back pocket.

Finding Louise in the picture winded me. The recognition that Jon had cruelty and menace, a conscious streak of unkindness, was a relief after so many nights of being injured by the accidental, the incidental, the breathless remark.

He’d never seen Lou. He must have got the face from the snapshot tucked into the edge of my mirror, taken when Louise was seventeen.

When I went to turn the page, something else caught my eye. In the same style as an in-joke amongst cartoonists at a snappy New York magazine, Jon had written himself into the picture. His hand waved or trailed behind him like an afterthought at the edge of the page: Jon, out of the frame, a vacating presence.

Until this moment, this image, I had not thought Jon clever. I took the remainder of the drawings into the bathroom where the tiles were cool under my feet. I sat with my back against the wall and focused on the gold of my taps and the ring of grease that coated the pink surface of the bath.
I’d painted the walls pale green and Jon had helped with the sills and window frames. We’d laughed at the colour names on the tins: waterberry, luminosity.

The remaining pictures were drafted like proofs for a children’s book, Peter and Jane in style, naïve. Jon and I were children. We walked. We ran. We even played with the neighbourhood dog. In this narrative I was the sulky older sister, tethered to a whimsical, child-like brother who was always looking the other way. I supposed there were worse ways to tell the story.

I left a message for Sarah to tell her that her car was back and stuffed the drawing of Louise and I down the side of the bed, then I tore up the rest of Jon’s sketches and used the scraps to wrap up the dead flies that hovered along the skirting boards before I threw them in the bin. I ate dinner quickly at the kitchen table, wiping the grease from my hands on my pants and then I filled the percolator with espresso coffee.

I hoped it was Lou ringing but Jon said, ‘Don’t hang up on me.’

‘Fancy that,’ I said and then, ‘I’m not the hanging up type.’

‘Don’t be so unambitious. Everyone can be the hanging up type given the right circumstances.’

His voice was ragged. He had been drinking. He sounded afraid.

‘Are we siblings?’

‘What? Are we?’

‘In the drawings?’

‘Not sure. Not sure.’ He waited. ‘Let me come around.’

‘Lou’s here,’ I told him.

‘She came back with you?’

‘It’s what they like to call a long story.’
'How are the drawings?' he asked.

'They’re very well. Serving two masters. Nice coffin padding for some recently deceased flies.'

He cleared his throat.

I lit up. ‘Are we finished?’

'I shouldn’t have stayed the night. I promised myself when we started.'

'Well you shouldn’t have come if that’s where it was going to end up.'

His voice rose. ‘Where did you think it was going to end up?’

I asked him what his wife said when she found out.

'She just said I’m a fuckwit man and that I’m blundering and obvious.'

'You are,' my voice lifted suddenly, ‘that’s it. You are a man, a fuckwit man.' The elation ebbed away. If I asked him where he was calling from, he wouldn’t tell me. The reassurances he must have given his wife remained unacknowledged between us.

'lt’s not the sex that upsets her. She says. It’s all the lying. She thinks I’m foolish.'

'And what do you think?’

'I don’t know. A marriage is a messy thing.'

I didn’t want to know about his marriage. He was lecturing me from the inside of an institution he assumed I knew nothing about. I wrote lists of swear words on the notepad next to the phone. Why couldn’t I let him go?

'What did you promise her?’

'She says she’s thinking about whether she wants to try and fix things with me, if she can be bothered. Fuck, she works all the time and then she says she wants to have a baby. Next week she doesn’t want to have a baby. She wants to rent an apartment in Paris and take photos. I thought men were meant to have the midlife crisis.’

'Oh but you are, dear one. What else am I?’
'Look Alice—'

'I can’t be bothered. I just can’t be fucked.'

'I guess you think I’ve treated you pretty badly. And I’m a shit. But there was something there. We had something. Even if it was raw and difficult it was real. At least give me that. Right?'

He’d slipped into the past tense beautifully, without a breath’s pause.

'Yes it was real. What sort of criteria is that? Global warming’s real. And rats and nuclear weapons. Leprechauns aren’t.’

We laughed. He said, ‘I’m coming over.’

‘Where’s Mary tonight then?’

He breathed in. ‘You are gentle and lovely and soft and warm and you know the blackest parts of me, won’t you let me come round and talk to you. Just tonight?’

It sounded like a song. I tried to make it into a tune in my head: you know the blackest parts of me/Won’t you let me come round/just tonight?

‘Hang on, the coffee.’ The coffee percolator hummed a warning and I jumped up with the phone but it had already exploded coffee all over the stove.

Jon said, ‘You should get a new one’ and I answered flatly, ‘A new what?’ very slowly and then we were quiet.

When he knocked on the door he was carrying a paperback copy of Bulgakov’s Master and Margarita to read to me. We embraced gingerly in the hallway. I looked at his face, the smooth brown skin, the swollen nose, the wicked tilt of his eyelashes, the faint creases beneath his eyes.

‘I thought I’d meet your sister.’

‘I’m not sure where she is now.’ I glanced at the clock. Nine-thirty: early if you were twenty-four and jobless. ‘I don’t really want her here. You’d
think she’s magical and stunning and she’ll tell you she can play the drums and she had a speaking part in a famous TV show or that we had a dog called Alexander that was hit by a car and you’ll be nodding along until you realise it’s utter invention.’

He brushed at his hair, nervy. ‘Right.’

‘I wish she wasn’t staying with me.’

He laughed. It was a throaty earnest sound. ‘Now tell me what you really think of her.’

He was doing his best imitation of irony but I considered the question seriously. After a long time I said, ‘I admire her.’

We got slowly under the covers and I felt the tug of sleep approaching. His skin was warm and electric. We kissed but it felt performative, self-consciously a ritual, as though we were rehearsing a scene in a film. It was too much: the faint stubble grazing his chin, the smell of pencil on his hands, the slowly growing dread of the announcement I was sure he would make. I worried that I could never feel the right thing at the right moment.

He read quietly, in a gentle voice that belonged to a younger man. He licked a finger before turning the pages and I felt him pause for a set number of beats between sections. He was the only man who’d ever read to me as an adult although Mum had read the Faraway Tree and Wind in the Willows to us as kids. The air hummed with the silent energy of what was not being said. He put the novel aside and stroked my hair.

He began drawing on my foot in pen, a path leading to an open door. It was too much like being branded, so I tugged away. ‘Freud would go to town on you.’

‘Why?’

‘Next you’ll draw a train in a tunnel.’

His laugh was a rough and nervous.
I realised that when Jon was illustrating, a pencil blunted to the stub in his pale hand, I knew him least. I asked him what it felt like when he knew he’d got an image right, how he could tell the good drawings from the bad.

‘When I get it right it feels familiar, like something that’s already happened to me. I remember it, even though it hasn’t happened before.’

He sat up. ‘Why do you admire your sister?’

I’d put on some blues music and it was making us limpid and heavy on the bed. There was something generic, clichéd, about our poses. For the first time since the affair had begun I felt almost squalid, embarrassed at my lack of originality, at the reek of evasion, desperation, in our silences.

‘She hasn’t given up on the idea of justice. Economic equality. Rights for the homeless. She still thinks fairness is possible. She doesn’t live in the real world.’

I wanted to avoid his having to tell me that it was finished. I looked at the pest control brochure crumpled on the floor.

‘Does this sort of stuff work?’

‘What?’ He shifted in the bed toward me.

‘Advertising like this?’

He shrugged. ‘Depends.’

‘Come on, ad man.’

‘Well, that’s pretty crude. Crappy design. There’s nothing that would make you remember the company. But the principles stay the same. It’s about repetition and association. You have a product and you get people to aspire to own it or you get them to fear something and you sell the solution to it.’

‘They see through it.’

‘But that might not stop them buying. What do you have in your bathroom cabinet?’

‘Disprin and homebrand plastic strips, aka bandaids.’
'Mmm and cream that promises to reverse the signs of ageing. You don’t really think you’ll look twenty forever. It’s the hopefulness you’re paying for, not the result. You’re purchasing the aspiration not the reality.’

‘Surely I look twenty now?’ But he wasn’t flirting. He was grasping at this conversation of nothing much.

‘Same as drug companies. Same with government. You train people to want something and forget what they need or create needs that they didn’t know they had.’

‘Assuming people are blank and stupid.’

‘Advertising’s much more creative now than it was when I was started. Especially television, it’s far more oblique, like video clips. The industry attracts a huge amount of talent.’

‘Did you make lots of money?’

He frowned. ‘A bit. I was pretty bad at it. We had guys who’d breeze in after ten am cocktails with storyboards and slogans or they’d leave it till the hour before they were meeting the client to get the adrenaline to do the work for them. Never lasted long but they were sexy. I was an A-grade plodder.’

I ran my hands across the smooth skin of his back and watched a line of tiny goosepimples appear.

‘The hidden life of Jonathan Foley.’

‘Think of pharmaceutical companies. They make their own markets. No-one’s ever heard of ADHD or knows they suffer from ‘social phobia’ until the drug companies repackage it as a disease. Then they sell the answer. Run articles in medical journals and newspapers, ads next to the stories, samples in the doctor’s drawer.’

‘Why’d you stop then, Oh guru of the market?’

‘Because advertising is a shitty shitty business.’
‘Really?’
‘No. They mostly quit me. And Mary wanted...well, you know.’
I quietly kept count of the amount of times he’d said her name so that when he told me he was leaving me I could embarrass him. I asked when he knew what job he wanted, how he could tell was what he wanted to be.

He got up and started putting on his pants. ‘This is not what I wanted to be,’ and though I explained I meant an illustrator, not an adulterer, the moment was already lost.

The first time I had thought about being something was in the office of Community Services after the fire. Louise and I sat on plastic chairs while the social worker talked to us about grieving and fans stuttered loud in the hot room. She asked us for thoughts on expressing grief. We didn’t want to talk about expressing grief but to know whether we’d have to live with strangers and whether our father might go to prison. Lou watched an ant climbing onto the woman’s table, surging forward into the warm sun.

The woman told us, ‘You can say anything here.’ We knew that we couldn’t. Mrs Daly from Louise’s school had ushered her off in the morning, spreading her wide arms around Louise’s shoulders, stinking of old sweat and toothpaste, drawing Lou into her armpits as she glanced over her shoulder to see if anyone was noting she was doing the right thing. I’d arrived with Dad. The social worker said, ‘Tell me about Jeremy.’

Lou said, ‘Tell me about your fat cunt’ and I said nothing.

The woman shifted in her seat and placed her palms up on the table. We listened to the uneven pace of the fan and Louise made the ant climb her finger. When the woman touched Lou’s bandages and asked, ‘How do you feel about this?’ Lou stared solid in her face and said, ‘About what?’

In the end the social worker said, ‘Girls what do you want for
yourselves?’ and my mind had jolted. I imagined we were going to be given presents or clothes and I planned what I might order for myself.

‘I mean, what do you want to be?’

They hadn’t been big into being things at our school. Until then it hadn’t occurred to me that you might be something other than you were. We would be what our parents were, or what we needed to be. We were too old to think we would be TV-stars, or rich wives, or nuns or even dentists.

Still, Lou said, ‘A rockstar’ and the woman leaned forward, approving. Lou explained that she sang in the school choir. We didn’t have a school choir and Lou didn’t like music and the ant was losing legs on the table.

When we exited through the glass doors the woman turned her tired face to the receptionist and said ‘These girls are unmanageable.’ I had understood then that the project of school, of social services, of the government hand-outs my father would collect, was the beginning of a life-long project of making me into a manageable person.

I told Jon, ‘I thought I wanted to be a teacher and make a difference.’ Our laughter was low and musical, extensive with disappointment. He hovered with his pants loose and drooping around his waist, his fly undone.

‘There’s some report floating round from the Education Minister. They might close our school.’

He shifted back on the bed, up onto his side and stroked my legs. ‘Would that be a bad thing?’

‘I’d lose my job.’

‘But you hate it.’

‘I still think the school should exist. We deal with some kids no other school in the area would even take. Otherwise it’s just a merciless replication of privilege. You condemn them. If you’re a migrant or have unemployed
parents you’ll get crowded classes and be quietly encouraged to drop out at year ten.’ My cheeks were hot, my voice rising.

Jon smiled, puzzled. ‘You make it sound like old-fashioned class war.’ I was trembling. He put his hand on my arm. ‘If the kids are clever they’ll still find a way through. Look at you.’

‘We don’t get the funding so we don’t get the students so we don’t... It’s fine for the schools in Camberwell with the best teachers and pretty red brick buildings with athletics fields the size of Pluto.’

He scrunched his face. ‘How big is Pluto?’

‘They don’t worry about closing. You probably went to one of those.’

He was assessing whether to take me seriously. He gasped in horror. ‘A state school. I don’t think so. Grammar boy all the way, thanks very much.’

He reached down and started kneading at the inside of my thighs. ‘Can’t you tell by my manners?’ He was dipping his fingers into me. ‘Ladies first.’

‘Get off. I’m talking.’

He took his hand away, smiling, unsure about whether to be offended or penitent. ‘Sorry, love. Honestly, Mary writes those sorts of things all the time and mostly it’s just covering their arses. There’s been a ministerial question or a shitty resident or an opposition promise and some committee’s asked to do a summary.’

‘I didn’t know she was in the public service. Function on tonight then?’

His erection was still there and he moved awkwardly onto his belly.

‘Let me give you a little clue for your next affair,’ I told him. ‘Bringing up your wife in bed is not sexy.’

We fucked anyway, pasted together with sweat and wet mouths. He stroked my face when he entered me, both of us standing and trembling, my back pushed against the wall. He was weeping and the tears fell saltily on me and I licked his shoulder, ran my hands over his ribs then pressing on the soft
flesh of his arse. I felt transported, even though he was impatient and we were both hurrying through the doubt.

He came too fast, and without much effort, urgently, groaning deeply. He rested his head on my shoulder. I thought of his gentleness then and his loyalty. After he got his breath back he dropped to his knees and went down on me. I tried not to think about anything but the feeling. I started quivering with his tongue in my cunt, then I was coming as the sounds of footsteps smacked on the landing of the staircase outside.

He checked his neck for evidence in the mirror above the pale couch, cooling his cheeks with his hands. I breathed in the smell of sweat and sex.

I was out of bed and pulling a jumper over my head when Lou opened the door.

‘Nice cock,’ she said, watching Jon who has just pulled up his underwear.

‘Did I give you a key?’

‘Fuck. Thanks.’ He found his pants on the floor and zipped them up. Lou waited in the doorway, her head tilted sweetly to the side, her body lounging against the door-frame.

He gave a small bow. ‘Hi.’

She nodded with the exaggerated patience of those who deal with emergencies or children: ambulance drivers, primary school teachers, firefighters.

‘I thought that’s why you left your wallet and the money. How else would I get back in?’

He talked over her, quickly, the blush spreading down to his chest and collarbones. ‘So…it’s late for me anyway.’
I pulled my sticky underwear back on. Louise walked into the living room and plumped herself on the couch, put her boots up on the table. He looked down at her lean brown legs and tried not to stare at the scarring.

‘Alice, I won’t be able to call for a bit.’ He wiped his hands together fiercely and then struggled out the door with his bag slipping off his shoulder.

‘C’n I’ve a smoke?’ she puffed heavily into the silence. ‘He seems like a bit of a joke.’

I put the electric kettle on without thinking, calming my shaking hands on the plastic handle. ‘In what way?’

‘Just a general man way.’

I rapped hard with my knuckles on top of the wooden chest I stacked my sheets and linen in. She looked away.

‘Do you like him, Ally Al?’

I waited. ‘Am I letting myself into someone else’s house without respecting their privacy?’

‘Okay, you’re knocking.’ I applauded her silently in the air.

‘I feel like he’s my second half, the missing part.’ She looked sadly at me. ‘Yeah I like him. Today I probably even love him.’

She began to hum a pop song out of tune. ‘Would you get married?’ she said it quickly but the air was electric.

‘That post is taken.’

‘Is she sexy? His wife?’ Lou was up and dancing now, her face rubbery and animated, cast half into shadow as she twisted and gyrated away from the light cast by the lamp.

I tried to remember. It was not a question I could answer. She’d been very graceful with a severe posture and loose limbs, older than me. I had been struck by the narrowness of her feet in ballet flats from when I’d seen the two
of them walking once, arms linked. ‘I don’t know, really. She’s kind of elegant.’

Louise nodded. ‘Probably at yosalates as we speak.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Bitch,’ she was snapping her fingers constantly as if we were ourselves advertising executives brainstorming a product.

‘I’m the one that’s fucking her husband.’ And we left it at that. I poured her some tea and she made a sandwich and slathered the butter on thickly, singing quietly.

The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the smell of a perfume of mine that Louise had apparently dug out and sprayed liberally on herself. I rarely used it but it had come in a package labelled with a preposterous name I could imagine would appeal to Lou: Goddess or Vixen. She danced to the music for a little while but I could see the strain on her face, beneath the sparkly glitter she was wearing on her cheeks.

‘Are we getting better?’

‘How do you mean?’ I knew what she meant. I chewed the ends of my hair.

‘Don’t,’ she said, without looking. ‘This would never have happened if he hadn’t run off.’

‘It wouldn’t have happened if dad hadn’t spilled kerosene everywhere.’ I thought of my brother taking home the school mouse the week before he died, too scared to let it out of the cage in case it escaped but poking his fingers between the bars, carrying the cage into the back yard when our parents fought.

Louise chewed her sandwich. ‘Dad was getting into quite a routine with that, wasn’t he?’

I shrugged. ‘A threat repeated is a threat diminished.’
'Thought of the day brought to you by Ms Alice Reilly.'
I looked directly at her. ‘She should have been more scared.’

My sister rolled her eyes.

I cleared my throat and looked out at the lights of the city, low and warm, pinpoints of coloured light from a grey city with secrets. ‘Were you working as a prostitute in Sydney then?’

She smiled tightly. ‘No. Are you prostituting yourself now?’

I feigned consideration of the question. ‘Maybe I am. Perhaps I am prostituting myself for the read-out-loud pleasure of a few Russian novels and some kind words.’

We laughed and then I walked over and put my arm around her. ‘There’s some funding crisis at my school.’

‘How come?’

‘Poor area. Underperforming in VCE. Drugs. It’s just a whole lot of shit, they’ve been dying to close it.’

She got up, excited. ‘You should run a campaign. How about sitting in? Well, not like for civil rights but barricade yourselves in and say you won’t leave until they agree to fully fund it. You should leak it to the media now, say you’re outraged, say—.’

‘I have to see what the union says, what happens.’

‘I can help you.’

‘How’s the project?’

‘If you were going to change your name, what would you change it to?’

I was appalled. ‘You thought you could just look her up?’

She shifted gear. ‘I’d change mine to the same as someone famous so I could get stuff for free and good seats.’
I nodded, not believing her and feeling ashamed of my own cynicism, my lack of engagement in almost all things that mattered.

‘You should look with me. We should hire someone to search. Why won’t you help me?’ She ashed with tiny taps into the glass bowl I’d been using as an ashtray. The rain hit the windows with a sound like wet washing slapping against a wall. The clouds were mauve.

I sat across from her in the elegant green armchair I’d never quite managed to sit comfortably in. I’d bought it under duress from Kirsty, another teacher at school, whose fiancé worked in a designer furniture store as a manager. The back of the seat arched unkindly away from my own back and I felt a draft creep up my spine.

‘What if she won’t see you?’

Lou’s eyes were bleary. ‘I’ll make her.’

‘How?’

She shrugged and her black sweater fell forwards revealing the narrow bones beneath. ‘I’ll pretend to be someone else.’

‘Are you going to try and get a job?’

She turned to face me. ‘I’m not staying here.’

‘You’ll be disappointed when you find her, Lou. Nothing will change.’

She put out the smoke. My throat was dry but I had to ask her. ‘Why did you try to go back into the house? We thought he was at the park.’ At the house Louise had flung herself through the gate, forced her way in the back door, even though the smoke was pouring out by then and we could hear the fire crackling. I’d been sure our father had done what he had begun quite regularly to threaten to do: to set fire to the place.

‘Maybe I could hear him.’

‘That’s not what the firefighters said.’

‘You’re the one that saw him that night, what did you tell him to do?’
I had told him to get away from Dad. I had made him terrified. ‘They reckoned smoke inhalation would have got him before we saw the place was burning. He was dead when you heard him.’

She watched me, thoughtless and deadpan, her eyes glassy and indifferent, like those of a snake. ‘Come with me to talk to Dad,’ she told me.
It’s the sounds that shake you out of bed; wood splintering and falling, the heavy lick of flame hissing as it grasps your nylon dress, in the dark dust of morning.

You wake with your face pressed into your own snot on the pillow, the tears rinsing your cheeks coolly like creek water.

The sun’s too high in the sky, an egg-yolk shimmer. No Alice. The fire runs across the floor and chases a line to your dress, which sticks to you.

Collecting things, you find some novel Jon’s left behind. Alice’s boyfriend doesn’t seem real to you: he’s a minor character in a movie, an actor whose important moments happen offstage. But he’s real enough to her, and so is this: the flat, the friends, the job, the right now. She’s struggled her way through to it and how she clings with brittle nails to what she’s made.

You eat peanut butter, which smells odd, straight out of the container, sticking your finger back down deep in the sweaty jar and then licking it off.

There’s Jeremy’s old detective game packed into a plastic bag, alongside the Freedom of Information submission you wrote out in Sydney Centrelink, and the news article about Michael.

You know that you are slowly destroying the game with touch: the sheen has worn off the cardboard box and the corners are soft and battered. The players’ tokens are gritty with the dirt of another time and the magnifying glass is an obliterating eye, shatter lines spreading across it like fine spider webs.

Touch the game and it will sing an old tune.

If Jeremy was planning to die then he should have left signs. He’d buried the game, which might have meant he was saving it. Or that you
should understand the game itself as a clue. You take out the instruction leaflet but it says the same things it always has and nothing else.

Jeremy wouldn’t play your game, the danger game. Alice was too old but she used to play anyway, calling plaintively ‘nougheway’, enough, the code word for stopping, sometimes before she’d even tried, wanting it to be over. The game is how you were able to go back into the house when it was burning. That’s why you are all scars and second skin.

You pick up Alice’s key and the identification you took from her wallet. Tip out the mess of papers and stare at the art postcard of the half-woman. The woman being undone. For you have wanted to peel off your own skin, unwind your flesh like cloth bandages.

Looking under Alice’s bed you find a dusty packet of Peter Jackson cigarettes that you shove into the pocket of your jeans. A used condom, smelling of rubber and old fucking, lies between the bottom of the mattress and the wall and behind that a crumpled bit of paper. You unpeel the shreds of a drawing; a broader, more substantial Alice staring into the distance. You pull out a smoke, light it and inhale softly. There’s a figure you can’t make out in the background, creased and withered. You could look at this for a long time and not know whether it was meant to show love or hate, intimacy or repulsion.

Alice’s bathroom is peppermint and berry. Fake and soothing. Bloody fruit and artificial preservatives. Black and white tiles on the floor – too small hexagons that hurt your eyes. You brush your teeth, spit into the sink, avoid your face in the mirror.

There are pale flickers, the ghosts of fireflies, behind your eyes.

On the tram you watch for ticket inspectors. Alice’s licence and teacher’s ID both have photos taken a few years ago. She’s got her hair back in
both, but the teacher’s one is better: there are more distractions. She’s wearing too much blush and a floppy collar.

You practice her signature a few times. It’s not easy. The A and R at the start of the words loop hugely and the letters are slanted back on each other.

Melbourne skids past, buildings low to the ground, the Yarra River a dirty slick.

The man at the pharmacist lets you photocopy Alice’s cards with photo ID and he certifies them, taking his time because you aren’t buying anything.

First you need to see how things are done.

A large sweeping desk curves across most of the room, three women all wearing headsets seated behind it. They hardly look at you when they direct you to the Freedom of Information Officer. Good. He’s in a smaller glass office at the right-hand side of the building, visible through the open door.

You hand over your ID to be photocopied and wait while the solicitor scans the letter you’ve written.

‘This is going to be a lot of information.’

You shrug. His face is oddly child-like, jowly, eyebrows soft.

‘Because if you are looking for something in particular it might be worth being specific.’

‘Anything that has my name on it. Any kind of document.’

He puts down the paper and looks hard at you. ‘You’ll receive a written response outlining what we’ve found or if any of the information falls into an exemption category or extra charges for time it will take to locate this volume of documents.’ He settles into the firm brown leather of the chair.

‘My sister’s going to make an application too. Should she just come and see you this afternoon?’
‘We shut at five and I’m out at four-thirty today but Tessa will be here then,’ he nods towards a bleach-blonde woman. She smells of coconut oil and is wearing pink lipstick. Crow’s feet spread like ripples across her skin even through the orangey foundation. Malibu Barbie hits the antipodes. And you want to laugh.

Your hands fly up to your face. ‘Oh, she can’t get here until half-past. It’s exactly the same as mine, only in her name obviously...’ a tremor of a laugh.

‘She has to make the application herself. You could ask to access documents that name her but then there may well be some privacy concerns outweighing the public interest in disclosure.’ His words are crisp and rapid. He’s said all this before.

‘Of course. Yeah. No, she’s a doctor on shift work. Well, an intern.’

‘I don’t need to be here myself if she includes her payment and identification. She’ll get her acknowledgement via email in the morning.’

‘Who should she leave them with?’

‘Try the girls at the front desk, but they don’t like doing it. Not really their responsibility. Otherwise she can organise for you to bring them in. Or she can post them or fax her ID and send them electronically.’

‘It doesn’t have to be in person?’ Your carefully chosen clothes, the pink powder on your cheeks, the cards nicked from Alice.

‘No. She can send it in.’ He takes a card and scribbles across it in pencil. On the way out you post the application in Alice’s name in the mail and buy a packet of hot chips to eat. Lick the grease off your fingers, chuck the paper cup into a rubbish bin.

The local library is six blocks from Alice’s flat, out the back of the dishevelled grand Town Hall building and across from the public pool which
is bright aqua in a bed of hot asphalt. If you had bathers you’d sneak in and lie in the cool lapping of the water, hoping to dissolve.

There are White Pages for the states and territories in a high bookshelf in the reference section. You look up Grieves but there are too many entries and your mother’s oldest friend Jean must have remarried or you don’t know how to spell her Polish surname. You write down all the Reillys in Victoria and New South Wales but she’ll have another name now. Maybe she’s in Perth or New Zealand or in a cemetery half way round the world.

‘Excuse me, can I help you look for something?’ The librarian’s holding out her hands for the phone books.

‘I’m fine.’

She clucks. ‘Other people have to use these,’ she says firmly and it’s only then that you see the wet mess of paper, the way your tears have sloughed down onto the page.

‘My mother just died,’ you tell her but she’s already frowning at your sticky face and thin arms, backing away to serve a man at the counter waiting to borrow magazines about boats.

You wait before you write in the words to search online. Somehow you think if you write her name it means she’ll be dead. Instead you find the address for the records office of births, deaths and marriages.

The big public hospital’s opposite graceful old gardens, where psychiatric patients walk warily on day release. They’re zombies to you, like addicts, half in the world half elsewhere. The head nurse just keeps shaking her head. ‘I can take your letter but there’s no guarantee we’ll release the records to you.’

‘How can they be confidential from me? They’re mine.’

She snatches your paperwork, puts it on her desk. ‘This is a well-established privilege. You do not have an automatic right to patient records.
We can withhold them. Particularly if the medical assessment is that such information could be damaging or confusing. If you want to know more, get some legal advice.’

‘Just the medical reports about my burns when I was a kid.’

She looks at you carefully. ‘We have a counsellor here, an administrator and a liaison solicitor for the hospital.’


The flats overlook a tobacconist’s and you crouch next to where the bins are kept. When your father leaves he walks down the staircase out the front of the building singing an old showbiz tune. It burns your eyes to see him, how much smaller he is, how calloused and weathered his hands are. The last time you saw your father was before you got off dope, before you got a job and lost a job and had an abortion and stole Katrina’s money and emptied her account. You follow him to the milkbar where he buys soft white bread, peppermint leaves sparkling with sugar in a brown paper bag and some tins. The paper. The assistant counts the change into his palm and he locks his fingers around it with the eager grip of a child. He squints into the light and loops the plastic bag of shopping over his wrist. Then he pauses. You turn quickly back and begin walking up the street to the train station, pulling the black hood over your hair.

‘Jeremy?’ He is following. ‘God. Jeremy.’ He clears his throat and begins to run. Breath rasps, his chase is shambolic. You sprint and then trip on a raised concrete section of footpath. You turn to face him. He touches your shoulder, crying in little gulps, mouth gaping open-shut like the gills of a fish.

‘It’s me,’ you say. ‘The other one.’ His eyes gleam, hollow shining eyes. ‘It’s only me.’ You are laughing in misplaced relief.
'Oh.' It's a huge sigh and gentle. His knees give a little and he sags forward, low in the knees, like an unsupported toddler or a hand puppet. The air is salty and rushing.

You only had a small taste back in Sydney, coasting through the E in the early hours of the morning. You don’t let yourself think about the wanting but surely how you'd love to be back in the falling, the pillowed warmth, the thick water holding you with kindness.

Sydney wheels through your mind, a waterfall of glass shards. There’s the lumbering office building, the taste of waves smashing your chest in the ocean, the rot of the flats, the faded orange and red checked tablecloths hung for curtains across the windows of the Abercrombie Street terrace, the cramped corners and low bluestone of the Rocks. Men wheeling down Oxford street on a Friday night, spilling takeaway south Indian food on their designer jeans. Your father's never been to Sydney. He grew up in Brisbane with his religious mother in a gaping house raised on stilts that smelled of bilge water and lilies. Sydney was a place where he didn’t exist.

You slide your hands into the comfort of scratchy pockets.

Your father says, 'I thought you were...Where were you...’ He breaks off. ‘Is Alice here?’

You do a little skip on the sidewalk. ‘You thought I was the dead one.’ He’s even a bit pudgy, doesn’t wear it well. You grab a peppermint leaf lolly out of the bag and begin to lick off the sugar. ‘The dead and gone son.’

He’s let the bag fall to the ground now, amazed by his own expectations, left off balance by the gap between what he’d hoped for and what he’s got.

‘Except I have tits.’ You swallow the lolly and it jams in your throat before going down.
‘Louie.’ He clasps his hands. ‘One of my old girls.’ His hair is greyer now but thick and his face is still burnished brown and fleshy. Only his eyes have the soft cast of sadness in them, the rest is all residual alcoholic good cheer.

You fidget with beads around your neck.

‘You were in Townsville. I didn’t think I’d see you.’

‘Sydney.’

‘Yeah. Sorry. Sorry about the…mistake, sorry, sorry.’ He looks at his feet.

Does he mean the city or the misrecognition?

‘I’m not feeling well. It’s the weather. Makes me…’ His sentences are small lurches. Your dad used to have a stutter and you can hear the ghostly silent sounds of the unrepeated letters in his pauses.

‘Are you in trouble, Lou?’

And there it is: the old generous impulse, the helpless helpfulness that your father’s always had, his instinct to put things right, nearly worn thin now.

‘Why didn’t you try to get Jeremy out of the house?’

He stops the beaming, the twitching and perhaps for a moment he’s even considering it, the white expanse of forgetfulness, but he knows his son is dead today, he does.

‘What?’

‘When it was burning. The day he died. Do you remember?’

You duck your head, shaking off the misery of it and you walk together down to the muddy creek, his shopping bag left behind on the street, right in the centre of the footpath like a hazard warning – an orange witch’s hat – for a danger that is unknown.
He tells you. ‘He was missing. He wasn’t – we thought he wasn’t – in
the house. He didn’t take the exam, just disappeared, L.’

‘But when you saw it was burning,’ you say dully.

‘At first we didn’t realise it was the house. There was just a weird
smell. We were outside going to search for him, hoping he was hiding nearby,
I said I’d look for him down near the trains before we rang the cops, go back
up to the school. Then we smelled the smoke really strong. She was calling
out to you and Alice. I was following. She went to the front step. That’s when
we knew it was burning. I already told you. She’s telling me ‘you did this’ but
how could I of? She went to the front door but she didn’t have the key and
she fell over.’

‘On the front porch?’

He shrugs. ‘On the stones. I touched the door; it was hot. I went next
doors to ring the fire brigade but they’d already called.’

‘How did he get inside?’

He shakes his head. ‘We don’t know. You know why they didn’t take
you from me? She knew she was going even then when the cops asked her
about it. She said that we’d had a leaking kero bottle and that you and Jeremy
used to play games with it. That you were little shits, really. So that you
wouldn’t be put into state care.’

You lean in. Is he lying? ‘Did she tell you she was going?’ you ask.

He clears his throat, stares down at the bald black patch of earth in
front of him as if the flecks of dirt will tell him what the right course of action
is. ‘She’d talked about it before. Always with taking you kids. I didn’t think
she would but maybe she would have anyway. She couldn’t afford to love me
anymore. That’s what she reckoned. Fuck she was a bitch.’ He gulps. ‘She
wasn’t. She...’

‘What did she say the day she left?’
‘I’ve told you. Nothing. She comes to the hospital to see you will be okay and then she had to do the interview with community services.’

He’s a fucking dupe, a false vague shit. ‘You thought she would come back.’

‘I don’t know.’

You wait for him to say that she left a message, she left a note but he doesn’t.

He nods tenderly, doesn’t look at you for too long. ‘Are you living here now?’

‘I’m going to find her.’ You watch for a jolt, a little gesture, but it doesn’t arrive. He doesn’t believe you.

‘I remember when you and Jezz did that circus performance with the cartwheels. God that cracked me up.’ He turns to you, waves his arms around. ‘All bashing into each other and clashing accidentally. Slapstick. Laurel and Hardy I thought.’

You say, ‘He hated being called Jezz.’

Your dad’s face bleats for pity. ‘Did he? Oh. I didn’t know.’

‘They used to copy you at school. Follow him round calling Je-ez. Jezz the spaz.’

He sinks his nails into the soft part of his hand.

‘You did a good show, alright.’ He steps back and looks at the thin ridges of black in his nails, the bitten skin around the cuticles, the tiny red marks on his palm.

After you have left you look back over your shoulder and he is digging in the dirt with a stick.

And it’s much later, on the long trip back to Alice’s, at a small greasy coffee joint where you smoke butts out of the ashtray and drink coffee for $1.20, that
you think about the stones on the front step and you do it. Stand on your hands. How the crockery comes down. You smack a waitress’s hands with your foot and then it’s cartwheels, glorious cartwheels with the chipped plates crunching underfoot and the agog floating faces, even a women clapping in the corner because the past is written now, it happened one way and not another, and you can’t return, not even for old time’s sake, not even for comfort, if you want to keep alive.

Alice’s is not a place with many hidden places. The bottom drawer of her dressing table is filled with half-deflated bath baubles in Christmas colours, old letters and bills, a school photograph bent in two, some dank mothballs, a bottle of cheap perfume without a lid, an expired cheque book and a black lace bra that has removable straps. One of the letters is from Sarah, Alice’s oldest friend. She’s written: There’s someone now but I guess I don’t know what I’m doing as usual. A few pages later: You should stop giving Louise money.

On her bookshelf there are curriculum reforms, notes from Alice’s teaching degree, superannuation statements. Nothing. You find it behind a glossy art book about house designs – the solar system project Jeremy finished just before he died. Right in the middle of the scrapbook is the photograph of his model. Stones and rocks collected from the front driveway and the train tracks near where your family used to live, suspended on string to show the size and arrangement of the planets, each one labelled carefully. A replica of space.

You rush to get your plastic bag of papers. There’s another photo. He’s smiling and holding a stick for a wand. Ten years old and crouching next to a circle of stones. It was your birthday that day. Blowing out the candles you made a wish you can’t remember.
If your mother fell on a circle of stones that night she knew Jeremy was nearby.

What you carry inside you is the blackest deep, an oilslick sea. When will the black mass rotting inside your chest dissolve? The front door was locked when you and Alice came back from the park so you’d pushed open the back one, warm to the touch and heavy, sticking because the doorframe had swollen in the heat. Already there were sirens; the Whittakers, your mousy neighbours, had rung the cops. You wanted the bracelet and your jewellery box. You didn’t go back in for him and now you won’t ever know if the squealing, the high thin shrieking you heard was just a feeling. In the ambulance the guy who’d bandaged the burns had said ‘what a family,’ to himself and you’d tried to cover your dirty bare feet with the white sheet they’d tucked over you.

You let the afternoon fade away until you give in.

He’s only a boy really. Just a boy. He won’t hurt you. His hand is on your arm and he is propelling you down the corridor as though you cannot go forward without being pushed. You are talking very quickly but the walls seem to soak up your voice and echo your words reorganised into senseless patterns, so it is difficult to remember if you have said some of these things before or if the walls are just reminding you.

North Melbourne greeted you with the smell of stale vegetables, the cotton-candy colours of the sky at dusk. When you walked across a man hosing down the entrance to the market, the undercurrent of slaughtered meat was enough to make you cover your mouth. Katrina’s friends used to live in one of those huge rambling houses so you’d taken a chance and knocked on the door and asked the guy who’d opened it if they’d got anything.
'Who the fuck’re you?’ In the dark of the hallway his face is young and chubby. He doesn’t seem dangerous at all. Heroin loves him now. Still it does. He’s dreaming your old dream, the one that got away. You ache for him because he’ll never have this moment again, the one that comes free.

‘Please.’ You know how to do the sway, the hunger. ‘Someone said there might be something going.’

‘Get inside.’

You lurch into his room and he pulls out a bottle of gin and a packet of tinfoil. He says, ‘No junk.’ You tell him that’s bullshit. You say you’ll suck him off. He says no way. He reckons his name is Sam. He’s a kid. He doesn’t live there. The dealer’s been and gone.

‘Take the ice and fuck off or the cops’ll get ya.’

‘Why won’t they get you too?’ His eyes roll back. He thinks for too long. He can’t find an answer. He says his mum is dying but no-one knows. He’s been taking her morphine and then getting the prescriptions filled again. That’s how he started. Sounds like crap to you.

His belly bulges softly. Mucus or coffee stains across the faded purple velvet of the couch. In the room next door you hear scraps of conversations – and then I said, “I don’t think so” and she says, “Well you wouldn’t” – and your head thuds time to go, time to go.

He pulls out two coffee mugs and the gin glugs coolly. You can’t pay.

‘Let me taste first.’

He leans in, giggles. ‘This isn’t even mine. You seem really nice. No I mean it, really nice. Just take it.’ He sips, then looks aghast. ‘I have a girlfriend, right.’

Everything is said as if it’s a secret he’s disclosing. ‘Whose is this?’ You wave around the drugs then you sniff some of the powder.
‘Ssh. You should go.’ Your palms are sweaty and the jitters travel through you like a pinball, rocketing from your ankles to the soft part of your arms and up the back of your neck.

An older man flings the door open with a packet in his palm.

‘You want it or not?’

You see stringy, pale yellow hair, high on top, with a mullet. All you can think about is how much he looks like Rod Stewart. You laugh and laugh.

‘How much?’ You can’t stop. His face is sallow. It’s not going to be okay. But the dread is lifting. You hear the wind outside and your heart is opening up. Perhaps it’s how it should be: the delay, the schoolkid, methamphetamines. Not today then. You shake your head.

‘Then fuck off you dumb bitch. Out. And don’t be a fucking moron, letting strangers walk in, she’d could’ve been anyone.’ This to Sam, hiding his head behind a school blazer. There’s something about the uniform or the stitching. The crest on the pocket looks like a toad holding a baby’s juice bottle. You throw yourself into the freezing cold of the night. Oh joy. It’s the uniform for Alice’s school.

Sick. Sway on the bar, put your hands up on the shiny wood, keep your money in your fist, sweating closely on the notes. Grind your teeth, think about lollypops, sugary foods, bones.

There are shamrocks on the coasters, green streamers bunched in the corners of the room. Waves of confusion ripple through the air. The cushions that coat the warm booths have Irish proverbs written across them. But there’s hardly anyone drinking in this part of the pub, they’re mostly at the pokies. And the ghosts in your head whisper words of comfort, songs of honey, of holy warm drunkenness.
Pop songs on the juke box from the nineties. Synthesised, inoffensive, prepackaged crooning. And still you’re humming without even knowing it, tapping on the bar in time, and letting the notes slide from under your fingers.

A man sits next to you. ‘This music is bloody awful.’ His accent’s English.

‘What’re you doing in here?’

He tips forward on his bar stool, takes another look. ‘Do I know you?’

‘You should be off oppressing the Irish in,’ hiccup ‘Belfast or something.’

He shrugs cheerfully, moves onto his feet. ‘Just asking if you want a game of pool. None of them bastards’ll play with me,’ He waves over his shoulder at a small group near the door then stops. ‘Oh wow.’

‘What?’

‘Your pupils are just...very impressive.’

You tell him, ‘Thanks,’ with glee.

You can barely hold the cue, let alone sink a ball but he comes behind you, puts his arm over and helps you aim. His name is Jason, he’s thirty, he emigrated four years ago after a backpacking trip through Bondi and Byron Bay, now he rents in Essendon and works in admin support. ‘What about you?’

‘Louise.’

He pots balls quickly and carefully, leaning forward over the table so that his T-shirt rises and a gap of pale flesh hangs out. ‘You’ve taken the honour for the crappiest game of pool I’ve ever played, Louise.’

You’re laughing, then spinning, then drumming on the floor with your feet, flourishing, in a hurry, tomorrow flashing before you and the long night to come. ‘Get me a beer then.’
He brings back drinks for all his friends, who are playing cards now, hands you a Carlton without really noticing, and shoots the black diagonally across the table so it rebounds neatly into the pocket. ‘Cheers.’

You fuck him in the bathroom, your chin on your hands, bent forward over the sink. He’s noisy and rough. He hitches his pants back up and washes his face.

He goes back to his mates with a ‘thumbs up’ to the boys and the sort of leer he’s probably copied from TV.

Bile in your mouth now, salt and sweat creeping over you. ‘I have to get outside.’

‘We’re going to try and have a bit of a dance, if there’s anywhere open. Come.’

‘Nah, I’m...’ your stomach heaves. Look at the floor, the black, the cornices, the floating ash, tiny sparkles litter the ground, glittering the way diamonds do in kids cartoons.

You can hear him announce to his friends. ‘She.Is. Fucked.’

You push into the door and as you feel it resist then give way he calls after you, ‘Good luck then.’

You vomit into the bushes outside, wipe your mouth with the back of your hand. You start running. See the huge trees and the tiny alleyways. Hear the hidden scuttlings in the night. Old strains of music from above the shops, windows thrown open. Step, skip. Hop. Jump. Curb. Horns blast. Back into the blackness and start to jog. Leap the puddles of water, outpace the boys hovering loose with a joint, the world’s beginning and ending. Up the big hill where the streetlights fade into fairy lights in the distance, one blinking on-off like a lighthouse. Into the sea and the spray’s on your skin now, salting away your shell. And you’re almost out into the highway.
‘Stop.’ The men are outlines forming in the blackness. You’re panting.

‘Is someone following you?’

They peel away from the fence and stand in front of you on the footpath. Cops.

And it’s good luck, Louise, good luck to you.

Stay away from the streetlight. Slide into the old years of camouflage.

‘Nah, I’m fine. Just running late.’

‘An appointment at this time of night? You nearly ran under the wheels of a truck.’

You’ve got to placate them, exhibit some fear. ‘Sorry.’ Now that you are closer you see one of them is a woman.

She takes out a notepad. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Why?’

Her partner comes closer too. ‘We’re trying to look after your safety.’

‘I’m fine.’

The man shines the torch at you. ‘Look at her, she’s speeding.’

‘It’s Louise.’

‘What?’

You have your hand in your pocket and it brushes against the cards. You think of the summary offences, the unpaid MET fines, the cautions, the possession charge and try to calculate if the good behaviour bond’s expired.

‘Alice,’ you say.

‘And where are you headed now, Alice?’

To hell. Fuck off. ‘Home.’

‘You’ve had a few drinks.’

‘Yes.’ Keep your eyes down, your chin in your hand.
They mutter amongst themselves while you wait for a moment to run. The woman is saying, ‘She looks out of it, probably got stuff on her.’ The man’s telling her he can’t be bothered. ‘Let her sleep it off.’

They move closer. ‘We’ll need to see some ID. And have a look through your bag.’

‘I’ve just got a wallet. You take the cards out of your pocket, offer up the license. The meth is crashing through you. It’s hard to be still.

They take Alice’s license, and her teacher’s registration card, copy down your details. The woman clucks. ‘Are you going to be able to get home? We can see you’re under the influence of some kind of party drug.’

You think: rat, dug, pty. ‘I’m okay.’

The man gives you a formal warning, says you need to think about your safety and the safety of others.

‘Thanks.’ Your legs are trembling. You grind your teeth rhythmically. ‘Thanks, you pack of cunts,’ you say and you are racing away before they know if they’ve heard you properly.

On the walk back to Alice’s you see a club with a bunch of people in their thirties and late twenties dancing. There are couples doing ballroom, swing; big brass band music. You sway and swoon too, on the outside, tapdancing the walk home, counting your steps. Alice had done Irish dancing in primary school. The whole family went to her show. Onstage she’d gotten out of time and was smiling too hard. You never knew when you were bad at things as a kid but Alice hated it.

You scuff your feet; see a fluffy seedpod on the ground. You cradle it close, blow and make a silent wish. Forgiveness.

She’s asleep on the couch when you unlock the door, arms crossed over chest as though she’s in a coffin. The note on the table says, *Pasta salad in*
fridge. I'm an old woman and can't wait up. If you're drug-fucked, go elsewhere. If not, love to you Louise.

You crinkle your forehead, uncertain about whether you’ve earned the love or not. No heroin. Whatever Sam gave you is wearing off. The note’s cheerful but she’s drawn anxious lines around the writing in thin pencil.

You tuck the cotton sheets under the makeshift Lilo and get ready for bed but your heart thumps on. You turn on the lamp, pull out Jeremy’s magnifying glass and look at your skin naked. He’d been so disappointed when he looked through the lens and realised the glass was ordinary, that what he held was a prop, not a scientific instrument. He’d said, ‘They use forensic pathology to solve crimes in a laboratory, not a magnifying glass anyway.’ He’d said, ‘This is kid stuff.’ But your dad had given it to him and so he’d clung to it.

Your scars are pale. Time bleaches them. You smack the magnifying glass against the ground and push out the lens, trace your scars with shards of sharp plastic, digging into your skin to see what you feel.

‘Louie.’

You shriek, leap back. Alice is in the door. She’s wearing bikini pants and a loose top. She looks less angular now she’s nearly thirty, fatter, and more undisciplined. Her hair curls around her shoulders.

‘Where have you been?’

‘I broke this by accident.’ You hold out the shards in your palm.

‘Oh no.’

You feel terrible for yourself as if it’s happened. You say, ‘My life and other disastrous experiments in humanity.’

‘I’m sure it can be glued.’ She takes the pieces. ‘Do you want to eat?’

In the early hours of the morning a siren wails.
There is only one light on in the house when he comes over the hill. He sits in the long grass and the weeds that cover the sodden pebbles of the driveway. The sky’s an old enemy, a thick black coat that hangs drab and sober, above his head. Jeremy makes his fingers into a circle and spies through. He limits his vision to the tunnel and imagines he has a telescope. The sky isn’t flat. It’s expansive. He feels a rush of excitement. He tells himself about the Southern Cross and the Milky Way. There are other galaxies. Science says stars are a cheat. It’s the light of absence that he’s seeing, a cheap trick. A too-late shining. The stars have already gone.

He can imagine the groan of the house settling around his father’s urgent stride. He will be looking. Jeremy thinks of the fluttery twitches of his mother as she follows him. He places the rocks in patterns around him. He tries to put them in every possible combination. There are long lost pieces of gravel buried beneath the clumps of grass and he collects these in his palm and closes his eyes and makes judgements about their size just by touching them. Jeremy can see his mother’s back through the window. She seems very far away. Lou stands facing her, arms folded. His Dad watches Lou.

Louise calls, ‘I did take him there. I walked all the way.’ Jeremy jerks his head up and leaves the stones alone. He has done something extraordinary. He is invisible at this moment. His father has no idea where he is. In the living room, his dad chucks Lou’s jewellery box, which is plastic and has dreamy unicorns painted on the outside in improbable colours, and it crashes against the window and bounces off.

‘That’s mine.’

‘You’re a filthy thief and a liar.’ His dad picks up the object and turns it over. He picks at his nails. Jeremy can see the fear in the touching, the need for a thing to belong in his father’s grasping hands.
Louise says, ‘And you take money out of Mum’s purse to get drunk. You stink. People hate you.’ Alice watches in the doorway and Lou runs in fierce stabbing steps, out the back door.

Jeremy creates a circle around him with stones but he knows real magicians’ circles are drawn with chalk. And anyway – he has read a book on it – all the tricks have a scientific explanation: a false bottom, a trapdoor, a hidden chamber, a distraction, an optical illusion. The circle of stones can’t make him safe.

His mother asks his dad if he wants to call the cops. His dad asks, ‘What have they ever done for me?’ Alice keeps hovering in the frame of the door. Jeremy doesn’t know why his Mum wants to ring the police. His parents always seem to shrink a little when they see the police. They drop their heads and turn their eyes away.

Jeremy’s father sags against the wall. ‘Do they hate me, Alice? Do people?’

Alice stands straight in the doorway, prim as a housewife in an advertisement for washing detergent. ‘Only some people do.’

His mother drags Alice out by the hand. She opens the flywire door and it smacks against the wall of the house. She has her hair down around her shoulders and no shoes on. Jeremy can tell by Alice’s jagged breath and the pinched clutch of her fingers that Alice has been arguing.

‘Get out’ his Mum says. Alice is crying, ‘Go to the fucking corner. Walk down and wait.’

Alice goes down the drive to Jeremy. He giggles. She walks over to him and kicks him hard.

‘Fucking retard. Go and tell him you’re here.’

He can’t stop laughing. There are tears dripping off the end of his chin.
'They think you’re dead or a pervert got you.’ Alice pulls him up hard under his arms.

Jeremy hiccups. There’s a strange rigidity to Alice’s skinny limbs, like she has metal inside her. Alice used to be a monkey who climbed trees and turned her elbow inside out for laughs. She’s holding herself carefully as if any lapse in attention might have catastrophic results.

‘He’ll hurt me.’

Alice pinches him, slowly. ‘He doesn’t care about the test, you cunt. Go in. She’s fucking crazy.’ Jeremy tugs his arm away from the injury, the slow burn but he can’t go back inside. It must be very late, later than ever before. Jeremy thinks missing is a good place to be.

‘Tell him and then nick off.’ Alice lets him go. Jeremy watches her back. Sometimes, when she’s walking, she reminds him of his mother.

His dad thumps the front door open so hard it splinters a bit. His mother stands behind him with her hand on his shoulder. His father sits on the doorstep and shakes.

‘Where’s fucking Alice? Where are my fucking kids?’ His mother doesn’t answer. She rubs his father’s back and turns her gaze outward into the black sky. His dad shrugs her off and eats the skin around his nails.

‘He’s afraid of you.’ Jeremy is shocked to see the red swelling of his mother’s face.

‘Yes, blame me, you fucking bitch.’ His dad is rocking himself softly.

‘He’ll come back.’ His mother shifts her foot against the bottle near the step and it spins and rolls. His dad lunges for it and misses, scraping his palm against the concrete.

‘You brought him up such a baby that he’d jump in anyone’s car if they offered to kiss him. He doesn’t live in the real world.’
His mother laughs. ‘Oh and you know all about the real world, I’m sure.’

His father tilts forward on the step in a drunken defensive dodge. Jeremy picks the stalks of weeds and crushes them in his hands and weeps in time with his dad’s sobs.

His father smashes a bottle against the side of the house. ‘Gave up on me and started in on him. Your special baby.’

His mother pulls back her pale hair. ‘You were meant to take him.’

It’s a long drone now, his father’s story, words tumbling into one another in a vacant, musical drawl. ‘Who wanted him to take the test? Who couldn’t give a fuck about her daughters because of her precious baby boy who was going to be nothing like his father?’

‘If I didn’t have him I would have left you ten years ago.’

‘I thought you were happy then.’

She shakes her head. ‘So did I.’

His mother goes back into the house and Jeremy watches his dad walk in dizzying steps, as if he might fall at any moment, down the drive to the back yard.

Jeremy loads the stones back into his arms but they leap free because he is shaking so much. He takes them one by one and spreads them across the front door step and wishes them – though he knows already that wishes don’t change things – to keep the house safe.
Had my parents ever been joyous together? I could remember being lifted into the air by them both: my mother grabbing one hand, Dad taking the other, swinging me up between them when they walked down to the shops, before Jeremy and Louise were born. My father sunburned in the summer, reading his books about philosophy and geology in the wilderness of the back yard. He’d been another sort of man then, easily transported, easily ashamed. He’d fancied himself as an autodidact. Showed his friends at the factory how the boy from Galway, Ireland knew the meanings of words they’d never heard. Had it been different before the rolling logic of hunger and doubt? Or was it only nostalgia that made me think so? There were flashes of memory, of warmth, the sound of my mother’s voice, lively and unconstrained, but they came to me without context like the scene of a dance floor at a club, lit up and then dark again, people’s teeth gleaming fluorescent.

‘You’re crying, Lice.’ I flinched. That had been dad’s nickname for me when I was very young. We’d been Lice and Fleas instead of Alice and Louise. Saturday morning. When had she woken up?

I said weakly, ‘I’m crying tears, not lice.’ I held my face in my hands, gingerly pressed my fingers into my skin. ‘I wish you’d tell me what’s going on.’

She shifted, put her cool hand on the back of my neck. The bracelets jangled. I looked at the hollow of her neck, her prominent collarbone, the brown skin, the faint smell of perfume still lingering. ‘Is it work?’

I had forgotten how comforting she could be.

‘I was thinking about when we were younger. Remember that cape Mum had?’

‘And when she borrowed a bike it got caught in the spokes?’
'And she wore it in the rain with the hood up and then it never dried properly and smelled?'

'When dad went away for training in the new machinery she went to that group in the scout hall on meditation and they were going on about the trees and lilypads and the great open paddocks and communing with nature and she tells us “I’ve spent my whole life trying to get away from nature.”'

I’d seen the photographs of our mother as a child on the dairy farm, could almost hear the call of birds in the cold quiet air, the pant of the dogs as they raced to their bowls, feel the toughness of her palms, the ache in her legs from a forty-minute walk to school.

Louise picked at her toenails. ‘Then she grew up.’

‘You forget that, don’t you, that she was ever like that?’ The last memory of my mother saw her dressed for work in the morning, bright blond hair greasy and tangled, the pockets on her blue dress sagging down and her body emitting defeat in a million ways. Grimness hovered around her mouth. The smell of grease and disinfectant and rubber gloves. But she had never even sent a postcard or rung us up since she left us so there must have been more to her, some hidden fury.

I had loved my father more, when I was a kid, before the rages and the despair. My mother was too practical, too earth-bound: he was fierce and funny, would let me sneak a cigarette, sometimes smoke one with me though he’d given up years before; take Louise on her sick days to work and start showing off her story-telling, her exaggerated imitations of her teachers to his mates.

Our mother must have been achingly lonely for a long time.

‘You know why you think she threw stuff around at work and told them to fuck off the day she left? Because that’s what you would have liked to do.’

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'Fuck off.' Louise folded her arms. 'If she was going to leave us, why have us?'
'They were different at the beginning, better.'
'I think she was planning it, already.'
'What?'
'Leaving.'
That Louise suspected this too left me breathless. I got up and washed my face, scrubbing at the dark skin under my eyes, willing a cheerfulness that wouldn't come.
'Al, what was Jeremy doing when you saw him? Had the other kids got him?'
I felt the heaviness descend, the dread grow. The past was a set of cruel claws that raked through me: unchangeable, never blunted or worn thin, razor-sliced regret.
'He wasn't hurt. He looked okay. You know this stuff. I said he should hide.' I had hurt him, kicked him and pinched his arm.
'Did you know there were stones on the front step?'
'What are you talking about?'
'He left a circle of stones out the front.'
I thought about whether there had been one of Jeremy's magic circles but I'd wanted to stay in the park the night my brother burned to death. I'd thought our Dad might hit him hard, injure him and so I sat on a park bench and read a magazine by the streetlight and all the while he had been doing whatever it was he did before he died.
'I don't remember. It was too dark. Do you want breakfast?'
'Toast. Tell me. What did Jeremy say to you?'
'Not much.' I looked at her. 'I screamed at him.'
'I went to see Dad yesterday.'
I got up from the couch, scrawled in the black leather handbag for my cigarettes and came across the battered report about downsizing the school.

After the fire our dad had said he didn’t know anything about the kerosene. He’d said this for months. Such is the nature of our denials.

I sucked in the first cigarette of the day, coughed like a flu patient, until even my ribs and back ached.

‘How was it?’

She tucked her knees under her. ‘He thought I was living in Townsville.’

We both grinned. I told her, ‘that’s a holiday destination. Resort town. You could have been a waitress at Burger Grill and got a great tan.’

‘He thought I was Jeremy.’

And there it was, the silence. All the things Louise and I couldn’t speak of pulled us together and held us apart like two beads on a tightly banded bracelet.

My throat stung. I swallowed. ‘Was he upset?’

‘He said she went to go back in the house and fell on the stones Jeremy left.’

The stones had littered our lives, small deposits, chipped and hard. They’d been irritating, a hasty arrangement to keep anxiety at bay. I remembered the patterns, the tight circles. ‘He never told me that.’

She went into my bedroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Picked up my hairbrush and started brushing her hair. ‘He wasn’t pissed. He remembered.’

‘So?’

‘We were at the park. You’d seen him but I didn’t know he’d come home. I thought he was getting beaten up by the kids from school.’

‘I know, Louise, I know.’
‘They thought he’d been kidnapped or hit by a car.’

‘Yeah.’ I got up and took two eggs from the fridge and shovelled around mushrooms and some thin strips of bacon in the frying pan. ‘Please. You’re upsetting me.’

‘If she tripped on the stones she knew he was inside.’

I cracked one of the eggs on the side of the bench and dropped it, shell and all, across my floor. The yellow leaked out over the pale jelly of albumen, splinters of shell stuck to the tiles. ‘Maybe she didn’t realise they were his.’

Louise watched me sadly. ‘Maybe.’

‘There was junk out there. It was really black. Or, she saw them before…thought he’d left them ages ago.’

‘Ages ago, when?’

‘I don’t know, Louise. I didn’t see them.’ Louise stood in the middle of the room, hands loose and gentle, back taut. So regal. So unrelenting. ‘She probably didn’t even notice.’

‘Anyway, she turned back. She didn’t try and go into the house.’

Then my heart turned. It was as if an anaesthetic or sedative had worn off and I was disoriented, unknowing, entering a conversation or job interview mid-way through, and expected to provide answers. I was adrift.

I picked up the remaining egg and threw it hard at the wall. It splattereded with a satisfactory smashing sound, crumpled, and flowed down the wall onto the carpet.

Louise fell back onto the sofa. ‘That was a very me thing to do.’

Then we were both quiet, watching the egg drip thickly onto my floor, the pattern of impact spread like blood over the wall.

She was easier to love when she was silent. I went over and touched her hair. ‘I’ll help you,’ I told her. ‘I’ll help you look.’
I hadn’t told Louise about the staff meeting yet. She’d been so extreme when she arrived home in the early hours of the morning and I wanted to get Sarah’s advice about what to do. At the Friday staff meeting Kirsty had been showing everyone her engagement ring before the staff meeting began. She taught year seven and was an irritatingly effective teacher. The kids adored her. She was twenty-two, with a golden ponytail and thin silver jewellery, including a delicate pendant made from semi-precious gems in the shape of a K hung around her neck. I thought there was something irredeemably fifties about her: she claimed to want hundreds of children and was organising a wedding with the full trimmings, including earnest discussions about napkin colours and the embossment on invitation paper. Before her fiancée had proposed she had spoken earnestly, if self-deprecatingly, about being left on the shelf. I’d tried not to despise her.

I had watched the second hand on the clock tick around as Tom worked his way through the agenda. Kirsty had a special needs kid who needed an integration aide but was only on the cusp of meeting the new criteria for assistance. Tom said he wanted this year’s reports to follow a different format. I’d been drifting, putting my hopes into the weekend. There was a tangle of tension because year-nine permission forms had been wrongly drafted for an excursion to the Immigration Museum.

Then Tom had stood and rubbed his hands together in the pose of a man ready to give an unfunny speech at his best friend’s wedding. He held the leaked document aloft. ‘Most of you will have seen this. I’m not sure how it was circulated but since it has been I want to clarify that no decisions have been made.’

Maria was our union representative. She asked why the union wasn’t included in the discussions around the report. I pulled out my copy of the paper and went over the finely pencilled initials, M.F, in pen.
Tom thought the report wouldn’t be a surprise to anyone, there had been concerns about results and enrolments for some time; the union representative had already been included in a committee to examine retention problems.

That’s when Maria said, ‘We are concerned that the school is going to be closed by stealth,’ and I realised how far things had already gone.

‘The report wasn’t to be released. It was a preliminary draft.’

‘But you knew about it.’

Tom rocked back on his heels and breathed deeply in an exaggerated way. ‘It was meant to provide the boundaries for a consultative process. We didn’t want parents yanking their kids out of here because of rumours.’ He raised his voice. ‘I’m on your side. I’m on the side of the staff and the school.’

He handed round a thickly stapled document. ‘This policy document has the new funding profile in it. It hasn’t been passed yet but it will be.’

‘What about jobs?’ Kirsty rifled through the pages.

‘Permanent staff, including anyone on leave, will be transferred if we’re in excess.’

Maria sat down quickly in the red plastic chair. ‘When is the decision being made?’

‘The union will be invited to make a submission. But given our enrolments the state government has done some preliminary investigation into the possibility of us becoming a middle school only and re-streaming into the other secondary colleges.’

I had been foolish, slow. ‘How long have you known about this?’

Tom put his glasses on. ‘Let’s not panic. It’s just an exploration at this stage.’

Kirsty said, ‘Where would the older ones go? The Catholic school’s expensive and the girls’ secondary is academically selective.’
He shrugged. ‘That’s what I said. It’s all in my report to the department.’

‘Why is this happening now?’

‘Apparently our enrolments aren’t meeting the new outcomes targets. The concentration of new migrant students means our LAP results are down and our completions don’t compare well.’

‘Isn’t this just procedure to make it look better when they close us down?’ Maria, the union delegate put her thick arms on the table. I saw my own resentment and surprise in the sour set of her face. Kirsty sat with her mouth open, touching her engagement ring.

‘I don’t think so. It’s not even a proposal. It’s a study. There’s a lot of good faith here. The department won’t force us to do anything. It’ll be our choice ultimately how we manage it.’

‘Is this something you suggested?’

‘Certainly not. I’ve been here for ten years, some of them as head teacher. Let’s be honest. We get fairly crap academic results. We’re in one of the poorest postcodes in the state and we don’t have the numbers.’

I sipped my cold coffee. ‘Then why would anyone suggest they go on to a selective academic college?’

‘I agree but we have to seem prepared to make changes.’

The phone rang loudly. Tom put his head down and ran a hand over the polished top of his scalp where the hair was sparse and wiry. ‘Leave it.’

Kirsty had looked at her watch, a dainty silver affair with a diamond-patterned band. She told Tom, in a near whisper, she had a dress fitting in the evening.

He looked about, his hands shaking. ‘Can we finish? Any other business?’
'What about teachers on contracts?' I knew Maria was talking about me.

'I can promise you that if we lose the senior years those staff will be reallocated. No one is going to be sacked.'

Tom painfully ad-libbed for a few minutes more about responding to challenges and giving the kids the chance to mix in different environments and meeting the students’ needs in flexible ways and not looking at the teaching process narrowly, not getting fixated or attached to any one solution. Because he seemed to know both too little and too much I was already certain that they wanted to shut the school.

Maria asked me to stay for the union meeting but I just nodded limply and raised my hand at the motions about consultation and liaising with the branch president and condemning moves to close the school in the strongest terms. I saw Kirsty was in the car-park when I left. ‘Those poor kids’ she told me. ‘Poor us,’ I answered.

I felt unprepared, ripped apart by my own assumptions. When I went to buy a ticket I found my teacher’s registration card, licence and union card were missing from my purse.

I had travelled through university to get away from my father’s heart-rending aloneness, his drinking and the blank noise of my mother’s absence. I had learned to read clever books and wear smart clothes and argue about Freud with a man who already had a wife. Now I was hopeless at reaching the students I taught, distanced by my authority and their willingness to see through my forced optimism. And yet somehow, like my father – for whom history was a trick, for whom each month and year somehow led back to that moment when he was told that the factory was closing – I was now also well on the way to losing my job.
The whole trip back I had thought obsessively about what we could do. Tom might sell out and take a quiet retirement. It was a wrench when I recognised that despite all the humiliations and failures of my classes – the older kids who had graffitied crude pictures of fornication into my desk, the parents who wanted to know when I would teach their kids real history with exams about dates and names – I desperately wanted the school to stay open.

We’d had students arrive in year-seven functionally illiterate, and leave the school reading. I’d taught the children of Iranian asylum-seekers whose parents had resisted their own government and fled in the night, as well as teenage potheads and girls like Selena who loved school but pretended not to. I had realised I had been smug, quietly self-satisfied.

I missed my stop and pulled the cord on the tram too late. I rushed down the stairs and into the Seven Eleven for cigarettes. If Louise got in debt again I wouldn’t be able to help her. I was jumpy with impulsiveness and uncertainty, and the old fear jolted in my veins that had once haunted me during the danger game as a child.

As I approached the counter I bumped into another customer. I turned to apologise and, because I recognised the woman from somewhere, I opened my mouth to greet her until I realised the woman was Jon’s wife.

We had met only once before, at a party. She’d had shining hair to her shoulders, and touched her mouth a lot. She hadn’t suspected anything, had been smiley and polite when we’d been introduced.

She stood grasping a leather handbag in both hands, tenderly, as if holding a gift. She was tall with broad hips and narrow shoulders. There were mild frown lines on her forehead. Her earrings tilted softly and looked horribly expensive. I wondered if he had bought them for her. She smelled of Nivea skin cream. I did not know what to say and I felt caught out in the most enormous lie. My private life – the sex, the half-asleep, mundane
conversations and the messy, sprawling rages – suddenly seemed childish, ridiculous, spiteful. I hovered at the counter, struck by the complete lack of social mores governing the situation I was in. I couldn’t remember her name. I tried to appear diffident, disconsolate, restrained.

She folded her arms quietly in a sure fluid movement. ‘Just so you know I’m not the mad woman in the attic.’

I kept my head down and asked for cigarettes from the young Indian guy behind the counter. I tried to appear like an ordinary kind of person but embarrassment made my voice high and I said please three times in the one request.

She waited, admirably unhurried. She watched me put the smokes in my pocket.

‘Do you know how long I’ve been with Jon?’

I shook my head.

‘Fifteen years. That doesn’t seem so long to you because you’re young.’

I rested the weight of my upper body on the counter and looked from her to the teenager who was watching me expectantly behind the counter. I hadn’t been able to break the frozen tableau.

Then she had clicked open her handbag. ‘I think he wants you to pay.’ And then I was out into the night.

Louise and I sat at the big wood table with cups of bitter black coffee and a rat-eared exercise book she’d dug out of her bag. She had come out of the shower with her hair dripping, stepping gingerly across the lounge with wet brown feet. The impressions left on the carpet by her footprints were shallow and disappeared while I was watching. Her pupils were normal, her arms unmarked. When she’d been absolutely in thrall to heroin she would inject
into her toes if she had to. This life had given her a secret knowledge, another language, of deceit.

Now her hair smelt of apples and rain on grass. ‘We could try her parents, make a list of people she used to know.’

‘I think we should start with Dad, ask him more about it. And Michael Grieves, the kid you saw, the one who used to beat Jeremy up.’

She scribbled into her book. ‘I don’t know it was him. What about friends? Births, deaths, marriages? What happens if you change your name by deed poll?’

I was remembering last night. ‘Hang on, Lou. Did you take my union card?’

She didn’t pause. Her eyelashes fluttered. ‘Was it in your wallet?’

‘Yep.’

‘I might have borrowed it when I was doing the application. To get back the community services records.’ She smoothed down a page of paper.

My voice was high. ‘Well, don’t. Don’t just take things from me and don’t bullshit me all the time.’

‘I forgot about it. It wasn’t a secret. It wasn’t deliberate.’

I felt cool, removed. ‘Did you even speak to him?’

She snatched a fag, got up. ‘Yeah.’

‘And he remembered?’

‘I just said.’

I held the cup of coffee tightly with two hands. ‘You say plenty of things Louise, it’s knowing which of them are true that’s the difficulty.’

Jeremy’s death, the dreams, the detective game, the wearing, wearying compulsion. I hadn’t seen the fantasy in it, the distraction, the element of ruse.

She grabbed the telephone and dragged it over. ‘Ring him. Ring him and ask him.’
‘I won’t do this again. Phone calls from debt-collection agencies for things you’ve ordered in my name, waiting up all night in case you’ve passed out in the middle of the road smacked up to your eyeballs…’

‘But I’m not, I’m not.’ She was pacing.

Then the telephone rang. Louise shoved it at me. ‘Where did you go last night then?’

She was ashen-faced, unreachable, picking up her things.

I took a breath, told myself careful. ‘Hello, Alice speaking.’ The receiver was cool to hold.

‘Hi, Alice, it’s Maria Theopolous. I hope I’m not calling too early.’

‘Oh, hi Maria.’

Louise had her backpack on, the plastic bag of papers she carried with her, slung over a wrist. She wrenched open the front door, then waited. As she was leaving she told me, ‘You lie to yourself all the time, Alice, all the time.’

‘Sorry, Maria. Shitty line. Can you say that again?’

‘Things have got a bit more complicated since the last meeting. I thought you’d like to know Tom’s called a community consultation meeting about the future of the school for next week.’

‘Well, good. The parents will be furious about it.’

‘The unofficial word from the education department is they’re submitting a preference to Tom for closing us down and they’d rather do it quietly with his acquiescence.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘There are rumours Tom’s already agreed. I’ve got a source that works in policy and procedures and she thinks that this has been in the pipeline for months. She says there are plenty of stories flying about that Tom’s happy to see the place shut. She’s going to forward me some emails, but you don’t
know this, Alice, you haven’t heard it from me. The state branch says this has been the strategy all over. Rather than have a huge battle all over the media that looks as if they’re being nasty to poor kids, they starve the schools of funds, watch them collapse into total dumps, almost paralysed and then look like they’re doing everyone a favour.’

‘So you don’t know anything for sure.’

She sighed. ‘Tom hasn’t objected to the new guidelines. This letter has invited a representative from the Department to speak and the state minister’s going to have a statement. It would have been drafted before the staff meeting.’

‘Because of this report?’

‘I don’t think the report matters. That’s just a bit of cover. It’s the declining enrolments, crap results.’

‘He just told us he was submitting a proposal for a Middle School. At the meeting.’

‘I guess a day’s a long time in the politics of sucking up. He’s drafted an invitation to the union and this letter to the parents for a forum would have been written days ago.’

‘Honestly, Maria, I don’t think he’d lie. I know he’s hardly a unionist but he cares about the school. And himself.’ Otherwise, I thought, why had he stayed there so long?

‘I’m calling our members for an emergency meeting so the branch can do a press release and get in first. And we’ll have to elect someone to speak at the forum. Tom may be on the side of the good and the great but he can retire in six months with a package.’

‘Someone should talk to Tom before this all goes ahead and try to get the facts right. We can’t assume he’s going to be on the wrong side of this. Why would he want to close the place he’s been in charge of for a decade?’
‘No, Alice, I don’t think that’s smart. Whatever he has to say about the school he should be willing to say publicly.’

‘But you don’t have any reason to think he’s abandoned pushing for a middle-school model.’

‘Then why has he been so secretive about a whole raft of funding decisions and that the report was commissioned?’

‘I could ask him quietly, unofficially, what he thinks should happen. I’ll say I’m worried about my position.’

Maria sighed. ‘Alice, I think it would be much wiser to wait until the public meeting and ambush him, demand that he speaks out on behalf of the school. And he’s not stupid. But we can discuss tactics at the branch meeting.’

‘If you’re right, then what do we do?’

‘It depends on what support the national branch can offer, what the other teachers think, how much of a fuss the parents make. We’ll have to fight this in a few strands, find out whether conditions and positions will be protected in a new environment if teachers are shifted, emphasise that we’re servicing a marginalised group of kids.’

‘Can we take industrial action?’

‘What? At a school that no longer exists? Slow down, Alice, you’re too impatient. We’ll talk about it but a third of the teaching staff’s not even in the union.’

‘How long will it take? Not the forum, I mean for the final decision?’

‘Depends on Tom. If he stands with us to keep the school open it’ll be much more difficult for the bureaucrats. If he agrees, no time at all. They’ll shut at the end of the year. If they’re smart they’ll let it drag on until parents rip out their kids, everyone’s fatigued and teachers start leaving voluntarily. Listen to this, he signs off: “Please be assured that I will be working for the interests of students and staff.” Shouldn’t it be in the interests of?’ She sighed.
'I don’t know. This Foley report’s a bit strange. Either he knew about it for ages or they’ve had their eye on us to close for quite a while.’

I got out a pen. ‘What does the letter to the parents say?’

‘Regret to communicate… something, something…open and honest discussion with parents about the way forward and best options for children of the school, bullshit, bullshit…um…here we go: Due to new state government funding profiles and federal funding distribution, it seems that our school does not have the enrolments to continue into the new year and beyond. We are presently negotiating with all sections of the education community to find a desirable outcome that will permit a smooth transition and minimum disruption for current students. We value your thoughts and input and shall endeavour to keep you involved and informed.’

‘When’s the meeting?’

‘I’ll post the minutes and the union notice on email. The forum’s Wednesday and I’d like to get state endorsements, something from the head honchos.’

‘What do the others think?’ Maria had been at the school for years. One of her daughters went there.

‘I’m ringing around now. We’ll figure out a proper strategy at the meeting. But I’m asking you not to approach Tom personally.’

‘They can just let my contract expire, can’t they?’

She said gently, ‘Alice if you get involved in this campaign to keep the school open they might do that anyway.’

I lay down, gingerly, on the red rug in my bedroom and tried to stop shivering. I wanted to get drunk. I remembered Jeremy’s face the night he died, the way he used to bury objects he loved in the garden, create treasure
hunts for Louise with real clues and tests, his milky breath when he was a
toddler, the soft pads of his hands in fists as a baby.

And perhaps our mother stepped back as the fire grew and spread and
Jeremy burned and burned and burned.

Tom had hired me to fill a maternity leave position when I was just a Bachelor
of Education graduate with patchy results and kept me when the vacancy
continued but he’d never tried to sell the school as much more than it was.

He’d been patient with my mistakes but largely disinterested. His wife,
who was hopelessly ambitious according to Kirsty, had railed to me once or
twice about how Tom could have been a research scientist but wasn’t
prepared to spend the years in postgraduate education and how she’d never
thought he’d settle in teaching because he didn’t have ‘super people skills’.
‘Not like me,’ she’d said, and laughed without humour, leaning in so that I
could demur, her perfume too strong, varicose veins spread like bright
pathways across her hands.

I had to trust Maria’s instincts. I had to shut my mouth. Instead I called
Sarah and got her voicemail. ‘Hi Sar. Can you ring me? It’s getting a bit
chaotic here. I need your sensible thoughts. Thanks.’

Louise wasn’t outside. I drank a glass of red wine quickly, which tasted
sugary, and lumped together my greasy breakfast on a plate, chewing and
waiting. From the balcony I watched the street. Ring back, Sarah. Ring me back.
A small balloon glided high in the sky, yellow with gold trim, trailing a wavy
ribbon like a tail. There was a warm wind and the black roads looked like
sticky liquorice.

But when the phone rang it was my old friend Timothy who’d flown into
Melbourne first thing and whom I’d promised weeks ago I’d meet for lunch.
'Hello honey, much as I love the suspense, when exactly are you arriving?’

‘Oh no.’

‘Why, yes. I’ll drink a beer while I’m waiting, shall I?’

I glimpsed Timothy in the park and darted over. He was trying on mournfulness, staring hungrily at the alcoholics who were huddled together.

‘I envy them their desperation,’ he told me.

‘Don’t be a fucking fool.’

‘At least they want something.’

I began to wish I hadn’t come.

St Kilda was a palimpsest where old stories still lingered. I looked across the road to the steps of McDonald’s as a boy, perhaps seventeen, cradled himself, touched his own skin with his fingertips, breathed in false security. His gaze was blank and joyous. He could barely raise his head. The smack was peaking. The skin on his face was clear, the crook of his arm unmarked and his cheeks were still fat with the sponginess of late adolescence. A tram cut off my view. The boy had looked like Sam from my school, Sam of the gentle hands and great responsibilities. A fat guy in a Singlet, skin etched with tattoos of snakes and breasts limped forward as the tram doors closed. The Vietnamese tram-driver shook his head and rang the bell. A beer bottle skittered against the tram rails. The fat man flung open his arms in a wild jerk and asked, ‘Didja see that Ching Chong cunt?’ to the open sky.

We pushed through the press of people, the surfeit that was Acland Street. I let my eyes flick over the shop windows and linger on bright, garish cakes with high towers of whipped cream and glazed, varnished fruit and custard. Across the road sparkly pink-and-silver tops clashed with pale yellow Fishermen’s pants in the discount stores. We negotiated our way past
struggling children and tourists, and let the drunks fade back into the short shadows of the trees in the park.

A middle-aged woman with a thick waist and low-heeled shoes almost collided with the empty hat of a homeless man. She dropped her bag. I picked it up.

‘I’ve heard they send their kids to ask you, to make you feel sorry for them’ she hissed as I passed it to her. ‘But then they just take the money off them and use it to buy drugs.’

‘They have plenty of money,’ Tim told her, and she began to nod. ‘I think begging is like a sport for them, a sort of game.’ She drew back, still smiling uncertainly in agreement. ‘You can make thousands of dollars doing this, more than CEOs do. They go back to their mansions on the cliffs and change out of their homeless uniforms.’ We cackled, we were twenty again, we ran the world, and the woman stepped jerkily away.

Timothy patted the top of his bleached hair softly. He was one of those men who had been thin but now carried too much weight. Each time I saw him he was losing his old shape like a receipt that had been through the wash. He’d insisted we meet while he was in Melbourne for a couple of weeks to visit his mother and to try and make amends with his ex-partner.

‘Help me find a present to placate my mother.’ Timothy pulled me by the hand into one of the upmarket stores, and fumbled with bottles of lavender oil and books with high production values and arty pictures of rainforests.

Timothy’s mother was in a nursing home. Sometimes when he visited she was caused great anxiety, because while she could remember both her daughters, she was occasionally adamant that she did not have a son. Timothy’s prompts usually managed to remind her of his birth but his
continued existence then made her weep and whisper, ‘This is not the sort of
son I thought I’d have.’

‘Ironic, isn’t it?’ I touched his shoulder.

‘Oh?’ He puts back a glass bowl filled with potpourri and gleaming
blue glass beads and sinister dried flowers the size of tarantulas.

‘Too funereal,’ I said. I had first met Timothy’s mother when I was
twenty. She had been astounding to me then – big boned, fleshy, flirtatious. It
was five years from those quicksilver gestures I remembered, her dancing to
the radio in tipsy weaves, to early-onset Alzheimer’s.

‘I mean that my father can’t remember that Jeremy is dead and your
mother can’t remember that you were born.’

Timothy shifted his weight from one foot to another and frowned at
himself in the mirrored glass behind the shelves. ‘I wouldn’t say it was ironic
exactly.’

‘What do you do with the presents she doesn’t want, refuses to take?’

‘I take them home and I put them all together and I line them up and I
count them, watch them accumulate.’

‘No.’

‘Nup. I give them to the nurses.’

Timothy had been my saviour at university. He had known how to make
awfulness funny. He was very briefly a pale boy from the country until he
found a certain rapid crisp pitch in his voice and a knack for cruel humour.
He was irreverent. He fucked strange men in the park and he had trained
himself to raise a single eyebrow.

At the counter I saw a straw basket with slips of glossy paper, a
collection of fortune-teller flashcards. I ruffled my hands through, closed my
eyes and clutched a card in my palm. It told me: Open your heart. There was an
indistinguishable fuzzy animal drawn at the bottom of the instruction,
perhaps a rabbit or a toy bear, that was smiling a lopsided, half-encouraging, half-admonishing smile.

‘Oh, Christ.’ I showed the card to Timothy.

‘Come on Alice, you grumpy tart, let’s get a drink.’

I felt the first drops of rain. Timothy and I ducked in under the umbrella of a bar decked out in bile-coloured pastels, all acid-yellow and bright citrus orange.

‘I thought I saw one of my students, well old students, smacked out of his brain on the tram.’

‘Tch. Tch.’ Timothy turned the thin silver bracelet on his wrist and looked away. ‘What are you teaching them?’

‘History.’

‘Oh yes.’

He could not comprehend my job. It was anathema to him, a sign that I was a bit of a hypocrite, a bit of a fraud.

‘What do you tell them about history?’


‘Do they like it?’

‘No. The year sevens get to do genealogy, or ‘my personal history’. They draw and collect things and paste them into their books.’

‘How I became the person I am today by Alice Reilly.’

‘That sort of thing.’

‘Do they see history as progress? As things getting better?’

‘Only in the sense that it’s one thing and then the next. They don’t think of it like that. It’s mostly just stories to them, especially the boys.’

‘What excites the boys?’
‘War. And pornography.’ I am not being accurate. I am using the kids I teach as fodder to impress Timothy with the banality of my life. ‘They hate Australian history, they think nothing’s ever happened here.’

‘Good for them.’

‘The Australian history?’

‘The pornography. Got to get a bit of pleasure somehow in this world.’

Timothy had started, since the end of his relationship, to watch pornography the way other people watch television or play solitaire, in a numbing private trance.

‘It’ll probably be closed this time next year.’

‘What?’

‘Our school.’ We were paused at the entrance to the bar, uncertain with each other.

He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Why? What’s going on?’

‘We don’t have enough students. Apparently. According to the new funding guidelines. And we’re now classified as an ‘under-performing’ school. That school’s been there for thirty years. One in three kids comes from a non-English speaking background.’

‘New funding guidelines. Blech.’ And the subject was closed.

I pulled my jacket on and scowled into the darkening sky, restless. I wondered if he didn’t much like women at all, or perhaps people. There was a fluid sadness in him, sharper than resignation, more subdued than grief. We were all getting older.

The bar overlooked the beach, and we sat watching the drizzle fall on damp sand, boats skip and toss in the shucking, billowing waves of the sea.

‘What’s happening with Jaryd? Have you seen him?’
'I rang and left a message. He hasn't called back yet.’ He picked up the thin paper napkins and folded one up into small squares. ‘I’m lonely. Why aren’t you lonely, Alice?’

‘Louise is staying with me.’ He waited. ‘I am. I’m sick of being trapped inside my own thoughts. At least I have Sarah here.’

‘You knew Jaryd was much younger than me.’

‘Mmm.’ It had been a cause of some ill-tempered humour in our fraying circle of friends. They’d been together for two years, shared an apartment in Bondi and then in the suburbs of Sydney.

‘I think he got bored.’

The waitress thumped two glasses of water onto the table, slopping the liquid over the sides. She smelled of frangipanis and cinnamon and her hair, tucked firmly behind her ears, was the colour of muddy honey. We ordered vodka lemon lime and soda because it was becoming that sort of day and Timothy asked for a spinach and fetta salad. I wasn’t eating. Instead I picked the crusts off our complementary bread and crumbled them into dust.

‘Is that what Jaryd says?’

Timothy shrugged, stirred the ice in his glass with a straw. ‘He never wanted to be home, picked and poked at me. Moved out into a studio apartment in a warehouse and drank ginger tea and went on the liver cleansing diet. You know these places, drawings painted right on the walls, someone playing bass guitar in the room below. He liked watching the neighbour get undressed through the overlooking window. Sudden interest in Buddhism.’

‘He’s restless. Sounds like he wants to be nineteen again.’ I did a double-take. ‘He wasn’t nineteen, was he?’

‘Very funny.’ Timothy leaned in, whispered: ‘Yoga stole my boyfriend.’
It was a ritual we’d had back in the early days, speaking in the headlines of tabloids and the mainstream broadsheets, the hysteria of current affairs shows. ‘This seemingly innocuous building is the scene of a cult snatching…’

‘Eastern brainwashing...’

‘Mind control salutes the sun...’
The couple sitting at a nearby table turned around to stare at us so we stopped. ‘Do you think he’ll come back?’ We looked together at the whip and pitch of the ocean.

‘Dunno.’ A tired shrug. ‘He’s got a friend in Northcote that he’s staying with. He says it’s a friend.’ A ragged breath. ‘Why do you think you’re so f**ked up about men?’

I smiled. ‘I blame men.’

‘Honestly.’

A rush of despair juddered through me. I hadn’t realised how obvious I was.

What had I forgotten? There was something I hadn’t remembered. Back at home I shunted back and forth between reading over my employment contract, my scribbled comments from the conversation with Maria and the state-wide funding submission the union had put together on disadvantaged schools in low-income areas last year; and hunting in the scraps of paperwork Louise had left behind, writing lists of people who once knew my mother. I kept walking between my bedroom and the lounge, treading a repetitive route in the same obsessive way I had once seen an armadillo at the zoo trot a figure-eight so constantly that the earth had deep grooves worn into it. The afternoon was nearly over when I realised.
Maria had called it the Foley report. Foley was a common enough name, English I assumed, perhaps Irish. Still it had been M.F and she worked in the public service. I couldn’t remember which department. I should have listened when Jon spoke of her.

Tucked into the back of my wallet was his phone number. ‘For emergencies,’ he’d said as he scrawled it down six months ago. We had both known I wasn’t to ring.

We’d only fucked at his home once, when his wife was away on a girls trip to the Yarra Valley, and I’d had to lie naked on their cool thin cotton sheets and listen to her leave a drunken message on their machine, using a pet name for him and gabbling about his mate’s wedding, that she didn’t want to go to. She’d sounded gregarious, mild, kind.

Usually we went to my place or his studio, which was uncomfortably small, and so cold in the winter we’d have to warm ourselves at the electric bar heater, turning one way and then the next to get an even temperature, our loose naked limbs like meat on a spit, before we lay down. Our breath puffed out visibly as though we were perpetually exhaling cigarette smoke.

We’d tried a weekend away ourselves, right back when it began, when the future wasn’t known, when even a casual touch would make me shiver and just the thought of him made me beam, quietly, privately, trying all the while not to assume anything. There were times in the day when we’d had nothing to say to one another.

I had gone down on him in the hotel lift, his hand on my neck, while my eyes kept straying to the mirrored wall and the uncomfortable reflection of myself on my knees. A woman with a cleaning trolley, who quickly turned away, had interrupted us. He’d told me, ‘You can keep going. It’s just the maid. I’m sure this happens all the time,’ and we laughed together uneasily: how abject were we prepared to be?
Later, under the table at dinner, when we were sitting outside on the
deck in front of a crowd of strangers, he’d lifted up my dress and
manoeuvred his fingers beneath my underwear and touched me to orgasm. It
had still felt like a love affair.

Even so we had packed up early with relief, his guilt and my diffidence
circumvented.

It had been easier to admit things then. ‘You only like me ‘cause I’m
great in bed.’ He would sigh and I’d nod frankly, without smiling.

I fished out the crumpled number, which was inked heavily and
followed by a couple of jaunty Xs. I dialled it with trembling hands.

*Hi* they chorused, in stagey unison. She continued, *Obviously we’re not
here at the moment-*

Then Jon’s voice. ‘Uh, hello.’ The machine cut out.

‘It’s Alice.’

A beat. ‘Right. Hang on a sec.’ I heard scrambling, the sweep of a door
closing.

‘Sorry. I really need to see you.’

‘Yup, I don’t think that’s going to work.’

It was too humiliating to reply.

‘I can give you a ring from the studio next week to set up a time?’

‘Please,’ I said. ‘Come over.’

He cleared his throat loudly and raised his voice. ‘Okay if you’ll fit me
in that’s fantastic but I’ve only got half an hour.’

By the time he arrived I was drunk. I watched from the balcony as he parked
the car deftly and jogged up to my apartment building. He had on dirty Levis
and black Dunlops and a tight T-shirt, expensive, patterned with blocks of
colour and flecks of white. The bottlebrush tree swayed drunkenly. I saw a
parrot flash past. A flurry of blue and red unfolding. Jon handed me a bunch of damp oak leaves. ‘Beautiful, hey?’ I let them fall to the carpet. They didn’t float but thudded. ‘Let’s go somewhere, let’s walk.’

He put his hand on my arm. ‘Alice, I can’t stay.’

He looked like he had been crying. His face was red. I looked carefully.

‘What’s happened?’

He frowned then grinned. ‘No, no, it’s hayfever. What’s happened with you?’

‘Can we go out? I don’t want Louise interrupting us.’

‘You’re not taking me out of your flat so you can break up with me are you?’ He took my hand and turned it palm up.

‘I don’t know. No.’ I felt limp, unencouraged.

He let go of my hand swiftly, shifted his own into his pockets. ‘You just asked me to come here. Alice, I love you, you’re gorgeous, but I am going home in half an hour.’

‘Fine.’ I shut the door behind him and we went into the lounge. I poured us drinks.

‘There’s stuff all over your wall.’ He dabbed a finger on the rough white paint.

‘Never mind.’ I didn’t know how to begin. ‘Where are you?’

‘I said I was getting a suit fitting for the design prize and they snuck me in.’

‘What design prize?’

He shifted from one foot to the other. ‘Just this industry award.’

‘I thought I’d know when important things happen for you but why would I? I spose that’s silly.’ I was edgy, kept shifting my glass from one surface to another.

Jon looked at his hands. ‘Is it your sister?’
It was the combination of generosity and ignorance that was painful.

‘Remember that whole, let’s be loyal and good to one another even if we can’t make,’ I swallowed, ‘certain promises, or not try to give promises we can’t keep?’

If I drew a cartoon of him now I would exaggerate the slump in his shoulders, the charcoal smudges under his eyes. He’d be despair, disenchantment.

He nodded, meshed his fingers together. I noticed the new watch, its face a Popart image of a woman from a fifties comic book, mouth open, brows raised, terrified and titillated by an invisible threat. ‘I thought that’s how you wanted it too.’

‘I need to know what’s happening with my school. Everything that you know.’

He grinned, relieved. He clasped my hands. ‘Okay but I know what you told me. That’s it.’ He attempted a French-German accent. ‘I know nothing.’

‘I won’t get anybody in trouble. I can even keep it quiet. I just want a heads up.’

He feigned tossing a coin, settled deeper into the couch now, assured. ‘I’ve been worrying that you wouldn’t see me anymore, was expecting you to say, “that’s it”.’

‘Your wife’s in the public service, right?’
‘Mmmm she is,’ his voice had an upward lilt, a warning.
‘Which department?’
‘They sort of ship her around, why?’
‘Jill of all trades’ I said unkindly.
‘I guess.’ He didn’t get it. ‘There’s no point obsessing about it.’
‘Do you listen to what I tell you?’
'Alice, what are you so angry about?'

I was calm. ‘Do you remember the name of the school I teach at?’

He fiddled with the braiding that hemmed the arm of the sofa. Suddenly remembered his drink and picked it up. ‘Let’s talk about where we’re going here. Just kindly and truthfully. What do we want to do with this mess?’ He put both hands on his knees, stooped his head.

‘Does your wife know that it’s me?’

‘She told me she saw you. I’m sorry. She guessed, said she’d suspected for ages. It’s pretty awful and I haven’t ... been able to promise her what will happen with us.’

I left the pronoun ambiguous. It was better not to know. ‘She’s in the education department at the moment, though?’

He looked annoyed.

‘You always want to talk about her, let’s talk about her.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re asking me to say.’

‘Where do I teach?’

‘I’m choosing to be here. I came here and now you’re acting like a dissociative.’

‘Do you want a minor reward? Is there some kind of sliding scale of remuneration for people who lie and cheat but come when called?’

Jon stayed unruffled. He smelled of Brut and damp leaves. His palms were huge and square, fingers narrow and elegant. He grinned, swept out his arms. ‘I’d say something in the minor to median range would be fine.’

‘Did Mary write a report on low enrolment state schools?’

The recognition was slow in coming. ‘That report was written months ago.’

‘And it didn’t occur to you that my fucking job might go down the drain because your punitive little wife...’
‘Don’t speak like that about her.’

‘Speak like that about her? You’re the one fucking around on her with other women.’

‘Not other women, just you.’ He clung to the point doggedly, a pinpoint of clarity. He was breathing fast.

‘Did you see other women before me?’

He flung out his arms, furiously. ‘What? I don’t understand this paranoia. I mean you never wanted any strings, you didn’t want a man in your life fulltime you said. You were happy to have company but really you wanted the life of an ageing spinster in an Agatha Christie movie: privacy and freedom and no-one to be responsible for.’

The longing rushed forward without my even knowing where it had come from, leaving a deep unkindness in its wake. ‘It’s not as if I was hanging about but privately hoping if I was sweet enough, undemanding enough, shaved my legs regularly, wore expensive clothes and never told you what I wanted that one day you’d realise how fantastic I was and leave Mary.’

‘Good.’ He ran his hands through his hair. ‘I knew you weren’t doing that. You’re not that kind of person. You look after yourself, you’re strong, you like being alone.’

‘How long has she known?’

He pushed his hands through his hair. ‘I’m sure she has no idea where you work. She takes her job a bit more seriously than to make recommendations she wouldn’t stand by professionally.’

‘You never even knew.’

‘I didn’t read the report and, no, my life is not so small that I memorised the name of your school. I try to keep things – my thoughts – separate.’

‘I won’t have a job.’
'You’ll get a transfer. You don’t even have to stay in teaching, Alice, if you don’t want to. You’ll have great references, plenty of experience. Don’t be so dramatic, you thought it was crappy pay and bad hours, here’s your chance.'

This from the man who’d read me *Gulliver’s Travels* in bed, the man who’d cooked a terrible cake for me when I was sick, the man who’d worked through the night painting pictures of mountain bears and ghostly horrors for a young adult novel’s cover. ‘Lemons from lemonade.’

He shook his head. ‘If you like. I was thinking spilt milk.’

The words rushed out. ‘You really are an idiot, aren’t you? No-one can be that naïve. This is an attack on everybody who lives in that neighbourhood and wants a basic education. It’s not just where I happen to work. There are parents there with incomes lower than what you spend on your car in a year. They’re closing the school because the kids are struggling, they don’t speak perfect English and if they miss out, drop out, fuck up, well who gives a fuck about them? Not people like you.’

‘Stuff like this happens all the time and people learn to deal with it. However much you’d like to make this the full dog and pony show, it’s actually pretty simple so far as I can see: the school’s draining money and losing enrolments.’

‘You arsehole.’

He held a smile on his face, bitterly, quietly. ‘You have plenty of resilience. I’ve never met anyone as tough as you. Alice will look after Alice.’

‘Are you talking about our relationship now?’

‘You like control.’ He shrugged. ‘You maintain an unnatural amount of distance.’

I was flummoxed, winded by how unfair he was being. ‘You’re married. You’ve never had any intention of leaving the marriage. What am I
meant to be doing? Wailing like a banshee and threatening to hire a hit man to take out your wife?’ I kept hold of my voice, kept it light.

He didn’t laugh or fall back. ‘But I have thought of leaving. There have been nights when I wanted to try and make it work with you: when we’d been trundling around here in the warmth, just putting things together, and making dinner, and I’ve dreaded all the dishonesty and the evasions and the silences I have with her, and years on years of recrimination and regret. Hated going back to it. But I can’t speak to you then, you won’t allow me to even contemplate it. And I do have years with her, good years with her too.’

‘That’s so great Jon, that’s really wonderful. Gosh I admire you that sometimes you even think ...just let your mind wander where it will...that you might one day, not yet, reflect on your screwed up marriage.’

‘Why are you being so vicious? You never wanted this to be more than it is. You love the fact I’m married.’

‘Oh yeah. It’s a real riot for me, a source of constant comfort and reassurance.’

‘Because it means you don’t have to make any decisions, or take any risks or make any commitments at all to anything or anyone other than yourself.’

I stood. ‘You’re screaming at me because you won’t admit your honourable, faithful, nineteenth-century character of a wife actually fucked over my job exclusively because you were fucking me. Go home.’

‘You talk about the kids you teach like projects, not people. Look at your sister, walking round like a fucking ghost, or the way you feel about your father. You want to treat fully-grown human beings like sparrows with broken wings, propping them all up, extorting gratitude.’

He clasped his hands together. They were trembling. He turned the gold circle of his ring on his left hand, slowly, and with painful care. ‘How
did we get here?” He got to his feet, looking dizzy and far older than before.
‘I’m sorry. I’m so ashamed.’

I tugged open the lock, slid the door easily. Jon walked stiffly to the door.

He hovered. ‘Wait. Just wait.’

‘Wait for what?’ I left a silence. ‘What’s the difference.’ I said it to myself as much as him, swinging closed the door, shutting out the draught and the night and remorse.

That was how things ended, not so differently from how we’d gone on when we were together: half-heartedly, not knowing whether to be relieved or disappointed.

As I was walking up the steps (worn in the centre from hundreds of pairs of feet, a million strides striking the same concave point) the rage nearly unbalanced me. My breath was coming so fast I was almost panting, I held my fists tight so that the blood pounded thick in them like the stamp of distant feet. And then I saw the warm haze of sky behind the balcony, so full of longing, so full of hunger. I climbed the stairs and noticed the twitch of dirty curtains behind a window, the rustle of men left behind; the lumbering shape of Diane approaching the laundry room and I felt washed away by recognition. My father lived here. My father was one of these men. He couldn’t hold a job. He was terrified of history. He didn’t have close friends, or ‘interests’ as the dating agencies and aged care facilities called it. He got up each day alone and clung with the same amnesiac determination as a sufferer of hypothermia stuck on a mountain, lost in a blizzard, to the present moment, to surviving. For this very moment, with the warm sun falling on
me and the smell of stale smoke and takeaway in the air, the fury subsided and I admired him, almost loved him again.

Like the others who lived here he would have become used to all the tiny calculations that made life possible: using teabags twice, checking your change, doing the divisions for the meal, the day, the week. Black and Gold butter, reading the newspaper at the local library, the bones of meat in soup, the bargain trolleys at the supermarket. Potatoes in their jackets, bread, noodles, carbohydrates to fill you, pre-made meals frozen or in cans. Fishing through the bins at railway stations for a ticket just discarded. Filling up his days with checking the mailbox, eavesdropping on conversations in nearby flats, a list of favoured TV programs (sports, cop shows) taped beside the bed, walks along the overpass to the shopping centre and the park, the preparation of small meals, and projects like painting a piece of furniture or cleaning the shower, spread over hours.

Jon had said you make it sound like old-fashioned class war Alice.

I thought of Dad explaining how you learn the age of a tree, and where the oldest known living tree in the world grew. Or the time we made a snail farm under the house when Louise and Jeremy were babies, one held in the crook of his arm, the other in a sling.

I could see him in my mind’s eye: peeling the newswrappers off steaming hot fish and chips, smiling and helping Louise make up a story while Mum poured tea and wiped the table.

I paused at the landing, giddy with grief and joy. In our last argument Jon had told me: It’s as if you imagine your life to be some kind of grim black-and-white Depression-era documentary, with barefooted mothers forced out of their homes and eviction notices nailed to the front door. Things aren’t like that any more. Everything’s more flexible now. You just have to learn how to make the change.
A Vespa gleamed on the floor below me, a bright bumper sticker splashed across it. ‘Ex-wives are like old horses. You can’t ride ‘em but you still have to feed ‘em.’

He came to the front door flushed. Down the corridor I saw Diane seated at the green card table, sipping a drink. They were playing cards. My father pulled me out a chair. ‘Just let us finish this game, love.’ His eyes were too bright, cheeks glowing.

‘Whose is that motorbike parked downstairs?’

‘That’d be Jake’s, wouldn’t it?’ He nodded at Diane who was pushing potato chips into her mouth furiously and didn’t answer. ‘Won it in a raffle, how about that?’

Diane swallowed. ‘My mother used to serve good drinking sherry every Sunday afternoon with the main meal.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Thought it was all class, all lady.’

My father was frozen mid-way through dealing the next set of cards.

‘She had photographs of the Queen up. Used to hide food from us, scared we’d get too big.’

‘Have a drink.’ He pushed the bottle towards me.

‘Since when do you drink sherry?’ The sweet smell was overwhelming.

‘It was a present.’ I saw Diane’s lip tremble. She was wearing an oversized pinafore dress over grubby jeans and a plastic charm necklace.

‘How are you Diane?’

She blinked slowly, put her cards face down in a fan on the table. Hissed. ‘I’m under cover.’

I felt the rage returning.

She got up and spoke in an exaggerated voice, taking a polite interest.

‘And how’s your affair?’
I put my head down on the table and didn’t raise it until she’d left. My father turned on the electric burner and poured a can of beans into a saucepan, flopped some bread onto two plates. The teabags looked ancient, pale and ghostly so I pinched them in the hot water to extract some colour.

We sat at the card table.

‘What day is it? Wednesday?’

‘Saturday.’ I put crisps in my mouth. ‘Why does Diane come here?’

‘She likes cards.’ His voice slurred. ‘I was thinking about cutting back, drinking a bit less, putting in for this job.’

‘Sounds like you’re off to a good start.’ The cynicism was automatic. Jon had said: Alice will look after Alice. I looked at his face carefully. He was banal, friendly, gentle, this man I had loathed an hour earlier. ‘Sorry.’ He shook his head from side to side.

Then as if for the first time I noticed the careful arrangements of decorations in the flat: the cut-out magazine images of Ireland, the Op Shop postcards, the dusty red-and-white curtains.

I meant to see if he could remember the night Jeremy died but something closed in my throat. ‘They’re shutting down my school.’

He put his hand out as if to touch my shoulder and left it waiting in the air, holding back an invisible intruder. ‘I’d say you could put up a good fight.’

I picked at the dull mustard-coloured fabric of the chair. ‘We’ll try.’

‘Be glad you come from a long line of people used to making a fuss.’

My laugh was a scoff.

‘Don’t let events overtake you.’

And now I couldn’t speak of the fire. Instead I asked about his factory job. ‘Do you think if you’d done things differently you would’ve kept that job?’

‘Which one?’
'The first one.'

'You’re kidding.'

I took my crockery to the tiny sink, saw the grease shining on the door to the grill, old bread with dried-out bread-crusts kept under plastic wrap.

It has been a long time since I have been ashamed in front of my father. At lunch I had been sprinkling my bread roll onto the plate.

'There’s a beer in the fridge. For me too.'

I pulled out the drinks. There was a carton of milk, a huge block of cheese, wilting lettuce, some packets of frozen pizza. 'Are you going for another job?'

'Jake knew someone who was looking. But test-driving cars at night. You just take them up and down the freeways, follow this route? See if they break down. I didn’t keep up my license...and you can’t...well you’re out all night.'

You can't drink is what he didn’t say, not unless you want to kill someone.

I brought the VB. He still had a glass half-full on the table. 'What about your sherry?'

'Cough syrup.'

'Why don’t you just tell her?'

He winced.

'Louise came over?'

'Used to be a real livewire that kid, always schemes going. She’s still pretty.'

'Pretty pretty for a junkie,' but I said it to myself and not him.

'When it’s your kids ... Like your mum used to say, “I’d love you if you had four noses and seventeen eyes and a mouth full of teeth.”'
That’s how much she used to tell us. That’s how much I love you. I thought of her whispering this to me before she went out, when she was working night-shift, sliding a paper bag of lollies under my pillow when I was almost asleep.

‘Did you tell Lou Mum tried to get Jeremy out of the house?’

He sucked out the rest of his beer and the can contracted. ‘He couldn’t have been in there, Alice. When I put down the kero I was bluffing. Louise is crying, burned up. That smell. The ambulance was coming.’

‘Do you remember him dying?’

Nothing. I made myself a cup of tea and brought one to him.

‘Thanks.’

‘Anyway, the union’s involved now, with my teaching job.’

‘Yeah.’

He swallowed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘I was in cars to start, you know? Ford.’

‘Why wasn’t it illegal when they sacked you?’

‘They did it right smart. We were a closed shop or closest thing. Some of those guys were amazing. You wouldn’t believe how they could get up in crowd and say the right stuff. Zero accidents in two years, not even a fucking paper cut.’

‘How did they do it?’

He sprinkled sugar over the crusts and added a teaspoon of milk, ate standing up at the sink, his back to me.

‘It was a huge company. We’d gone on pattern bargaining. Then they sold it off to a new owner. Took them a year. Offered contracts with sky-high penalty rates to the bastards who didn’t give a fuck. Fought it out, took their time, voluntary redundancies, said the industry was going broke. We hung on.’
I drank my beer, listened to his breathing increase. ‘Seven months till they registered the agreement. We went out, come back, they locked us out. Got a few onto the contracts, it’s all rosy. New machinery, now the older blokes’re redundant whether they like it or not.’

‘What did you think was going to happen?’

‘I was a patsy. I was a bloody moron. The boss’s son takes me aside, says they’re going to lay me off, they’ll pay what I’m owed, it’s all fine, they’re sorry. That’s how they did it, quiet and smart. You done a chart every union member was gone, individual contracts stayed. Hired again six months later.’

‘What about the union? Unfair dismissal?’

‘They got benefits back for most of them. I fucked myself, Alice.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Summary dismissal. I belted him in the mouth. He’s holding his chin, dripping blood and grinning. Fuck it.’

‘I thought there was a whole bunch of you owed.’

‘The managers outsourced drove the company broke, made sure there’s nothing there to pay out the blokes who stayed. Got themselves pay rises then bankruptcy.’

Even in the dark I saw the tears.

‘But, like I say to you three kids, “You play the cards you’re given.”’

And the gnomic wisdom felt too bleak even for me.
Mrs Daly said there might be things on the exam that Jeremy might not recognise. He shouldn’t allow himself to get confused by mathematical problems that were expressed in words or surrounded by stories. Jeremy should find the question and then answer it and forget about who had six ice creams or which train was travelling where. Through the gap in the cupboard door – a sharp slice of lemon light – Jeremy watches his father. The picture is cluttered by details. There’s the loose leg of the chair tilting his dad slightly towards the plastic cover on the kitchen table. There’s the great stack of old papers and the mug with Santa Claus broad-faced with blushing circles for cheeks half-beaming, half-scowling on the side. There’s his dad’s fingers touching each other slowly and trembling. From this angle and in this moment only, his father is a small man. In the bright light of the kitchen, in the dirty smells of the pipe running down from the sink, Jeremy’s father is not someone to be afraid of. If he stares long enough, things will slide back into their usual places again and there will be a pulsing in his chest as the story falls away.

There is a long lost box of velvet soap in the cupboard, so old that the cardboard has stuck damply to the blocks of soap and there is a sticky yellow residue that has leaked out. Jeremy thinks that the box must have been hidden because Louise used to eat soap for the danger game. His sister’s lost treasures are hidden here. There is the sewing box where Louise used to hide the jellybeans she nicked from the chemist’s. He loves the smell of black jellybeans, the call of stale aniseed. Jeremy leans into the water pipe, which is still warm against his back, and his foot nudges the deflated rubber of the soccer ball. Before his dad got wrecked, his father used to take Jeremy to the park down the road where they’d kick the ball and pretend to find secret gardens behind the swings. They’d keep secrets together and sometimes when they all went out to dinner at the big place where you could get a token for a kid’s drink and take it up to the bar, his dad would wink and make jokes that only he and Jeremy could
understand. The secret garden was at the bottom of the little hill, behind the swings, at the back of a thick hedge and his father saw it too.

Through the gap, Jeremy sees the pale legs of his mother and the dirt smudged across her feet as she comes in to make tea. The kitchen is loud with the sounds of her. Jeremy stays undiscovered.

His father clears his throat and pushes the Santa mug away. ‘Come here.’ His mum keeps making the tea and when she slaps the teapot down sharply on the bench the reverberations carry through the cupboard.

‘You were always jealous of him. Why aren’t you happy?’ Her movements are tight and contained. There’s a dull blur to his father’s face, a small dissolving. His mother sits and the angle of her elbow in her arm is precise, like the side of a triangle. His father is muttering in a gentle rhythm, a whispering chatter. His mum takes his father’s shoulders and strokes his head. Jeremy can hear his father saying ‘forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.’ He says it so many times that the words begin to sound like something else or it seems his father has always been saying these words and just these words.

His mum separates and stands back and still his dad murmurs. His mother says, ‘I can’t.’

‘Just tell me. Just say it.’ The Santa mug rolls on the table.

‘If he comes back you’ll hate him again. You can’t help yourself.’ Jeremy closes his eyes but he can hear the shudder of the back door frame and his dad asking his mother to come back, quietly at first and then yelling, ‘You come back here now.’ Jeremy hears his father walk towards the cupboards and he pulls the door closed so that he is sealed in tight. His dad opens the cupboard next to him and slams the door shut. ‘Do you want me to do it? I’ll do it.’ There is a tinny echo and then a trickle and the sound of water sloshing. Perhaps his dad is tipping out all his drink onto the ground. ‘I’ll burn this fucking place down.’

‘Why don’t you’, his father is bellowing, ‘Why don’t you help me?’ His
mother doesn’t answer. ‘Get back here.’ Jeremy presses the sewing box to his face and
sniffs in deep from the pale crumbs of black jellybeans.
The day of the public meeting everything seemed sharper, more chaotic. School was scattered with streamers and balloons for the Year Seven sports carnival when I walked through the gates. It was a silvery morning. Children in sneakers and maroon and white windcheaters poured out of buses.

Louise had woken me up at dawn, listening to the Clash and getting dressed for a trial shift at the sandwich shop around the corner from my apartment.

I avoided the staff room, the thin lines of tension that would be curving through the air like twists of wool or smoke rings. But I glimpsed Maria inside, slumped forward over the Greek newspaper. Although the State branch had faxed out a press release condemning any closure or downsizing and was liaising with the admin and cleaning unions, and Maria’s carefully worded summary had been added to an email bulletin to members, she was enraged about a few of the teachers on staff who had already murmured about taking packages and travelling, or finding work in the private sector. At the branch meeting she’d chaired to help plan the union’s intervention into the public meeting, she was unable to concentrate, fiddling with her packet of unfiltered cigarettes and making a list of the teachers who weren’t there. ‘They’ve no principles.’

My first class of the day meant preparing for the end of term test. I unlocked the door. Without students, the room felt bare, oddly austere and preserved as though the school had already closed. I drafted revision questions, on the ‘Australians at War’ photo exhibition my year-tens had seen on excursion, alternating between trying to be inventive, and feeling irate about the curriculum.
Sam knocked on the door. He’d hardly been in school since he told me that he might be leaving. He was sweaty and out of breath. ‘Hi. Still here?’

‘S my last week.’

‘You’re early, the bell hasn’t gone. Are you going to sit for the exams?’

‘I have to ask you stuff, Miss.’

‘Come on in.’ I pulled two seats over to the near corner of the room and left the door open, remembering Tom’s warning. Sam kept standing.

‘How’s your Mum?’

‘Okay. They say she’s “comfortable”. She doesn’t reckon. Me brother’s back.’ He jittered his feet on the wooden floor.

It was then that I realised. ‘She’s dying?’

‘Cancer in her bones.’ He picked at the sleeves of his school jumper, which must have shrunk in the wash. It reached only to a few inches before his wrists. ‘How do I get more painkillers? It’s not enough.’

‘You know I can’t tell you that. Get your brother to speak to the hospital.’

‘She doesn’t wanna go back. She wants to die at home.’ The heavy school shoes smacked the ground, kicking rapidly, like an old-school tap routine.

‘Are you on something, Sam? You know the policy on drugs.’

He swung his head back and forth slowly, brought to mind an elephant rocking its trunk at the circus, weight shifting sadly from one side to the other. ‘Nah, Miss. I’m not.’

I let it go.

‘This is my last instalment.’ He pressed some folded up sheets of paper into my hand. ‘The story.’ He’d wanted to write a three-part tale about interspace. His writing never had apostrophes or capital letters at the beginning of sentences, though he would occasionally capitalise a letter in the
middle of a word to wake me up. They were beautiful and curious. He hadn’t
given me a history assignment most of the term.

‘Thanks, Sam.’ If it hadn’t been for the rules, the borderlines, I might
have hugged him.

‘Hamish and Ben are twins so maybe they could learn to read each
other minds, d’you reckon?’

I had to grapple with a smile. ‘No.’

‘With ESP, they could have ESP,’ he spoke far too quickly.

‘I don’t think so, Sam. They’ve done studies of twins and how their
lives develop, though, you should look in the library.’

He scowled. ‘It’s possible they have ESP. That’s what my story’s about.’

I gave up, put on my SBS world-news commentator voice. ‘They say
there’s a lot we still don’t know about the mind.’

The bell went. Bodies bustled in the aisles. ‘My sister was a twin,
identical. And I wouldn’t taste-test your Mum’s drugs, you’ll fuck yourself
up.’

His head snapped up. He was probably thinking, Miss said fuck.
I got out worksheets for the students who were streaming into class. ‘Okay.
Morning. Last class before the dreaded test.’

Near Sam the boys shoved and pushed so as not to take the seat next to
him. ‘What’s the problem?’

Nicholas whined. ‘He’s got a cold, he’s all germy, I don’t wanna sit
there.’ Even Ben was playing along, whacking the history textbook onto the
wooden seat next to him as Sam moved towards it. Sam waited, uncertain, his
skin burning up, his fingers jostling the air.

‘This seat’s taken, someone’s sitting here.’ Hamish, who was listening
to Rage Against the Machine on an iPod he hadn’t owned last week, put his
feet up on a chair.
I stood in the front of the room. ‘If you think you’ve got a good reason not to sit next to Sam, stand up.’ His eyes fastened on the floor. A few of the boys sitting at the back jeered each other and started pushing back their chairs. ‘And get out. Out. And don’t come back in. You can all go straight to the principal’s office. Each and every one of you.’ The two boys stood with bent backs and tried to get back into their chairs without making any noise.

Hamish moved his feet. ‘There’s a seat here.’ Sam lumbered into the seat. I yanked the earphones out. ‘This music isn’t meant to be listened to quietly. Stop showing off.’

‘Sorry, Miss.’

‘Who’s going to tell me what’s going on?’ I tried to get control of myself but I could hear my voice was too shrill, too high. ‘Fine. Try to answer questions one through five individually then we’ll discuss them in groups.’

I walked around in the silence, watched them scribble down definitions of conscription and alliance. Then I found a scrap of paper with a scrawled snowman figure of a man with an arrow pointing to him and ‘Poofter. He sucks dicks’ written in a neat speech balloon. Of course: Sam’s brother. The handwriting was Ben’s. I didn’t have the energy for a patient, hollow discussion of discrimination and sexuality and inclusion. I scrunched up the paper, breathed carefully and went to the board. ‘Swap your sheet with the person next to you and we’ll go through your answers.’ I began writing up the major military altercations Australia had been involved in throughout the twentieth century as they were called out. ‘So what is the US alliance?’

Nicholas waved his hand in the air.

‘Like ANZUS.’

‘Okay, good. And what’s that?’

A silence.
Hamish put his hand up. ‘Miss, if we have go to another school, will you still be our teacher?’

‘I don’t know. But this is your school for now.’

There was a burst of enthusiasm in the room. ‘But Mum got a letter there’s no funding.’

‘That’s what the meeting tomorrow’s meant to talk about. If you want to keep going to school here you should come.’

Nicholas muttered, ‘What if you don’t want to go to school at all,’ to the floor but it was mostly bravado and he did it quietly.

‘If you think you deserve a publicly funded education, come to the meeting.’

‘My dad says you’ll strike, that means no classes.’

I coughed. ‘Anyway for your short essays you might be asked to explain why Australia sent troops to Vietnam, or World War One and Two, the explanations for these wars.’

I chalked the revision sections up on the board.

‘So let’s keep going. What are some of the other features of the alliance?’


‘So what’s the point of an alliance? What’s meant by it?’

‘America is a superpower and Australia’s not even a middle power so it helps protect us and they get stuff back.’

‘Mmm-hmmm.’ Selena put up her hand, shuffling through her old notes. ‘Australia needs a shield, so it used to be Britain, but now it’s America and they have a special relationship.’
I ticked off questions on my list. ‘And looking at the person’s paper in front of you and correcting as we go, what was significant about Australia and the Vietnam war? Sam?’

‘TV.’

‘What about TV?’

He shrugged. ‘Happened on TV.’

‘No, it didn’t happen on TV, it was broadcast on TV. What else?’

I looked at the clock. Class was finishing late and I hadn’t got through the revision.

‘For homework, have a look at the copies I made of the photos of World War Two soldiers and then I want you to write down how you think it might feel to be in the army or do the essay in your book on why you think Australia went to war in one of the case studies, one of the situations, on page fourteen.’

Ben curled his lip. ‘What if you don’t get why?’

‘Then you can write about that, whether you think it was the right thing.’

‘Course it is.’

Selena was waving her hand again. ‘Can we do this war now?’

‘Not the war in Iraq.’ I told Selena, ‘It won’t be on the exam.’

They streamed out of the classroom. ‘Can I see you for a moment Ben?’

Selena slouched next to her desk, one hand on her hip, her books held tight against her chest. ‘Even if it’s not on the exam what if I want to do it?’

Ben made a noise like a missile falling to the ground. I studied her face.

‘You’re that excited about the war on Iraq?’

She chewed gum rhythmically. ‘Not excited.’

I straightened up, nodded my head. ‘Okay. Off you go.’
I held out the paper out to Ben that he could see it. ‘How did you feel when the others used to call you a fag or a poofer?’

‘Don’t care.’

‘You didn’t mind? You thought it was fine?’

‘But Miss, he is one. Sam’s brother is. I saw them and he was there and they were kissing.’

I thought of the danger game. I was almost thirty. ‘He’s gay. But when you say he’s a poofer, you don’t mean it as a compliment do you?’ I wanted to say, stop fucking me around, you’re thirteen not three.

Ben shook his head.

‘You need to leave Sam alone. His brother has a boyfriend and that’s perfectly fine and natural. He loves men.’ Sam’s parents were probably not going to love me. ‘There’s nothing wrong with that so stop treating it as a disease you can catch or pass on.’

‘Yeah, whatever dot com.’

‘Do you want to sit in here at lunch like a child?’ I couldn’t keep hold of rage, which was mostly disappointment, not even at Ben, but at my own naivety, my lack of realism. Hadn’t poofer been Louise’s favourite term when we were kids? Perhaps Jon was right, my empathy was conditional, my commitment to the school drummed up.

‘Ben, there are things that happen in your family, your life, that you wouldn’t want broadcast everywhere.’

I was confusing him. Now I was talking about horrible, shameful things that should stay hidden. Before I had been telling him that was okay to love whoever you want. My analogy resounded like a threat.

He got up. ‘Yeah. Sorry.’ I heard my own mood in his voice: convictionless, impatient.
I drank instant coffee with Maria in the classroom overlooking the basketball court. Kirsty unhooking the rope lanes she’d pegged up for sprint races, tugging down her skirt as it ballooned in the breeze.

The lines across Maria’s forehead were deep grooves that dashed across her skin like underlined words on a page. Her daughter had the flu but Maria hadn’t stayed home to look after her because she was afraid of how it would look if she weren’t in class. She’d been elected delegate during a state-wide pay campaign but she had just recovered from an ulcer and had told me her husband thought she was insane for putting herself at the forefront of the struggle to keep the school open.

She was drinking a Big M from the canteen. She carried extra weight around her hips and belly and was a short woman. Her build was motherly but her voice was gruff and gravely and I often heard her telling off students in her mathematics class, even through the closed door. Her sense of humour was deadpan, occasionally dirty, and I thought perhaps I giggled at the wrong moments when she told jokes to us at lunch.

‘I nearly exploded this morning. They were being toxic little bullies. I almost swore at them, told them to give up, get out, go home.’

‘Wish they’d bring back corporal punishment.’

I had heard rumours when I started that Maria had smacked a child.

‘Joke. Everybody has those days.’ She was unperturbed, scowling into the middle distance.

‘Not Kirsty.’

‘She’s joined up.’

We watched Kirsty talk to a boy who’d lost his sneakers and was crying. ‘She’s incredibly pissed off with Tom,’ Maria told me.

‘But unions are so out of date.’ I recalled her objections.
She nudged me, grinning, holding out a piece of a paper. ‘Have a look at this. From the staff noticeboard.’

I took the document.

‘Read Tom’s unilateral policy. We’re not allowed to talk about it in class.’

‘What?’

‘The school closing, the public meeting, any of it. He’ll address assembly but we’re not to discuss it with the kids.’ She made a sour face, copied Tom. ‘It sows confusion if staff speculate about facts they can’t possibly prove.’

‘Oops. I think I’ve already done that today.’

‘Charming isn’t it? No discussion, no attempts to include the staff. But now Kirsty’s enraged. That’s Tom’s problem. She swallowed all the honour and trust and teamwork he peddled, hated the idea of industrial action and now she feels betrayed.’

‘I went and spoke to him yesterday.’

‘What for? Anything he promises you privately he should be willing to say in public.’

‘He asked me to. But you were right, he’s not going to speak out about the funding or us closing. He thinks we’re ruining our chances of negotiating.’

She snorted. ‘Actually that’s probably what the local organiser thinks. I know a bunch of people on the State Branch do.’

‘Because they think we can’t win?’

Maria blew on her coffee cup. ‘Pick your battles.’ Her singsong imitation made me think of Louise and the way she’d been able to copy the intonations of politicians and TV characters.

‘They haven’t even offered us anything.’

Maria stood up. ‘They will.’
‘What about the argument that by lumping in low-income kids, migrants, teenagers with behavioural problems, we’re creating a ghetto?’

‘Did we create the demographic makeup of this suburb?’ She turned back, accidentally sloshing coffee onto the ground. ‘Presumably Tom was suggesting a huge injection of funds and staff so we could have excellent ratios and learning skills support and integration and ESL?’

‘But if it comes up in the meeting?’

Maria laughed. ‘Tom’s not going to tell the parents he thinks their poverty and country of origin is giving the school a bad name, is he?’

I felt sick. ‘Sorry. I just…things keep changing, shifting.’ I didn’t trust myself and I was meant to be speaking at the meeting about my experiences and concerns as a teacher on contract.

‘It’s not as if they’re trying to replace it with something better.’ She paused. ‘You should write out what you want to say tonight.’

‘In case I get mixed up and forget which side I’m on?’

‘By the way your sister called this morning. She said ring back, it’s about your brother.’

So much of the urgency about finding our mother had begun to slip away. At the beginning of the week Louise had tried to access any legal change of name our mother had registered but the office of births, deaths and marriages wouldn’t release any information. I’d located a single person out of the list of my mother’s long ago friends Louise and I had drawn up and then realised, when she answered the phone, that I didn’t know what I expected from her, and so I’d hung up.

The hours when Jeremy was lost, after he’d skipped out on the exam, were a kind of vanished time. Maybe our dad had threatened him or taunted him while I was at the park, or he’d hidden, just as I’d said he should,
somewhere in the house. Louise thought he had been beaten by the boys at school, even tied up.

He used to line Louise’s dolls up for her when her friends came over to play, set up the toys for tea parties, hungering to be part of the game. The year I’d given him Lego for Christmas, funded by my mother, he’d hugged me so much I’d toppled over.

I hadn’t told Sarah we were looking for our mother. Yet I’d found a new kindness with Louise. When I told her about Jon she’d cried, ‘You have to admit he looked a bit like a ferret.’ If she came home late I tried not to ask her where she’d been, or to worry when phone messages from people I’d never met collected on the machine. I let the evenings I used to spend with Jon pass drinking too much and playing backgammon with my sister.

Louise had taken the series of objects we’d kept of Jeremy’s: the space project, the pieces of magnifying glass, the player’s tokens of the detective game and was gluing them into a giant collage alongside cut-out reports and headlines sliced and rearranged into new, weird phrases. She pasted these directly onto canvas tacked on the wall. My flat was littered with her things: apple cores lolled next to pillows on the floor, sneakers with worn soles went forgotten on the balcony.

I returned her call in the staff room where Kirsty and Deirdre were sharing lunch.

‘Hello?’
‘It’s Alice.’
‘Can you come home?’
‘No, I’ve got a staff meeting after school and a bunch of stuff to do. Aren’t you meant to be at that job trial?’
‘I’ll come in to your school. These documents came back. I’m not feeling good.’
‘Louise, I can’t, I’ve got to work.’ I kept my voice down, spoke into the wall. ‘It will look really bad if I leave now when I’m speaking tonight. I’m meant to be representing the position for contract teachers. Did you try for the job or not?’

‘It disturbs them to discover I don’t know the difference between pumpkin bread and pumpernickel bread or silverbeet and silverside or hot salami and mild salami.’

‘Silverbeet is a vegetable,’ I volunteered.

‘Piss off Alice.’

But as I put down the phone again I thought of Louise pacing the flat, compulsively rifling through the paperwork gathering in her plastic bag of misery, inciting herself to some new incarnation of the danger game.

‘Kirsty, can I borrow you?’

‘Now?’

‘Two secs, I promise.’

On the brick path next the cream-painted art room I asked her to cover my afternoon classes. The Year Sevens were having a half-day because of school sports.

‘That’s no trouble but when will you be back? Maria thinks you’re helping plan. And Tom’s called a staff meeting beforehand.’

I fixed my eyes on the pretty vintage broach pinned to her lapel and tried not to show how I embarrassed I was. Instead, I gushed. ‘Kirsty, you’d be a total lifesaver. I’ll be on time for the evening meeting.’

She hesitated. ‘It might look a bit unreliable.’

I didn’t say anything.

‘Can do, but you’ll need to tell him yourself.’
Tom opened the door to his office abruptly, talking on his mobile, and holding a mug of tea in his hand. He waved me in. There was a bright green school calendar up on the wall and various certificates and nominations for awards pinned on the noticeboard next to a couple of pieces of student art work. I sat on the leather couch.

‘Gotta go, Therese, I’ve got someone with me. Okay. I will. Bye now.’ He put the phone down on the desk, sat opposite me.

‘Sorry, Tom, I need to go home. Kirsty said she could take this afternoon’s classes.’

‘Kirsty was here at the crack of dawn to set up.’

I nodded, clasped my hands together. ‘It’s a family thing.’

‘I’ve been very distressed, very tense, about these recent events.’ He fiddled with his glasses, flicked papers in the diary on his desk. There was low-level panic in his voice. ‘The way I see it, this school’s at the end of the road.’ He struggled to find the appropriate clichés. ‘We’ve done good things, useful things but the momentum is fading.’ He nodded to himself. ‘Whatever the outcome, Alice, you’ll still be expected to fulfil your responsibilities to the school.’

Tom turned a page in the diary on the desk. ‘How have you found your time here?’

‘In what way?’

‘Do you feel I’ve been fair to you, you’ve been supported enough?’

‘I do.’ This was half true.

Tom rifled in his drawer and drew out a packet of biscuits and pushed them towards me. ‘I hope you’ve considered the realities of what’s happening carefully.’

I crunched on a Gingernut. ‘Tom, I have accumulated sick leave. I can go home.’
‘Of course, of course.’ His hands fluttered like forgotten rags. ‘Kirsty can do it. I can even step in.’ He was puzzled, benign. ‘I just want to be completely transparent about this. You are in a difficult position but if there’s an easy transition, if, then I hope you’ll be transferred, or at least recommended with good references and given priority for upcoming vacancies. My concern is that there’s a lack of reality in the union’s response. Dig your heels in and hope for the best.’

I ate another biscuit.

His hands were shaking. ‘It is so demoralising to see people you’ve taught with for years, staff you’ve hired, assume you’re malevolent, to be treated as the enemy.’

‘What are your own plans?’ I asked at the door.

‘I haven’t decided yet. Not thinking that far ahead.’

Back at the flat Louise had papers spread across the table. She was wearing an old striped Singlet she’d found in the back of my wardrobe, grubby yellow converse and a short black and green kilt. The bones of her spine protruded as she leant forward. A trail of scrunched up tissues was scattered around her. Cigarette butts had amassed in a rose-coloured saucer on the bench.

‘Shit. I’m afraid. I’m afraid.’ Her eyes were shining darkly. She started pacing. I dragged a chair over to the table. ‘Oh Lou, no.’ Her lips were trembling amphetamine fast. On the top of the mass of paper I saw a letter. Louise’s freedom of information application had come back. Then I saw the social worker’s report from after the fire.

And where had she gone, the sister I knew, so shiny and pointy-edged and brimming with stories?

I lit a cigarette myself. ‘Will you make me a coffee?’
She went into the kitchen and turned on the tap, opened and closed cupboard doors. She dropped the coffeepot on the ground, where it bounced and spun uncertainly on the spot.

‘Forget it. Where’s the bottle of gin?’ I put my arms around her and breathed in the smell of her hair

‘He nearly went to jail.’

‘Dad?’

‘Yeah. Criminal negligence. The police report’s all blacked out but that’s what it looks like.’

I unscrewed the gin bottle and found some ancient orange juice in the bottom of the cupboard to drink with it. Bits of pulp floated on the surface like debris in a river. I got a glass for Louise. ‘Here, have.’

She raised her glass, toasted the air. ‘A pardon, Pandora.’ She reached across for my packet. ‘I think this occasion calls for yet another cigarette.’ The jauntiness was familiar. It was my own. Our camouflages, our hidden selves, were becoming visible to each other.

I sorted through the pages. The coroner’s report said ‘accidental death by asphyxiation.’ There were notes from community services interviews with my father and inspections of the public housing flat we’d moved into. There was even a psychiatric report on Louise when she commenced the methadone program, and a note that her Centrelink file was exempted from FOI claims.

The past seemed simply a litter of documents on the public record, reports and debts stretching back in a line of fluttering flags that led nowhere.

‘What’s that smell?’

‘It’s fine, it’s fine.’ Toast was burning under the grill. ‘I’m making you lunch, Al.’ She tossed the burned bread into the bin. ‘When you die of asphyxiation I think your lungs collapse. Do you think you would feel your skin burning or would you be unconscious?’
'Unconscious.'

She hugged herself. ‘I felt it. Like my skin was melting. But I don’t remember how I got out.’

‘Dad rolled you on the ground to put out the flames. You were in hospital for weeks.’

I unfolded the social worker’s report.

Counselling report DHS & CS. CASE # 3353, Meeting 1 & 2

Summary: Louise appears to be sheltering herself from the reality of her brother’s death by assuming roles and playing out desires and fancies. Her playfulness belies a deep injury. She refused to discuss her brother’s death except by inventing quite convincing and detailed stories, which she then almost immediately undermined. She does appear to be getting some solace from the fantasies she is creating though when this charade collapses she may well struggle. Although Louise is impulsive at this stage she is controlling her negative instincts via strategies of regression, deferral and projection. She exhibited attention-seeking behaviour but was noticeably uncomfortable when pressed deeper about her feelings and reactions to trauma, including her own physical injuries. Louise appears to envy her older sister’s equilibrium. Alice has described her sister as highly imaginative, demanding and extremely social. When complex questions were asked of Louise she tended to slip into the voice and mannerisms of a much-younger child. Throughout our interview she consistently changed the subject and ‘phased out’. She refused to draw or role-play when asked. During the first session I interviewed both girls together and then separately.

The most significant element of Louise’s self-description is the dissonance between her own-self image (her idea of her own qualities and faults) and the reality. She claims, for example, to be an outstanding student and a mime artist.
Alice presented as an extremely sober teenager, who was nervous about the perils of adult existence even as she tried to shield her father and sister from criticism. She was extremely hostile to authority figures. Upon entering the interview room she declared she didn’t want to be taken away. She expressed a fear that the entire family is now dependent on her and cites Louise as a source of her anxiety. Alice seems naturally a quieter and more solitary character who has developed an assertive and forceful side as a survival strategy. Alice also feared questions about money, repairs to the home, living arrangements and so on. While both children had normal physical and social development, Alice showed certain signs of immaturity for her age, for example boasting of sexual conquests (most likely invented). Louise identified more with her mother, Alice increasingly with her father’s position.

Intelligence testing reveals Louise to be of highly superior intelligence and Alice of above average intelligence, although Louise refused to complete some tests and exhibited a lack of focus. Louise has already been kept down a grade, and may have been deliberately under-performing as a defensive strategy. Louise was extremely imaginative and able to master quite sophisticated abstract concepts well beyond her age level but her visual memory was poor and her self-awareness lacking. Louise’s vocabulary and reading skills presented as below average.

While I do not detect any immediate risk of self-harm with either child, Alice may be prone to depression. Her strategies of detachment are quite disturbing. In my professional opinion Louise is a likely candidate for truancy and potentially liable to engage in risk-taking behaviours. The suspicion towards institutional involvement from welfare agencies appears to have been passed down from the girls’ parents.
Both children felt in some way responsible for their brother’s death. Alice had seen her brother in the period before he died and Louise expressed a belief that she had induced him to engage in risky behaviour through a particular game. When asked whether or not an adult had spread the accelerant for the fire, as a neighbour had suggested, Alice has said she was not present and Louise said she didn’t understand the question.

While neither child expressed this overtly, there were some indications of a history of family violence. In any case the home life has been highly dysfunctional and socio-economically deprived.

**Recommendations:** Regular monitoring of home environment and school attendance; approach mother/father (guardians) regarding continued counselling and bereavement support

**Removal/state care:** No, subject to outcome of police investigations and possible legal proceedings

**Legal caveats:** No

**Casework status:** Open/ongoing

Louise read over my shoulder. ‘Superior intelligence. What sexual conquests?’

‘Hang on.’ At the bottom of the page were some handwritten notes. Suicidal thoughts. Preventable accidental death. Fear of injuring children. Missed work days. (Husband unemployed). Disturbed sleep.

There our mother was in the traces, in the tacked on lines at the end of someone else’s story, thinking about dying.
She had left behind so little in the new unit we’d been allocated after the fire: a worn-down lipstick lolling in a handbag, her work uniform hanging on a hook behind the door, her last pay stuffed in cash into the pocket of my father’s pyjama pants.

I remembered Louise being dragged to the social worker’s office, done up in scratchy cardigan and too-big black boots that had been donated from a local charity, crying and pretending she didn’t know us. Dad had thought it would make a good impression but Louise wanted to wear what she called her own clothes, systematically nicked from major department stores.

Louise puffed out her chest. ‘God that social worker. Tell me how you’re feeling, in here,’ she echoed and patted her chest with a fist. Her laugh was a sob. ‘We were under investigation to see if someone was going to be charged with a crime and she’s prattling around fat to the gills with do-gooder determination promising that if we let out our feelings like slugs into the garden we’ll be better.’

‘She was a monster.’ I had a vague impression of a young woman with sharp eyes and a glossy bob, carrying a clipboard. ‘What was she bloody called?’ The name had been removed from the document.

‘Janice.’

I drank more gin and juice, jerked up my head and felt dizzy as the memories fell like ash from the fire. ‘That night I fucked some boy from school in the park. That’s why she said I was boasting.’

‘Slut.’ She grinned uneasily. ‘Did you really do that?’

I put out my cigarette. ‘Why didn’t they tease you the way they teased him?’

‘He was weird. He was embarrassing. They thought he was a snob; that he looked down on them. I didn’t care what they said about me and I wasn’t smart.’
There was my brother: drawing maps of Africa, tracing the continents of the world on butcher’s paper at the kitchen table. I saw his awkward left-hand grip on the pen, his legs not reaching the ground and dangling strangely beneath the chair, the humming song he’d made up for himself, sleepy and tuneless.

‘Do you dream about Mum?’ Louise asked me, standing at the window, watching cars flash past.

‘No.’ Louise used to sit on the warm footpath outside the new flat waiting for Mum to arrive at our new home, chalking hopscotch patterns onto the road. ‘Do you?’

‘Nah, I dream about him.’

‘Dying?’

‘Just, him. I thought he’d been murdered that night. I thought he’d been thrown in a ditch somewhere because Dad forgot to pick him up.’

I could see the shape of her collarbones under her Singlet, her sinewy frail arms.

‘I dreamed she visited me when I was in hospital. After she’d left. But I don’t reckon she would have, do you? To go away and to stay away you’d have to draw some kind of line. There’d be things you couldn’t ever think about.’

‘I think we have to stop this.’

Louise sat stiffly. ‘This conversation or the search?’

‘It’s not the search, it’s not anything. We know he’s dead. She’s fucked up, she fucked off, it’s gone.’

‘Did you see the report from after she left? The notes about Dad?’

I looked at the pages but there were too many black texta marks across names and privileged material. At first he’d rung the police, wanted her on the Missing Persons list, before he saw some photographs salvaged from the
fire had been taken. Then she’d rung a few weeks later and told him she wouldn’t return, that he should stop looking for her. Louise had written our mother a letter and posted it to our grandparents’ farm more than a decade ago. It hadn’t been returned or replied to. We hadn’t known she had called. Dad had never told us.

They’d asked him to promise we’d get to school, that he’d do anger management programs, otherwise we’d be taken away, put in foster care. He must have threatened them with disputes in the courts, though, because the handwritten comments were full of anxiety and suggestions for tying his Centrelink payments to our school attendance.

When I lit the stove for coffee I thought of Jeremy, alone in the cold damp house and full of dread, lighting the stove to make tea for mum and dad or poking a bit of burning newspaper through to light the faulty pilot light for the heater in the living room.

Mum had told me that our father had put down the accelerant, all through the back part of the house, the night of the fire when we stayed in a single room in a motel that overlooked a service station and a plant nursery. I was not to say this to the police if they asked.

She’d been feverish, brutal, washing our clothes in the tiny bathroom sink, unable to really look at us, tearing the skin off the flesh around her fingernails with her teeth, opening and closing the curtains. After he came back from hospital, Dad slept in the bed, moaning in his sleep. Mum and me slept on the floor, her body curled away from me, her fingers clasped together, rigid, like a snap-frozen prayer, through the night.

‘Alice?’

Louise had stopped shaking. She was reading a document, grasping it firmly in her lovely pianists hands. ‘Did we see our grandparents?’

‘Her parents?’
'Yep. Can you remember them?'
'Sort of. We visited once. Mum took us to their farm. Got out of school early, it took hours.' The flat paddocks had stretched out in all directions. Everywhere I had looked there was dry dust, cows, trees twisted into shapes of agony.

I took the coffee to the table and handed a cup to my sister. 'You were too young.'
'They tried to make a deal with Dad to look after us. So we wouldn't be wards of the state if the police laid charges or they took us off him. They wrote a letter.'

I drank the hot black liquid, inhaled the bitter steam rising from my cup. I summoned up vague associations of a tin shed that smelled of fertiliser adjacent to the dirt road that ran beside their house, and a hallway with worn pale green carpet, but they were the sorts of scenes that might not even be real memories, but dreams, or other people's descriptions. I couldn't recall my grandparents' faces, they way they spoke.

I rifled through the documents. There were notes on how clean our house was, what was in the fridge, our health. Interviews we'd assumed were counselling sessions that had actually been assessments. The grandparents our mother had cut contact with for years were put forward as temporary custodial guardians. Our father had fought for almost a year after the police investigation had finished to keep us. From the letters back and forth not losing us had been a kind of full-time job.

Louise snatched a cigarette from my packet. 'So.'
'So?' I felt my fingers slip on my cup.
'You don't like me, do you Alice?'
'Au contraire. Today, I don't like myself very much.'
The breeze brought the smell of warm croissants from the bakery as I rushed to meet Sarah. I was late. I wanted her advice on what to say at the meeting this evening.

I saw her waiting from across the road. She was idling near the counter of the café, her hands in her pockets, back slumped a little, her face soft. I pushed open the door, which was decorated with red ribbons and tiny silver bells that clinked together when the door swung closed behind me. Sarah hugged me and we sat on a giant black couch, beside a plastic orange lamp. In the warm circle of light her hair was chocolate and her skin glowed pale brown. ‘Oomph.’ I sighed and made a face. ‘Sorry I’m so late.’

‘You look weary, Al.’

Sarah and I hadn’t talked properly since I’d left the message on her machine. She’d promised to help me, and now I had missed the union strategy meeting. I thought of the spreading staining mess of my family, of my own harsh dismissals, the careful signature of my dad on legal papers and I nearly wept. ‘How many things have you done in your life that you completely regret? That you think made you a blacker, crueller person?’

‘Including saying you look weary?’

I didn’t smile.

She shifted her bag down onto the ground. ‘A few.’ There was an anxious silence. ‘Tell me why you’re so upset.’

I wanted her to comfort me but I felt my eyes sting, my face grow hot. Sarah ordered fruit and vegetables every week from a farmer’s market. They were delivered to her door in a cardboard box. She went for walks along the Maribyrnong River. She wanted me to take care of myself. She’d worry and pick at my decision to help look for my mother. ‘I just want to get ready for this thing. Please.’

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She shrugged a shoulder and gave me a token smile, her red lipstick bright against her teeth. ‘Fine. Give us a look at your speech then.’

Before I handed the draft to her, I charged into the next topic. ‘Are you going well?’

‘I am not. They shifted me into intensive care for two weeks because we’re understaffed. I drove piece of shit from the other side of the city.’

Sarah had taken to calling her car ‘piece of shit’ and thinking up more extravagant and sophisticated phrases to describe its decrepit state, its insufferable drawbacks. ‘You’re lovely to do this for me.’

‘I had a date this week.’

‘You don’t go on dates.’ My voice was too loud. Since the collapse of her marriage Sarah had declared her love for being on her own, while regaling me with stories of successful flings. ‘Who with?’

‘This guy, Andrew, in his forties. I’m doing Spanish classes with him.’

‘Any good?’

‘Star Trek geek.’

‘Oh.’ Sarah was trying to be pleasant, but I knew she was angry with me, and now I was angry too, but I didn’t know why. I hugged the edge of the couch and looked straight ahead.

‘Back to business. I hope I can help you. I’m probably not the best person to ask, I’m hopeless at public speaking.’

I handed her my speech. ‘You’ve got more experience than I do.’

‘The union stuff is exhausting, isn’t it? Trying to keep your balance while the politics shift this way and then that. There were days when we were campaigning for a pay rise, when I first started nursing. There’d be mass meetings; I’d have to nick into the toilets for a cry before I’d go back to it. ‘

She laughed. ‘Mostly frustration. You need a thick skin.’
I pinched myself gleefully. ‘Fortunately I have one of those.’ When I’d
told Sarah about the report and public meeting she’d been so quiet on the
phone I’d wondered if it was all decided already and I was the only one who
didn’t realise. ‘But I missed the preparation meeting in the afternoon.’

She straightened out the pages, licked her finger, sifted through them
Her face was clear but I thought I could see a line of tension in her neck.

Soup arrived for Sarah. I ordered a cup of tea and a sandwich. ‘You
know I leave the staff room and then I eat the same food when I go out.
Chronic failure of imagination.’

‘Practice saying your speech to me.’ Sarah kept reading my paper.

‘Why did you get married?’

‘I don’t think that’s a very good opening. Too personal.’ Our laughter
was weak and cheerful.

Sarah had met her husband when he tried to sell her a stereo at JB HiFi.

‘I was eighteen. I was full of shit. And deeply suburban. I wanted to be
safe.’ She exhaled heavily. ‘So I tried to be a good wife down to the last
Pavlova recipe and free set of steak knives.’ She smiled. ‘Then I missed
playing music and being a teenager. Except by then I was twenty-three.’

‘I’m terrified Jon’s wife will be at the school for the meeting.’ I didn’t
know whether Jon had told her he’d stopped seeing me.

She put her hand on mine. ‘You’re jittery. Breathe.’

I sucked in my breath and exhaled, exasperatedly, then lit a cigarette.
Sarah had said on the phone she thought I was paranoid.

‘She can’t be that high up in the bureaucracy; she sounds like a public
servant dogsbody. And you told me that report covered eight schools.’

I took a drag. ‘Mmm Hmm.’

She looked pleased with herself. ‘Where does that leave Jon?’

‘We split up.’
She put her hand on my arm. ‘Good for you, I thought he was a wanker but I’m sure he didn’t know about your school.’

‘How could he not know?’

Sarah shrugged. ‘If they didn’t talk. Or didn’t talk about you.’ She slurped her soup. ‘Not talking keeps many marriages alive.’

‘Now I’m dreaming about him. He’s about to declare his love for me and then some stunning woman appears and she’s all of twenty-two and just before they walk off together he says mournfully, “Sorry, Alice, I though you knew. I thought you realised.”’

Sarah was unsettled. ‘You should have told me. I would have come around and looked after you, fed you barbeque shapes and Ribena.’

‘Why did you leave Greg?’

‘Alice I married someone who used to make me scrapbooks of cooking recipes as presents.’

‘But what made you finally decide?’

She was smiling faintly as though remembering a pleasant occasion in the long distant past she’d almost forgotten entirely, like a birthday celebration with paper hats and bowls of punch. ‘It feels so long ago.’

‘It is.’

‘Anyway, Jon’s married. Why do you care how many other women there are?’

‘In my dream, as soon as I see him, there’s this incredible sense of rightness. I see I’ve had this longing for him to appear.’

‘I guess the dream’s not really about Jon.’

I chewed on the sandwich, which oozed butter and cheese and was garnished with some limp parsley. ‘You should have done psych. Yeah, dream’s about alligators. And World War Two fighter pilots.’ The bitterness
in my voice was rancid. She was my oldest friend. I thought of acid peeling paint off a cabinet, eating away at skin.

Sarah’s face was clear but her hands were pressed firmly together in her lap and the knuckles were white.

She went back to my draft. ‘You’re very thorough.’

I coughed, gulped some tea. ‘There’s a lot of data on schools and disadvantage in low-income areas.’

‘Mmm. It reads more like a briefing paper.’

My hands were shaking. ‘Too much material?’

Sarah put her thumb in her mouth without thinking. ‘If your school rep is speaking she’ll probably cover some of this. Certainly the state organiser would.’

‘I thought it would seem more authoritative.’

She looked at me carefully. ‘It’s good, Alice. But who are you trying to convince?’

I wriggled into my seat.

‘If the new funding profile’s been passed, the Department’s decided and nothing you say will make any difference. It’s not a lack of information, or the right information, that’s behind their decision.’

‘Who do you think I should be focusing on?’

‘Really, you’re talking to the parents and the other teachers, trying to get them passionate about fighting for the school. So you don’t have to be so impersonal and measured. Speak about what the school’s meant to you, how vulnerable you feel as a teacher on contract, that sort of jazz.’

I swished the tea-leaves at the bottom of my cup around glumly. ‘Seems a bit fake.’

‘Does it?’

‘Often I hate teaching.’
'So why do you care?'

I didn’t answer. It was almost time to set up for the meeting. Sarah was angry with me and I was angry too but I didn’t know why. ‘What’s it about then? My dream?’

She packed her things into her giant handbag, which bulged with an assortment of random objects: tissues, scraps of paper and old tickets, books, even a paintbrush. Sarah had long been a hoarder. ‘I don’t know.’ She smiled oddly. ‘With Lou here I supposed you might have been thinking about your mother.’

I couldn’t think of any answer.

‘How’s Lou-Loubelle?’

I’d forgotten that our mother used to call her that. How had Sarah recalled it? ‘What made you think of that?’

‘Louie? I’ve hardly heard from you since she arrived. She’s not still using?’

‘Don’t think so. She’s working in a café. Not that the two are mutually exclusive.’ Sarah gave me a half-smile. ‘I meant the nickname. Mum used to call her that. Do you remember my mother?’

‘Not that well. I only met her once. She had really tiny wrists and she made crap kid jokes. She kept telling Lou to calm down. I’d like to see old Lou. You should invite me over.’

‘I’ll make dinner.’ Fear fluttered like a heartbeat in my wrists. ‘Actually I’m looking for Mum too.’

Sarah buried her surprise in pushing her keys back into her bag. ‘And if you find her, what happens then?’

‘Louise,’ my cough was hacking. ‘Louise says she must know more about the day Jeremy died.’

‘What sort of thing.’
'Just...I don’t know.'

‘Why does she think that?’

I waved the speech at her. ‘I’ll go and redo this.’

The last fifteen minutes before the public meeting were tinged with a dispiriting quality of irony. Putting out jugs of water and paper cups with Kirsty, and arranging Monte Carlo biscuits on trays, unstacking chairs, it almost felt as if we were preparing for a school fundraiser or parent-teacher night. Maria was back in the staff-room talking to the state organiser about tactics. While I’d rewritten my speech, I’d missed the union planning meeting and Maria had clucked at me to ‘stop being so flitty,’ in a scolding, bemused voice that reminded me of my Catholic grandmother correcting me when I’d forgotten the words to hymns.

The Minister’s contact had arrived in a wide gleaming car and was dressed for a photo opportunity in blue jeans and a ‘support PUBLIC education’ T-shirt.

Tom was writing out name-tags for the speakers and scrambling to greet people as they arrived. There was a sallow greyness to his skin and he wrung his hands slowly, in the careful repetitive fashion of someone making bread. His wife clung to his side. She tried to smile and nod at parents who consistently didn’t recognise her, as if Tom were a presidential candidate and she the first lady in waiting. I felt a pang of sympathy. She had put on mascara, polished her high-heeled shoes. Kirsty’s fiancée huddled at the back of the room, rocking back on his heels and idly glancing at the ceiling.

People crowded in, scraping chairs on the wooden floor of the assembly room and fanning away the smells of kids’ feet with the union
statement we’d placed on the chairs. The sounds of chatting abated into the anxious silence that institutional buildings invite.

Maria introduced me to the union organiser who was a chunky man in his early thirties. ‘Ned knows the department guy, says he’s pretty low down in the scheme of things. Won’t make any promises or statements beyond what they’ve already given.’

Ned frowned. His skin was smooth, his teeth the straight and white of a man in a chocolate commercial. ‘Mmm. It’s not a closure, it’s a reprioritisation. No firm decisions have been made yet.’

Maria grinned. ‘It’s not an arsehole, it’s just a…’ We took our seats on the stage. She squeezed my hand. ‘Good luck, Alice.’

I looked at my watch, my heart beating fiercely. It was starting. Tom got up on the stage and welcomed everyone. There were more than a hundred people in the room. I saw Sarah take a seat up the back next to Louise. Sweat gathered under my arms, trickling down my back. Tom spoke first.

‘I can’t tell you how difficult it is to see you all here under these circumstances. I began working here, as some of you will know, as the head of Science twelve years ago, before I took on the role of Principal, which I’m still in. That’s long enough for me to have seen two entire generations travel through our school from year seven to year twelve. I’ve seen students arrive as new migrants with barely two words of English and leave with places at university. Throughout my guardianship at this school I’ve been indebted to, in a hundred different ways, the support and skill of the teaching staff, who I’d like to thank.

I’ve seen your sons and daughters learn and triumph, go on to apprenticeships, to trades, to professions, to tertiary study and to excel not only as students or workers but also as people, young adults who’ve learnt
how to be generous, how to contribute, how to participate, how to be kind to each other.’ He sounded like a Democratic Presidential candidate.

‘But in recent years the school has faced hardship. We’ve seen enrolments fall, we’ve seen increased problems with drugs, petty theft, truancy. So, of late, the road has been difficult and it hasn’t always been clearly marked. Some of you have spoken to me personally about these challenges. As you know the school’s results and new enrolments aren’t sufficient to meet the current funding profile, the minimum standards for increased and ongoing support.

My own opinion is that it’s time for a fresh approach, to consider moving this community back into the broader education community. There’s a larger public secondary school with greater resources than we have here that could accommodate our students. And I know the Department’s set aside a grant for relocation to make that possible for those of you who don’t have the finances to pay for new books and uniforms, if that’s what eventuates.’ Next to me Maria hissed, ‘nice bribe,’ and was shushed by the union organiser.

‘It’s tempting to see the learning process as belonging to, or limited to, a particular school or set of teachers or learning environment. And we should value each of these things. But I believe it’s the whole community of learning, of committed staff and engaged students, not one particular school, where teaching and student welfare and growth can be protected and promoted.

I know there has been too much confusion circulating. Today, more than anything, I’m here as a facilitator so that you as parents and members of this community feel consulted, involved and considered. If you have questions, they’ll be answered. If you have objections, they’ll be recorded and, more than that, heard. So I appreciate your patience and your time tonight.’
There was a long pause. Parents waited in the realm of chalk and sweat then nodded, one or two even clapped. The question had begun forming, though, in their crinkled foreheads and half raised hands, what did he mean? I’d underestimated Tom as a simple man searching for a quiet retreat, the simplest exit strategy out of a conflict. He’d managed to reassure the audience without clarifying anything for them and I couldn’t reconcile this person with the man who’d chatted to me about football all through lunch on my first day at work, the man who’d given me time off to visit Louise the last time she was a chronic user and who’d spoken of his nephew who was in Pentridge for drug dealing. Even as I waited to speak I almost expected him to change his mind, to speak passionately about saving the school.

Maria seemed small on the gaping stage. She held the microphone too close with broad blunt hands and spoke too close to it so that her voice was both amplified and distorted. She spoke about a lack of transparency and consultation. She talked too quickly, in a throaty, slightly accented tone. As she got more incensed her words grew longer and louder until they approached a wail. I saw Ned, the union organiser, cross his legs and look at the floor, flip open his mobile phone.

Maria talked about the importance of job security not just for teaching staff but also for the cleaners, administrators. She said that she’d always been proud of how the school had taken up the particular needs of migrant students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The audience shuffled. Maria talked about how our class sizes were still large, the huge proportion of students with literacy and learning difficulties we encountered, how more prestigious schools with lower enrolments in wealthier areas remained open, why she considered the new funding profile unjust, targeting schools in poorer areas while exempting those that were already well-resourced. Sarah had been right about information: it cluttered the assembly.
hall like old furniture. The room was too hot and the tight cotton dress I was
wearing rubbed against the back of my neck, the tag irritating my skin. I felt
light-headed already and wondered what Jon was doing this Wednesday
evening, if he was with his wife, if they knew the meeting was happening.

Maria cleared her throat and took a piece of paper from her pocket.
‘What we at the Education Union would like to know today is whether the
school is being closed down or not, and will you make a commitment to
keeping it open at least until the end of the year?’ She stepped away from the
microphone to a scattering of applause like light rain on the roof. Her
question sounded defeatist, but then I’d missed the meeting to discuss what
points we wanted the union to raise on our behalf.

Tom invited the departmental representative to answer the question. ‘I
don’t think we’re in a position to make any guarantees. My recommendation
would be for the school to close voluntarily in a timely way so that we can
resettle students. But I’ll talk to that in a moment.’

It had taken me an hour to get dressed in the morning since the day
was coloured by a sense of special occasion, as though I was preparing for a
court appearance or a wedding. I’d worn a black pinafore dress and boots. I
felt unprepared. I had let my caution and control slip. I guessed I’d been
rubbing at my eyes and that my mascara and liner were smudged onto my
cheeks.

My hands were shaking. Even my knees were trembling. Tom
introduced me, ushered me toward the front of the stage with an arm
hovering near the small of my back. For a moment, looking at the neat
patterns of the chairs, the puzzled faces of parents and staff, I felt nothing
other than the magnificent sweep of embarrassment. My speech was probably
elevated and pretentious.
The Minister’s representative was signalling to someone at the back of the hall. *Five minutes.* The meeting felt set-piece.

But I spoke. I read out the amount of money given to the private system and then the names of public schools that received the most funding in the state and the annual average income of families in the surrounding areas and then listed the locations of the poorest schools in the state. I gave examples of schools in wealthy areas with low enrolments that weren’t under threat of closure. I said the suggestion of closure was irrational and ideological, that it was writing off students who came from less advantaged backgrounds, that the school had an irreplaceable culture and ability to assist students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

When I paused and looked up the Minister’s representative was making notes. People were listening. ‘We keep hearing that our results aren’t competitive, that we don’t retain enough students through the VCE. Some people think you have to run public services the way you marshal any army: send reinforcements to the side that’s winning and if there are soldiers struggling on another front, well, you have to go where the results are and they’ll learn to fend for themselves.’ My militaristic comparison felt off-key, absurd but I took a deep breath.

‘Privately our Principal has told me that he worries we’re a self-fulfilling prophecy, seen as a school with a bad name, the place dropouts go, we end up replicating that culture. But I think pouring millions of dollars into schools in the wealthiest areas of the entire state ensures a self-fulfilling prophecy of another kind and starving schools in low-income areas of the funds to help them make the changes to increase their enrolments is self-fulfilling.’ In my peripheral vision Tom sat straight and did not look at me. I thought I could see my father in the crowd.
‘Between last year and this year, how much did our enrolments fall by? Does anybody want to guess?’ I saw Sarah smiling. ‘Four students. There were four students less. The year before we had exactly the same number of students. And that’s the so-called crisis in enrolments.’

I’d tried to write a new section about my brother and poverty and my childhood. I didn’t want to read it aloud. I bumped the microphone. I could see Tom preparing to come forward and introduce the next speaker so I took a step forward so I was directly under the fluorescent lights.

‘I do feel vulnerable as a teacher on contract who doesn’t have any job security.’ I had meant to explain how much living in poverty taught you that you had almost no control over what happened in the world, that you shouldn’t expect too much, that you had to learn to be ‘realistic’, to settle for what you had, to do without, that I wanted what happened to our school to help break these ideas not reinforce them. I didn’t read the section that mentioned Jeremy. Instead I plunged in. ‘And I have to admit I’m nervous speaking today because I know my position is uncertain and future employment isn’t guaranteed,’ I finished all of a sudden in the middle of a thought like a cassette tape ejected from a car stereo.

I sat down, giddy with relief. Maria patted me softly on the thigh and scowled with pleasure.

‘And I’m sure Alice is aware that I will personally ensure no-one is penalised in any way whatsoever for expressing their point of view on this, which is the properly legal position,’ Tom spoke quickly and sourly.

The Department of Education speaker was introduced as Graeme Michaelson. I barely listened until he began correcting me, talking about how the new funding arrangements weren’t calculated purely on the basis of enrolments but a combination of enrolments, results, program delivery and retention rates. He threw around figures of millions of dollars of government
funding to the state sector and talked about ‘self-starting’ schools versus ‘unviable’ schools, about the solutions that already existed if the school closed at the end of term. He was a paunchy man with greying hair and a garrulous, boysy manner. Tom stood to the side, flustered, while Graeme called me disingenuous since ‘enrolments over a five-year period have collapsed drastically and were already well below the state average.’ When he summed up, much of his aggression had dissipated. He repeated, ‘No-one’s being forced to do anything here, folks, this is a consultation. But next year these guidelines will come into effect. Regardless of what happens now, reduction in funding is what happens next. That’s the decision of this government and flows through to the school.’

Hands were raised and waved like stalks of wheat in a breeze.

‘This sounds like double-talk. If you’re so good at teaching English, speak it.’

‘Why dontcha have a parent up there? This was followed by Selena’s mother giving a short and very loud speech in Greek and then a thin Vietnamese parent, who I’d never met, who was wearing a pale anorak and synthetic jogging shoes, reading painfully from a slip of paper in his hand and asking if the kids had done something to cause the closure, if they had done something wrong.

After more questions, at the end of the meeting I saw that my father and Diane were near the door. I tried to catch them as they left but they were entranced in some other project, Diane stuffing her pockets with biscuits.

I climbed the stairs down from the stage slowly and made my way up the back to Sarah and Louise. My cheeks were warm and adrenaline rushed through me. Parents I’d never met before came over and shook my hand, introducing themselves, or patting my arm quietly and nodding. ‘You a good
girl,’ Selena’s mother told me in a thick accent. ‘Very strong.’ I was flushed. Exuberant.

A journalist from the local newspaper took a quote from Tom and then spoke to Maria. It was impossible not to feel lifted up by the crowd of people, the conversational harmony of voices falling over one another, the clatter and shuffle of chairs on the plastic matting of the floor.

As I scuffled over to Sarah and Lou I dropped my bag. Two of the parents reached forward together to pick it up. We all laughed. The gentleness, the quiet elation was catching. We had surprised ourselves. The press of bodies didn’t feel suffocating, the way it often had on the tram, pressing in with the grim determination of people who wanted to be somewhere else. It was a reassurance. We were all holding on together.

A couple of my students were mooching outside in the cold, looking caught out as if they’d walked into the over-twenty-eights night at a local club but thought the only way to keep their dignity was to pretend they’d intended it all along.

Louise had donned cut-off shorts over orange tights the shade of a fluorescent highlighter. She tugged at her sleeves. Sarah hugged me.

Louise rolled her eyes. ‘What a sleaze.’

‘Tom? Unlikely.’

‘Hasn’t been fucked in long time, I’d say.’

‘Stop it.’ But I was smiling.

‘The bureaucrat was so macho he practically had his dick out.’

Sarah grabbed my wrist. ‘It went really well. You managed to put our friend Graeme on the defensive.’

‘Not too bad at all.’
‘They’ll call it successful “community consultation”,’ Lou announced. ‘And vacuum up the good press. You gotta fuck them up, Alice, force their hand.’ She was wound up.

I saw Sam near the entrance, trailing his older brother who was pushing their mother in a wheelchair. She seemed sunken. Her skin emanated an odd stained pallor, greyish yellow, almost jaundiced.

‘Did you talk to dad?’

Louise flicked her head. ‘Gotta take a slash.’ I called after her, ‘The toilets are round the front,’ but she was already marching away.

‘How’re you going, Sam?’

‘This is me Mum, Miss, and Toby.’ Her hand was dry and cool when I took it. ‘Thanks for coming. This is my friend Sarah.’

Toby had neatly cut nails and wore a thick silver ring on his middle finger. He was lightly tanned, relaxed. ‘How do you think it went?’

‘I was pleased so many parents spoke. It’s hard to tell, really.’

‘What happens now?’

‘Scuse me, can you hold still for a sec?’ The local journalist snapped a photograph of us and copied down our names.

Kirsty walked over and hugged me, swamping me with the smell of coconut moisturiser. When she said I was brave I tried not to flee.

‘I took some photos of you speaking,’ she held out her digital camera. ‘I’d like to talk to you about all this,’ she leaned in and flashed her eyes towards the ceiling, ‘now that we’re comrades,’ she said the word with curious emphasis, drolly, and I wondered if Kirsty had a hidden gift for irony. I didn’t speak to Tom.
We saw Lou sitting out the front after we’d struggled past all the parents. She grabbed a hip flask of brandy out of her pocket. ‘Ta da.’ The liquid burned my throat but I gulped down more. It wasn’t the time to be cautious. I wanted to shake off all the bandages that held me: the stiffness and the unkindness. Tonight I wouldn’t think about Jon or his wife’s document or our dead brother. I took Louise and Sarah each by the hand. Louise was skipping and singing a song softly to herself.

I found myself at Sarah’s place, drunk, and it was only nine in the evening. Louise had peeled off after we’d left the first pub, bored. I sensed the nervous energy humming beneath her skin, knew I should have gone home with her. She was still reading and re-reading the documents she’d been sent from Community Services and when she left she’d said, ‘I wish you wouldn’t do that, milk your little sob story in public. You’re not being paid eight bucks an hour.’

Sarah made me tea and took warm scones from the oven. ‘You did a good job Alice.’

‘Do I have your ex-husband’s scrapbook to thank for these?’

‘Everybody knows how to make scones, Alice.’

I made a face. ‘Do they?’

‘Want brandy in it?’

‘Err…absolutely.’ We drank our spiked tea, two old ladies with bad habits. Birds fought in the fruit trees in Sarah’s backyard. The evening blurred like a child’s watercolour painting.

We collapsed onto her bed. I felt the warm beat of her heart through her wrist, which was lying next to my side. I stretched and put my hands above my head. The ceiling was creamy like a suburban dessert: Pavlova or meringue, cheesecake. I was drowsy from the setting sun and the scent of
fresh washing. I leant over and accidentally jammed my face into her neck. We laughed and I kept my face buried in her skin, in the warm humanness of it. She started tickling me but I edged away. I touched her back, slowly, and felt the texture of her skin beneath the blouse, the dip near the spine, the broad arching of her lower back. The desire felt like falling, like fainting, but the vertigo was glorious. I had a flash of de jà vu: I was climbing the stairs behind Jon the first time we’d fucked, watching his hips and back, the heels of his sneakers. It meant the rush of lust was also painful, strung into the past and to loss. I knew if I kissed her there was no disguising what was happening.

Her mouth was warm. I touched the skin on her face with the very tips of my fingers, and her neck. She ran the back of her hand along my side from my armpit to my hip. I wanted her to touch me, to fuck me. We kissed more deeply and I sucked her fingers. Sweat ran between my breasts. It was dazzling and terrifying to be in bed with Sarah. Sarah took off my dress. She smelled of cinnamon mints and grass clippings. I just wanted the sensation, the hunger and the delight to keep singing in me. We lay side by side, Sarah touching and licking my breasts while I put my fingers inside her, a thumb sliding against her clitoris, feeling her open and wet, juice flowing thick and warm like cooking toffee. She breathed shallowly. ‘Mmmm…Oh…Put your fingers all the way in…That’s…’ and then I felt the pulsing of her muscles as she came. I kissed her belly. Her skin tasted of salt.

The flesh on her hip was dimpled and tanned. I ran my hand over the pale stretch marks that gathered like broken lines on a map. Sarah flipped herself down to the bottom of the bed and kissed my thighs. The anticipation was also trepidation. My heart thudded gigantically.

I couldn’t remember what underwear I had on. I’d showered in a rush this morning. Flickers of self-consciousness broke through desire. When Sarah
put her mouth on me I felt as if I were underwater, pushed forward by ripples and waves. Where had this sexual chemistry come from? I came, all of a sudden. I lay with my whole body tingling. But then I thought of Jon again.

I realised the CD we’d been playing was skipping and that the Smiths’ woeful bleakness was looping in permanent longing and despair. There is another world. There is a better world. There must be. I reached to pull myself up. We rolled over and fell off the bed.

Sarah pulled on tracksuit-pants and thin cotton shirt, turned off the CD player and rolled a joint. We sat in the warm breeze outside sharing it. I asked her ‘Have you done that before?’

‘Sex? Never. Don’t believe in it.’

‘With a woman.’

She looked at her feet. ‘I don’t like my toes. Because the second toe is longer than the big toe. It’s mutant.’

I put my hand on her toes. ‘I don’t like my toes because they’re hairy. Look.’ I waved my toes out.

‘You’ve been having lots of sex.’ She was looking at her feet, wiggling her toes. ‘Who did you lose your virginity to?’

‘I’ve told you.’

‘No you didn’t.’ Sarah waited, took a drag on the joint.

‘His name was Robert. I think he was some kind of juvenile delinquent. He used to do really cool graffiti at the community centre wall near the park. We fucked on a park bench near the Scout Hall. I got a cigarette butt caught in my hair. His dick smelled.’

‘Did you have any fun?’

‘My arse was freezing. He was quite chunky and so it was a bit like those dreams where you want to move but you’re paralysed. I liked the idea
of it. When he was trying to get it in I thought after this I’ll know stuff, I’ll be an adult.’

‘And you never said.’

I clasped my knees to my chest, watched the green gleam of grass, the ghostly waving flower heads whose stalks vanished in the dark so they bobbed like balloons or small eyes in the air. ‘Jeremy died the same night.’ She put her hand on the back of my neck.

‘Did you see the guy again?’

I lit a cigarette. ‘He ejaculates in no time. Says, thanks, thanks. Pulls out, zips up, walks off saying, “Alice is a slut.” Wasn’t it his good luck that I was a slut? I don’t get it.’

‘Weird.’

Sarah cut up oranges into pieces and brought them out to me on a silver tray.

‘Fuck I’m starving. Did we eat dinner?’

She shrugged. ‘We drank dinner.’

‘God I don’t want fruit. I want chips and biscuits and sugary lollies. It’s the dope.’ I looked at my watch. ‘I should get back to Louise.’

Sarah looked at me. ‘Why don’t you stay the night?’

I tapped ash onto the ground.

‘I have had sex with women before,’ she said firmly. A neighbour’s window snapped shut with a bang. ‘Oops.’

I gathered up the orange skins.

‘They go in the compost bin. Garden loves it. But because they’re so acidic you have to chuck a bit of shredded newspaper in there as well.’

I wanted to joke that I wasn’t moving in with her but our old comfort hadn’t yet returned. I tore strips off the pile of old papers Sarah had stacked
next to the open fire in her house, sneezing at the dust. Sarah told me, ‘I’m really glad that happened. Are you?’

I kissed her on the mouth, touched her cheek with the back of my hand.

Then I saw the photograph of Michael Grieves.

I read the article. He too was dead. Louise had never seen him on the streets of Sydney.

Sarah insisted I take her car. On the way home I pulled into a McDonalds parking lot, dropped my head onto the steering wheel and tried to calm down. Sarah’s sensuality and her generosity, the language of her body, was exhilarating. I was already imagining a future for us but I had no idea what she wanted, whether she wished she could curl back into the certainty of the old friendship. My heart beat fast. I watched a teenage raver swish and cut her way along the footpath, limbs jerking, face awash with dreams. A cat clung to the fence, black fur prickling up, hackles rising, claws sinking into the damp wood as it pulled itself up.

Louise wasn’t there when I got back home just before midnight. She’d copied down Sarah’s number on a pad next to the telephone. Her Jeremy collage had been taken down. The clocked ticked persistently as I went from room to room, patting at the dust, shaking out my pillows, wiping hair and toothpaste off the bathroom sink. Small delays.

She’d brought hardly any clothes from Sydney. I rifled through a few pairs of stained underwear, some sleeveless sequinned top perhaps, or a garish theft from a costume store, two pairs of blue jeans, worn in the knees. The packet of foil stuffed into a sock smelled like dope, not amphetamines, I didn’t open the package. Her blue spiral-bound notebook was almost empty,
except for a list of names and diary entries describing her dreams, none of
which I could bear to know about.

The article about Michael Grieves’ death was in her bag, right near the
top. She had known he was dead for months, since the newspaper first came
out, probably, but her need to embroider, enlarge, tell stories, had overtaken
her.

All her hidden pockets of shame were here: detailed, voyeuristic lists
of horrific ways to die, including research into war crimes, exotic diseases and
car accidents. There was a recovery warrant for unpaid fare evasion fines, the
notice she’d first been given in Sydney of her cancelled Centrelink support, an
unfilled prescription for anti-depressants and a university offer for art school.
Beneath these, dodgy printed internet research on death by asphyxiation. A
long account of many of the lies Louise had told recently with instructions to
herself about how to avoid lying: options: come clean, try to tell all others what
actually happened, do not assume names, think first. You are not forgiven.

And then I found the paintings, portraits: Jeremy (rendered pink and
green with thick brushstrokes) held up a mask, which was Louise’s face. In
another drawing, only a sketch, Siamese twins in the womb with two sets of
arms, one hand reaching out to saw off the other’s head. In the next painting,
there was a woman in a white apron holding out an enormous dinner on a
silver platter. It was a too-shiny fake and cheesy advertisement for roast
lunch, lush and vivid, but with precise contours and objects so realistic it
could have been a photograph, except the colours were crazed, glossy, and
the lunch was a suckling pig that had a shockingly naturalistic child’s face,
drawn in pencil. It was Jeremy from a photograph the year he turned seven.

I put the portfolio back where it had come from and closed the front
doors tightly behind me. I summoned my courage and spent the night at
Sarah’s and went to work in stale clothes, smelling of cigarettes.
Even at recess, Tom’s office door was closed. The blinds were down. In the staff room I saw Kirsty reading aloud from the local paper. Deirdre, who wanted to take a package and teach in the private sector, left the room. But the other teachers crowded over the article and congratulated me on my fifteen seconds of fame and made jokes about how photogenic I was.

‘Wouldn’t be hard to look good standing next to a woman with cancer,’ I declared. ‘Don’t,’ said Kirsty, ‘That’s awful.’ There was an interview with Sam’s mother describing her as a cancer patient and parent and a sympathetic article about the threat to close the school.

‘Did you hear Maria on talkback?’ Kirsty asked me eagerly.

‘I slept in.’

Vanessa, the part-time art teacher, said, ‘There were heaps of calls, plenty of nasty ones. She said it’s only happening because the school’s got a high proportion of migrants. And that they know they won’t lose votes in poor areas. One of the safest seats, practically heartland.’

‘And we’re having another staff meeting today and a union planning meeting for the branch on Friday.’

My head hurt. I made a cup of coffee. ‘Okay.’

Kirsty followed me to the kettle and nudged me. ‘You should be happy.’

‘What’s Tom’s latest line?’

‘No-one knows. He’s been holed up dealing with pissed off parents since I got here. They’re talking about holding a demonstration.’

When Maria came into the room, we gave her a round of applause. She was wearing a blowsy floral dress that was almost a smock, carrying bags of clothes. She bowed. ‘Been shopping for Cassandra. And I got a call. I’ve a boy in VCE maths whose Mum’s South-African. Says she’ll organise a community
picket. She’s calling Tom a turncoat, reckons they only want to support white kids with good grades.’

I sat next to her.

‘Come out to lunch with me.’

‘I can’t, I have to do something with my sister.’

‘Alice. Chin up.’

I tucked my chin in. ‘I’m happy. I just drank too much. I’ll be at the next meeting.’

‘We’ve got the advantage, now we just have to press it home. The state branch advisor thinks we could go legal. The funding profile looks like it’s designed to close us quietly and I’d bet Kirsty’s bloody wedding ring they’ll find an excuse to discard it once we’re gone.’

‘You can’t bet my ring!’

‘How could this get into the courts? Doesn’t seem a great tactic, endless delays and distractions.’

There was an education department bulletin on the table. I glanced over an article on support staff for students with disabilities and a fundraiser.

Then I stopped at the photograph, chilled. My mother’s eyes looked back at me blankly.

Yet hadn’t Louise seen our mother everywhere in the years after she left? She’d followed a woman off the train once, all the way to her door until she’d understood that this person was far too young to be our mother. She’d been hoping for someone who didn’t exist anymore: her thirty-four-year-old parent of years before.

Heroin must have closed some kind of portal in Louise, blocked one madness in her with another. When she first stopped taking smack, in rushed all the ghosts, the armies of the dead and the gone. She’d been a kind of
magnet for misrecognition and misunderstanding. And now it was happening to me.

Tom plodded into the room with his chin pushed out. He saw the paper on the table and the cluster of teachers. ‘As I’ll say when I talk to Graeme today, it’s clear to me that I’ve underestimated the level of staff and parent sentiment about this. So perhaps I’ve been hasty.’ Deirdre pushed open the door and stood beside him. ‘But I assume, unlike Alice, most of you don’t believe I’m concealing and plotting.’

Annie, the school administrator, gave me a telephone message after my final class. ‘It’s a policeman,’ she said with a rising inflection. ‘Here’s the number. You’re to ring back after five, he said he’s on night-shift. I hope everything’s alright.’

Even at four in the afternoon the day was bright and blustery, the proper weather for walks along the beach and sticky trips in cars, for lying on towels in the backyard and buying icypoles at the local service station. Louise was inside at work, sweltering over a coffee machine, mopping up milk, and drying dishes. And I was in my dirty flat, stuffing pretzels into my mouth and licking salt off my fingers, looking at the half-painted banner she was making, with the slogans stencilled in, and the placards she’d glued together with balsa wood. They said: School closures: Just say no and Education for all, not just the rich. Louise was paying attention. Her instincts told her to.
Louise (2005)  Chapter Fifteen

You’d forgotten how much you remembered. There are two of you: Louise, now, with a shot of whiskey in your belly and all that useless energy motoring your flight, pounding behind you. And there’s the old you: the younger, better one, who stole chewing gum from this milkbar, hid it in your knickers and blamed Jeremy when you got caught, who swang on the swings in the park and watched your father use a stick to draw pictures of the galaxy in the dirt for Jeremy.

And you’re eight years old and riding your pink, Malvern Star bike home, all the way up the hill though you’re puffing and your bare feet are sore on the pedals because you refused to wear shoes, the day he knew he’d lost his job for certain.

There’s the tangle and the dread.

Station Street’s bustling now, waking up. You walk the footpath you used to avoid the cracks on, count the same squares you used to count. Even though so much has changed, the old bones show through, like X-rays. You can see what’s not always visible on the outside. You hear the plaintive hoots of the trains, still hear the sounds of the factories, thump of goods on and off forklifts, the packaged goods being stamped and labelled, the crates coming from the docks.

A florist has opened on the corner: ‘Say it with flowers,’ the sign advises. *Faithless wiry tow. A fetishist low wry*. There are even a few orchids beginning to bloom wrapped in clear cellophane on display. You’ve been inside, when it was a Chinese takeaway and you’d eaten sloppy potatoes and carrots in a hot sauce. You went with Alice and her boyfriend the same week
you dropped out of High School. He was Chinese and made small talk with
the restaurant owners and clucked at the food when it arrived, sucked in his
breath. They’d given him another bag of food to take home without charge.
Alice’s fortune cookie said: Like the eagle you will soar and swoop. The
boyfriend had laughed.

You were fifteen, then, still living with your dad and Alice was out,
home free, gone for good.

This used to be a tiny shopping strip: supermarket, fruit store,
milkbar, newsagent.

The sky is getting lighter and people rush from the train station out
onto the street. Cars pull up and beep. Kids slide out of them. A woman
pushes a pram and the wheels squeak indignantly on the damp road. She
tugs her older child by the wrist, sets her gaze on elsewhere.

You walk past where the community centre used to be. You and Alice once
made clay mice there and baked them in a kiln. The tail fell off Alice’s when it was
cooking and so her mouse was just a rounded clump with ears of different sizes and a
lopsided tilt.

The building looks empty. Brown brick, peeling window frames, grass bunching
over the borders of empty flower beds.

You think of Alice, perched on this fence, school bag at her feet, a book in her
hand. The cover’s bright, with a love heart on the cover. Your mum had told her, ‘Love.
I wouldn’t bother with all that,’ and so Alice tries to read with the cover folded back.
Alice sits on the fence and lights a smoke. She’s probably waiting for a boy. She puffs
hard into the air and your Dad winks at her and says he won’t tell your mum. The
wink is a painful thing. It’s too large – it echoes the nervous twitch he gets in one eye
and flutters like blinds or shutters being dragged down.

It’s been almost a decade since you walked along this street.
They’ve levelled out the ground completely where the old tip used to be. A new apartment building looms, balcony protruding like a stuck-out lower lip. The primary school’s lasted. It’s been improved. There’s a proper oval and a new library with huge glass windows tilted towards the sun and a purple entranceway. Jeremy waits at the door to the science room, clutching a leaf to analyse under the microscope.

There are colourful paintings about the different seasons stuck in up in the window of the Prep classroom. You bend over the water fountain to get a drink, kick your feet into the tanbark under the swings, practice walking the rope bridge but all the old power of the school, its whiff of death and dying, has gone.

You’re twenty-four and without really knowing it you’ve left heroin behind. But you remember its old call, the way it was devouring you, chewing off crumbs of flesh, dissolving your limbs with warm tongue and acid breath. Heroin was homecoming; heroin was ruin.

Jeremy’s grave is thirty minutes away. The danger game says you should hitchhike and so you do. Traffic travels up to a hundred ks round here and it’s a truck route. The drivers look through you when you stick out your thumb. You start walking.

The woman who pulls over looks a bit like Sarah, only younger and posher. ‘Umm, where to?’

‘The cemetery.’

‘What?’ she looks as if she wants you to get out again. ‘I mean where are you going?’

‘West.’

On the radio, the Pet Shop Boys sing, ‘we were never being boring. We were never being bored.’
When she drops you off she says. ‘You could have just caught a bus,’ and cups her chin in her hand.

‘It was sort of a bet. Thanks.’

The gates are pinned open with blocks of bluestone. It’s a huge cemetery, with a brown-brick crematorium and chapel in the centre and paths fanning out like spokes in all directions. Even dying seems, economical, pre-packaged here. Anonymous: a one-size-fits-all experience. It’s a late twentieth-century cemetery, no sculptures for famous men, no beautiful old headstones, no-one who died before the eighties, no history. The graves are close together, evenly placed. You stand under the shade of a Poplar tree to catch your breath.

When you find his grave you dig in the dirt, which is harder than you imagined – baked with clay beneath the topsoil, and bury the magnifying glass again, the pieces of the detective game.

Alice didn’t come home last night. You haven’t seen her so relieved, so abandoned, for a long time. You cooked dinner for her because you’d seen her face in the afternoon. When she didn’t come, you started to make a banner, stealing a white cotton bedsheet for material. There’ll be a rally. Some woman at the meeting said she’d heard a developer’s interested in the school’s land for high-density housing.

In the middle of the night, after you’d tried to ring Alice’s mobile and you’d read, and re-read, the freedom of information documents, you got out of the flat.

You went to the slaughter-washed streets alongside the Victoria Market, where pig’s blood and fish-scales are hosed down the drain daily, while cheap shoes are sold to tourists, along with home-made lavender soap,
and rinds of pricey imported cheese, and ‘healing’ incense and knockoff jackets in zany designs that aspire to Tokyo kitsch.

The door of the North Melbourne flapped open, listlessly, in the still air. UDL cans marked the entrance, one either side of the hallway, like miniature pillars.

The boy, Sam, was in the back yard, pale and lolling. He didn’t look up.

‘Who else is around?’

‘Nah, me.’ He hauled himself up onto his elbows. ‘Why are you here?’ He tried to instil some abruptness into his voice. ‘I’ve got nothing.’ Then you knew that it’s him you wanted the comfort of, to give comfort to, not the drugs.

He was blinking off the shreds of dreams and memories.

‘Want to know something funny?’

He shook his head.

‘My sister’s your teacher.’

‘Bull she is.’ He leaned over a rumpled exercise book that he had been writing in.

‘Miss Reilly, history.’

‘You’re identical.’

‘What?’

‘Can you think what the other one is doing?’

‘Alice? Now, you mean?’

He swayed and grabbed hold of his book. ‘She reads my stories, Miss does.’

‘Sorry about your Mum.’

He drifted back into his blanket on the porch and closed his eyes. ‘I meant your twin, can you know what they are thinking.’
‘No,’ you said, but he was asleep.
You read some of the stories, his hunger for the future, the world of robots and galactic wars. Then you hugged him. He smelled like a man: pungent sweat, dirty skin. If he was on smack, you couldn’t see it. The earth held together, didn’t split in two along a fault-line. Spit’s gathered in the corners of his mouth. He felt warm and stupid, warm and rotten. You had to dodge when he woke up because he tried to kiss you, and you could see his erection. You told him to go home. He had been crying in his sleep.

At Jeremy’s grave you take out the document that shows your mother’s application, which you found last night in the thick wad of paperwork you’d been sent. Last year, under a new name, she filled out a foster parent application for temporary guardianship over a six-year-old girl with a severe disability who had become a ward of the state. She’d had to list the name change. She had written down your name and Alice’s and Jeremy’s under the section asking for information about children, and she has her occupation down as an aged care worker. Her marital status is ticked as ‘separated’. The application was withdrawn a week after it was submitted and there’s a red stamp across it. There’s an address for her, a telephone number.

If you found her she was meant to be sexy, sassy, a TV-movie actress with a fag hanging out of her mouth and a satin slip. Not the way your grandparents were, deflated, evasive. Retorts crack out of her mouth, whip and sting. A woman working the prawn ships off the coast, with blistered hands and a peeling, ravaged face. Small-time con woman signing up people awash in spare time, drowning in it, to sell pyramid schemes where she snaffles the cash. In jail for holding up a Seven Eleven or welfare theft. A blubbery monster, yawning, unlovable, getting larger every day. Otherwise, why hasn’t she ever contacted you? Otherwise, why didn’t she come back?
Why are you so fucking stupid, Louise?

Alice says again, with her mouth full and sour, it’s TV, it’s fantasy.

Probably, you should never have been sent this document. Probably, it’s a mistake. You fold up the paper, fold away the masochism and the lunacy and put it in the ground.

You cover up the game, the file, the broken magnifying glass and whisper nougheway to the bruised storm-clouds in the blue-black sky, the gathering wind.

On your way back, a woman pushes a leaflet into your hand. She’s scrubbed up, middle class. ‘Jesus SAVES but those who set themselves beyond his forgiveness will BURN in the inferno.’ You tear the pieces up in front of her and sprinkle them like confetti over her head. She trembles. ‘Repent,’ but it’s delivered like an instruction, so much wishful thinking, a kid’s whisper over a magic wand and just as powerless.

There are people queuing for takeaway coffee when you arrive for the second day of your trial. They haven’t taken down the ad in the window, which should bother you but it doesn’t. You slice prosciutto paper-thin for a man in a rich silk suit with a bowed head, and wrap it up.

The manager asks you to make coffee and writes a list of orders in inscrutable shorthand.

The customer’s spotted all over. Silk red-and-white spotted jacket, tight black-and-white skirt with tiny dots like exclamation points. ‘I don’t know if you realise this but a Macchiato only has a tiny amount of milk. Sorry to be fussy,’ the woman tells you unapologetically. Smiles. Turns to the other person on trial who’s a man, assuming he’s the manager. ‘Is she new?’

‘She’s black/white colour-blind.‘

‘I see,’ the woman says blankly and she frowns. ‘What?’
'I'll get you another free of charge,' he tells her before she goes to the manager.

'That would be lovely.'

He takes you through the steps; he’s proud of how he makes coffee.

Your manager comes up. ‘Louise? You need to clear the till.’ You slide the fifty-dollar notes out from the bottom drawer of the register and wrap an elastic band around them, push them into a plastic snap-lock bag and tuck the package beneath the bench. She stands behind you and checks as you count the money and scribble it down on a notepad.

At the end of your shift she peels off a couple of notes. ‘Do you want this job or not?’

You let yourself into Alice’s flat. She’s working at the desk, grading papers with her shoes kicked off beside her.

‘Where were you last night? Not the usual shape of things, for me to be asking…’

She doesn’t turn around. ‘Yeah.’ The room is filled with the sounds of a whining saw from the renovations across the road.

‘Did you stay at Sarah’s?’

She keeps writing. ‘Mmm hmmm. I was drunk.’

‘And how was your esteemed Principal today?’

‘He announced to the staff room he’s been “hasty”.’

‘I made signs for if there’s a rally.’

She smiled thinly. ‘Yeah. I’m not sure if that’ll happen.’

‘You should embarrass the fuck out of them. You could all chain yourself to the school like they do at forest protests.’

‘Being chained to the school any more than I am already is not my idea of a good time.’ But she grins a little.
'Those parents were seriously fucked off,' you tell her. She doesn’t answer. The lightness you saw in her at the meeting, the elation, has faded. You go into the kitchen, rummage in the fridge and the cupboards. You find the peanut butter jar and scoop some out with a finger. She grabs the jar from you, snaps it away with too much force. ‘That’s disgusting.’

All the rage is held in her body. Kept precious, hugged near the bone, like blood or tissue. Alice is a woman in a glass cubicle.

‘I went to Jeremy’s grave.’

‘That’s not like you.’

‘Sentimental?’

‘Thinking of others.’

You put your hands on the warm wooden island bench. ‘Sister, resist.’

‘You are retarded, did you know that? Rearranging words, it’s compulsive. Ridiculous. Not clever. You’re like a child. On and on and on and on.’

‘And on.’

You see now that she’s been cleaning the flat, rearranging objects, dusting down the blinds. It’s not a good sign with Alice; all that compressed fury.

She laughs, shoulders shaking in a small way. She waits, grinds her teeth. Her eyes look green and opaque.

You drum your fingers on the bench. ‘What’s up?’

Her face was blotchy. ‘I’ll tell you what I do know. I get sucked back into believing you, into hoping, thinking about Jeremy, and I know it’s toxic and pointless but I keep—’

Alice’s doorbell rings. ‘Oh not now. You get that.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m not home.’
'What am I going to say?'
Sarah’s outside, holding a bunch of roses and fruit: a mango, pineapple, some berries. ‘Hello, Lou.’ She holds out her arms. ‘Relax, I’m not going to bite you.’ You give her a hug. ‘Where’s your lovely sister?’

You think quickly. ‘She went out with Jon.’

The smile wobbles. Sarah’s dressed up, wearing a sleek dress in tropical colours and a swipe of dark lipstick. ‘I told her I’d come round.’

‘I upset her. She’s gone out.’

Sarah picks up her things. ‘You take care, Louise. Say hi from me to Alice, pain in the arse that she is.’

Alice is calmer when you go back inside. She looks at you fondly, head tilted to the side. ‘How do you have such a sophisticated ability to say precisely the wrong thing?’

‘She knows you’re home.’

‘I heard.’ She pulls out a glossy stapled union newsletter. ‘Can you look at this?’

You nick one of her smokes. There’s an article about curriculum reform and another about students’ attitudes to social studies, uniformly hostile and negative, although the researcher notes that some of this is the product of a generalised hostility to school itself. A glossy photograph of a small girl with her mother next to an information campaign about disability support.

You are so tired you want to crawl under the covers and never get out of bed. The shame is burying you alive. The shape of the woman’s neck and the narrowness of her back, this you know. The effect is like a child’s colouring book where only a few sections have been filled in so the rest of the outline fades back into the paper. The child’s propped against her, mouth gaping, one pigtail bunched higher than the other.

Inhale the cigarette. Dream of yesterday or tomorrow, slide past time.
The woman isn’t wearing a wedding ring. She isn’t smiling. Her face is in shadow and blurry. The caption below says: ‘Meredith is in Grade Two at Astonbury Primary.’

‘Is it her?’

Keep hold of yourself. ‘Dunno.’

‘She’d be too old to have a kid. That girl’s about seven.’ Alice chews her hair. ‘I tried to get her name from the editor, said I think I used to know Meredith, love to be in touch, blah.’

‘I never saw Michael Grieves at all,’ you tell her. ‘I wanted to.’

‘I know,’ she says. She lights a cigarette too. ‘I went through your things.’

‘When I was coming off heroin I got confused. I used to think about him a lot. And I read it in the paper.’

You both sit on the couch. ‘I’m surprised you didn’t seriously take up crime as a career,’ Alice tells you in a flat voice. ‘Your talents are wasted on petty shoplifting.’

‘I really wanted to know what he was thinking about that night. If Michael bashed him. Where he went.’ They hadn’t told you he was dead until you’d been released from hospital and been led into the new unit, its paper-thin walls letting through all the groans and calls of the neighbours on each side, the navy carpet worn but smelling of steam-cleaning fluid. ‘Did you look at all my stuff?’

Alice nods. ‘You made me think she left him to die.’

‘I don’t think we should keep looking. You know when my arms got infected I dreamed she came and put her hand on my forehead.’

‘I did dream about him,’ Alice admits, her face to the wall. ‘Not much. When I saw him, before he died, I pinched his arm really hard, broke the skin. I was so fucked off with him for hiding.’
‘It is her. The photo.’

‘Louise.’

‘Did you look at my paintings too? They’re from the nightmares.’

She’s pale. ‘They’re good. You’ve always had an eye for the ghoulish.’

She takes your arm and strokes it.

‘She tried to foster the kid in the photo.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I got the paperwork by mistake with the other freedom of information stuff. She was going to apply to be a foster parent and then didn’t.’

‘And you made sure I couldn’t see it?’

‘I didn’t read it properly.’

‘Show me the application.’

‘I chucked it out.’

‘Please, Louise, just stop it.’

She thinks you are lying, now that you are telling her the truth. ‘We don’t need to see her.’

Alice stamps into the bedroom and tears open the window, cools her face in the breeze. ‘Why did you come here? You said she knew Jeremy was dying. That’s what you said.’

‘She couldn’t foster. Cos of us. One dead, two dumped, not a great parenting record.’

‘She wouldn’t have adopted another kid.’

‘It said fostered.’

‘And now you don’t want to see her?’

‘I’ve finished playing the danger game.’

She lights two cigarettes and passes one to you. ‘Alright, Lou.’ She flicks back into efficiency: empties the ashtray, checks her mobile phone. ‘I
might go and see a movie with Sarah. You can finish your banner or come with us.’

‘What would you ask her, if you could ask her something?’

Alice is tugging on her sneakers, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. ‘Why she didn’t take us with her. Anyway,’ she stubs out her cigarette. ‘This is masochistic.’

So all through the evening while Alice is out, you walk and walk, try to get lost in the night. Catch trains to stations you choose by closing your eyes and stabbing a finger at the rail map. You walk along the scratchy sand near the sea, the luxurious silence in tree-lined streets that whisper words of money and comfort, then the rubbish-trailed streets where men shuffle into boarding houses and women’s legs puckered with goose pimples beneath short dresses, their hips swinging in hopeful steps as they pace up and down the block. You see a fat woman in a pale blue coat poised outside what look like army barracks, below a sign that advertises the ‘crooked places made straight Christian academy’. You pick up some rubbish from the bin and take pot shots at the windows. A milk carton bounces off the entrance. A dog barks cruelly.

You can watch the industrial belt melt into outlying suburbs, scrubby farms, new estates; see the cramped inner-city terraces become roomy renovated two-storeys with glossy cars in the driveways, let the world fade and reform through the frame of the train window, limit your field of vision.

They wake you up when Sarah leaves, feet thumping to the front door and stage whispering. You have a headache and your skin’s dry and papery. You pull on the ratty Manga-print T-shirt. It’s morning. Sarah’s bunch of roses in on the table in a vase now and Alice is making cornflakes and toast. You chew your fingernails, bite down hard on them, rip the skin around your cuticles.
off with your teeth. You walk over to Alice and put your arms around her, lean your forehead against her back.

‘Her name,’ you say into Alice’s back. ‘I know the new name.’
She turns, ‘I can’t hear you.’
‘Mum.’
Alice slices tomato onto her toast. ‘From this document?’
‘She had to put it in. They run background checks.’
‘Was there an address?’
‘I buried the file. She changed her name to Lucinda Grey. Lucy. Last year she was on the outskirts of Albury, some shithole town.’

‘Lucinda Grey.’ Alice holds onto the rim of the sink. ‘At least if we do this, it’s done.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ you say, ‘but I won’t go in.’

After reams of flat country, tobacco crops and grimy sheep lining the Hume, you stop near the border for a break. Alice brings two milky coffees to the table, froth slopping over the lip of the cup.

You are in a tea-room next to the wide, open river that the sun bounces off in flashes of generous light. You want to be out there: barefoot on the shingled shore, up to your knees in shady water. You squelch the mud in your toes, knock against mangrove roots.

The menu advertises Cuppachino. Truckers order plates filled with hot chips dripping oil, and crabsticks and potato cakes. The soft drinks fridge is almost empty. There are pastel prints of innocuous country villages on the wall.

‘I guess we were damaged in the wrong way.’ Your mother has found a child who was loveable, whose injuries were visible.
Alice stirs sugar into her coffee. Already she looks younger. Her hair is wild and gleaming. There are stains down the front of her dress and near her armpits. ‘Remember the stories you used to make up for Jeremy about the trains.’

‘They went underground.’

‘It could be a coincidence. Alice, Louise, Jeremy, Chelsea. Was it all in Victoria? Did you check her date of birth?’

‘Didn’t think of that.’

‘Burying stuff, what are you, a giant mole?’

‘No moles in Australia.’

‘Mum did a good voice for Ratty and Mole in Wind in the Willows.’

You fill in the crossword in the local paper, which advertises feeding lots for sale.

‘I know you used my ID.’

Her face is calm, crafty. You spoon froth off your coffee and wait.

‘The cops rang me to ask me to come in for an interview. I was on speed or ecstasy in Fitzroy weaving in and out of traffic.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Now the guy’s coming to see me so I can prove he’s never met Alice Reilly.’

‘You should’ve told them your wallet got stolen.’

She blows on her drink. ‘It did.’

‘I thought they’d forget about it.’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘That boy in your class with the sick mother?’

‘Sam?’

‘Yeah. He’s been using ice, probably smack too. I got it off him.’

She puts her head down on the table. ‘Louise.’
Tears drip off your checks, salty as the sea.

‘Not smack?’

‘Nup. Methadone down to twice a week.’

‘Why did we hate her and not him? He put down the kero.’

‘I shared the hate around, thank-you-very-much.’ You do a twirl and a curtsy but it doesn’t dislodge the anchor in your chest, the heavy dragging of what is to come. ‘Because she left and he stayed.’

‘I went to his place. He was so pleased to see me. Says he’s gonna cut back on the drinking. Yeah right. And shadowed by that stupid woman from next door. Why did she come to the meeting?’

‘I would guess he is fucking her. They’re a couple, Alice.’

Alice smashes her spoon onto the table. ‘Sure they are. She keeps claiming she’s getting marriage proposals from that young guy with the porn.’

But after you both giggle and drink the lukewarm coffee, you go to the address written on the bit of paper in Alice’s pocket.

It takes another forty minutes to get there. The place is on the outskirts, near where a housing estate is being built, bisected by a shallow creek with honey-coloured water, the artificial lake still only a hollow in the earth dotted with bulldozers. The area’s full of roads that go nowhere, loop back in on themselves.

‘Forty-eight B’ Alice tells you.

You find it: a small bungalow, behind a large main house, brick veneer, with its own entrance onto a back street.
You are caught at the door again, your arms reaching for the handle, your lungs bursting, the skin on your arms blistering, a wailing in your ears, smoke like a winter fog all around you. ‘I’ll wait out here.’

Alice takes your hand. ‘Please.’
‘I don’t want to go in.’
‘Just for twenty minutes.’
‘I didn’t know he was inside. I was getting my toys.’
‘You’re okay, Louloubelle.’

Alice presses the bell. The mat on the front step says ‘welcome.’

There is the sound of several locks being drawn back.

This woman is not your mother. Her blond hair is greying, her nose looks as if it has once been broken, and her shoulders are broad, like a Phys Ed teacher’s. Where are the old smells of Velvet soap, or the residue of those rubber gloves she wore to wash walls, where is the heart’s cut of recognition?

You used to know your mother’s face: seeing every wrinkle or spot, noting each change, a darkness under the eyes, a fattening of the cheeks.

Now she’s here you can hardly look at her.
You almost hyperventilate. The breaths come quickly. Your dad pushes you onto the ground, shoves you onto the grass and beats the fire off you with his hands.

‘I was going out,’ she says but still she waits in the open door, clutching her black free-giveaway handbag in her hands. She is pale and washed out, her placating stare almost abject. ‘Just on my way to the shops.’

Then she tries to slam the door. You shove your foot in the way, both of your legs trembling.

‘Get out,’ she says but she’s barely raised her voice and her eyes are on the floor, as if she’s shooing away a cat or a fly.

‘Do you know who we are?’ Alice asks, so gently it’s hard to hear her.
'Yes.' She turns away and goes back inside the house. You and Alice wait on the step, hovering, and Alice flings the door open wide and follows her. ‘I don’t have to do this.’

During the walk down the hall Alice takes your arm. It’s a narrow corridor, painted a lively yellow.

When your mother sits down she doesn’t know how to greet you and keeps her arms pinned close to her sides as if to ward you off, as if you are small children still, who might cling to her and wrap yourselves around her like limpets. She puts out her hand to shake and then takes it away. Her hands are bony, knuckles large. They’re man’s hands, broad and thick. All the while, during the placing of her bag back on the hall table, the scraping out of the chair, she’s crying.

Your mother says in a soft voice – even her accent’s changed, she speaks more slowly and her vowels are flatter – ‘You look really happy, nice.’

She lives in just one room. There’s no mess. It’s bare but hopeful: some books about tapestry and wildlife on the makeshift shelf, a built-in-wardrobe, a few spice jars on the kitchen bench, a half-sized fridge. There are louvre windows half-open, like slitted eyes.

She’s washed out, thin, with sad elbows and child’s wrists. ‘I like that dress. It suits you.’ You touch the fabric of the blue-and-pink floral polyester number that Footscray Saver’s provided. She cries.

‘Do you have anything at all to say?’ Alice has never sounded so much like the mother you remember: so curt and flat.

She doesn’t say, ‘I wanted to see you,’ or ‘I wrote.’ She introduces herself to you, says her name’s Lucinda. She tells you that she works as an aged-care assistant and lives alone and that you both look beautiful.

‘Louise found you,’ Alice announces.

‘You’re both very big,’ as if you are still teenagers and likely to grow.
'We're not *too big,*' you say, although the entire conversation is permeated by a curious ache, not for anything that belongs to the three of you but for the world your mother excluded herself from, the time when you and Alice knew nothing at all. For here she is, harmless, almost powerless.

'Sorry.' Your mother pats down her pleated skirt over and over.

'So, how have the last fourteen years been?' you raise your voice, weight your words with the cheery emphasis of a soap-opera character's speech.

She cries some more. 'Louise.' All over the walls are photographs of Meredith, the girl she wanted to foster.

Then she looks at Alice and back at you. 'Why have you come here?'

Alice sits on the plain wooden chair and folds her arms. Her voice is clear. She forms the words without shaking. She speaks at a fair volume: 'Did you know Jeremy was trapped in the house? Is that why you left?'

She's too thin. She doesn't know where to look. 'I have a glass of water in the afternoon, I have a drink of water, just to, I'll come back...’ She turns on the tap, fills herself a cup and returns.

Alice rolls her eyes at you. 'It's okay.'

Your mother says, 'I feed the birds, outside; I put out a bath on the windowsill. Parakeets. Even a Kookaburra.'

Alice nods but you stand up. 'Why are you acting as if we're going to beat you? Are you psychotic?'

She collects a tea-pot from the small cupboard in her kitchen area, carries it to the table without hot water or tea. She smiles at you. 'When you were newborn you used to be so tiny I could almost hold you here,' she cups her hands together. 'Like that. Course you don’t remember,’ a husk of a laugh.

'No.'
'Is your dad alive?'

Alice answers, looking at her feet. 'Yeah. He shifted into a new place when Louise moved out.'

You want to break all the furniture in the room, shower it down on her, smash the windows, ruin the birdbath. But here she is, a middle-aged woman afraid of her own kids.

'Who lit the fire?'

'I had a boyfriend then.'

'Who cares?'

But she keeps talking, patting the belly of the teapot. 'Wayne Colvert. I missed adult company. Being touched. Sometimes I meet him in the offices. Mondays. Or he'd get me. Used to park his car across the road. He'd flash the hazard lights on/off so your dad wouldn't see. Couple of times. Then off I'd go in his car, I was meant to.' She's stopped crying and now she rakes her hands over her cheeks, again and again, as if her skin is just a mask that will fall if she tugs hard enough.

'So...the things you think you'll never do, I did. I had an affair. I let my son die. I left my kids.'

Alice tells her 'If you were a woman in a movie, you'd have to die now,' but she doesn't have a sense of humour, this ghost of your mother, and instead she flinches.

'You left us.' You tell her.

'In the house that night, I knew, that was that, I was going. I would've brung you, all of you. I go to myself if Jeremy comes home safe I promise I'll leave.'

This time, you ask. 'Did you know Jeremy was home when the fire happened? Did you let Jeremy die on purpose?'
She pats the tea-pot. ‘I have. A thing.’ She breathes brokenly. ‘It’s. I get. I had a nervous breakdown. Actually, I was in the bin. But that was – not near, not recently.’

Alice straightens her back. ‘The heart bleeds.’

Your mother jumps. ‘What? It...I see.’

‘What happened to you?’

The question remains in the silence, like a musical note held too long.

She clears her throat. ‘We never saw him. Jeremy. I thought your dad had lit it. That’s what he was holding over me. I went to go in the house but I heard him shouting for you, Louise, at the back.’

‘What about the stones Jeremy left?’

The smile was terrible. ‘Magic circle? I did think that. But then.’

She pats her hands together softly. ‘You see Shaun was there, so it wasn’t our house on fire, I reckoned. No-one’s inside. And when flashed the lights, I knew the guy from work was waiting. I thought it would destroy him, your dad, if he found out. So I go over to Wayne’s car and say for him to go, it’s not a good day.’

The room is too warm, you’re sweating. ‘You didn’t want to get caught?’

She cradles the teacup in her hands, looks at the tea-leaves for signs. ‘It wouldn’t have made any difference what I did.’

Alice is watching her with tired eyes. ‘Why didn’t you take us when you went?’

She switches on a light and the gloomy room’s recast. ‘Shaun thought they would’ve taken youse away, put you somewhere else. Just temporary. So I was, ‘oh well,’ for a bit. I could get some sleep. Change my life. Shaun wanted to fight for you. After Jeremy died, I had nothing kind, no pity. If Shaun hadn’t put down the kero. If he’d been picked up. I was the one that
wanted the exam. If you didn’t go in the back door. I thought I’d come back for you. Took one year then I stopped wanting to cut myself, imagining there were spiders living in my skin, so I say when I got off medication: it’s too late.’

‘What do you tell people?’

You hear a trace of a tone you recognise: sly, light. ‘Divorced. No kids.’ She nods. ‘You really have to believe it to keep it going.’

You rush to the bathroom and vomit on the floor, your stomach twisting. You wash your face.

Alice stays and talks to her. She spent months in and out of psychiatric hospitals, and now she works for a pittance in aged care, volunteers her time for ‘causes’, visits Meredith, who is being shipped from one foster family to the other, and takes her out. She’s saving to help fund an operation for Meredith that will make it easier for her to walk. ‘Good deeds.’ Alice says blankly and when she replies, ‘something like that’ she sounds so much like Alice herself, with the self-deprecation, the dismissal, that it almost breaks you.
He dreams. There are shadows with sharpened claws but kind smiles that lure him into a boat made of fish scales that can fly across the sea. The waves are tremendous. They crash and lurch and wail. They pitch him forward into a tunnel that’s too small, where his ribs are squeezed. He’s drowning in the dark air.

He wakes by hitting his head against the cupboard door. The skin on his legs is creased red with the shape of his shorts. His limbs feel heavy and lazy and one of his feet is paralysed with pins and needles. When he pushes open the door the bare bulb of the kitchen shines on the patterned linoleum. The fridge must be leaking again because the floor gleams with water. The newspaper taped across the broken louvre windows has come loose. Jeremy can only read half of the headline, the first part with big block letters. He tilts his head: ‘History in the Making’. The photograph shows three women with grimy faces standing in front of a grey building. Everything that happens is history in the making, really. It hurts his head to think about.

Memories whisper through his mind of the art room at school: imaginary animals made out of egg cartons; painting his own shape, which had been drawn and cut out, in orange and yellow; finger-painting and using toilet rolls or potatoes cut in half to make shapes and patterns. It’s the smell. Methylated spirits was used to clean the brushes when they ran out of turpentine. Meth would sting the skin on your hands but it could get the paint off easily, whether it was water or oil based.

Jeremy steps slowly out of the cupboard and almost skids on the floor. The smell is everywhere, on the patchy brown cushions in the lounge, across the great sad roses of the carpet, sliding off the kitchen table in slow drops. He can’t see his father but there are clues.

The box of extra-large matches that they used for the pilot light when the hot water went off is lying on the floor next to the table in a wet puddle. His mother’s lighter – that she uses for the Alpines she smokes with her friend Jean – has been taken.
If he was a detective he could call the kitchen the scene of a crime, although the crime hasn’t happened yet. His dad has done this before. Jeremy’s mum was scared the first time but later she said, ‘Go on then,’ or ‘you don’t have it in you.’

The house is his. Alice and Lou are at the park. His parents are not here. The best magicians can make fire appear and disappear. Illusions are all about making your audience look the right way. His book of card tricks says that most people are so busy keeping the card they chose hidden, tucked unseen into their palms, that they won’t notice how you asked them to select it, or if the deck is marked, or that the answer’s found by logic. You can distract people with their own expectations: where they think the rabbit will come from, the hand the coin is meant to be in. He leans over and touches them.

The matches feel strong in his hand. The box is warm and heavy. He is king of the world.

At the crunch of footsteps outside he jolts. Being king of the world is a child’s game. He is disgusting. He’s got a whirring, thankless mind like a machine. He’s a mutant. A retard. A psycho.

No one comes.


If you play the danger game you have to do what is dared in twenty seconds.

He can taste sweat like salt on his lips. When he was four and learned to swim he vomited salt water back up. Dad took him to the beach and held him in the water. A wave washed over his face. His dad put his hand under Jeremy’s neck and tilted him back. He had said, ‘I’ve got you. It’s alright, I’ve got you.’ It was a secret that he was learning how to swim.

He can still remember the dizziness, the sense of endless falling. Jeremy feels the same now, both heavy and light. Around him the room breathes. It expands and contracts. Whatever he does will change things. He is transforming.
The matches might be too wet. If there isn’t enough friction nothing will catch.

Jeremy once kept lots of secrets with his dad. The garden behind the hedge at the park was one. When they played they pretended the creatures from Where the wild things are had come to life.

His dad used to take him to the shop and let him choose any icy-pole flavour and Jeremy would hope to pick the one his dad thought was best. ‘Just for the boys,’ his dad said. ‘A secret for the boys.’ If his mum heard she frowned.

The seconds are running out. He sees them fall away, discarded, as if they are real marks or lines. He counts them out of existence, checking them off like squares on a number line. At school if you have to minus negative numbers you takeaway by counting backwards, on the other side of zero, away from whole numbers.

He takes a match from the dry home of the box. Louise has crawled into the veranda of the ghostly old man who lives around the corner. She said he was a wizard and that his eyes glowed red when he found her. Alice has walked four blocks on the too-warm black of the road in bare feet, without going onto the shady side once. She got blisters on the soles of her feet. They haven’t done this.

He tilts the box. His hands shake. He can’t.

Back in the cupboard he puts his arms around his knees, hugs the matchbox to him. He can win the danger game.

When he strikes the match, the red tip sparks off. It burns his fingers so he flings it out. It soars in an arc and for a moment it’s just a spinning, pretty flash. He sees a streak of orange lagging behind in the shape of a rainbow. Sparklers and Halloween and fairy lights flick on and off in his mind.

He pulls at the cupboard door when he hears the fizzle of the match-head landing. He waits for a roar, something more definitive. The darkness is soothing. There are three seconds left. He is ten years old and he is magic.

The heat, when it comes, feels like love.
We both slept for almost seventeen hours after the visit to our mother’s house. I woke at three in the afternoon. Louise was still snoring on the bed beside me, the doona tossed off her, arms and legs askew. Every so often her limbs twitched. My breath was sour, my throat dry. I saw my downstairs neighbours pegging up washing on the line, sheets billowing around them. A steady stream of people carrying shopping bags to their cars from the supermarket on the street below. My bedroom was stuffy.

I poured myself a cup of tea and thought of the way my mother had petted the china teapot at her house, as if it were alive and needed comforting. We’d visited dad on the way home, Louise so tired she’d barely spoken. He was trying to grow seedlings, and showed us the new wooden model of inner Melbourne, which he was building. Louise had been dark-eyed and tetchy. We played cards with him and Diane who looked at my hand over my shoulder, and called Louise Lois and refused to be corrected. Our father had been too excited to see us. When I asked if he knew our mother had spent time as a mental patient he pretended not to hear.

When we left, he stood in the doorway and asked, ‘That wasn’t so bad was it?’ and Louise and I buried ourselves in the noise of the radio on the way home.

I drowsed off in afternoon sun and dreamed about Sarah. I woke to the sound of thumping techno and realised there was someone knocking at the door and shouting my name.
I opened the door to Sarah, carrying a newspaper and a baguette. She
looked prim: her hair was held back with a plastic headband, there were tiny
silver circles in her ears.

‘Are you in exile from the world, Alice? I’ve been ringing.’ Her gaze
skittered past my unplugged phone. She held my face in her hands and
looked at me.

‘Your hands are too cold.’

She rubbed them together, an anticipatory motion that didn’t suit her
expression, the tightening of her face. ‘I will make coffee. You will want the
newspapers.’

‘Lou’s asleep.’ I sank ungratefully into a chair.

‘Want some bread and cheese?’

‘Come and sit for a minute.’

She made a wonky face. ‘But I’m trying to make myself indispensable
so that you’ll think, “that Sarah, she’s handy, worth keeping around.”’

‘We found Mum. We went to her house.’ The night Louise had
admitted to lying about seeing our brother’s tormentor, Sarah had said, ‘Give
the obsession a rest, Alice.’ She had thought I should write a letter expressing
everything I wanted to say to my mother and that then I should put it away.
When I told her this was psychobabble she’d become careful and melancholic.

‘Your mum?’

‘She calls herself Lucinda Grey. She was incredibly skinny, lonely,
marginal.’

Sarah settled into the sofa. ‘I hope you never have to sum me up in
three words.’

‘And an adverb.’

‘Did she have anything to say?’
‘She was crying pretty much the whole time. She got screwed up because she was cheating with some guy from work.’

‘What about Jeremy?’

‘She didn’t think the fire was at our house. She was so confused I could hardly understand what she was saying. She didn’t want to get caught out having an affair with the guy who was waiting out the front, so she didn’t try and go inside our house, just walked over and warned him off.’

‘Did it help? Getting that part of the past back?’

‘I wouldn’t see her again.’

‘But did she tell you why she left?’

‘No, she kept talking to me about this fucking birdfeeder she had in the garden.’

‘This is big, Alice.’

‘Does it have to be?’

‘Did you ever really think you’d find her?’

‘Nup.’ Her sympathy was condemning me. ‘Let’s leave it for now.’

‘Sorry.’ She pulled her hand back and marched toward the stove, pale summer skirt swishing around her calves. I heard her packing the coffee into the percolator.

‘When we started having sex,’ I began, without looking at her, ‘did you expect it?’

She lit the stove. ‘Not expect it but I hoped, I guess.’

‘And what are we now? Friends plus sex, or are you assuming that’s it, we’re in love, domestic harmony is declared?’

There was a long silence. I lit a cigarette and played with the silver foil lining on my pack. Sarah coughed.
‘Yeah I like you – love you – just like I always have.’ She turned back to the newspaper. ‘Once you read the headline on page eight, you’ll want coffee.’

My mother had said that she loved Meredith, that she was putting aside forty dollars a month for her operation. She had told us this without chagrin or hesitation, just as she’d offered to show us photos of them together, and taken me before we left to see the cockatoos feeding in her tiny backyard. The self-deception was monstrous.

The moment before I’d knocked on my mother’s front door, when I was still on the threshold of that tiny contained room, its fragile collection of possessions, its story of a contained life so trimmed and bottled, I had hoped to be angry. Louise, I had expected, would be insane, would spit out the years of longing and spite. Now I wanted to retrieve my mother as furious and whole, frank and unforgiving. Her hope for Meredith brought with it all the symptoms of despair.

And now Sarah was emanating hope, shining with it.

How could she love me just the same way she always had? ‘So what is this, just fucking? You’re a bit bored, a bit interested, a bit horny?’

‘No, Alice. I don’t think you’re disappointed with me.’

‘Oh, stop being so self-satisfied.’

The last time we’d fought like this had been when Sarah was first married. We hadn’t spoken for nine months.

Sarah walked towards me. ‘I’m not Jon. I won’t have you self-destructing because of some situation you’ve engineered.’

‘Right. So that’s what happened with Jon. Thanks for the illumination.’

She came and sat next to me. ‘I’m glad we slept together. I want to keep being with you, or learning how to be with you, but I’m too old and too
tired and too sensible to let myself get caught up again with someone who’s ambivalent. Especially you, Alice.’

‘I’m trying to be careful here,’ I told her.

‘One thing I can promise you: if we try this I will hurt you.’

I had to laugh. She raised her eyebrows. ‘People fuck up when they love each other. You make yourself a soft target. You just have to be prepared to take the risk.’

I couldn’t answer.

‘Should I go?’

The thin paper bags full of sweet pastry wilted on the table. ‘I don’t want us to change.’

She tried a smile, a flash of the old Sarah courage. ‘It’s the weekend. Want to go down the beach and lie around in the sun?’

‘I need to find out what’s happening with school.’

‘I hope it goes well. Sorry for the impassioned pledges. Read the article.’

‘So that’s it?’

‘Up to you, Alice, old girl.’

I joked, ‘Old girl makes me sound like a horse,’ but she had already closed the door and when I went to the balcony to watch her leave she did so with powerful steps, the wind blowing her faded red skirt around her thighs.

Page eight of the paper had a photograph of Sam sniffing some white powder next to a black-and-white photo of the science building that looked like it had been downloaded from our school website, alongside a random close-up of a needle and the headline: ‘MEET SAM. HE’S FIFTEEN. HE’S A DRUG ADDICT AND HE GOES TO THIS SCHOOL.’
Either a member of staff or a parent had leaked the information to the tabloid. The column described Sam as a pupil at ‘a trouble-plagued public secondary college.’ The education section was titled, ‘Our schools in crisis?’ and talked about the sale of drugs on the playground, issues of bullying and violence in the classroom. The text implied that Sam had conducted drug-deals just outside the school gates and reported our ‘ongoing struggle to clear “chromers” away from the district.’

I called Maria. She answered to a background of cheers and clapping.

‘Did you see the paper? What scum.’
‘I’m at Caz’s netball match. Bear with me.’
‘That is so unbelievably cynical of them.’

‘Tom’s calling the mother in. He confiscated one of the boy’s mobiles and that photo was on it.’

‘His mum’s got cancer, she can’t walk.’
‘But good news, Alice. I’m emailing around a proposal from the state executive. The department’s talking about working on a middle-school model instead. They want to avoid the community rally, so I’ve got a motion that we have an in principle agreement to give the media. “Interested in pursuing discussions” and so on.’

‘For a middle-school? What about redundancies?’

‘No, the organiser reckons they’ll stick to voluntaries, transfer or accommodate. Even contracts. Good girl. Sorry, it’s the semis. We’re lucky. A little birdie told me the local rag’s keen to run a story about the developers who are greedy for the land if the school closes and sells. I don’t think there’s any mileage in it but whatever keeps them nervous…’

‘Can’t we get a promise to keep it open?’

‘Not going to happen. No way, according to Ned.’

‘Have they publicised the rally?’

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'For Monday. Say they’re going to march and ask the Minister to meet with them and sign off on some agreement to keep the school open until the end of the year.’

‘I could organise a teacher’s delegation.’

‘Well, read the motion I’ve written. I think it’s better to let the parents handle that side. The union will send a statement to be read at the demonstration. But get this...’ Maria trailed off.

‘Speak into the phone. I can’t hear you.’

‘One of the parents said they asked if someone from the state opposition wanted to speak, which is pretty bloody dopey, and the guy’s PR manager tells him on the phone, off the record, verbatim: “We’re not holding some pity party about a bunch of chinks, wogs and blacks whose parents can’t stay off the dole.”’

‘Oh fuck.’

‘Wish she’d had a tape recorder. You know Tom wants to see you.’

‘Me? Shit. What for?’

‘He was poking round the staff room Friday making a performance out of your sick day. Sounds nasty.’

‘Thanks, Maria. Who’s winning?’

‘Can’t tell yet. Speak to you soon.’

While Louise slept I put on my sneakers, dusty from lack of use, and went for a run. In Royal Park at the top of a hill I looked out over acres of bushland and a footy oval, a cricket pitch and the cramped housing created for Commonwealth Games athletes. I crossed the old train-line, steered away from the adolescent psychiatric institution and the factory in the park, hemmed by barbed-wire fences and warning signs and an air of chemical
secrecy. Becoming a middle school didn’t feel a victory but it might be the only victory we’d be offered.

People played golf on a small green, families crowded around strings of sausages in plastic bags near the barbeque, cyclists whirred past in a blurred flash of motion.

Serial joggers overtook me and pounded on, their calves muscular, earphones in, heads nodding to the rhythms of music I couldn’t hear.

Maria had been so determined but she was already adjusting her expectations, without comment and fast, as if fiddling with the rear-view mirror in a car.

Sarah and I had brought a picnic here to celebrate when I’d first been offered the job. Looking at the horizon, the wobbly pools of water on the bike path shimmering in the blazing sun, I knew I had wanted Sarah to be enthralled by me. I had wanted to be irresistible, for her to need me enough to refuse to give me up.

And now I knew if I wanted to find out how she really felt, I had to choose to. I was in love with her. I stopped running.

Louise came to school with me, carrying the banner she’d painted and the placards. Some of the parents were holding a vigil outside the local member’s office in the morning, before the lunchtime rally outside the Education Department.

‘I got a call from the phone tree at seven am Alice! These people are cruel and determined.’

She was trotting along in short steps.

‘You’d only had eighteen hours sleep the day before.’

‘No dreams.’
I feigned a toast, swung my arm out holding a mimed glass. ‘To the end of dreams.’

‘I’ll drink to that. Speaking of the end of dreams, Dad rang yesterday. He married Diane in a registry office. I guess she’s doing it for the money,’ her voice dripped with sarcasm.

‘Bullshit, Louise. You are fucking with my head.’

‘Cross my heart.’

‘Your black heart indeed.’

‘It’s true. Romance is not dead, just mentally ill. Can you direct me? I don’t know where I’m going.’

‘Two doors from the pizza shop once you cross the main road.’

‘Why do you think Sarah’s using you for sex?’

‘Christ, Louise!’

She sped up into a jog. ‘You were talking very loudly. And fucking come to the rally.’ She sprinted for half a block and then halted when she dropped her signs.

Tom had left a note in my pigeonhole where the notice about our lunchtime union meeting had also been posted. He found me in the staffroom. He liked to wear suits to work but was dressed in beige pants and a faded grey shirt. ‘Alice there’s been a complaint about you.’

‘Who from?’

He spread his hands on the table. ‘Just an informal chat that we’re having. Nothing’s on your record and it’s not going any further.’

‘Is it with Sam because I gave him a warning and he was meant to be dropping out.’

‘No, it’s the Thomases. She rang me. Your private life is your business but she said you were explicitly talking to Ben about how wonderful gay sex is.’
'Does that seem at all likely to you?'
'I vouched for you. I said staff have an obligation to communicate our policy on discrimination and victimisation in the classroom.'
'I promise, it was a bullying incident. Some of the boys were chucking around homophobic drawings.'
'You’ve got to develop your judgement, Alice. It’s an ongoing issue for you with teaching, you want to identify with your students when you need to be the professional, the teacher.'
The energy I’d felt when I woke in the morning drained away from me. ‘Maybe you’re right but I’m learning, I’m trying.’
'I haven’t doubted that, it’s just a real shame you didn’t return that trust. And for some reason I don’t want to know a thing about, a police officer called to say he’s coming by at lunchtime to talk to you.'

Maria chaired the school union meeting, wearing thick glasses, and writing down names as teachers trickled in. ‘If we can shift four-point-two up the agenda we’ll get through more.’

It was twelve o’clock. ‘Are we going to try to get this finished before the rally?’

‘From what Ned said, as you can see by the motion, which will go out in the union’s name once it’s ratified, the Department wants to hose things down. We want to release it after all the staff have endorsed it. I don’t think the rally’s the priority.’

We read the motion. Kirsty cleared her throat. ‘Until they’re talking formally about something concrete, shouldn’t we try and keep the pressure up?’

Maria blushed. ‘I’m going on what the organiser told me. If we wait and see and then show we’re happy with that model, there’s a good chance.'
They wanted to close us quickly, quietly. So we can give ourselves a round of
applause they’re back to negotiating.’

I put up my hand to speak. ‘I think we should defer the motion until
we know what they’re proposing.’

Vanessa said, ‘I thought there was talk of a legal remedy.’

Maria made a face. ‘We’re getting advice. But this is a smart strategy.
We look reasonable, we can secure jobs, do it on our own terms.’

Kirsty was shaking her head. ‘The parents really want to keep the
school going, the whole curriculum.’

‘What about industrial action?’ I asked her.

‘We’re just going all over the place,’ she put down her papers with a
thump on the table. ‘There’s no protected action we can take about this. And
we’ll look like, well, fuckwits, really, if we force kids to miss classes on the
basis that we want to keep the school going.’

I tried again. ‘We can go today and support the rally. That won’t look
weird. It’ll look worse if we don’t.’

Kirsty asked what had happened in the past when non-protected
industrial action had taken place.

‘I don’t know. I can’t remember it happening. That would be totally
renegade. Remember, I didn’t make the legislation, in fact I went on strike
against it. Can we get back to the agenda?’

Kirsty looked at me and smiled. ‘I agree with Alice. I think we should
go to the rally.’

Maria folded up her union minutes into a tiny square and swore
quietly under her breath. ‘I’m not trying to ban you. If you’re on lunch, sure,
fine, do it. Just don’t expect to be able to call some spontaneous strike.’

Then Deirdre put her head around the door. ‘Shut up about your stupid
secret union business for a minute. Tom’s just resigned.’
‘When did he?’

‘Said he’s going home on stress leave and can I take over since I’m Deputy Head. He’s quitting.’

We scrambled to the window to see a white-faced Tom carrying a cardboard box into the parking lot.

‘You know the big cheque for twenty-thousand dollars they gave to Brighton High for the swimming pool last week?’ Deirdre’s eyes were full of joy and malice.

‘No,’ Kirsty said.

‘Well, you know big cheques: they present them at award nights sometimes, they’re about three foot high. So the vigil parents made this huge letter, same format, basically promising to keep the school open until the end of year, and they got the TV news to film them delivering it to the Minister, handing it to him, and he signed it.’

After I found Louise I called Sarah.

***

I stood in the classroom. The sun cast dapples of light across the desks. I took in the sounds of students scrambling for their seats, smelled the tang of teenage sweat and the bitter waft of damp erasers. I looked at the floor, at Doc boots and socks that shrugged down to the ankle, at regulation T-bars adorned with stickers of Japanese cartoon figures.

I held the chug and tremble of Sarah’s car humming in my body, from when she had dropped me off in the morning. We’d eaten cornflakes and cheese on toast and she’d kissed me goodbye with a sleep-dry mouth, her nurse’s badge digging into me when we embraced.

‘Miss, she took my pencilcase, Miss.’

‘Brianna thinks she’s the girl in Black Eyed Peas.’

‘So not.’
For once the chaos and the scramble didn’t daunt me. It felt odd, this thrill in my own skin, this sureness and anticipation just because I was with someone who knew the whole story from the very start, or at least the start that mattered, and because we’d won back one small thing.

Through the clear windows at the back of the room I saw cars crawl up and down the street, saw the freshly painted lines on the basketball court, white and stark, and I breathed in hope and a beginning.

I turned back to the board. ‘Let’s start.’
VOLUME II: Exegesis

‘Pick a side and stick to it’? Representing history in Amanda Lohrey’s *The Morality of Gentlemen* and *The Reading Group*.

*An exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.*

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Introduction: Histories of the Future and the Past

The title of this exegesis is taken from an exchange in *The Morality of Gentlemen* between the Narrator, a young man in the late-1970s investigating a union dispute that took place on the Hobart docks in the 1950s, and Leo Eyenon, a one-time industrial militant:

> At the door, he stops. ‘What did you say this was for?’
> ‘I’m writing a history.’
> ‘Whose version, yours or ours?’
> ‘A combination of both,’ I say ingenuously. ‘I’m here to be objective.’
> He laughs. ‘It’s not possible,’ he says. ‘Pick a side and stick to it.’

This scene establishes the approach to history that Lohrey’s novel presents and interrogates: the past is contested territory and the writing and construction of history is resolutely partisan not apolitical. The passage is more than a mere critique of naïve empiricism that claims to be free from ideology or ‘bias’, and goes beyond an attack on the notion that the ‘facts’ speak for themselves, or the notion that the task of the historian is as straightforward as to “tell it the way it really was”. Instead, it situates politics and class relations – rather crudely outlined by Eyenon in this passage – at the centre of history. (“‘Whose version, yours or ours?’”)

The irony embedded in this passage is directed towards the Narrator’s claim to neutrality and objectivity (his stated objective throughout the novel is to locate a ‘reliable witness’). The alternative position presented in the novel, however, is not a postmodern indeterminacy and radical scepticism that favours plurality, uncertainty and instability as tropes. Eyenon’s instruction (to “’pick a side and stick to it’”) could be (mis)read as a myopic, static or disengaged perspective. But in the context of the rest of the book his view emerges poised as both ‘unsophisticated’ and principled. The phrase also reveals an acknowledgement that the construction of the past is fundamentally bound up in the competing interests inherent in class relations, social forces and political commitments and that the writing of history is a discipline and practice that cannot avoid a complex web of intersecting, sometimes antithetical, cultures, sides and affiliations.

An exploration of representations of history in Lohrey’s writing must itself historicise. In this sense ‘representing’ is also about establishing a historical perspective, ‘speaking for’ history in a literary study of the two novels and following, in a necessarily
limited and specific fashion, Jameson’s maxim, “always historicise”³. This in turn involves unravelling more complex questions and precepts – such as historicising representations of history themselves in Lohrey’s work – and ultimately connecting this analysis with form and history in my own creative practice.

I utilise particular insights of Marxist literary criticism to historicise both the explicit representations of history in Lohrey’s work, and the form employed, while retaining scepticism towards simplistic and often mechanical conceptions of base-superstructure and any attempt to reduce literature directly to ideology. Chapter One provides a brief outline of both the complexities and limitations inherent in elements of the theoretical framework that has informed this exegesis.

The Morality of Gentlemen (the title references a pamphlet by exiled Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky) captures through fiction the idea that history is constructed out of oppositions and competing class interests in its exploration of the Hursey dispute on the Hobart docks in the 1950s.

As I go on to argue in Chapters Two and Three, it is my contention that Lohrey’s 1984 novel relays – through the conjoined yet irreducible elements of form and content – an approach to history that is resonant with dialectical or Marxist understandings, placing class relations at the centre of change, conflict and transformation and positing a historical understanding that is dynamic, contested, complex and contradictory yet also systematic, interconnected.

For indeed the conversation with the Narrator reveals a further structural irony and layer of self-reflexivity. The Narrator’s research methodology ostensibly depends on his ability to “eliminate point of view, to present a mirror not a prism”.⁴ However, the very form of Lohrey’s novel constitutes precisely the opposite: through multiple voices and narrative positions, it emphasises rupture and juxtaposition rather than unity and formal realism, and privileges conflicting points of view. In so doing Lohrey repudiates the theoretical precepts and characteristic strategies of Stalinist socialist realism as well as the formal aesthetics of ‘classic’ or ‘expressionist’ realism in the early bourgeois novel.⁵

“Pick a side and stick to it”? The interconnecting and overlapping voices in both The Morality of Gentlemen and The Reading Group belie this approach as a formal, if not a political, proposition. The Morality of Gentlemen is polyphonic, incorporating multiple narrators and shifting time frames that are interpolated by newspaper articles and newsreels. Employing strategies of dislocation and collision, Lohrey’s acknowledged
model is not a mirror to the world – the realist ‘reflection’ theory that partly underpinned socialist realism – but a prismatic montage drawn from Brecht’s theories of epic theatre (“if art reflects life”, Brecht wryly observed, “it does so with special mirrors”) and verfremdungseffekt, which is explored in Chapter Three. Lohrey has also spoken of the influence of American modernist John Dos Passos.) In Chapter Four I go on to historicise the effect of employing Brechtian devices, developed in the 1930s-50s for epic theatre in a novel produced and read within the particular cultural “structures of feeling” or ideologies of postmodernism and the economic and political landscape of the early 1980s. I also examine The Morality of Gentlemen as an “interrogative” text, following Catherine Belsey’s analysis of point of view in the novel.

The relationship between form, content, and political commitment operates quite differently in The Reading Group. Published in 1988, it relies on, yet transforms, conventions of twentieth-century dystopian fiction in the course of conveying what was ostensibly still in front of us: an Australia of the ‘near future.’ In Chapter Four it is submitted that this novel be considered an ‘incomplete dystopia’ and The Reading Group in relation to dystopian form is also explored in this chapter.

The novel is, amongst other things, an allegory about Australian society in the eighties, and an unmasking, indeed a condemnation, of Suvin’s ‘false’ or ‘fake utopia”. The text reveals the coopting power and real violence of liberal capitalism, an argument I pursue in Chapter Four. The work laments the failure of utopian and dissident movements in the late 1960s to achieve permanent radical change, and extrapolates from their subsequent implosion.

If The Morality of Gentlemen has an elegiac quality and an intimation of the persistence of history, The Reading Group’s dominant relation to history is amnesiac. The ugly present is with us. We do not know how it arrived – or, better, we do know the tendencies, forces and pressures from which it came but are not given any sense of how this future might be avoided.

For all its scattered allusions to some of the defining events of the sixties and seventies in the West (the Vietnam war, the moratorium marches, the campaign for equal pay), the novel is noticeably silent about recent history. While the oppressive government measures are implicitly depicted as the result of political pragmatism and the collapse of radicalism, there is a silence about any of the concrete events or tendencies that have produced such a desultory and degraded Australian society. The menacing
climate appears open to interpretation as either the inexorable result of the collapse of hope in the wake of Fraser’s election or an inevitable effect of the ruthlessness of social-democratic governments at times of global economic pressure and uncertainty (even crisis). Paradoxically, the novel exhibits a degree of historical specificity that positions it as a product of the 1980s, while history as a process of change, even recent history, remains almost (but not entirely) absent from the text, even in portrayals of personal memory or subjective recollection. In other words Lohrey presents a critique of the present via a portrait of the near future yet does so in such a fashion that the state of affairs she describes is vacant of a historical explanation for its existence, except by broad implication, so that the setting becomes an anagogical ‘future-present.’

I argue in Chapter Five that The Reading Group can be interpreted as both an intervention in the economic climate and hegemonic ideologies of the 1980s yet also, in quite a mediated and complex way, a product of – and influenced by – these very same forces.

The Reading Group does not reference the events leading up to the installation of the repressive regime or the haemorrhaging of the working class, which has already occurred when the text commences, which enhances the pessimistic tone that haunts the manuscript. This amnesia is reinforced by the lack of any real moments of meaningful resistance in the novel. In Chapter Five I consider history and memory in the novel then use Pierre Macherey’s theoretical framework to make the silences in the text “speak”.

History is mostly present as an echo of the abandoned practices of the past: the novel renders the erstwhile utopian aspirations of the characters futile in its recollection of just how thoroughly they have been abandoned, how utterly behind us the movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s truly are. Chapter Five also touches on the impact of historically specific textual allusions and quotations in the novel.

The Reading Group has a form that is disrupted, open rather than closed, and self-interrogating. While it also “changes sides” by cutting together distinct narrators, the fact that most of the characters are not imperilled by the regime and share the same ambivalent middle-class existence (Lohrey has happily expressed her view that “The Reading Group is not about characters, the characters are in a sense ciphers”), means it does not produce the same collision of discourses evident in The Morality of Gentlemen.
The novel alludes to, employs, and subverts conventions associated with late twentieth-century dystopian fiction. The novel is less individualistic than many dystopian works of social criticism, and yet in other ways potentially more pessimistic, its historical amnesia a fertile landscape for the flourishing of the logic of inevitability that has haunted twentieth-century anti-utopias of all kinds.

In Chapter Five I adopt Pierre Macherey’s adaptation of Althusser’s “symptomatic” reading to consider how the silences and omissions (not only of history) can speak to the historical conditions surrounding the novel. Macherey, writing in France the 1960s, was essentially a forerunner theorising what Jameson later termed ‘the political unconscious’.

This exegesis is focused on a series of central questions. How has Lohrey in her two very different novels of political commitment in the 1980s harnessed and adapted or reinvented form (strategies of structure, style and narrative) to reinforce or refract notions and understandings of history, historicity and historiography? Can form alone create or constitute the basis for politically committed, counter-hegemonic writing? What might Lohrey’s representations of history tell us about the economic, ideological and social forces at work in 1980s Australia? What might these cultural “structures of feeling” or dominant ideologies tell us about Lohrey’s representations of history?

“It’s a piece of Left political activism”, Lohrey wrote of *The Morality of Gentlemen*, describing her intentions to write “a form of contestatory narrative”, which “would answer back to…dominant narratives, answer back to power”. Lohrey has also deemed the book a “compensatory narrative, which showed that…the Left had been misrepresented.” She drafted the novel after studying Left aesthetics at Cambridge, influenced by reading Brecht, and David Caute’s writing on literature and commitment.

Lohrey has spoken of *The Reading Group* as a “meditation on the evolution of the ALP and to a lesser degree all pragmatic social democratic parties.” Her draft notes for this novel include extensive research into Gramscian theory, Althusser, post-structuralism, Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson. Regarding her intentions for the book, Lohrey stated:

The main question…had to do with what happened in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. In some way the inspiration of this book was Malcolm Fraser. Some of us were young at a time when there was this great Utopian vision…[Now] I think a kind of melancholy has overtaken us. The melancholy of pragmatism…in the current system there isn’t enough money to go around for everybody.
Of course novels are, as John McLaren reminds us, political as much by their
effects as their intention and I am outlining Lohrey’s attitude to her writing
predominantly to help illustrate her own intentions, rather than reinforcing what Terry
Eagleton has called “the customary bourgeois division of critical labour which assigns to
the ‘political’ category only such fictions as are explicitly (and usually radically) concerned
with politics”.15 Frederic Jameson reiterates this point in his *The Political Unconscious.* “The
convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and
those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely a symptom and
reinforcement of the reification and privatisation of contemporary life.”16

The connotations of ‘literature of commitment’ (*littérature engagée*) have developed
significantly from its theorisation in Sartre’s *What is Literature?* and while the phrase has
often been associated with social and socialist realist writing in Australian history, it
cannot be confined to these specific formal and political parameters17. Indeed Sartre’s
own philosophical and artistic position was far from that promulgated by the 1934
Congress of Soviet Writers and exported to Western Communist Parties around the
world. Writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Lohrey’s context, theoretically,
organisationally and historically, is far from that of Communist writers in the nineteen
thirties, forties and fifties. As Lohrey herself has observed, “the [Left] political novel has
not been a major project in Australian literature since the demise of the Communist
Party and the socialist realists and the Realist Writers Groups in the Communist Party” 18
(Chapter Four examines the relationship *The Morality of Gentlemen* has to those fictions
authored by writers in and around the Communist Party during the cultural promotion
and enforcement of Stalinist ‘socialist realist’ theory.) Yet Lohrey wanted her novel to
function as a political and social critique: “*The Morality of Gentlemen* keeps asking the
questions: ‘what is utopia’ and ‘how much social change can you make?’ Though it’s
clearly set in the 1950s, it still keeps asking questions about the present”.19 Concerning
*The Reading Group*, in an interview with the *Saturday Mercury*, Lohrey said: “If you write an
interrogative novel you want people to realise that these questions are ongoing and
immediate. You don’t want to create that sense of something finished and in the past.”20

Relationship with my own project

When I initially undertook my project, and during the early stages of its development, I
had ‘thought I might write a much more explicitly critical work of fiction about people
who felt alienated by, or were marginalised and excluded from, contemporary capitalism. This is what led my interest in Lohrey’s novels.

Early drafts of the novel displayed a much stronger feminist consciousness, interest in the social construction of gender, and affinity with stylistic characteristics of ‘grunge’ fiction in the 1990s. My characters were younger (as was I), the setting was entirely contemporary and the structure was episodic, largely plotless. The first sketches led to a plan to write about the relationship of two sisters who had survived a devastating childhood. I wrote in the first-person and created a deadpan cynical voice. But this rapidly dissolved as the narrator felt asphyxiating, the subject matter did not invite much narrative momentum, and the disengaged style promised to become tedious. Meanwhile the grittiness of the prose disguised an ethical problem – there was the risk of painting unemployment and addiction as exotic, anarchic experiences for middle class readers to goggle at, or to fetishise marginality rather than work to portray the light and shade of ordinary people who thought the world needed changing, or were exploited. I made Alice a schoolteacher and decided to write about political or industrial activity. But how?

During my research I had examined politically committed fiction from the Left broadly: from early utopian novels to the period of Australian ‘socialist-realism’ in the 1940s and ’50s, resurgent environmental, feminist and anti-war novels during the utopian revival of the nineteen-sixties and seventies as well as writing in the contemporary period. Alongside post-colonial and feminist analysis, I began to draw more closely on Marxist literary criticism.

A series of theoretical problems were raised as my focus crystallised. Was there, as Ian Syson argued, such a thing as ‘working-class writing’ in Australian literature? And if so, how did this proposition connect with the already diverse body of Marxist cultural theory? What relationship did literature have to ‘ideology’ or ‘hegemony’ and was there a non-mechanical, complex and dialectical hermeneutic available to explore this question?

This research began to open up the question of how novels of political commitment (which attempted to use the novel as an instrument of change) might be read. How could they be historicised and analysed as both interventions in a culture and products of it, challenging ideological norms yet steeped in them? Could form itself have a politics, play a progressive or revolutionary role within the development of genre and literary conventions or was this inseparable – in meaningful as well as practical terms –
from content? There was no chance this exegesis could answer all of these questions. I needed to consider what implications these issues had for myself as a writer.

At this stage Lohrey’s writing interested me because she had tried to theorise her own practice, her literary intervention, in *aesthetic* and *formal* terms. She had developed an argument about what a novel that critiqued or challenged society should be, not only in terms of content or focus, but also in terms of form. Lohrey argued that it was necessary for the Left political novel to destabilise point of view.22

Yet even as my interest in Lohrey’s first two published novels grew23 and I began to consider the specific relationship of form to content in her work, my own project was moving in another, unexpected direction, away from the novel I had imagined it might ultimately be.

I found that my portrait of a working-class family in a realist form (such were the early drafts of the novel) was drowning in difficulties of mood, plot and pace. Although I had begun to abandon some of the negativity and stasis of previous attempts and to settle on a plot, many scenes remained plagued by pessimism (though I wasn’t averse to a bleak portrayal, this felt static and lacked nuance). The proliferation of the dismal, the dreary and the hopeless inhibited any exploration of struggle. I gradually became concerned the work left itself open to a reading as a conservative portrait of a poor family that was its own worst enemy, that was unwilling to solve its own problems. I wondered if the realism of the novel form I had adopted invited a portrayal that was *prima facie* individualistic and psychological.

Stephen Knight, reviewing *The Reading Group*, outlines Williams’ work on the ‘Welsh Industrial Novel’, which raises eloquently the difficulty I encountered drawing lumpen or working-class characters. “[Williams] points out the difficulty of having working-class characters who are oppressed, cramped, disadvantaged and so on, but who also have to be the powerful, and persuasive, and credible voices of the novel’s politics.”24 Did my characters carry the “novel’s politics”? Did my novel even *have* a discernible politics?

Early drafts of the novel had been entirely restricted to Alice’s voice in the first-person (thus the current practice of seaming in ‘flashes’ from the forty-eight hours before Jeremy’s death in the third-person in alternate chapters was not employed) and predominantly placed in a contemporary setting in the present tense.
But my attempts at capturing resistance to the status quo, scenes of struggle, felt almost impossible to write and frequently failed as narratives. There seemed, at least as I saw it (not having by this stage considered the prospect of writing in either a more commercial mode or employing the devices of science fiction or magic realism, as my background had been, at least as prose writer, predominantly in realism) something implausible, or disingenuous about representing the power of collective action in the present global climate.

Whenever the critiques of economic rationalism and the privileging of profit over human need across the globe became more overt in the novel, these sections seemed ‘out of key’ with the narrative voice, having the tone of reportage or journalism and, on occasion, didactic commentary. Moreover, as the focus of the story began to emerge more clearly, it became apparent that while I hoped my novel would retain critical and progressive elements, the terrain of the work had shifted significantly.

The solution emerged from two casual asides already embedded in the prose, at first merely descriptive details I’d scribbled while on holiday: that Louise was scarred, and Alice proclaimed her brother had died. I fixed on the notion that Jeremy had died in a house-fire (helpfully explaining Louise’s burns too) and took up Christos Tsiolkas’s suggestion I write from Jeremy’s point of view. Finally I had the embryonic promise of a potential plot. Finding the importance of Jeremy’s death as an event of ongoing narrative significance in the present was the next complication.

Two narrative threads began to come together: the death of a young boy in a house-fire in the early-1990s, which was then interpolated into the contemporary narrative following his two sisters living in contemporary Australia, one facing the closure of the school where she works and engaged in a bleak romance, the other, an ex-drug addict obsessed with discovering how exactly her brother died by finding the mother who abandoned them in the wake of the fire. As this narrative began to provide a structural focus for my story, the relationship between my own work and the exegesis changed.

While the initial nexus between the creative project and the exegesis began to transform, other networks of connection emerged. Lohrey’s use of multiple narrators as a device in both The Reading Group and The Morality of Gentlemen was one I eventually employed in my own project, which is narrated by three characters (Jeremy, Alice and Louise) within two time frames. My own novel now had three distinct voices (conveyed
in the first, second and third person) and possessed a structural aesthetic of collision and fragmentation. These literary strategies operated quite differently in my project to how they were fashioned in *The Reading Group* and *The Morality of Gentlemen*, although my narrative framework was broadly modernist (arguably postmodernist).

For me the splintering of narrative voice arose out of immediate technical concerns. I was frustrated with the restrictive, sometimes claustrophobic, narrative parameters of first-person and intrigued by the possibilities of a dual narrative that would set two understandings of a single event against each other. The montage cuts between perspectives assisted with the sense of atomisation the novel engendered.

But if the use of multiple narrators continued to link my project to the exegesis, there remained important differences. My analysis of Lohrey’s work involved a historicizing of her writing under the *particular* conditions of production and aesthetics of the 1980s. And one of the most interesting and noticeable aspects of *The Morality of Gentleman* was its emphasis on *collective* action in the working class and organisations of political importance, such as the CPA, the WWF, the anti-Communist Party and so on, while my own work was limited to focusing on a small number of individuals from the same family.

However, the argument I developed regarding *The Reading Group* and *The Morality of Gentlemen* concerned representations of history, a thematic concern that had become central to my own work, *Enough*, both through the experiences of the protagonist Alice, as a high school history teacher, and via tropes of memory and forgetfulness, which meant that the exegetical component provided another context for my creative project.

While the more overtly critical and political emphasis in my work receded and the story itself transformed, my creative project retained a focus on the experience of work and incorporated, even if it did not explore in depth, elements of union struggle, industrial action, sexuality, and poverty.

The intention behind withholding, or failing to deliver, the conventional experiences of catharsis, epiphany or the recovery of a ‘healing truth’ from the characters of Alice and Louise, once they have found their long-absent mother and heard new information about Jeremy’s death, was to circumvent the traditional or expected *psychological* solution and explanation in favour of an (implicitly) societal and systemic understanding. The ending, in other words, aimed to rephrase and reposition the
question that had been driving the narrative (‘what happened to Jeremy’) rather than answer it.

Indeed it is in the collective sphere that Alice finds herself most optimistic, resisting the closure of her school through the public campaign. Her embryonic sexual relationship with Sarah, who knows Alice’s class background and her past, is also a (problematised and only fragile) source of reassurance and comfort that promises to circumvent some of the difficulties Alice has experienced on a personal level in heterosexual experiences with men, while more broadly challenging elements concerning the social construction of gender.

Any epiphany in the novel, if it occurs at all, arrives when Alice chooses to forgive her father as a result of recognising that he shares a bond of solidarity with her socio-economically disenfranchised students and other marginalised tenants in his building, or when Louise buries the information identifying her mother at Jeremy’s grave and speaks the ritual pig Latin to end the danger game.

I sought to explore questions in my writing including: What kinds of personal or psychological damage emerge from economic or social stigma? How do conditions of exploitation or marginalisation compound moments of tragedy? How do gender, and the experiences of ‘femininity’ shape views and values, especially when it comes to acts of power and acts of resistance?

The questions driving this critical study were not always identical with those arising in the creative project, nor did they always develop in tandem. Each raised new possibilities and new formulations, each encountered difficulties, each had false starts and unexpected directions. I return to representations of history and the effect of multiple narrators in my own novel in the conclusion to this exegesis.
Chapter One: “Some people think the future means the end of history; well, we haven’t run out of history yet” – theoretical frameworks for a literary analysis

Marxist Literary Criticism

This exegesis adopts a broadly materialist approach, informed by aspects of Marxist literary theory as explored in the work of Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams (and cultural materialism generally). The contributions to utopian studies of Fredric Jameson, Tom Moylan, and Raffaella Baccolini – a feminist scholar – have been invaluable to my arguments regarding The Reading Group, as has Pierre Macherey’s important contribution in his seminal work in France in the 1960s on Marxist structuralism, namely his insight that the presence of history can be found in the significant absences or silences of a text. Brecht’s ‘critical realism’ and his exploration of the estrangement effect, alongside the work of Catherine Belsey on the ‘interrogative text’ and Jameson’s argument regarding culture in late capitalism have provided aspects of the theory and methodology for my consideration of form in The Morality of Gentlemen.

I am speaking of Marxist literary criticism here not simply as “one more well-tilled field of enquiry for students to tramp” but an approach that is, as Raymond Williams asserted in the late-1970s, “active, developing, unfinished and persistently contentious”.

The need for such an eclectic approach becomes clearer when one considers, firstly, debates within Marxism itself (concerning the base/superstructure model, ideology and the practice of literary criticism) and, secondly, the relationship of Lohrey’s texts to Marxism.

Marxist literary criticism aims to analyse the complex and highly mediated, often contradictory, relationships texts have to particular cultures and ideologies, and to the economic relations and struggle of the class society of their origin and reception. Such an approach also encompasses how texts might change or challenge this culture, and how this changes over time. As Eagleton has noted, any reductive reading that treats literary works as unmediated expressions of ruling class ideas and power cannot explain why “so much literature actually challenges the ideological assumptions of its time”. Contemporary Marxist scholars, including Eagleton, Jameson and Moretti, may also attempt to chart the “conditions of possibility” of a literary work or movement; to theorise the evolution of
theory and its relationship to class and hegemony; to conceive of models to research literary history as Moretti does; and to situate literary works within a broader economic framework of the market and the publishing industry.⁵ (Although, as Eagleton suggests, “Marxism is not merely a sociology of literature, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully”.)⁶

This study of Lohrey’s work recognises the importance of paying attention to the particularity and specificity of the two novels as fictional productions, creative works of art, rather than attempting to reduce them mechanically to economic conditions or simplistic assertions about ruling class ideology or to subsume culture into class positions or relations. Importantly, this exegesis does not presume a deterministic base-superstructure model whereby the literary text is taken merely as an unmediated corollary of the “ultimately determining” economic organisation of society, nor does it wish to resuscitate or legitimate either Stalinist socialist realism or the crude ‘reflection theory’ of vulgar Marxism. As Eagleton argues, reflection theory “suggests a passive, mechanistic relationship between literature and society, as though the work, like a mirror or photographic plate, merely inertly registers what is happening ‘out there’.”⁷

Marxist literary criticism is not a homogenous or settled body of theory. More than thirty years ago, Williams noted the “highly variable and even alternative” positions held about literary theory within Marxism.⁸ Even a relatively cursory consideration of Marxism and literature reveals a series of debates: rebuttals of Marx’s and Lenin’s occasionally deterministic and simplistic comments on literary works, for example, or of the relationship of form to content. There have been complex discussions of the role of theory – and theorists – itself or the attitude Marxists might take towards ‘modernism’ in literature, a debate which, even as it was consistently overwhelmed by the crude Stalinism of ‘socialist realism’, was also partaken in by Lukács, Bloch and Brecht in unpublished polemics that grappled with the meaning of literary ‘realism’ and the function of art.⁹ There have been important reappraisals and new formulations about the nature of art and class struggle, such the Frankfurt school’s groundbreaking work on the special status of experimental, avant garde art, or Lukács’s notion of the capacity of “deep realism” and typification to reveal the truth of class society, or his contribution to genre studies.¹⁰

Debates persisted in the revisions and reformulations in the mid-to-late twentieth century about ‘base and superstructure’, the question of commitment, the meaning of
‘ideology’ and ‘hegemony’ or even ‘culture’ or the appropriate approach to take to mass (popular) culture, ‘high’ culture, and new technologies. In the arena of literature, these alternative and occasionally antithetical positions engendered criticism with some very different methodologies. In the last few decades, discussions of how to approach questions of genre, form and textual analysis (does, for instance, the text have an ‘unconscious’? How to characterise modernism? What is the ethical and formal distinction between science fiction and fantasy?), the relationship of Marxism to psychoanalytic, postcolonial and postmodernist theory, and to the practice of close reading have deepened, as have considerations of the broader and expanding realm of culture and new technologies (the internet, blogging, cinema, digital art and music, television).

I try in this literary analysis to employ a dialectical methodology that considers how literature can contest as well as be part of hegemonic practices; how Lohrey’s work might challenge as well as emerge from economic conditions or dominant practices; how culture itself can influence social relations (Jameson’s argument on the expansion of the ‘culture industry’ as a market under late capitalism is a pertinent example); and how individual novels connect with a history of forms and culture broadly.11 As Williams argues, “whatever else it may be, literature is the process and result of formal composition within the social and formal properties of language.”12

Base and Superstructure
Any current examination of literary production under capitalism would be forced to concede, as Eagleton has consistently argued, that literature belongs to both the so-called base and the so-called superstructure at once. Jameson reminds us that the relationship between the economic ‘base’ (often assumed to be the particular mode and relations of production at any given time, the economy) and the ‘superstructure’ (defined variously by both Marx and Engels as denoting anything from the legal and political system only, to institutions of the state such as the education system, the media; or even extended to the realm of ‘culture’ – itself a changing term perhaps encompassing religion, philosophy, the arts, practices of ‘everyday life’ and cultural institutions) has always been contested and complex within Marxist theory.13 Jameson, writing on Adorno, asserts: “very serious qualms and reservations about this [the notion of base and superstructure as distinct] ranging all the way to the most drastic proposals for its total removal, are also a recurrent
part of the Marxist tradition, virtually from Engels himself onwards.”

Jameson foregrounds these debates while noting that the base-superstructure distinction: “has often been thought of as one of the essential working principles of the Marxist tradition”.

Or, as Williams puts it: “In the transition from Marx to Marxism, and in the development of mainstream Marxism itself, the proposition of the determining base and the determined superstructure has commonly been held to be the key to Marxist cultural analysis.” Yet, in his Marxism and Literature, Williams finds the formulation encourages an ongoing abstraction, by cultural theorists and others, of the base-superstructure model. “The usual consequence of the base-superstructure formula, with its specialized and limited interpretations of productive forces and of the process of determination, is a description – even at times a theory – of art and thought as reflection.”

As Williams correctly notes, such an approach remained unable to capture the interrelationships and multiple factors at work in producing and receiving art, and particularly literature as a social activity and practice. Hence his warning against the “abstraction” of a base-superstructure model: “it is ironic to remember that the force of Marx’s original criticism had been mainly directed against the separation of ‘areas’ of thought and activity”.

Myriad attempts to crystallise the relationship between base and superstructure, whether through notions of “mediation”, “correspondence”, metaphors concerning “a house and its foundations” or assumptions that the superstructure “expressed” the base right up until Adorno’s “negative dialectics” did not resolve the methodological and analytical weaknesses.

Althusserian analysis, recently repopularised in Jameson’s The Political Unconscious revised the question of base, superstructure and determination by developing the notion of “structural causality” and “relative autonomy”.

The great many problems raised by the application of base and superstructure cannot be resolved or re-theorised here and I do not pretend to offer a new understanding. While I examine the effect of economic and social forces and disputes as a necessary context for analysing Lohrey’s work, I prefer those multi-faceted and dialectical ways of connecting (and seeing in their wholeness and entirety) consciousness, art and relations of production. Throughout this exegesis I rely on the notion of “structures of feeling” defined by Raymond Williams, and Gramsci’s theory of “hegemony”. 

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Instead of offering yet another examination of Marx’s writing on the topic, I adopt Jameson’s suggestion of viewing base and superstructure “not as a full-fledged theory in its own right but rather as the name for a problem whose solution is always a unique and ad hoc invention”.

**Ideology**

The question of the superstructure invariably raises issues surrounding the meaning of ‘ideology’, which appears, like the tail of a kite, in its wake. As Raymond Williams observed, Marx used the term ideology in at least three different, if overlapping, senses. Thus Williams writes: “there can be no question of establishing, except in polemics, a single correct ‘Marxist’ definition of ideology”.

Marx used the term ‘ideology’ (and the use of the term predates Marxism) to denote a series of different, sometimes mutually exclusive meanings in different contexts and this has led to an ongoing confusion and polarisation within the Marxist tradition about how to understand the phenomenon and the term. Considering the relationship consciousness had to the “actual life process” Marx spoke of ideology in the metaphor of a “camera obscura” that had the effect of rendering reality in an inverted or distorted way. “Ideology”, Engels wrote, “is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker, consciously indeed, but with a false consciousness”.

Eagleton supplies one common understanding of the term: “the function of ideology…is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class”. In this reading, literature is “an element in that complex structure of social perception that ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the other is either seen by most members of society as natural, or not seen at all”. However, Eagleton does not characterise this as an unmediated, entire or uncontested process. “Ideology is never a simple reflection of a ruling class’s ideas; on the contrary, it is always a complex phenomenon, which may incorporate conflicting, even contradictory, views of the world”.

However, literary critics have also used the term far more neutrally (pertaining to motifs or ideas, organising principles), more pluralistically (speaking of ideologies, ascendant and residual, new and old) and more porously (to denote the construction of ideas, consciousness and understanding of the world more generally). This is the definition Eagleton himself provides elsewhere. Writing in the late nineteen-seventies,
Eagleton expands on his definition of ideology, perceiving it as less to do with the production of ideology by the ruling class as pertaining to the perceptions and experiences of all classes in society, their subjective, if not natural, way of seeing the world: “The ideas, values and feelings by which men [sic] experience their societies at various times” (the fact he used the male pronoun even in the late ’70s is a rather bleak indication of the power of gendered ideology operating even on proponents of social change).30 The term is close to being a corollary of or synonym for the old usage of ‘culture’.31 And even in his early, structuralist-oriented work such as Criticism and Ideology, Eagleton recognised multiple not single ideologies.32 Other critics have described ideology in a more loose fashion to suggest “the world-view or collective attitudes of a class or social group”.33

The most significant revision to the term perhaps occurred with Althusser. His pessimistic analysis of institutional “ideological state apparatuses”, and definition of ideology in his first thesis is now very well known.34 Ideology represents the “imaginary” relationship of individuals to “their real conditions of existence”.35 Althusser’s examination of “interpellation” and the creation of the subject is one of many attempts to revisit the practice, workings and meaning of ideology. This line of reasoning suggests ideology is experienced as a set of material practices, or rituals, through institutions such as the church, schooling system, and so on.36

While this understanding is in some sense less reductive and mechanical than early Marxist criticism, as Thompson notes Althusser concedes very little agency to collective action and change (subjects are deemed the ‘supports’ of historical processes). Ideology, in Althusser’s analysis, seems omnipresent and irresistible so agency seems impossible; ideology permeates almost every corner of class society, and even an individual’s subjectivity is inscribed by it. “It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he [sic] is acted by the following system.”37

Marx’s fleeting comments on art and literature suffer, according to Raymond Williams, by a lack of recognition that “consciousness and its products are always, though in variable forms, parts of the material social process itself”.38 Likewise, without doubting the insights Althusser has offered, I suggest his unmodified perspective is too totalising and obliterating of difference and opposition.

I do retain the term ideology in this exegesis, despite how problematic it has become – Jameson calls it “that shop-worn chestnut” – but usually reserve it for when I
am speaking of the conscious promulgation of the dominant or ruling ideas of a period, rather than the practices or experiences of life in class society or assumptions about cultural form and expression. My general methodology follows Gramsci’s understanding of the function of hegemony as well as Williams’ interest in the “human material social processes”, taking up the notion that “thinking and imagining are from the beginning social processes”.

I want to retrieve the “positive sense” of the utopian role of culture, where, as Eagleton concedes, “we have come to recognise culture in the broader sense as an arena in which the discarded and dispossessed can explore shared meanings and affirm a common identity…as social life fell increasingly under the rule of utility, culture was on hand to remind that there were things which had value but no price”.

_Literature, Culture and Theory_

Eagleton argues that “English Marxist criticism seems to subscribe simultaneously to a mechanistic view of art as the passive ‘reflex of the economic base’ and to a romantic belief in art as projecting an ideal world and stirring men [sic] to new values”. While cruder practitioners of Marxism treated art as the unmediated reflection or expression of economic relations, disputes about the relationship of literature and culture to society are an ongoing and important part of the legacy Marxism has left to criticism.

In the 1960s and 1970s structuralism had a tremendous influence on Marxist attitudes to culture (building on both Russian formalism and advances in linguistics). Althusserian analysis proceeded on the basis that a text was a “certain _production_” of ideology. Althusser himself argued that art ought not to be simply ranked as an ideology, but rather gives “us a view” of ideology because of its ability to “retreat” from it. “Art makes us see, in a distanced way, the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes”.

Pierre Macherey took this further by advancing the concept that ideology was in fact the “raw material” with which the author (as producer) worked and that the incoherence of multiple ideologies brought together in the text demonstrated the gaps and fissures in ideology, precisely because of the _formal_ properties of literature. It is the ‘unconscious’ of the text that reveals its relationship to history. “The work does not so much reflect ideology as stage or produce it.”
While Goldmann developed the notion of “homologies” between economic relations and literature, the Frankfurt school theorised “mediation” and avant guard literature. Elsewhere, Ernst Fischer argued in *Art Against Ideology* that authentic art is irreducible to the ideological norms of its conditions of production.

In the late-1970s Williams argued forcefully, in his appraisal of Marxist literary criticism, that the “attempted assimilation of ideology to literature” ultimately “was a disastrous failure” and instead contributed his understanding of dominant, residual and emergent culture in process, interlocking, connected, and the usefulness of hegemony and “structures of feeling”.

Eagleton’s more recent work has functioned to recover the revolutionary capacity of texts by ‘reading against the grain’ but his interest has increasingly moved towards philosophical and theological questions, whereas Jameson’s abiding concerns remain with the “repression of history” in the text, the dialectic of utopia and postmodernism as the cultural expression of ‘multinational capitalism’.

In other words, it is worth highlighting just what a complex and contradictory body of theory Marxist criticism truly is. While I am only employing particular aspects of this huge field, there is a persistent and underlying set of crucial questions, not all of which have by now been answered. While this is not an argument that I have scope to explore, neither the attempt to create a ‘scientific’ method for literary analysis offered by structuralism (which I find too abstract, closed and universalising, unable to respond to the particular text, its manifest content and form, or the particular moment, and likewise unable to account for literary texts as *social* practices and works of language, and giving insufficient attention to agency and reader reception) nor the Vulgar Marxism that simply saw art as another ‘expression’ or ‘reflection’ of the realm of production, have, in my view, been entirely satisfactory or sufficient as genuine dialectical methods. Nor, conversely, do I wish to reduce the complexity and contradiction of social relations, consciousness and literature to an expanded and all-consuming realm of ‘culture’ devoid of a class analysis.

Lohrey’s novels also present, even foreground, a certain problematic for Marxist literary criticism: how should we read fictional works of political commitment that attempt to intervene in the dominant ideology? Is the task of a Marxist literary critic then to insist nonetheless on the fiction’s connection to it, to treat the politically committed text like any other? Eagleton, in the opposite spirit, read Benjamin in a way that
recovered the revolutionary potential of his contribution.\textsuperscript{50} Ought such texts be – counter-intuitively – read ‘against the grain’ for their relationship with the very ideologies they seek to contest, cutting the text free from the author’s intentions and positions? (If so, wouldn’t this then accept the impossibility of agency and the power to change consciousness in the realm of ideology?) Or, can they be taken at ‘face value’ to denote the subversive or radical precepts they seek to explore?

To some extent, the ongoing importance of this question, and its implications for the question of ideology, are revealed in the diverging paths taken by Tom Moylan and Fredric Jameson in their treatment of utopia and dystopia (explored in Chapter Four) where Moylan examines closely the progressive prospects for the ‘critical dystopia’ while Jameson insists on the utopian text’s incapacity to utterly break with the limits of the present, and reads utopian ‘blueprints’ for a harmonious and rewarding society negatively so that they become expressions of our “inability to imagine the future”.\textsuperscript{51}

On a broader level, authorial commitment aside, within the realm of the publishing industry, review culture and field of reception, the question is raised in another way. As Jameson has suggested, in his reading of Marcuse and utopia, “The problem, however, is the same: can culture be political, which is to say critical, or even subversive, or is it necessarily reappropriated and cooped by the social system of which it is part?”\textsuperscript{52}

\textit{Lohrey, Commitment and Creative Practice}

Marxist theory can be both challenging and problematic. Yet Lohrey’s own reliance, as a novelist, on the aesthetic debates of the 1930s, her use of Brechtian devices for \textit{The Morality of Gentlemen} and reading of Bloch and Jameson for \textit{The Reading Group} has made drawing on elements of Marxist literary criticism both pertinent and productive even if this endeavour is less than straightforward and the insights and methodologies it has to offer partial.

Using elements of Marxist criticism to enrich a consideration of amnesiac and dialectical representations of history in Lohrey’s first two novels is a delicate, multifaceted process. Lohrey used Brecht’s contributions to Marxist literary theory on aesthetics to provide the basis for some of the devices in \textit{The Morality of Gentlemen}. She theorised her own practice partly from the debates about modernism and realism between Brecht, Lukács and Bloch, rejecting the prescriptions of Australian socialist
realism. Of course, producing a piece of writing that adapts Brechtian theatrical devices is not the same thing as analysing the completed literary work. Macherey reminds us that “the work that the author wrote is not precisely the work that is explicated by the critic”.

Both novels invite a revisiting and consideration of debates within Marxism, even as Marxism is called upon to then historicise Lohrey’s project (adopting devices theorised by Brecht for the theatre to the novel form at the end of the 1970s, alongside strategies of ‘documentary realism’; reformulating the dystopian near-future novel in the grim times of the eighties).

In Lohrey’s work I choose to see her representations of history historically; in other words, I connect her explicit textual constructions of history to history. In The Reading Group, I consider, following Macherey, what is absent from the text in terms of history and historicity, and I focus my discussion of dialectical and class-based history in The Morality of Gentlemen through the prism of precepts of hegemony and structures of feeling.

This examination of representations of history is not merely one of content: I go on to consider the effect of devices such as shifting point of view, interruption, an interlocutor, headings and self-reflexivity; and I consider Lohrey’s amnesiac sensibility in The Reading Group in terms of the formal properties of the twentieth-century dystopian and anti-utopian genres. For, as Eagleton observes, a genuinely Marxist criticism:

[M]eans a sensitive attention to [a text’s] form, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping these forms, styles and meanings as products of a particular history.

Concretely my consideration of the two novels involves examining the effect – in The Morality of Gentlemen – of taking an approach and devices developed by playwright Bertolt Brecht in the 1930s-1950s as an attempt to produce a scientific dialectical theatre that would show “art [as] a form of production not a mystery” and applying them to the novel in the different political, artistic and economic climate of the early 1980s, to create an aesthetic for politically committed fiction.

In The Reading Group this means examining the literary work in the context of theories of dystopian form and arguing that the partial historical amnesia the text exhibits is connected to the climate of the 1980s: the sense of defeat for the Left, the rise of free market liberalism and the gutting of the welfare state, the rise of postmodernism. The novel was drafted in an era, as Jameson has argued, “marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have
been replaced by a sense of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class, the ‘crisis’ of Leninism, social democracy or the welfare state).”

There are some final qualifications that need to be outlined before proceeding with the substantive argument. Marx’s and Engels’ own writing on literature never approached a rigorous theory and to some extent, as Williams has suggested, both men absorbed and occasionally reproduced dominant assumptions about literary aesthetics, the canon and so on. Terry Eagleton acknowledges that Marx’s and Engels’ “comments on art and literature are scattered and fragmentary: glancing allusions rather than developed positions”. Macherey states that “they never developed a method” and notes they “showed a continuous interest in literary and artistic production, but although there are many allusions and examples in their work, neither of them devoted any extended study to the problems of art”.

Secondly, feminist scholars, queer theorists, and post-colonial literary critics have rightly drawn attention to the limitations and blindspots of aspects of Marxist theory. This reminds us that Marxist approaches to culture, like everything else, are themselves the product of particular historical moments and conditions and limitations. Finally, I do not see Marxist literary criticism as an unchanging or self-contained set of principles. Fruitful engagements with feminist criticism, postcolonial studies, post-structuralism (the work of Foucault on discourse, power, the body, and institutions in particular) and psychoanalysis have also posed questions anew and invited a nuanced rather than reductive reading of the relationship between class relations and culture, the dominant culture and challenges to it, ideology and class struggle.

This exegesis merely tries to synthesise the contributions of a number of Marxist theorists in order to find a sufficiently subtle and ‘open’ methodology for examining these particular works of fiction, which are politically committed and ‘contestatory’. Such a synthesis is difficult. I am not proffering a new methodology or a complete one, so much as selecting those elements of, and developments in, Marxist literary criticism that provide useful insights and appropriate concepts for analysing Lohrey’s novels.
Chapter Two: “History must count for something or their lives were meaningless” Or “what side are you on?” – Representations of history in *The Morality of Gentlemen*

After the introduction of a list of characters, *The Morality of Gentlemen* opens with a brief episode presenting the ‘character’ of Robert Menzies through an industrial metaphor:

MASTER OF CEREMONIES

Robert Menzies is revived. The flight from the capital had been tiring but he is enlivened now. All afternoon he has primed his wit on the locals. The wisecracks have zipped and sparked in and out of the foundries and along the assembly lines, defying heat, noise and sulphurous odours. Badinage.¹

By beginning the story with a real figure (and a Prime Minister and infamous Cold War warrior at that) who is operating in a specific historical period, and evoking the language and imagery of mass industrial production, even a short snippet such as this anticipates the abiding concerns of the novel and suggests its reach. The present tense of this strand of the novel’s narrative imbues the scene with an immediacy. The section heading (“Master of Ceremonies”) mediates the story it precedes. While echoing newspaper headlines and headings, or perhaps the chapter titles of novels in the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, the device also threatens to dispel seamless readings by mocking the rendering Menzies as the grand designer of a staged performance, or circus, the host of the events to come. Placing this at the absolute foremost of the book might allow an inference that Sir Robert is not merely the MC of his own forthcoming speech to the converted but, in an unexpected manoeuvre, both the novel and the Cold War battles it depicts.²

The subsequent rapid switch in perspective from a third-person omniscient narration, at times closely aligned with Menzies’ mindset (“the PM doesn’t like to discuss Business before the port”), to a view from ‘outside’, from the point of view of militants Barnes and Quinn who attend the Town Hall address, has the cinematic quality, in suddenness and contrast, of a ‘jumpcut’ or montage in film.³

This scene in the Town Hall, only a few pages into the novel is, although this does not become apparent until later, a ‘flashforward’ to a period after the ‘Moseley’ dispute is already history, in the past.

There are several clues to the timing of the episode that can only be identified as significant in retrospect as the novel develops: the seemingly inexplicable aggression
shown by Barnes and Quinn towards the wife of Bertie Baker, and Tommy Quinn’s elliptical memories of Rachel Conlan, as well as the incidental aside about the Communist Party’s overdue “second thoughts” on Stalin.⁴

The reference to foundries in the opening paragraph might even be an oblique tie-in with Menzies’ “carefree ramble” mingling amongst the zinc and hops workers reported in a mock news report that appears much later in the novel, an occasion that might chronologically precede the Town Hall event.⁵ However, the slippages of time and the regular use of present tense make it impossible to establish with any certainty, given Menzies’ fleeting and sporadic appearances in the novel. (Events are sometimes ‘out of time’ in the text; the effect of this is examined in Chapter Three.)

Class, a backdrop of real historical events, abrupt shifts in point of view, montage, a panoramic dialectical chronotope alongside more conventionally eighteenth-century plot structures of “life by time”: such are the formal and thematic concerns revealed by the opening pages of the text.⁶

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of the novel’s opening, I consider it important to acknowledge that the pivotal conflict in The Morality of Gentlemen quite literally belongs to, comes from, history (and not just in the sense that every piece of art or fiction ultimately does). The novel dramatises the lived experiences of dock-workers in Hobart alongside representations of the impervious ‘public record’ of myriad news articles and letters to the editor, embedded in the text, themselves permeated with allusions to the published histories and court transcripts on which Lohrey draws.⁷ The worldview of the 1950s that The Morality of Gentlemen dramatises cuts against those other representations in the post-modern period which, as Fredric Jameson has argued, seem to view the 1950s, at least for American readers and audiences, as “the privileged lost object of desire”: the cultural representations and recurring images of (white) innocence, peace, security, family and the unthreatening clean-cut ‘rebellion’ of Rock n Roll and ‘parking’.⁸ The novel aims to do more than “represent our ideas and stereotypes about [the] past” — although it does do this by both undercutting and implicitly interrogating them.⁹

For The Morality of Gentlemen is a fictionalised revisiting of the struggle between the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) and the Hurseys (part of the burgeoning Democratic Labour Party founded by Santamaria and called, in the novel, the Anti-Communist Party), who became swept up in the splintering conservative Catholic
‘Movement’. The novel is based on the industrial action and protracted court proceedings between 1956 and 1958-9, where a father and son (Lohrey’s characters are named “Moseley”) refused to pay the Waterside Workers’ Federation’s political levy to the Australian Labour Party, and the DLP wanted to undermine the leadership of the Communist Party and the Left of the Labor party in the unions. For Anne Diamond, the Cold War is the “larger political backdrop” to the novel, invoked in Lohrey’s work by “the narrative strategies of silence”.¹⁰ In an interview I conducted with Amanda Lohrey in 2004 she said: “I did have a political agenda, which was that the whole version of this history was Right-wing and this was in response to it.”¹¹ The Morality of Gentlemen was inspired by Lohrey’s father’s stories of life on the wharves and informed by her study of Left aesthetics at Cambridge.

The novel appeals to multiple heterogenous forms of history: the official records of history books and court documents, the hegemonic power of the mass media, memory, class or collective memory, as well as the vantage point of hindsight for those who, like the Narrator, know how the world has since developed. The reader’s own preconceptions or assumptions about the case or this period in Australian history then intersect with a layered series of representations, a kind of palimpsest where snippets and phrases of published articles and comments are embedded in a novel that also contests them or reveals their prejudices, their interests and their limits.

Returning to an examination of the beginning of the novel, can illuminate the contention that the work portrays the writing, remembering and making of history as a complex and contested site or process, and that it formally and structurally privileges tensions and contradictions. The Morality of Gentlemen situates class relations at the centre of the 1950s. The novel starts – like some contemporary fantasy books, genealogical “family sagas”, play scripts, or innumerable Victorian novels – with a list of characters, but here they are grouped, not according to the ‘natural’ ties of biology, marriage and property that ‘family listings’ connote, or by occupation, but according to political affiliations, loyalties and memberships. There are unionists, Communist Party activists, anti-Communist party activists and multifarious ‘others’. Menzies doesn’t even make the grade. In Chapter Three, I will assess Anne Diamond’s assertion that the character list forms part of the Brechtian matrix of the book. Lohrey has said it was included simply to avoid confusion given the huge array of characters in the novel.¹² Interestingly, from the perspective of the construction and performance of gender, and the position of women
as subjects in history, most of the women, even when they are political activists in their own right, are classed merely as “others” (an ironic nod to De Beauvoir?) and listed simply as, for instance, “wife of Tommy Quinn” or “wife of Jack Delaney”.13

Immediately following this, Menzies’ dinner party – a seemingly rather insignificant social gathering at the Athenaeum that has the appearance of capturing merely the daily comings and goings of men with lives of wealth and power through descriptive detail – in fact contains details of class privilege and common interests that are easy to ‘read past’ at first glance. But the presence here of both the editor of the Courier – it becomes clear with closer analysis of the articles excerpted and incidents recounted that there are moments where the Courier is the name Lohrey has given to the reformulated pieces of coverage provided by the Daily Telegraph newspaper – and the “director of a consortium of shipping companies” – provides an implicit class analysis that validates the union’s later (but chronologically earlier!) presumptions that the newspaper would not give their side fair coverage and that the interests of working-class people are in fundamental conflict with those of big business.14 This triumvirate of the major newspaper director, the Prime Minister and the wealthy owner of the companies thus form part of the “agreeable circle of select gentlemen” at dinner.15

A passage embedding a speech delivered to the Australian public by Menzies in the late 1940s (the radio broadcast from which it has been taken is slightly edited and embroidered by Lohrey) strings a bridge from the novel back to materialism and lived history itself. Here the conservative government reinforces class divisions by attempting to deny them, in a polemic that illustrates Rick Kuhn’s claim that “capitalism is the first class system in history that pretends not to be one”.16 To quote Menzies from the novel (from “quite recently” the speech is rendered verbatim):

‘As I entered the enchanting hall this evening, I was greeted by a young man carrying a rather scruffy placard. It said: MENZIES IS A TOOL OF BIG BUSINESS. Now I welcome the suggestion, put to me by my young friend, that I might speak to you tonight on the subject of so-called big business, for that is exactly what I intend to do…Quite recently a bishop wrote a letter to a great daily newspaper. His theme was the importance of doing justice to the workers. His belief, apparently, was that the workers are those who work with their hands. He sought to divide the people of Australia into classes. He was obviously suffering from what for years has seemed to me to be our greatest political disease, the disease of thinking that the community is divided into the rich and the relatively idle, and the laborious poor; and that every social and political controversy can be resolved into the question: what side are you on?’17

The proselytizing – witnessed now from the perspective of the militants – continues, only
for the speech to be undermined or underscored (depending on your point of view) by working-class Barnes, who yells out from the crowd. The centrality and the complexity of class relations – and the elusive, seductive, almost-invisible power of the dominant ideology at work, of hegemony – are therefore the crux of the work’s link to history from its opening pages. Despite the invidious and virulent anti-Communism of the period, for example, the fact Menzies even has to, in the novel, argue against the notion of any existing class system in Australian society, demonstrates the different cultural and political “structures of feeling” of the era Lohrey is portraying.

There are no dates supplied in the novel, except for the Narrator’s mention of the dispute’s occurring in the fifties; the timing can only be inferred, enhancing the dialectical interaction, the doubling or twinning, of the present and the past: this is no self-consciously or generically “historical” novel such as those analysed by Lukács and which waned towards the end of the nineteenth century just as science fiction emerged as a genre in its own right.

The dismissive reframing of the final question in the speech (“what side are you on?”) brings up a refrain about taking sides that recurs in the novel – anticipating Jaz’s final words, toward the very end of the book (in an unspecified narrating instance reflecting on events circa 1961) after Stalin’s body is removed from the Kremlin: “Now, I said, Now, show us how good you are. Whose side are you on, Stalin or Khrushchev? Stalin or Khrushchev, I said. Who do you support?"18

Indeed, running through the entire novel is an implicit critique of Stalinism, which nonetheless becomes a negative symbol for the missing utopian impulse regarding the possibility of real systemic social change. As we learn in an opening chapter, Alec Plunkett, for example, in an unlikely scenario, feels confident quoting Trotsky to leading CPA bureaucrats since “they never read him…they’ll never know the difference” while Travers, notorious in the press first as a valiant hero and then as the local embodiment of the red menace, apparently doesn’t believe in strikes and lectures members about the need for moderate ‘united front’ tactics.19 Meanwhile it is history and memory that divide Eyenon both from his nephew and the Communist Party. Both militants on the dock and related by marriage, Eyenon and Quinn no longer speak because of a decade-old dispute concerning the Communist Party’s withdrawal of support for the 1947 waterside workers’ strike.
This closing section (titled JAZ: A FINAL WORD) is set temporally after the opening sequence, closer perhaps to the narrator’s present than the 1950s when the dispute took place. Jaz is recollecting an earlier period. We learn from him that Quinn has left the CPA (“No, not over Conlan’s Missus”) and now “puts the moderate line”. 20 “Once they give up the idea of revolution, mate” Jaz assures either us or the Narrator, or both, in a moment of wry recognition of the sudden reversals and accommodations politics can bring about, especially, or so it seems, during the long march out of the Stalinised reformist western communist organizations, “they’re just like the rest of us”. 21

However, although much of the pivotal Cold War context is referred to in the novel – such as the various attempts to ban the Communist Party, the leaking of Khrushchev’s speech, a response to which seeps through rather belatedly (the organisation addressing the ripples long after the stone has been cast), the anti-Communist thrust of Menzies and the press, and the Brisbane line – the convulsions that emanated throughout Western communist parties after the crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 by Soviet troops, is never mentioned. It is the highly localised decisions not the repression in Eastern Europe that is conveyed as affecting attitudes towards the CP amongst the militants and party members. 22

Raymond Williams, amongst many other literary scholars, has vaunted the theoretical contribution of Gramscian hegemony as capable of capturing a sense of the production and absorption of a “lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting”. 23 Such an analysis, in Williams’ view, recognises that the hegemonic system can not only accommodate, but in fact needs, oppositional and resistant cultures, and that hegemony is never total or uniform but always has elements of dominant, residual and emergent cultures and institutions. 24

The effect, upon the Narrator, of his own family background, class relations and political affiliations is conveyed with wit and humour in the opening sequence of the novel, revealing the effect of the dominant or hegemonic ideas and practices, the “practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living – not only of political and economic activity…but of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships”. 25 Set against or amongst the newspaper headlines and letters to the editor in the novel, which are hostile to the union and, perhaps more significantly, the actions of the Communist Party, the Narrator’s memories exhibit the trickling down of the ideas promulgated in the mainstream press regarding the dispute. (The fact that his
father’s hostile reaction occurs as he reads about it in the press – what Althusser would
have called an ideological state apparatus, Marx part of the superstructure and which in
Gramscian terms forms part of civil society – can surely be no coincidence, especially as
the key phrases he uses echo letters to the editor and anti-Communist speeches
elsewhere in the novel.)

It is precisely when the Narrator attempts to reassure us that he has no position
on events that his position becomes most clear, his demurring least convincing. It is one
of Lohrey’s strengths in The Morality of Gentlemen that she represents political
commitment, struggle and class experiences as at once historically specific, collective,
material and contested but also intensely particular, personal and felt. The Narrator’s
association of pejorative anti-Communist terms with “burnt chops and soggy toast” (see
below) serves to demonstrate the capacity of hegemony to operate in a fashion that is “in
some important respects self-generating” and that “the true condition of hegemony is
effectively self-identification with the hegemonic forms”.26 The section below also illustrates
how this process is never complete, entire or unmediated but mixed and filtered, unstable
and in motion. In one of the few moments where the Narrator allows a personal or
confessional tone, he reflects on his own associations with the Moseley dispute:

Reading his morning paper provoked my father to such fervours of indignation over the breakfast
table that even now the words ‘Muscovite hoodlum’ and ‘union scum’ call to mind an image of
burnt chops and soggy toast. The words ‘rights of the underdog’ have also retained an early
morning resonance for me. They were used often, and not lightly, by my mother who sent a ten
shilling postal order to the wife and mother of the individuals in question...Don't get me wrong.
My parents are not conservative people. My father has almost always voted Labour and probably
always will. Furthermore he was, as a young man, a member of the Party and not without some
personal sacrifice...Still, in the matter of strikes and what is generally termed 'unrest', my father,
as he would be the first to tell you, is not a red-raggar. He's a reasonable man but believes above
all in the freedom of the individual. As I do. I am not one of those restless offspring of the
paranoid working class, eternally overwhelmed by the harshness of its politics and the
abrasiveness of their fathers.
I don’t wish to go on for too long on this subject, merely to establish my bona fides as
an impartial investigator of events.27

The Narrator’s claim to uphold modern capitalism’s fetish of the “freedom of the
individual” is here worn like protective armour or a badge of liberal pride (and
juxtaposed with the primarily collective structures of feeling and class values of the
WWF). His ideological views are expressed in the context of a whole matrix of historical
and occupational identifications and intersections that simultaneously attest to this belief
and undermine its explanatory power.

The Narrator’s search for a “reliable witness” shows how the past, as Anne
Diamond has perceptively suggested, “is self-consciously presented as under
construction” creating a fictional splitting, perennial revision. The Narrator’s investigation perpetually undermines the confident fictional premise, the suspension of disbelief invited by the story we are reading. Anne Diamond has described this duality as “the double-take in narrative form” whereby “it is precisely that moment of revision, the surprise of the second glance” that “confounds the sometimes one-eyed vision of so-called official history”.

*The Morality of Gentlemen* is panoramic in scope and episodic, with a large cast of characters and perspectives. There are continual shifts in point of view, time, and place. Even so, at least three major distinct narrative strands emerge.

There are the present-tense musings of the unnamed male Narrator, writing in the late 1970s (or so we can deduce from scattered clues in the novel), who is searching for “typical” testimonials regarding the ‘Moseley’ case. There is the third-person present tense voice giving an account of the dispute, cutting rapidly from place to place, one moment to the next, from one perspective to its opposite, omniscience to vocalisation. Then there are brief flashes of Jaz’s recollections, short interludes scattered through other perspectives that slide from present to past tense.

Interspersed between are descriptions of newsreels, brief biographies of participants in the dispute, letters to the editor and news articles (some of the headlines or content similar to actual material published in the *Hobart Mercury* and *Daily Telegraph* during the dispute). History is thus presented in the novel as behind us, and in the making, always happening.

The Narrator in *The Morality of Gentlemen* is predominantly an ironic figure with his rather naïve empirical emphasis on the values of positivism and objectivity and an almost scientific fascination with classification and categorisation. His significance as a Brechtian device is suggested in the following chapter. As a link both to the unavoidability, rather than erasure, of the ‘now’, the [then] present, and to the construction and writing of history itself, his role in the narrative on the one hand is similar to that of a detective figure or documentary film-maker placing together the pieces of a puzzle, a man who tracks down and interviews the surviving waterside workers; while, on the other, he is intruding upon and refracting the more traditionally “narrative” sections of the novel to engage the reader’s critical cognition.

Not much is canvassed regarding the period he is living in. His own position at the end of a radical decade in Australian history does not make itself felt, either by
confession, implication or incidental description, nor does the reader learn much about
the project he is undertaking (some reviewers presume he is a young academic but the
text does not entirely explain his endeavour; those interviewed refer to him variously as
“the young scholar”, “the media man” and “Dick Tracey”)31. He is writing a history and
that is all we know. This lack of historicity – the absence of any real sense of his own
time – may indeed be bound up in his construction as a character who wishes to elide
“point of view”, to disavow strong passions or political commitments. I should establish
that I am not foregrounding these silences on the basis of presuming the Narrator is or
ought to be a “realistic character” but rather to exploit their significance for history.

Most of the novel is written in present tense third person and follows the dispute
(not always chronologically) with an omniscient narrator that drops into an intimate or
vocalised perspective to take up the points of view of an array of characters who occupy
various – and often oppositional – class positions and religious and political loyalties in
the conflict (Tommy Quinn, Vic Moseley, Fergus Llewellyn, Rachel Conlan, Menzies, the
list goes on) much like a camera cutting between moments, and sides, closing in on
individuals, then panning out again, changing frames and alignments.32

The relationship between the Narrator’s investigation and the storyline pertaining
to the 1950s in The Morality of Gentlemen is an ambiguous, even ambivalent, one. Most the
book is comprised of the narrative sections that convey the dispute in present tense and
it is in the “1950s” that the book opens, preceding the Narrator’s claim to “introduce” us
to the dispute, and suggesting that these are the primary voices and incidents of the
novel, the real ‘guardians’ of histories, even as these voices conflict. The way that these
sections capture political affiliation, ideology, home life, place and memory may imbue
them with a veneer of authenticity, as does the omniscient narrator’s capacity to convey
details that the Narrator does not seem to know. Ironies emerge as a result of
intersecting yet competing points of view.

On this reading the Narrator’s musings are either an interruption of the narrative
of the past or bear witness to the impossibility of ever knowing it (the past has become a
foreign country): the untranslatability of the past is evident even as the Narrator trawls
around interviewing ‘witnesses’. The intricate complexion of the lived experience passes
him by, evades him.

For example, take the Narrator’s consistent puzzlement at the militancy and
investment, the lack of balance, he perceives in the radicals he interviews, evident in his

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bemusement at Eyennon’s instruction to “pick a side and stick to it” which testifies both
to the effect of hegemony (see below) and his distance from the dispute. The Narrator
sniffly reflects:

I’m insulted, both by the abruptness of the dismissal and the crudity of the sentiment. That’s the
sort of remark I’d have expected from one of the others but not from Eyennon, a man who, from
all accounts, has read enough history to know it’s not that simple.

So much, I tell myself, for self-education.33

On the other hand, far from being merely the background or foreground that the
Narrator vainly attempts to access, these scenes frequently dramatise the discoveries the
Narrator has just unearthed. On occasion they illustrate (much like a documentary ‘re-
enactment’) the information to which he is privy: for instance in the interview when
Barnes explains how the motion to expel is eventually put, the comments of Doolan in
the next section follow on almost without pause or break, like memories or testimonials
to underscore his account.34 Elsewhere, following the Anti-Communist Senator’s doleful
assertion, “Our trump is the Cold War, make the most of it”, the Narrator addresses the
reader as if the story as it has been thus far apprehended has almost been created or
shown by him: “Perhaps by now you will have some flavour of the times”.35 These
connections serve, conversely then, to suggest that our uncovering of history is ushered
in by the Narrator: we learn of the incident as he does; it is his demonstrations, or at least
his “mind’s eye” that provide us with the narrative.

Anne Diamond concludes:

This is where the narrative double-take occurs. Through an ambiguous doubling it is possible to
read one narrative as an embedded version of the other, and vice versa, though the major effect is
a persistent questioning of what the narrator ironically calls the ‘Point of View’. Such a dislocation
provides a Brechtian interstice, foregrounding the constructed nature of the documented history
and nudging our suspension of disbelief into something more unwilling and reluctant than the
pleasure of vicarious experience narrative realism characteristically offers.36

In Chapter Three I use Catherine Belsey’s analysis of the ‘interrogative text’ to consider
the effect of multiple and conflicting voices and subjectivities in The Morality of Gentlemen.
In the current context, it is sufficient simply to note the mutual dependence structurally
of these two narrative parts, and how the predominant use of present tense in the novel
gives a sense of the eternal present: history is never entirely ‘over’, it is, in some more
profound sense, always happening and always with us.

The three entwined narratives engender a dialectical portrait of history as being
both unearthed and rewritten; it is somehow at once both behind us and in front of us. The
form of the struggles may have changed but the competing class interests remain.
History is not neutral but invested and, as Jameson has argued in his *Political Unconscious*, all histories are narratives; the past comes to us in narrative form.37

The novel formally and structurally privileges those moments in history that reveal class forces in conflict (shipping company owners and unions, Menzies and the working class militants) and show tensions within groups (atheists and believers in the working class; conservative Catholics and Labor Party members; dissidents, moderates and Stalinists in the WWF).

But *The Morality of Gentlemen* is not only ‘about’ class. It is a novel that attempts to show history through politically committed characters who not only embody or show working class life but ‘act’ class: experience it, live it, interpolate it and resist it. *The Morality of Gentlemen* captures what Raymond Williams has conceived of as “structures of feeling”: the “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt…a social experience which is still in process”.38

The novel presents class as a relationship (with the shipowners and other heads of big business, the employers, Menzies), in a fashion consonant with British historian E.P. Thompson’s conception. As Stephen Knight has astutely noted, the term ‘working class’ can be interpreted as referring to both the ‘objective’ (the existence of class divisions, the proletariat) and ‘subjective’ (class consciousness, working-class self activity) understandings; that is, ‘class in itself’ and ‘class for itself’.39 In *The Making of the English Working Class*, in the 1960s, Thompson offered an enriching, even groundbreaking, revision to presumptions about the operations of class:

The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making …‘Working classes’ is a descriptive term, which evades as much as it defines. It ties loosely together a bunch of discrete phenomena. There were tailors here and weavers there, and together they make up the working classes. By class I understand a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasise that it is a *historical* phenomenon. I do not see class as a ‘structure’ or even as a ‘category’ but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened in human relationships). More than this, the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluence which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure…The relationship must always be embodied in real people and a real context. [Emphasis mine]40

The men in the ‘strike committee’ repeatedly connect Moseley’s refusal to pay the levy with Menzies’ attacks on the right to strike and universal unionism, and see Moseley as, “to use an old-fashioned expression, a traitor to his class”.41 The levy is itself nicknamed
“Menzies money” while a stuttering Mason reassures the Narrator, “It was nothing personal [sic] against Mmroseley [sic]. It was Mmmenzies [sic] we were after”. Later, interviewing Eyenon, the Narrator concludes:

I observe again this recurring equation. It is clear from the way Eyenon talks that in his recollection Moseley and Menzies are locked inextricably together, and that his memory of Menzies is, if anything, the more bitter. ‘The wharfies hated Menzies. It was a personal thing. You understand me? A personal thing and a political thing at the same time. That can happen. He set out to make fools of us and we paid him back in kind.” [Emphasis mine]

The sense of class as at once personal and collective, subjective and objective, felt and material, is conveyed numerous times in the text. At times the collisions between opposing and different “structures of feeling” or discourses are comic, even hilarious. Jaz, for example, recollects being asked to give false witness to an event he didn’t see and so his lawyer proposes: “I’ll have a detailed description of the incident written out for you and all you have to do is memorise it. I’ll see you through it in court. I said, that’s all very well but I’ll be perjuring myself. Don’t worry, Mr Eyenon, he says, I perjure myself every day. That’s alright, I said, but you get paid for it.”

Elsewhere, the courtroom cross-examination scenes (based indeed on the actual court transcripts of the case) take on an equally humorous cant where the Latinate language, interpretation of statute and reified orthodox legal procedure clash with the lived politics of the witnesses who try to explain their theoretical frameworks, their tactical choices. Part of the irony is the gap between the contemporary reader’s hindsight and own knowledge of historical events and those who inhabit the courtroom in the 1950s, as well as the transformations in the political Left in the period since. The incommensurability of the discourses can be seen by the following exchange between Piggy Baker and Quinn:

‘Did you express your disapproval to the editor over this article? Did you rap the editor over the knuckles?’
‘We don’t do such things as rapping over the knuckles in the Communist Party.’
‘Dear me, how very considerate of you. I’m sure Mr Joseph Stalin, were he alive today, would be very surprised to hear that.’
‘Mr Stalin, as you call him, is not a member of the wharf branch.”

A similar collision of values, customs, politics and subjectivity produces equally wry results in a short conversation between Travers and the presiding Judge where the irreconcilable discourses of legal claims to impartiality and the insistently committed are brought together. “Do you mean to say,” said Cosgrave, ‘that action by me, while sitting on the bench, could be political?’ ‘Yes, Your Honour. Only the insane have no politics.’
The workers’ personal histories often privilege experiences regarding work and industrial action. For instance Jaz, who’d lived on the waterfront before driven out by “slum clearance”, remembers the 1947 strike from his boyhood. “[Tommy Quinn’s] mother and Jaz’s mother queue together at the union office for meat parcels and brown paper bags of fruit sent up by sympathetic orchardists. But Jaz’s mother stops coming. Leo has forbidden her...Jaz’s mother complains, ‘A striker’s wife has nothing to be ashamed of.’ The Quinns are ashamed of Leo’s shame.”

Crane’s recollections of the assistance he and the WWF once gave to Moseley fuels his sense of Moseley as a traitor to the union movement, and so Crane sits in his small office “contemplating history”. As Travers notes, “we’ve all got long memories.” The waterside workers en masse, as the Narrator paraphrasing Proper Ewington tells us, “Shared a history. To men like them, history meant a lot.” This is reiterated a few paragraphs later: “History must count for something or their lives were meaningless.”

That a lingering preoccupation with history may also signify a craving for compensation, a respite in the ghosts of the past, one generated by present passivity, is the latent notion in Tommy Quinn’s fear of nostalgia. He “observed that people are constantly reliving their past; it distracts them from their role in the present. Now he’s succumbing to it [...] Thinking about the past is a bad sign; it seems, somehow, to be an intimation of the end”.

Bev Roberts has drawn attention to Lohrey’s talent for imbuing what are often presumed to be private or domestic (‘personal’) spaces and landscapes (belonging to both place and thought) with political and social meaning, indeed to represent their indivisibility from the so-called public and political. This attention to the built environment, the territory of the dispute, is also a signifier of class difference even in the opening chapter, where the “brick lanes and stone stairways, to the water and the reclaimed flatlands of the wharves” and the pubs and warehouses of the blue-collar workers is set against “the huge iron hulls of the merchant ships” beyond which the “grand but incongruous marble columns of Parliament House rear up”.

Class and place are inextricably linked. Menzies’ “idling limousine” in the opening chapter is set against Quinn’s “chipped bathroom mirror”, while the rough-and-tumble character of Eyenon’s one-time barber’s shop and Quinn’s newspaper-and-pamphlet-cluttered house contrast with the understated intellectual Spartan eloquence of Baker’s legal chambers, where “the only touches of professional luxury are leather-bound books,
a cut-glass decanter of whiskey and big black leather chairs. This is a place for thinkers and serious men.”56 Different again is the fancy disarray, jazz music and silver cocktail shakers of the Conlans’ home, with its good crockery and cultured dishervement.

The ports are captured with a poignant combination of the poetic and the pedestrian, “a network of lights and silhouettes” but also “the working voices, the thud of cargo and grating of steel.”57

Another view of class is encapsulated in the space of the proper, carefully arranged, “feminised”, sedate front parlour of the Llewellyns (he a transport workers official, she a housewife) which attests to a certain prosperity and prudence for relatively ordinary people in the post-war boom, while the detail of “a portrait of the Sacred Heart” emanates portentous religious devotion.58 During Moseley’s first Anti-Communist Party meeting:

Moseley takes a self-important look about the room: the rising-sun mirror over the fireplace; the row of willow-patterned plates along the mantel; the dried arrangement and white lace doily on the occasional table; the piano in the corner by the lace-curtained window. By the door is an oak side-table, set with cups and saucers, a milk jug with a beaded doily over it and an austere mound of plain cake in the centre. There is, in this room, an air of great propriety.59

The description in this passage concords far more with the dominant cultural representations of the 1950s we have become used, to or are usually saturated with, than the remainder of the text, which disrupts these expectations (the suffocating banality of the accoutrements of hospitality – plates on the mantel – and cultured leisure time – the piano – somehow belied by the sense of being “on display”).

The presence of a Vice-Chancellor and his wife at the meeting also suggests, at least at this point in the novel, that the Anti-Communist Party is predominantly serving, or bound to serve, middle-class interests. The signifiers of privileged respectability the Catholic Llewellyns enjoy, however, are not diametrically different to Eyenon’s home, a “shabby Victorian terrace with rickety wooden verandas, flaking brown paint, and small, carefully cultivated gardens”, which also contains a piano and a portrait of the unionist in a dinner suit. (“Is this what Lenin meant by a Labour aristocrat?” reflects Tommy Quinn.)60

The various guests at the meeting of the Anti-Communist Party include individuals whose class position is distinct from that of Moseley but this gap is tempered here by the unifying presence of a shared Catholicism (“the crucifix tie pin does not go unnoticed”).61
The pattern of behaviour pertaining to gender established in this scene is one that recurs (though not without occasional exception) throughout the novel with a regularity that cuts across class lines. The woman (usually “a wife”, perhaps a housekeeper or daughter) serves the men, opens the door, arranges the food and withdraws or sits silently. This implicit, though peripheral, feminist perspective will be taken up later in the chapter.

There is the foreshadowing here of another ambivalence or split vision that reverberates through the entire novel: Moseley’s aspirational class ambition, registered in this moment by his satisfaction with the literally well-heeled decorum and manners of his hosts: “Moseley’s too self-conscious to look at the faces of his new associates; he looks instead at the circle of feet, noting with satisfaction that the shoes are all well-heeled and newly polished.”62 That this minor detail does indeed engender a sense of poignancy, even empathy, for Moseley, is one of the advantages of Lohrey’s use of shifting point of view throughout the work. The flipside, or inverse, to this hunger for social mobility – suggested at other points by his nickname the ‘Professor’, his boasting of a university education and prolific quoting – is his resentment of the others, his sense that they are not, as it were, at the coalface: “At the same time he feels slightly superior. They can only know the enemy at one remove.”63

“By showing the details, the textures of life, [Lohrey] creates the complexity which deepens the understanding of political behaviour”, writes Bev Roberts; in addition I want to suggest this is achieved without ever letting the centrality of social relations out of sight.64 The focus on class relations as the motor of history in The Morality of Gentlemen and its formal structure of contradiction, collision and conflict produces a view of history in keeping with Marx’s famous assertion that:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight.65

History is conveyed as the realm where entire world-views, material interests, networks of loyalty, tradition, class and religion and “structures of feeling” collide. My critical study concludes that while the events are from the past, the mode is not primarily nostalgic. The novel does not occupy the safe territory of backward looking nostalgia for the ‘old good times’, the purportedly soothing securities or certain values, of yesteryear.
How is history gendered? Women in the novel are predominantly absent from ‘public life’ – from the world of employment, industry and politics. They are the missing subjects of history in *The Morality of Gentlemen* and the Left is portrayed as rather unremittingly chauvinist. While many of the women do attempt to participate in political organisations, and come down to the docks to support their husbands and relatives, they are mostly seen preparing tea and biscuits, serving meals, cleaning up, looking after the children, or doing the shopping.

This is not out of keeping with the actual position of many working-class women in the nineteen-fifties, nor their attempt to struggle, to take back agency. Dorothy Button tries to push herself forward in the Communist Party: “Every year she runs for a position on the State Committee and every year she’s defeated by the men. She quotes the example of Rosa Luxembourg to them but it doesn’t make any difference. Your turn will come, comrade, says Plunkett, but not yet. Meanwhile he redirects her to reforming the petty-bourgeois elements of the Housewives Association.” Perhaps in her own form of reclamation or protest Vi Delaney refuses to make herself scarce, listening in on discussions of union affairs “to make sure common sense gets a hearing”.

Even Stella, terrified by the patriarchal figure of her father who assumes her to be her husband’s property, eventually finds the courage to leave Quinn (there are conclusive intimations she has been having an affair). Before she ends the marriage, when she refuses to be “obedient”, her father encourages Quinn to beat her and lock her up to break her spirit. Quinn demurs but, puzzled, reminds himself (in an unexamined concession at once to sexism and racist stereotyping) that: “Greek girls are supposed to be loyal to their husbands at all costs.”

Sex and sexuality is not an overriding concern of the novel (unlike, as we shall see, *The Reading Group*), yet the passionless encounter to which Rachel Conlan subjects herself is another reminder that these events in the novel take place before the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s, before the pill, before the women’s movement and consciousness raising about women’s sexual desire and pleasure, before no-fault divorce, before such a thing as rape within the marital contract existed in legal terms. Rachel, who has had “intimations of another life”, one shared with Tommy Quinn, spends the night with him:

Tom has hardly said anything to her all evening. He lifts her head now and puts his arm under it and around her shoulders. Lying on his side he kisses her heavily and she feels the taut curve of his chest pressing against her. In this new and unfamiliar environment all his movements have a stilted quality. Without a word to her, or any further caress, he parts her legs and begins to thrust
so that the wooden behead shudders and the bedsprings creak. Rachel gives herself up to the sordidness of it all.  

Aside from the evident lack of pleasure or satisfaction she derives from the experience, which is phallocentric in a literal sense, it is Rachel’s feeling of invisibility (Tommy has been ignoring her, not conversing with her, making plans without her) that reinforces representations of women’s oppression and the depiction of women as gendered historical subjects in this passage. Rachel’s reflections the next day position her rather curiously as a kind of ‘tourist’ of the working-class experience, adrift from her own class moorings and ordinary habits of marriage, although it isn’t apparent whether this hunger for the erotic charge of transgression is purely a symptom of Tommy’s indifferent treatment of her: “Surely some bohemian excitement will emerge if she is patient.”

Interestingly, one of the few insights readers have about the Narrator’s own prejudices, desires and context, is the attitude he assumes towards women. Eager to assure us from the outset that he is not “one of those restless offspring of the paranoid working class” and concomitantly revealing a whole network of assumptions of his own regarding self, class and hegemony, the Narrator gives us glimpses of a rather tangled and essentialist distaste for the women he encounters. Speaking with Nora Bates (the daughter of Crane who died of a heart attack during the dispute), who does not wish to be interviewed, he states: “I make a note in my file. The men I have spoken to, while occasionally wary, have been reasonably willing to talk, sometimes with aggressive eagerness to put their case, as if there could be no doubt of its veracity, and let anyone claim the opposite. Let me remark that in a woman I find the first sign of that siege mentality and paranoid fatalism that are said to characterise the outlook of the working class.” Later and conversely, when the conservative upper-middle or ruling class figures decline to discuss the Moseley case with him (“History writing of this kind is a futile exercise”, writes Moseley’s elderly doctor, “this was one we lost”), the Narrator merely notes that these dismissals “emanate from the confidence of caste. In their discretion, they agree: these things are best left to the licensed guardians of memory.” Stymied in his attempt to write the past “as it really was”, the Narrator is “thrown back onto the dry acquaintance of documentary sources” but unleashes none of the ferocious judgement onto his (male?) list of “eminent persons: magistrates, newspaper persons, retired senators” that he has previously exhibited towards Nora Bates. (And there is an intelligent deduction here about why those sympathetic to the Moseleys might be entirely comfortable leaving history to be conveyed by the press and official sources.)
On his quest to interrogate “the very nature of political opposition”, and even when attributing apparently positive or desirable attributes to women, the Narrator reads ‘against the grain’, presuming that these ‘feminine’ qualities or insights to be somehow inhibiting and prohibitive: “of course I’m not interested in ‘the personal’ or in anguish, or at least only insofar as they relate to a commitment to change the world”. The Narrator seeks out Rachel Conlan as a possible source of information about Quinn, although he does not reveal this motive to her directly, and recoils from her challenges about the relationship of the “personal” to the “political”. When she suggests that he might find her own story (the affair, its end, her relationship with her husband) banal the Narrator says:

Not all love affairs are profound or interesting; some of them are banal. How should I know until I had spoken to her? ...To reveal motive is difficult. Men obscure it with accounts of their actions and statements of official policy, but women are by nature more alive to subtle nuances and the penetration of feeling. If only they would cooperate more, instead of being obsessed with their own grievances and vestigial passions from the past. They set up blocks to objectivity.

The inflection of the Narrator’s response – an awkward conjoining whereby somehow assessing the intensity or depth of the relationship will be connected to or equated with his capacity to extract political motive from her own reflections – might suggest an unacknowledged shadowy presence, a muted echo of his personal experiences (“not all relationships reach the heights” he tells Rachel Conlan, strangely). Yet the appeal to the stern patriarchal authority of commonsense objectivity (“if only they would cooperate more”) reinforces the inference that while women belong to the intuitive world of feelings and private longings, it is the masculine framework of “objectivity” to which such insights must ultimately be beholden; the ‘male’ hermeneutic is the only one capable of engendering the fleeting personal observations of women with genuine historical meaning, where the ‘masculine’ here is also assumed to be universal and neutral.

The characters in The Morality of Gentlemen are comprised of a mix of actual historical figures (eg Menzies), composite characters who are based on individuals (Frank and Vic Moseley, Doolan, Crane) and, one can only assume, some entirely ‘invented’ characters. The novel plays on public and collective memory of Menzies so that the representation mediates, interrogates, disputes, reinforces or indeed interpellates the accumulated cultural and historical representations that already exist. As Jameson argues, “All historical novels, beginning with those of Walter Scott himself, no doubt in one way or another involve a mobilisation of previous historical knowledge generally acquired through the schoolbook history manuals devised for whatever legitimising purpose by
this or that national tradition – thereafter instituting a dialectic between what we already know.” Although strictly speaking perhaps Lohrey’s is not a “historical novel” since it can also, at least for now, summon up memory as well as other representations – articles, films, documentaries, school texts – of these events of the 1950s.

The immersion of the novel in the lives of predominantly proletarian characters in a little-known skirmish is also significant. Entering the terrain of Australian politics in the 1950s through a relatively minor (so far as the ‘official records’ go, in any case) industrial dispute, and from the perspective of what might once have been quaintly described as ‘ordinary people’, the novel also brings to mind Benjamin’s observation that “a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”

The Morality of Gentlemen relies on detail from public documents such as news articles and court transcripts for not only the bones or outline of the story – such as the order of events, the use of Pinkenba tactics, or the legal exchanges in the Supreme and High courts – but also for characterisation and dramatic detail, such as Lohrey’s incorporation of the Hursey demand for a written invitation to speak at the meeting concerning their expulsion, the WWF Federal office’s refusal to ratify the expulsion, the St Patrick’s day incident, the Domain rally and so on.

Those characters I have here termed composites are those who have some clear counterpart in historical material pertaining to the case. Tas Bull’s history, for example, substantiates elements of Lohrey’s portrait of “Moseley”, confirming that Hursey himself did indeed tell dirty jokes “of the St Peter said variety”, that he was nicknamed the Professor, loved to be seen as a man of learning and ended up owning a fishing boat, that he had been helped by a union official of the WWF to return to work in the past when he was injured. His physical appearance as “cadaverous” with a wall eye is also in keeping with Lohrey’s portrayal and much of the court question and answer scenes that involve Moseley and the unionists are based on existing transcripts. There are numerous other instances: the Scot “Doolan” in the novel bears an uncanny resemblance to Hursey’s neighbour James Colrain who reported being locked in a freezer as occurs in Lohrey’s novel; the pair of detectives represented share positions and attitudes to those in Bull’s account; Wright was indeed hostile to the unions and a “maverick” in parliament (just as Senator Baker is in the text) and so forth. (Bull was an active
participant in the WWF at the time and published a memoir-history in 1977.)

More significantly, for representations of history, Lohrey incorporates news clippings and headings into her novel. None of these is identical with genuine articles of the period but often the tone and the phrasing is similar. This makes us aware of the hegemonic positions and frames of reference promulgated in the media and also destabilises if not dislodges the illusion of being swept up in ‘mere fiction’, removing any possibility of a reader’s confidence that a literary work is, in the romantic tradition, entirely an act of imagination and instinct, against the ossifying and mechanical organisation of the contemporary world.

‘End the Waterfront Anarchy’ – a headline from Sydney’s Daily Telegraph – appears as the heading for an article entitled ‘End the Anarchy’ in the Courier in Lohrey’s novel. The Telegraph did in fact begin a ‘Freedom is not Dead Fund’ and a student newspaper ran a parody of this. (The Morality of Gentlemen also recounts the launching of this ‘Freedom is not Dead Fund’ and the contributions to it from Liberal members and key businessmen.)

This use of documentary sources is more significant in the contemporary environment for its implications of form rather than matters of content, since the gap between the original, historical publication of these implanted quotations or paraphrases and Lohrey’s novel is so pronounced. Thus it is their contribution to pastiche, the multiplication of forms, the interspersing discourses in the work, rather than the likelihood of readers recognising their origins or their intimate connection with the real events and publications, that is being stressed here. To put it another way, since we can’t assume that readers will recognise the reliance on sources and direct quotations, as for example, in the Menzies speech or various headlines, some almost thirty years after the event upon first publication and now approximately fifty years later, the Brechtian aspiration toward “complex seeing” or distancing may not be fully enacted (but this is to foreshadow a discussion in the next chapter).

Even as the novel depicts the making, keeping and writing of history as contested, running along fissures of divisions evolving out of class interests and networks of political commitment and affiliation, the Narrator’s present class position is absent from the work, as is any murmur or hint of industrial relations or the broader landscape of the late-1970s. The Morality of Gentlemen punctures and refutes a great deal of the enduring pop-cultural images of the fifties as times of peace and prosperity (or, by more
theoretical proponents of the period itself, a time when the end of class is declared, while
working people are pacified, satisfied with the accumulation of new consumer goods
such as washing machines). How ought the silence regarding history and class, or in fact
any strong sense of contemporary life in the 1970s, alongside the particular
representations of history in the 1950s, be read and how are they connected?

The late 1970s was the “present” for Lohrey, the vantage point of the author if
not of the reader (because of her difficulty finding a publisher there was some delay
before it was distributed). One reading then, particularly in light of Fredric Jameson’s
attention to the “loss of historicity” he argues is characteristic of the postmodern period
(“an age”, in his account “which has forgotten how to think historically in the first
place”) would be to interpret Lohrey’s work, much as Jameson does Ragtime, as a text,
with its composite, historical and invented characters, its use of real news articles and
speeches, that functions to “shortcircuit an older type of social and historical
interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws”; one that does not convey
the historical past but rather “must trace our mental images of that past upon its
confining walls”. Jameson uses his conception of postmodernism’s characteristic
“waning sense of our history” to give a very particular reading of Ragtime, and his broader
presumptions are investigated in the next chapter. Yet I do not find this an entirely
satisfactory approach to employ for Lohrey’s novel. Not only are there difficulties with
Jameson’s methodology (problems of Americancentrism and an almost exclusively first-
world focus not only in his characterisation of the cultural and economic forces of “late
capitalism” but also with his explanation and definition of “late capitalism”) but, as I
have been arguing, I consider one of the most engaging and interesting aspects to The
Morality of Gentlemen is how it problematises the notion of history and the process of
writing history without stigmatising commitment, how it both formally and substantively
presents the past as the territory of conflict and the space of struggle, without making
that past inexplicable, unknowable or, worse, making the process of remembering and
historicising simply a symptom of our confinement to the present.

Curiously, and given his context significantly, there is something very 1950s
about the Narrator’s own attitude to history (a search for “the typical”, a desire to
eliminate subjectivity in order to follow the guiding light of neutrality, a rooting out of
the moderate who is not “excited about things”) as if the revolutions in history from
below, women’s history, social history, anthropology, Annales and mentalité, cultural

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history, memory, Geertz’s “thick description” and so on had never happened (perhaps, in the fictional world of the book, they haven’t). Such naiveté is partly what makes me dubious about assumptions the Narrator is a scholar of some sort. His coyness on the question of his project and occupation – when Eyeron demands to know from the Narrator, “where I’m from, what do I do, and why do I want to know”, he merely notes that “when I give him some answers he does not appear to be impressed” – is one of the interesting gaps in the novel. This quintessentially old school approach to history (to tell it “how it really was” without ‘bias’) may also be why, despite what Ian Syson has asserted is his mostly “sympathetic” attitude to the workers, the Narrator seems so gauche. It also affirms the sense he is somehow ‘outside history’ even as his aspirations to eradicate point of view are plainly a product of history itself.

The final years of the 1970s, in a cyclical expression, was also a low point for class struggle in Australia, after the last great upsurge in twentieth-century radicalism; perhaps the Narrator is representative here of the unaffiliated liberal Left – both lofty and residually engaged – or the perverse methodology of history “without” class (without history!)

Of all the characters, the Narrator comes closest to embodying a Brechtian representational figure rather than realist characterisation. His ironic status means the silence and absence around him ought not to be read too literally. Broadly, too, it’s easy to forget that our understanding of teleological history is in fact a historical phenomenon, a relatively modern discipline born of particular economic and cultural shifts in class society.

Still, how to theorise this silence as to the Narrator’s contemporary life and history, if not as a symptom of the novel’s plight in the waning of history under postmodernism? Another conclusion would be to interpret the relationship between the present and the past as primarily nostalgic: the era of political commitment and real struggle, utopian belief for the future is behind us and, given that the seventies in this work are devoid of significance, it is the old times that are better. Except such an analysis seems crucially insufficient. For the 1950s in The Morality of Gentlemen is still an era rife with sexism when the leading figures on the Left were under the hold of Stalinism. It’s not an idealised realm. More than this, the interpretation doesn’t hold in formal terms. The Narrator, our bridge to the late-1970s, is an ironic figure, who finds the perspective of the affable but disengaged Jaz more reliable than that of his father, Leo, who “still
believes, despite many disappointments…the world can be changed for the better.”  
Jaz himself is largely peripheral to the dispute, notorious (deservedly or otherwise, the novel doesn’t resolve the point) for being a “corrupt sportsman”, a cheerful cheat, and it is he who has perhaps been changed the least by the industrial dispute. And it is precisely the caricature of “the restless offspring of the paranoid working class” that the Narrator is trying to escape, from which he wishes to cleave his own investigation. It is difficult, then, to see the novel as explicitly nostalgic simply because of the abistorical Narrator. However, the Narrator’s naiveté does not necessarily mean that the work itself cannot authorise an interpretation that is nostalgic.

But I think a better tack is to consider how, in playing against the grain of our collective cultural memory regarding, and popular portrayals of, the 1950s (which include not only the passivity of happy families I have written about, which turns up in everything from Jameson’s arguments about American TV sitcoms in the period to David Lynch’s horror-parodies, but also representations of the victimisation that occurred under McCarthyism of which Goodbye and Good Luck is but one recent example) the absence of history in the Narrator’s world and the presence of class struggle in the past combine to jettison prognoses of the ‘end of class.’ By reinstating agency the novel in fact takes on a kind of reverse mirroring where not only the Narrator’s present – the 1970s – but the reader’s own moment of historical specificity are then invited to be interpreted against the silence or seeming absence of history. For just as the Narrator symbolises historical enquiry without historical specificity, so too the work suggests that class struggle persists even when it appears invisible.

The contestations of history in the 1950s then become reminders that while class struggle and commitment might appear absent from the Narrator’s world (the end of the decade in Australian history saw the sacking of Whitlam, the waning of the post-war boom and the disintegration of mass movements for national liberation and the dampening down of struggles for women’s, black and gay-and-lesbian rights) and our world now, it is not; indeed, in this interpretation, it is present in its absence and as always “under circumstances encountered, given, transmitted from the past”.  

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Chapter Three: “The truth comes whole, not in bits” – Brechtian devices, *The Morality of Gentlemen*, history and the interrogative text

We have, wrote Brecht of his theatrical practice, given up seeing things in the world with “an astonished eye”.\(^2\) *Verfremdungseffekt* (the alienation effect)\(^3\) was intended to correct this phenomenon, to reorient our gaze on the apparently usual and natural and to unmask the ordinary, the taken for granted, as historically specific, implicated in relations of production and power and capable of being transformed. For the playwright another phrase, which he had painted across a beam in his workspace, was the necessary antidote to all the mystifications, camouflages and diversions of ideology in class society: “Truth is concrete”.\(^4\)

The metaphor of sight and perspective is an apt one. *The Morality of Gentlemen* relies upon, in a newly realised way, devices popularised by Brecht and Dos Passos and exhibits elements that usually belong to a documentary film, complete with interviews, newsreels and scenes of ‘re-enactment’.

Lohrey’s father was a waterside worker and she grew up in a family which had ties with the trade union movement (some of her relatives, at least for a period, were members of the Communist Party). After studying the European debates (see *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Class Debate Within German Marxism*) she decided to write a political novel based on the stories her father had told about life on the wharves. At Cambridge, her own political identifications were with the Left, loosely with Trotskyism, though she had originally joined the Australian Labor Party at sixteen.\(^5\) Of her childhood and Catholic schooling during the Cold War she has said: “I used to joke later that, for other girls, the supreme family injunction was never to get pregnant but for my family it was that, no matter what, you must never cross a picket line”.\(^6\)

Lohrey rejected Brecht’s own novel, *The Threepenny Opera*, as a model for her writing\(^7\). Instead she chose to transplant Brecht’s devices for the theatre. Transplanting, naturally, also means transforming by adapting elements of epic theatre under new historical circumstances and in a different medium.

On the use of Brecht in her work, she explained: “I was consciously using Brechtian techniques. I’d read a lot of Brecht. I’d read some English commentators like
David Caute. I’d read the debates with Lukács.”8 In the same interview (in 2004) Lohrey spoke about her intention to depart from both ‘classic realism’ and socialist realism:

I knew that the only way you could honestly write a political novel was to foreground the multiple points of view and cut them loose from a dominant narrator to some degree…to induce the reader to stand back from the text, not to identify wholly with any of the characters, to not immerse their subjectivity in the text but to always have an ironic, critical, distancing intelligence.9

In this chapter I will firstly outline very briefly Brecht’s theory of epic, or dialectical, theatre and go on to examine Lohrey’s use of Brechtian strategies and the effect they have on her representation of historical change (which was explored in Chapter Two). Then, by historicising Lohrey’s novel itself, I ask what might it mean to write a work informed by Brecht’s theory and techniques, developed for theatre in the nineteen thirties, forties and fifties in a completely different political climate, for another medium in the nineteen-eighties. How should the novel be read in the context of the specific class relations and ideological and cultural movements of that period?

Brecht and Aesthetics

In the realm of culture Brecht was a fervent critic of Stanislavskian ‘method’ acting, ‘Hoftheater’ imperial-style performance and German expressionism; and, although only by implication and never publicly, Soviet socialist realism (Zhadanovism).10 His hopefulness about the prospects for a scientific theatre of instruction came about in an age of rapid social and technological change in the instruments and organisation of capitalism when forms of new, supposedly ‘low’, culture such as cinema caused him great excitement. By the late 1970s, when Lohrey’s novel was being drafted, Fredric Jameson wonders if Brecht’s entrancement with science and innovation (the “sheer experiment, and of practical well-nigh manual activity” leading an “ideal of popular mechanics, technology, the tinkering of a Galileo”) was not a world-view produced by a particular stage in class relations.11 “It must also be asked whether Brecht’s vision of science is still available to us as a figure today, or whether it does not itself reflect a relatively primitive phase in what has now come to be known as the second industrial revolution.”12

Brecht fervently iterated the need for theatre and literature to respond to new contexts. “Literature” he wrote, “to be understood must be considered in its development. Literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man [sic].”13 He was associated with, although in important divergences
also critical of, the (‘second wave’) modernist movement (not without its own diversity and antinomies between mediums and amongst practitioners, within content and form, in its relationship to history and political engagement – where to make it new could also invoke nostalgic reaction).

Brecht’s approach to aesthetics emerges in the debates about German expressionism that raged in Das Wort during the late thirties, at the time of the Communist Party’s ‘popular frontist’ strategy. Brecht’s responses to Lukács were never published during his lifetime and his strident critiques of Lukács’ method (what Brecht perceived as his formalism, his limited focus on a handful of nineteenth-century novels and his lack of consideration of forms other than the novel) never formed part of the – admittedly rather rarefied – public debate about Marxist literary criticism then.\(^\text{14}\)

In these debates Lukács privileged the progenitors of nineteenth-century realism and dismissed modernism as merely replicating the pessimism and distortion of artists’ own immediate experiences, their individual consciousness. His essay against Bloch, articulating a position against interior monologue and stream of consciousness asserted: “If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance to grasp that reality as it truly is and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.”\(^\text{15}\) For Lukács, even reactionary authors were able to reveal the dialectical whole, the totality of class society – “man [sic] in the whole range of his relations to the real world” – through realism, whereas the techniques of modernism were lambasted for being inward-looking, formalist, reactionary and decadent.\(^\text{16}\)

Brecht’s (then unpublished) response was to defend the innovations of modernism, such as montage, by pointing out that Lukács was effectively calling for a return to a certain set of technical conventions in the novel that had exhausted their relevance, been outgrown by changes in the relations of production (as capitalism solidified and ideological needs altered) and therefore been relegated to history: “In no circumstances can the necessary guidelines for a practical definition of realism be derived from literary works alone. Be like Tolstoy but without his weaknesses! Be like Balzac – only up to date!”\(^\text{17}\)

In an impassioned demand for a Marxism that could respond to developments in form, technique and materials, as well as consider the role of literary production in the superstructure as a highly mediated and relatively autonomous process, Brecht wrote:
“Literary works cannot be taken over like factories; literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patents. We shall take care not to describe one particular historical form of a novel of a particular epoch as realistic…Reality changes; in order to represent it modes of representation must also change.”18 This attention to the historical specificity of form will become important in the third part of this chapter, which examines Lohrey’s adaptation of Brechtian form.

Brecht, Epic Theatre and the Alienation Effect

A close analysis of epic theatre would need to trace the evolution of the “V-effekt” (or defamiliarisation effect) through Brecht’s writing and productions, a task beyond the scope of this exegesis. However, while Brecht’s theatre went through various stages of development, it remained resolutely hostile to a theatre of illusion, particularly ‘fourth wall naturalism’, which Brecht condemned as effectively duping an audience into a drugged acquiescence with the status quo since “a technique which served to hide the causality at work in society [could] hardly be used to show it up”.19 He saw his own mode of working as ‘critical realism’.

The notion of estrangement had predecessors in theories of Russian formalism and the futurist movement. Brecht was influenced by aspects of Chinese acting and movement techniques, Japanese Noh theatre, silent film, elements of Elizabethan drama and German Expressionism, the Greek chorus, ‘agit-prop’, the work of Piscator and Meyerhold, Charlie Chaplin, folk stories, early morality plays, fairground productions, clowning, cabaret and mime.20 This may be as good a place as any to foreground Jameson’s point that “Brecht is also ‘Brecht’” since so much of the work he did was collaborative – indeed there has been much criticism of his publication of the writing of various women collaborators and lovers as his own (their work appearing under his name). 21

Brecht’s theory of epic theatre arose partly as a methodology, a result of his theatrical experiments; it was not initially a decisive and coherent manifesto. Peter Brooker asserts that “the most damaging yet most common error in discussion of Brecht’s theory has been to see it as fixed and unchanging”.22 It was not until the late 1920s and the early 1930s during the rise of fascism, the Great Depression and huge transformations in technology and the expansion of cultural forms like the cinema, and the shattering of old aesthetics through cubist visual art, that Brecht developed many of
the conceptual elements of what is now known as ‘epic theatre’. This period was also the
time when he was becoming politicised, attending KPD lectures at the Marxist Workers’
Institute at the end of the twenties.23

As Brecht’s understanding of a scientific theatre for “instruction” and “pleasure”
evolved, so too did his conviction that epic theatre, its contradiction and collision, its
appeal to critical reason, was able to expose the social relations of production at any
given time as historically specific without concomitantly reinforcing these as natural and
inevitable, forever determined and thus he felt his work could do more than merely
“interpret the world” in Marx’s famous phrase, but also “change it”. Brecht’s theory and
practice altered and developed throughout his career and was intimately informed both
by Marxism and modernism.24

In Brecht’s view only epic theatre was capable of responding to what he saw were
“the great themes of our time...the building up of a mammoth industry, the conflict of
classes, war, the fight against disease”:25 Plays replicating sentimental expressionism,
realism, Aristotelian mimesis, the suspension of disbelief and classical narrative structures
could not expose relations of exploitation. “Petroleum resists the five-act form...there
are fields of force which can be seen radiating in opposite directions; the power groups
themselves comprise movements not only against one another but in themselves, etc.”26
(It was not until his Short Organum for the Theatre that Brecht slightly revised his assessment
of realism, acknowledging debts to some of its conventions.)

I will leave aside the tremendous and perhaps unanswerable question of whether
the estrangement effect in practice affected its audience as intended.27 Politically the
social upheavals and transformations of social relations he was calling for clearly did not
eventuate, but the effect on audiences so far as breaking identification is difficult to
establish, particularly given the class composition of Brecht’s audiences in the final years
of his life in the East German state. But the estrangement effect aimed to prevent a
purely empathic identification between audience and character. The alienation effect
“took the human social incidents to be displayed and label(led) them as something
striking, something that calls for explanation.”28 “Complex seeing” or “critical distance”,
Brecht declared, “turns the spectator into an observer but arouses his [sic] capacity for
action, forces him [sic] to take decisions.”29 In Raymond Williams’ view, the alienation
effect hoped to convey, amidst the growth of fascism and its aesthetics as well as
American capitalism and McCarthyism, “a world purged now by Brecht of pity and
acceptance – held at arm’s length – criticised, explained”. 30 Althusser defined the purpose
the alienation effect thus: “Brecht wanted to make the spectator into an actor who would
complete the unfinished play”. 31

Structurally Brecht employed montage and juxtaposition, creating episodic scenes
and sudden jarring jumps in time, point of view or place, speaking of montage’s capacity
to foreground “two warring visions of the world”. 32 Moreover the “separation of the
elements” principle 33 suggested that music, language and production ought to be
conceived together and work against one another to produce tension and collision rather
than attempting to create (false) organic unity. Of his conjoining of the popular and the
comic with montage for a revolutionary theatre of dialectical materialism that is
nevertheless enjoyable he wrote:

The theatre of the scientific age...is in a position to make dialectics into a source of enjoyment.
The unexpectedness of logically progressive or zigzag development, the instability of every
circumstance, the joke of contradiction, and so forth: all these are ways of enjoying the liveliness
of men [sic], things and processes, and they both heighten our capacity for life and our pleasure in
it. 34

While some of his work was historically specific and politically charged, other plays
upended and subverted the notion of time altogether, covering vast years or indefinite
moments on the stage. His plays often ‘retold’ classic folk tales, well-known fables or
myths (The Caucasian Chalk Circle), adapted earlier works (The Threepenny Opera) and even
subverted elements of the ‘morality play’ (The Good Person of Setzuan) in forms that
repositioned them for materialist or socialist analysis and projection. Other plays
explored the contemporary world through parables interrupted with the ‘literarisation’ of
placards and signs (The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui), used historical events as allegories
(Mother Courage and her Children, Galileo), or took more literally instructive forms (as in the
Löhrstück or learning plays, e.g. The Measures Taken/The Decision). 35

In performance, particularly in his later plays, suspense was frequently
undermined through the use of projected scene titles announcing the action to come, or
narrators and choruses dictating the events to follow or commenting on their
significance. The distancing of the audience from empathic identification with the
characters was strengthened via the use of placards, cycloramas, projections, scrim and
signs. Bright white light and the half-curtain revealed scene changes and alterations in
costume. Properties were representational rather than realist (though his productions
tried to use a number of props which, through their authenticity and use value, signified
given modes of production) and music, mask, song and costume were employed to convey an anti-naturalist sensibility on stage: to break identification and immersion.  

Rehearsal devices such as asking performers to describe their character’s action in the third person or exploring, even acting out, alternative conclusions to the play or new turns of events (the ‘not but’ technique) were employed to prevent actor-character ‘identification’ through the Stanislavskian ‘system’.  

In his short essay “The street scene” Brecht enunciated his vision for epic performance as involving ‘acting in quotation marks’ where the actor should adopt the manner of a bystander describing a car accident to a crowd (that is not attempting to ‘become’ a participant in the action).  

The use of gestus (in Mother Courage this is exemplified by Helen Weill’s performance, which saw her snapping open and shut her purse repeatedly to emphasise that Courage’s class position leaves her dependent economically on the war that’s destroying her) was another strategy to produce the alienation or defamiliarisation effect.  

Brecht rejected the bourgeois notion of character as individualistic and psychologically constituted: “Character” he argued “should not be regarded like a stain of grease on a pair of trousers, which, however much you try to rub and wipe it away, will always come up again. In actual fact the question is always how a given person is going to act in a specified set of circumstances.”  

Willett’s Brecht on Theatre documents Brecht’s own conception of the precepts of epic theatre:  

Dramatic theatre says yes, I have felt the same. I am just like this. This is only natural. It will always be like this. This human being’s suffering moves me, because there is no way out for him. This is great art, it bears the mark of the inevitable. I am weeping with those who weep on the stage, laughing with those who laugh…Epic theatre says I should never have thought so. That is not the way to do it. This is most surprising, hardly credible. This will have to stop. This human being’s suffering moves me, because there would have been a way out for him. This is great art: nothing here seems inevitable. I am laughing about those who weep on stage, weeping about those who laugh.  

The Morality of Gentlemen and Brechtian Techniques  

In an article providing an account of the writing process for The Morality of Gentlemen Lohrey said “Brecht was my primary source because he had a developed praxis; he had actually grappled with technical questions of representation and how to represent political points of view”.  

In Chapter Two I suggested The Morality of Gentlemen foregrounds the centrality of class conflict to history while refusing to simplify it. For the moment I want to suggest Lohrey’s adaptation of Brechtian devices produces a dialectical form that presents the very stuff of history as emerging from contradiction.
and complexity within a systemic whole, and that it is the effect of form and content together that produce a dynamic portrayal of a class history rife with contradictions, contestations, and fissures.¹³

I have already argued that the use of real historical documents, pamphlets and articles (Menzies’ speech, quotes from Trotsky on bourgeois morality, the pamphlet authored by CPA leader Sharkey, the resonances with actual news headlines) prevents the potentially pacifying closure of realism. In Chapter Two, I followed Anne Diamond in considering how the Narrator’s investigations and the third-person ‘omniscient’ narrative (I am enclosing this term in quotation marks because I believe it is an open question whether the narrative is, in any real sense, omniscient, and because of the complexity of such terms given vocalisation, free indirect discourse and the contemporary novel form) had a dialectical relationship where each of the narratives could be seen as a version of the other that contests as well as illustrates the claims of either or both.

The Narrator – who splinters the narrative momentum and the suspense of the main storyline, while also returning us to a time when these events are history – is arguably a Brechtian device. While Brechtian narrators are often reliable, like Greek choruses, the narrator-historian in The Morality of Gentlemen is an ironic figure who pursues the patently unrealisable goal of apolitical and objective historical truth. The presence of a ‘character’ called the Narrator is interesting for several reasons. Clearly he does not have exactly the same function as the narrator of theatre, who, in much of Brecht’s work is a link to the world outside the play: the figure who both teaches us how to understand the significance of events and often announces them before they are dramatically enacted.

In Lohrey’s novel, the self-conscious naming of the Narrator as narrator occurs in a work that is intrinsically, unavoidably made up of narrators, voices, and narratives. The artificiality of the production of fiction is foregrounded by this device, even as it is deconstructed (whereby the presence of a Narrator somehow presumes another layer or level of writing explicable to us in non-narrated, or non-narrative form.)

That the Narrator is also a character of the novel, portrayed to us as a specific person in time makes his ‘doubling’ function even more complicated. (The kind of character he is – a man on a quest, traversing the city unearthing clues, interviewing witnesses, trying to put together “an identikit if you like” – carries echoes of the detective figure in fiction.) Characterisation is deliberately sketchy but the Narrator is at points
imbued with a certain flashpoint of imagination, impressionistic whimsy, such as when he wonders if Rachel Conlan might have insight into Quinn’s motives, gained “over secret lunches of chicken sandwiches, eaten half-heartedly, plastic containers of tea sipped to the halfway mark”. And yet the Narrator’s absence from the list of characters at the start reinforces his externality, his othering or ‘outsideness’ to the rest of the text.  

Chapter Two articulated the paradoxical and irresolvable question of whether the third-person events of the novel can be seen as enactments of the Narrator’s discoveries, or whether these are indeed to be seen as ‘primary and original’ at least in terms of predating the Narrator’s investigations. This relationship is mystified by the lack of any formal division of the text into chapters and the presence of multiple narrators and pieces of material within the same section. I do not intend to return to this riddling embedding but in the final part of this chapter, I will use Catherine Belsey’s analysis to suggest it is precisely the incommensurability of the various narrators and voices that is meant.

However, another pertinent structural ambiguity emerges from the fact that the Narrator uncovers very little that is not communicated elsewhere – from Jaz’s recollections or the ‘omniscient’ strand of the narrative – about the Moseley dispute. Instead, it is the future of the men involved, what they become, or their own reflections from the position of hindsight, as well as some occasional contextual remarks (the history of Eyenon’s family on the wharf, the background to Moseley’s discontent with Crane, the ALP and the WWF) that is revealed. The Narrator has no privileged knowledge. The Narrator as character thus does not so much narrate his knowledge of events as embody a reminder that any ‘speaking for’ history is also an interpretation, a politically and ethically imbued narrative of it (redolent of Hayden White’s notion of “meta-history”). To resuscitate Brecht’s “street scene” analogy, the Narrator here becomes the bystander who was never there, the absent witness, ironically overlaid with a whole network of ideological and political anxieties about removing point of view.

It is tempting to read the Narrator’s earnest promise (“I’ll be trying to do the right thing by you, the reader: I’ll be trying to eliminate the Point of View, to present a mirror, not a prism”) and his instruction to “always look for the typical” and pious sidelining of “characters and eccentrics” as a fictional tongue-in-cheek parody by Lohrey of Lukács’ preoccupation with the qualities of the canonical nineteenth-century novel and socialist realism and reflection theory’s investment in ‘types’.
Because, counter to the Narrator’s plea, the multiple points of view in the work 
juxtapose (even as they layer into one another in a dialectic) the discourse of class-
conscious workers with that of the church, Menzies himself, assorted ruling class figures 
(the shipping company directors, ‘Lady Pearl’), parliamentary politics and the legal 
system, and so on. It is not the mirror held up to the world so beloved of reflection 
theory (following Stendhal’s analogy) that exemplifies the principles guiding Lohrey’s 
form but rather something resembling that most eighties of objects: a mirror ball – or 
prism – that deflects and deforms, recasts and refracts light so that it falls in new shapes, 
illuminating unexpected surfaces and, in so doing, creates an utterly different effect that 
is transformative.

The Narrator’s second-person address to the reader (“you, the reader”) also has 
the effect of compounding his unreliability, not intrinsically because it speaks directly to a 
reader, a technique which has a long tradition in the realist and social novel – think of 
Jane Eyre’s famous and exuberant “Reader, I married him!” – but because the multiple 
and contradictory voices of the novel undermine the Narrator’s authority: the 
conventions and formal practices of the work do not support his presumption to mediate 
history for us.

The montage structure of the novel implies that the records of the Narrator’s 
investigation are only presented to readers in part; that time, as it were, has passed or 
been lost between his interpolations. (These gaps, for example, can be inferred when, in 
his interview with Proper Ewington, the Narrator states in an aside “This I have already 
heard from others”, or in his unreported access to the knowledge of Quinn’s and 
Conlan’s affair.) As a Brechtian device the Narrator is crucial in two connected ways: 
firstly he interrupts the third-person description of events and thus breaks suspension of 
disbelief in the major narrative (from its embryonic beginnings, the union’s response, 
expulsion and picketing, to the Supreme court scene); secondly, by reporting summaries 
of what happens next in the story – such as during his interview with Barnes – before the 
third-person narrative is able to depict it, he forces the reader’s attention away from 
outcomes back to implications of history, class and political commitment.

It might be helpful initially to consider estrangement devices from the start of the 
—

The significance of the groupings of the character list at the beginning of the 
—

While Anne Diamond leaves 
—

open the possibility that the cast list “typographically...courts allegiance with Epic
Theatre” the preponderance of authors who either have used or do use character lists in the novel (from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* to current fantasy trilogies), and the ability of readers to accept it as a convention in realist works cuts against this presumption, although, as noted, Lohrey subverts the traditional allegiances and hierarchies with her groupings.\textsuperscript{48}

Montage underpins the structure of the novel where event, time, character and point of view are spliced together in unexpected, even jarring sequences. Even the opening pages move from Menzies’ dinner party to Quinn at his bathroom mirror, with no attempt to link the two. Time is reinstated briefly to what we are told is “tonight” at the Town Hall where Menzies speaks. (This, we can only presume, is the “more public obligation” Menzies left his guests for, several paragraphs and perspectives earlier.)\textsuperscript{49} After some short snapshots where Quinn leaves his friend at the GPO and then attends a CPA committee meeting, and after no direct mention of Moseley, there is an abrupt cut to: “THE NARRATOR: Let me introduce you to the Moseley case, a notorious industrial dispute of the nineteen-fifties”.\textsuperscript{50} The Narrator is clearly not in the nineteen-fifties but his own time is mystified, while the previous sections are, as we learn later, a ‘flashforward’ from the Moseley events, yet not a climactic endpoint or narrating instance that brings closure or direct reflection (and this moment is not returned to). As we read on we know these events are still the ‘past’ not only for the Narrator, but, as we can see at the end of the book, for Jaz and other militants. All this falls under the heading “MASTER OF CEREMONIES”.

The following section continues this juxtaposition and entrenches it with the addition of the second-person description of newsreels and Jaz’s first-person recollections. This method of conveying meaning cumulatively through contrasting scenes and story-within-story has many parallels in Brechtian plays. Again and again, like a camera, Lohrey’s text cuts between narratives that, laid side by side, are discordant, either in point of view, time, narrative voice, or place. Montage is evident even at the level of the sentence, with pared back, one-line paragraphs providing a glimpse of one dramatic moment only to wrench away from it to another. (“Pinkenba it is then” is immediately followed by a shift in character and context: “That night, lifting a sling from the wharf, Doolan has a blackout”).\textsuperscript{51}

Montage is also attained in the text by the reordering or cutting up of time. Ian Watt considers one of the essential formal characteristics of the novel in its inception to
be the attention to particular and specific details regarding the movement of time, compared with the “strong classical preference for the general and the universal” in the early eighteenth century critical tradition and previous forms such as Greek and Roman literature and Shakespearian drama (Forster’s “life by values”). But whereas authors like Fielding and Richardson chronicled linear progression, Lohrey slightly unravels time, not so much that we cannot put it back together – there are many developments captured chronologically – but enough that it possesses a slipperiness, a jerkiness.

Moving now to the end of the novel, in the section titled “THE JUDGEMENT”, the action shifts from Justice Cosgrove’s announcement that the union has lost the legal case, to Tommy Quinn’s drunken thoughts at the pub, deciding to take Rachel Conlan with him against the advice of the Party bureaucrats, to Conlan’s waiting thanklessly for him to appear (the reader’s left to deduce something has changed between these two moments which follow one another on the page). After one of Jaz’s monologues, there is the news of Doolan’s death, an account of the Trades and Labour Council’s defiant vote to strike a levy, followed by Llewellyn’s meeting with the Archbishop where he allows himself to admit his dislike for Moseley. This is the last we see of the union militants (the final sections are from Jaz and the Narrator), but the next section – without a heading – entails a huge lurch forward in time where, as Nigel Conlan attends a soirée with Cosgrave, we learn – almost as an aside – that the entire decision about the Levy has been reversed on appeal!

Similarly, the suspense of realism is frequently undercut in classic Brechtian fashion by the announcement of outcomes before they are dramatised: the opening gambit of the Narrator is to reveal the dispute reached the heights (or depths, depending on your point of view!) of “a thousand rioting wharfies”; the first newsreel tells of a court verdict in Moseley’s favour before it is even apparent that legal proceedings are underway, and so on.

The present tense of the third-person narrative creates a sense of history as capable of being changed, in the making, while at the same time focusing the reader’s attention away from the final outcome in the courts and back to the experiences of class and commitment. The intersecting, refracting points of view also help to disjoint time. A third narrating voice in the novel pertains to Jaz.

How are we to understand the placement of Jaz’s own view of the waterfront as the one character who is both a (peripheral) participant in the dispute and able to speak
directly to us at a later point, unfiltered by the assessments of the Narrator? Are his ‘testimonial’ accounts meant to be responses to the unarticulated questions of the Narrator, pieces of an interview then distributed throughout the book? From what position in history is he speaking? From some undated vantage point in the 1960s? The late ’70s? Are these his thoughts, memories or answers to the Narrator’s questions?

Jaz’s narrating instance is shifting, elusive or concealed. His sections often begin in past tense and then slide into present (simple, continuous) tense, suggesting he is looking back on the dispute from some later vantage point and this is reinforced by his incidental references to key moments in history antecedent to the dispute. Off-the-cuff references to the way things have turned out, or how society has subsequently altered support this reading of his positioning at some distance from the fifties, for example, “as it turned out”, “In those days there were some words you just never said in front of women, not like now” (Emphasis mine).54

Not only is this reframing or unsettling of time integral to montage in the novel but it allows Jaz to be viewed in the first and third person (that is from ‘inside’ and ‘outside’) even as it demolishes the distinction and corrodes our expectations of what such categories might mean. Anne Diamond posits that Lohrey uses “the antagonism between the omniscient and the first-person narratives” to demolish the categories of the personal and political.55

Diamond has also argued that the section headings “function as Brechtian placards”.56 Only a detailed comparison with specific theatrical productions could really prove this but the headings certainly operate in a different style to the “omniscient” sections of the narrative, even as they frame them. Diamond presumes the headings belong to the Narrator and that they communicate by “incidentally underlining that this is a mere fiction sustained in someone else’s note-taking”.57 This seems to be erroneous, not only because “THE NARRATOR” is one such recurring section heading (!) but also because they precede his appearance in the narrative and are frequently tonally quite different to the Narrator as he appears in his ‘own words’.58 Unless the effect of linking the chapter headings to the Narrator is to undermine his credibility (the foremost promoter of neutrality suddenly employing headings as vague as “EVENTS”, “ACTION”, or as loaded as “THE MOTH” or as historically specific as “TODAY ON THE WATERFRONT…”), it seems more likely the headings are not expressions of the
Narrator’s notes (especially as these notes have their own headings, more intimately connected with his interviews, such as “EXTANT MILITANTS V” and so on).

The headings are often not summaries so much as propositions or tiny fragments (from “THE LAW” to “THE SMOKO DEBATES” to “INTERREGNUM”) that resemble subheadings in magazine articles or, at other times, news headlines. The section headings are clearly anti-realist, if not Brechtian, as they stop short any classical narrative flow or claim to totality – and do not work harmoniously in their use of language, and implicit perspective, with the remainder of the text.

The incorporation of news articles and indignant letters to the editor is presumably intended to elicit the reader’s reason and sceptical interest over empathic identification, since many of them are, with the benefit of hindsight, brimming with the ideological expressions of Cold War paranoia. (Alec Plunkett tucks one away as an example for his class on ideology?) These also, as I have tried previously to show, drive the novel back to the historical record itself and those literary forms outside fiction (the epistle, journalism, the political pamphlet, the speech) where the explicitly and radically political is more often to be found – and presumed, by some, to belong.

Other Brechtian devices in the work include the interruption of narrative with biographical summary – also characteristic of Dos Passos – such as the “BRIAN JENTS: A RETROSPECTIVE” passage, which gives a potted history of Jents’ changing political allegiances, organisational memberships, education, Church affiliations and cynical manoeuvring. More alienating than the use of headings, I would suggest, are those moments in the narrative that have the appearance on the page of playscripts or transcriptions. Here, rather than prose, the words have the force of instructions, stage directions or notations, so that the very experience of reading itself has the unusual sense of being interrupted by a crowd. “I’ve been called the Pope’s cousin (LAUGHTER)” is one example; another in the same section is “I want you all, here and now, to put up your hands and show me who you support. (A SEA OF HANDS)”. Elsewhere at the Domain the speeches are interrupted by everything from “(MILD CHEERS)” to “(BOOING)”.

The reader – prose’s only equivalent to an audience – is also directly addressed in the second person by the narrative voice (the Narrator?) summarising the newsreels she or he is watching (another Dos Passos echo). The second ‘newsreel’ interpolation has a dispassionate, yet conversational quality, as if it were a missed cricket game being
described to someone on the telephone. Its staccato ‘telegram’ short sentences open out into a more elegiac tone where painterly detail meets the colloquial. This newsreel also gives some clues to the historical moment:

THEY ALL LOOK MORE OR LESS ALIKE. SOME OF THE HEADS ARE BALD. SOME HAVE HAIR, MOSTLY SHORT IN BRUSHED-BACK WAVES. SOMETIMES THEY STAND QUIETLY, THOUGH IN AN ATTITUDE OF CONFRONTATION. A FEW IN A SMALL GROUP TALK AMONG THEMSELVES, LOOKING SIDEWAYS FROM TIME TO TIME AT THE CAMERA OVER THEIR SHOULDER. WHEN THEY FEEL THE OCCASION WARRANTS IT, THEY MAKE A GREAT NOISE: THIS BUZZ EMANATES FROM THE SCREEN IN A SHORT-LIVED BURST THAT IS SOON REDUCED IN VOLUME TO A BACKGROUND BUZZ SO THAT THE AUTHORITATIVE VOICE-OVER OF THE NEWS COMMENTATOR CAN BE HEARD EXPLAINING EVENTS. GIVING AN EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE ACTION. TELLING US WHERE THE NOISE IS COMING FROM. IT’S COMING FROM THESE BLACK, WHITE AND GREY MEN IN THE BACKGROUND. SEE. ANYWAY, THE ISSUES HAVE DIED. THEY ARE NO LONGER TOPICAL. BUT YOU GET THE IDEA. THE IDEA OF MASS. THE MASS.

THE MASSES, ETC.\textsuperscript{62}

Aside from being close to Brecht’s notion of the narrative spectator explaining events in the ‘street scene’ essay, the newsreel raises both the hegemonic power of television news (where the ‘authoritative’ voice belongs to the commentator not to any of the participants) and its ability to mediate history, as well as reminding us of how rare it is to receive accounts in the mainstream press by \textit{working-class people} of their struggles (the men here are mere “background”). Despite the fleeting use of the first-person collective, distance is also established (“anyway the issues have died”), while the section closes with a pun on (religious or scientific) mass and the (proletarian) masses.

In other significant ways the novel breaks with Brecht whose work was often highly allegorical and analogical (he termed some of his later work “philosophical folk theatre”). The terrain of \textit{The Morality of Gentlemen} is far from the retellings of classic stories, uses of mythology and folk parables of some Brechtian plays – where audiences often know the stories portrayed in advance. Moreover, Lohrey seems to have some investment in staying faithful to the historical record of events in covering the dispute.

It is arguable that the highly intricate plot creates suspense despite the use of montage and the revelation of the outcomes of particular conflicts before their resolution. Modjeska has noted that Lohrey “traverses ground more usually associated with the old Left and with socialist realism: industrial disputes, the Communist Party, \textit{working-class struggles}”.\textsuperscript{63}

Characterisation, aside from that of the Narrator, is largely realist, while Brecht’s characters often demonstrated some resemblances to the early stock or ‘virtue’ characters”. The working-class men in the novel are not conveyed as exemplifying the
“spirit of revolutionary romanticism” of socialist realism either, however.64 Lohrey saw her novel as departing from the doctrine of socialist realism, which she saw as deploying the “aesthetics of classical realism” and in practice often romanticising and sentimentalising working-class life and struggle.65 It would no doubt be an interesting project to compare The Morality of Gentlemen with some of the fiction by Communist Party members in the nineteen forties and fifties to see in what ways and to what extent the novel represents a break with this tradition.66

At the Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934, to consolidate Stalin’s state capitalist rule and extend his control of literature and culture, Gorky, Radek and Zhadanov oversaw the promulgation and enforcement of precepts of partinost (commitment to the working-class cause of the party), narodnost (popularity) and klassovost (the theory of the class nature of art) alongside a crude hostility to the techniques of modernism.67 To shore up Stalin’s ideological control at a time when the Party effectively controlled publishing entirely, this involved a shrill insistence on literary production that created positive working class ‘types’: individuals who were heroic and engaged and imbued ‘with a spirit of revolutionary romanticism’.68 As Selden suggests, “The modernist rejection of traditional realism left Socialist Realism as the leading custodian of bourgeois aesthetics!”69

In Australia, Zhdanovism became a dominant and persistent influence for writers in the Communist Party of Australia and the organs of literary publication that surrounded it, such as the Realist Writers Groups in Sydney and Melbourne, and the Australasian Book Society. Socialist realism intersected with an existing indigenous radical nationalist tradition and its associated motifs of city and bush, masculinity, social protest and the battler figure, as well as pre-existing forms (the ballad, the satire, the protest novel).

It has usually been accepted by reviewers that The Morality of Gentlemen is a significant departure from socialist realism. And yet David Carter, in his “Documenting and Criticising Society” argues that in the 1930s there was a culture of experimentation and openness in politically committed writing in Australia, including incorporation of documentary writing, modernist devices, and fragmentation. Carter suggests it was not until the Cold War years that socialist realism was taken up the Communist Party leadership as the only appropriate literary theory and form.70 Carole Ferrier also raises Oriel Gray’s assertion that in Australia it was only “after the war ‘the dreaded phrase: “it doesn’t show the face of the party” began to be heard.”71
In practice, socialist realism often became a matter of directing content to a particular political end or immediate argument (attacks on the union bureaucracy or the Labor party to later praise of ‘united front’ anti-fascist writing) rather than a discernable literary form.

Indeed Ian Syson suggests: “In the end there are no such things as socialist realist novels; there are only novels written by socialists and informed by varying degrees of socialist realist ‘theory’.” The Morality of Gentlemen in its implicit critique of Stalinism and the Party calls out for not only new forms but new politics of resistance and it is perhaps here, more than in questions purely of form, that the break can be best seen, although there are no doubt investigations to be made into the possible similarities between The Morality of Gentlemen and so-called ‘socialist realist novels’.

To return to characterisation, the working-class men are presented sympathetically but they are neither typical nor ideal. Speaking of her characterisation, Lohrey has said she wished to present the proletarian dockworkers “in the spirit of plebian anarchy” and to show that “no side had a monopoly on virtue” and it is in this portrayal that the novel is most ‘realist’ (for lack of a more precise, less contentious, word). One of the men cheats on his wife, another cannot recall whom Karl Liebknecht, the murdered German revolutionary, is, and still more are entranced by the liberating power of minor acts of violence. Jaz’s mate beats to death a pensioner and Jaz claims to know plenty of men who aren’t “fair dinkum” on the wharves. He himself is dubiously if dimly associated with match-fixing and has been arrested for public drunkenness. Plunkett, a leading member of the CPA, is an alcoholic with a penchant for self-criticism and a demeanour of regret combined with an interfering manner. Even Eyenon, whom, the Narrator tells us, “still believes, despite many disappointments” in changing the world, fades from the leadership of the dispute and is entranced by all manner of middle-class gentlemanly rituals and pastimes.

Moreover, the Narrator’s interviews with militants in later life (in his contemporary existence) allow us to see what they have become before we know what they are, which cuts against notions of permanence and essentialism. (The unruly Barnes, for example, becomes an ALP numbers man.) The use of shifting points of view also has the advantage of decentraling the focus on the individual. The novel socialises the subjective: characters are seen acting collectively and in constant interaction with those institutions of modern capitalism: from the courtroom to the Church, the Labour
conference to the union committees, the educationals run by the Communist Party, to meetings addressed on the restrained topic of “The reds have got the guns!” To the extent that there is some connection with Brecht’s view of character, the fluidity and change in the characters operates against static and passive portrayals. The fact that most of the characters are working class is noteworthy in itself.

The Brechtian devices in Lohrey’s work were never intended to be wholesale reproductions or imitations but to engender an alienation effect appropriate to the particular content and form of a politically committed novel produced in specific circumstances.

If the form of Lohrey’s novel undoubtedly helps construct a dialectical view of history, what is the effect of the use of the alienation effect? Do such Brechtian devices have the effect of foreclosing empathic identification and suspense? Does the splintering of the conventions of realism in the novel operate to redirect the reader back to an engagement with the argument of the novel? How disruptive, radical or unexpected are these techniques? It’s not possible – without some empirical sociological research – to attempt to speculate about how readers concretely responded to the novel. Instead, the question now becomes: In what sense was the incorporation of Brechtian devices into the novel form at this time new or radical given the cultural and political climate in which it emerged? Furthermore, to what extent could such devices, techniques and strategies themselves have a politics – or a political end – and, conversely, in what ways might they need to be examined as intimately bound up in the content they shaped and expressed?

Of course there have been tremendous developments in literary form since the 1930s-50s, as well as in the whole way we experience culture (and a host of new technologies that change the role of literature and theatre in contemporary capitalism). The shift from one medium (with a discrete existence in time as well as space and a whole host of available mechanisms of production denied to the novelist, such as lighting design, set, properties, performance, music and song, as well as the ability to change and transform from one night, one moment, to the next) to another is part of the explanation for the way in which The Morality of Gentlemen cannot really be compared, in any simplistic one-for-one capacity, with Brechtian theatre.

Still, it’s worth flagging just how significant the shift from one medium – theatre – to another – the novel – is. The novel, of course, has its own genealogy, since it first solidified as a genre, as Jameson puts it, “in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural
revolution – that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were informed by other, now archaic modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism.”

Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* charts the rise of the genre, the growth of the reading public out of an emergent bourgeois class, and the particular formal characteristics of eighteenth-century realism, as well as the ethical and political implications, for a society with a particular set of philosophical and cultural ideologies, of the content of the new form.

The use of Brecht needs to be historicised within the conditions of production, cultural expression, literary form, economic ‘reform’ and class struggle in Australia in the very late seventies and early eighties. Because the novel – begun in 1977 – wasn’t published until 1984, there are effectively two distinct historical contexts for it: the conditions of production at the end of the 1970s, just as the radical part of that decade was screeching to a halt, and the conditions of reception – from 1984 up until the present day (and presumably into the future). As John Frow has argued:

Every text is marked by a multiple temporality: the time of its production (the “internal” time of its rewriting or repetition of prevailing literary and ideological norms), and the times of its reception in which this textual process is transformed by its entry into new textual relationships.

While the Brechtian dislocations, particularly the use of multiple points of view and montage, foreground antinomies in Lohrey’s novel that serve the dynamic, engaged class conflicts she portrays, by the late seventies and early 1980s, many of these literary devices were practised in literary works in Australia that did not have an explicit political agenda nor a connection with epic theatre, and in a ‘postmodern’ climate of reception where tropes of partiality, fragmentation, multiplicity, parody and pastiche were privileged. From this view, the devices no longer appear to have the same estranging power they once promised, or had the potential to deliver – whether they did or not is a question taken up by Brecht critics – in the world of the stage in Brecht’s time.

In other words the realist form of the novel – bourgeois or ‘classic’ realism to socialist realism – was no longer necessarily the privileged set of aesthetics promoted by critics, academics in universities or by the guardians of the canon. In the post-war period, the works of modernism – with their fragmentation, atomisation, allusion and heightened subjectivity, their stream of consciousness and transformation of time and memory – were now taught and studied, forming a new establishment set of privileged texts and cultural “values” even as the influence of ‘postmodern’ theories of literature and history, and the notion of ‘postmodern’ writing came to the fore.
The particular class relations and state of struggle, of the Left and of movements for human liberation, when Lohrey was writing provide a context for comprehending how the Brechtian devices only achieve partial success in dislodging realist suspense for progressive purposes and engendering “complex seeing” via the “interrogative gaze”. At least while we are focusing on form alone, they risk being reappropriated or coopted back into a postmodern indeterminacy and suspicion of the explanatory power or interpretive presumptions of grand narratives (particularly Marxism, that very grand narrative to which Brecht was so beholden).

The early-mid 1980s was a period of triumph for the Right and the global neoliberal policies of Reagan and Thatcher, of attacks on the organised working-class and the welfare state, and an ideology celebrating free market individualism. By the late 1980s this had hardened into gloating about the end of history and the capacity for capitalism to forthwith declare victory over any conceivable alternative. Of course the early part of this decade, though notable for pushing back of reforms won in the radicalism of the late sixties, was not without its contestations and exceptions, its important class struggles, and campaigns for liberation. But strike rates fell significantly as unemployment grew and many of the more militant trade unions were targeted here, in Britain, and in the United States. In Australia as elsewhere the long post-war boom had given way to the early eighties recession even as the economy was becoming increasingly internationalised and the welfare state dismantled while the deregulation of the economy was matched by an ideological emphasis on individualism, the pursuit of profit, and the divine wisdom of the market.  

Paul Kelly in his End of Certainty: The Story of the 1980s has written of:

[The internationalisation of the world economy in which success became the survival of the fittest...The upshot is that the 1980s was Australia’s decade of creative destruction. It witnessed business shake-out, financial excess, economic restructuring, individual greed, the making and breaking of fortunes, and, for many, a struggle to maintain financial and family security. Despite the hopes it engendered, the decade closed in pessimism. But the significance of the 1980s transcends this pessimism, the decade saw the collapse of the Australian settlement, the old protected fortress Australia.]

While I am not as convinced as Kelly is that the eighties waved goodbye to “fortress Australia” (in 1992 the ALP introduced mandatory detention centres), or of the progressiveness of the new ‘relationship’ with the United States rather than Britain, Kelly’s book is one of the few ‘total histories’ of the decade.

In Australia Whitlam had been disposed of in a coup and Fraser was elected during a period of economic downturn where many of the fragile victories of the
previous decade were snatched back. Hawke’s government changed the ALP’s direction toward a mixed economy and “consensus” politics. By the early 1980s, after severe recession and high unemployment, the Left was on the defensive while major strongholds of militancy in the union movement around the world, such as the coal workers in Britain, were being savaged and the ‘welfare state’ of the seventies was rapidly dismantled under a welter of privatization and de-regulation. Much of the energy and optimism that governed the new Left movements began to subside or be channeled into more inward-looking pastimes concerned with the politics of identity, although there was some continuity and consolidation for aspects of these movements, including the filtering through of reforms won by the women’s movement (refuges, anti-harassment policies, legal reform) or the continuing struggles of Indigenous rights activists. Yet the Right crowed about there being no such thing as society while sections of the intelligentsia in the US and Europe diagnosed the end of class, the end of history, the end of alternatives themselves (something of a cyclical return of the “end of ideologies”, end of social class prognosis in the fifties and sixties but in a significantly different world capitalist structure).  

Indeed, at the level of form, strategies of partiality, irony, fragmentation, plurality, self-reflexivity and allusion had begun to be read in the eighties as expressing another kind of ideology, or ‘cultural logic’, depending on one’s reading of the phenomena, a theoretical outlook perhaps based in the material and social changes after the new social movements had subsided: namely postmodernism.  

Australian literature was increasingly formally diverse in the 1970s and by the 1980s this process was accelerating. In his thesis on the Australian short story, Phillip Edmonds argues that “many of the short fictions were influenced by ‘postmodern’ theory to the extent that they became a form of traumatic note-taking, which masked a late romanticism beneath a fear of the sovereign subject”. Edmonds thesis examines the reasons for the increasing diversity of short fiction at the same time as society and government was markedly conservative. Edmonds has also observed the continuing “technical diversity” of Australian writing into the eighties, including such narrative subversions as “fear of closure”, incompleteness, pastiche, multiplicity and fragmentation (illustrative both of the rise of postmodernism, the ideology of the eighties, and the continued influence of modernism). Edmonds notes that the technical diversity was not always accompanied by any political progressiveness.  

Gelder and Salzmann’s account of
the (relative) boom in publishing of Australian literature in the period also confirms a shift away from realism without any concomitant politic:

A whole range of experimental approaches to fiction materialized; form itself has been one of the most heterogeneous aspects of the fiction produced during this period. Experimental form, of course, may or may not mean radical fiction.86

Jameson and Mandel both argue that in the period after the Second World War capitalism entered a new phase: “multinational” or “late” capitalism, and, for Jameson at least, postmodern cultural expressions and theoretical and philosophical hermeneutics are ultimately expressions of this particular economic organisation of society.87 The origins or parameters of the rise of “late capitalism”, in Jameson’s reading, are to be found sometime in the 1950s or ’60s, where this particular stage in capitalism’s arrival is preceded by “all kinds of supplementary epicycles”88 where the economic structures predate the cultural, social and psychological ruptures. In other words, this set of social relations (more internationalised than ever before, dominated in the first-world by the culture industry, with a new “globalised division of labour”, the rise of multinationals) produces postmodernism’s “conditions of possibility”.89

For Jameson then, postmodernism is not a “style” or movement – in film, architecture, literature and the visual arts – but rather more akin to Williams’ “structures of feeling”, and characterised above all by the “loss of historicity”.90 Jameson writes of the theoretical discourse of postmodernism as: “[T]his unforeseeable return of narrative as the narrative of the end of narratives, this return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos”.91

The formal qualities of postmodern artifacts, for Jameson, are the “waning of historicity” alongside the collapse of modernist historical sensibilities, the turn to “spacialisation”, the use of “blank parody” or pastiche in place of the old irony of modernism, the “waning of effect” within the works – depthlessness and simulacrum – the parasitic use of allusion rather than any claim to being new or authentic, the schizophrenia of the artwork as the bourgeois subject is decentred, a “nostalgia for the present” alongside the commensurability of these cultural forms with the dominant ideologies and new cultural realms of advertising and replication, the erasure, or attempted blurring, of the “older (essentially high modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture”.92

There are important criticisms to be made of Jameson’s approach. Firstly, his work is necessarily highly selective in terms of the works of art and texts it examines and
for that reason often problematically universalizing or insufficiently complex in its analysis of the relationship of economic organisation to cultural expression (and the divisions between and amongst these). Secondly, despite his admirable claim to a totalising perspective, the limited, first-world and highly Americancentric focus prohibits a genuinely global and sufficiently detailed analysis of “late capitalism”. Often a lack of nuance appears to be a symptom of the huge reach of the book, its desire to connect the economic and cultural in a fashion that attempts to articulate an entire period. Lastly, Jameson’s approach can leave little room for agency – both within economic structures, for example his obsession with the process of consumption rather than production and a lack of analysis of social class under late capitalism – and, in the realm of culture, the danger of flattening oppositional or committed art back to being yet another symptom of the impossibility of oppositional representation.

But Jameson’s *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* makes the useful point that even cultural forms that are not, in themselves, ‘postmodern’ are not therefore separate from or ‘nothing to do with’ postmodernism as a theoretical discourse, style, politics, and field of reception:

I am very far from feeling that all cultural production today [1984] is “postmodern” in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term. The postmodern is, however, the forcefield in which very different kinds of cultural impulses – what Raymond Williams has usefully termed ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ forms of cultural production – must make their way.93

Regardless of whether or not such a particular and particularly inflected thing as “late capitalism” as Jameson defines it exists, postmodernism is certainly an element of the climate (cultural, economic, political) that *The Morality of Gentlemen* encountered.

Alex Callinicos, a critic of Jameson’s who sees the advent of postmodernist theory as a symptom that is also a return to reconstituted modernism intermingled with a residual romanticism, has correctly, acerbically, noted that: “the eighties were a boom time for postmodernism”.94 And whether we see such a development at the level of scholarly attention and artistic experiment in the West as an element in the superstructure of a particular stage in world capitalism as Jameson does, or as a “theoretical construct, of interest primarily as a symptom of the Western intelligentsia” which speaks to nothing so much as the disillusionments of the post-68 generation, pessimism about the prospects for social revolution, and the triumph of Thatcherism, as Callinicos suggests, this is the ideological network in which Lohrey’s work is caught, read, produced.95
Lohrey’s novel was published after Lyotard’s famous essay on the Postmodern Condition that posits “incredulity toward meta-narratives” and Hayden White’s pronouncements about ‘metahistory’. While it precedes the work, The Morality of Gentlemen could be easily, if counter-intuitively, absorbed into those readings suggested by Linda Hutcheon’s study of irony and playfulness, “complicity and critique” in ‘historiographic metafiction’ by which she means: “those novels, which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages”.

Anne Diamond argues that to read Lohrey’s novel through the lens of postmodernism would be to misread it: “The Morality of Gentlemen cannot be neatly shelved under the familiar label of Post-Modernist indeterminacy” (emphasis mine). I would go further and say to do so runs the risk of depoliticising the novel. Yet the fact that postmodernism was, at least to some extent, a cultural expression of the individualised ideology of the 1980s, means the field of reception to Lohrey’s work, and its use of form, robs the novel of a wholly estranging effect, even if it is this very form that crystallises and foregrounds, as an organising principle, a structure of voice, the contradictions of history.

For fiction in Australia in the early eighties was perhaps no longer even predominantly influenced by unreflexive realism and so the Australian literary market had a readership not unaccustomed to devices of anti-realism, fragmentation, shifting points of view. One cannot speculate about the reader’s response to the formal devices of estrangement in the work but only say that they may no longer seem strange or distancing because the sorts of conventions and expectations engendered by the novel have altered. Secondly, of course, the theoretical and scholarly framework via which they are interpreted, or mediated, has also radically changed (the collapse of the Communist Parties and Stalinism but also the subsequent hostility to, or apparent irrelevance of, Marxism, and the decline generally of theories of liberation from the system, the decline of a class analysis inside the academy and outside).

And perhaps Brecht’s own warning about the need to treat forms as products of their concrete and specific historical circumstances should be taken here. “Whole tracts of literature which seem, judging by their form to be radical, can be shown to be purely reformist” and likewise “Literature, to be understood, must be considered in its development”.

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I have, until now, deliberately (problematically!) been limiting this assessment of Lohrey’s use of Brechtian devices to a discussion of form, clearly a limited methodology, especially given my earlier assertions about the need to analyse Brecht’s method for theatre in a resolutely political way that does not attempt to segment his practice from his Marxism. But it is precisely because I want to eventually argue that it is the particular combination of form and content in Lohrey’s work that makes it so innovative, and its representations of history so dynamic, that I have been emphasising how a purely formal analysis cannot explicate the progressive elements of the work.

Before considering Belsey’s notion of the ‘interrogative’ text and Lohrey’s attention to working class life, I want to foreground an apparent paradox in my argument, which is that, surprisingly, those critics who either ignored or ‘read past’ Lohrey’s Brechtian techniques did so not by considering the work postmodern but by recourse to its strength of narrative, its resemblance to a much earlier form, the social realist nineteenth-century novel (a rather elastic term naming content as much as form and not really a “genre” or subgenre in itself). Indeed, the APCOL blurb claims a connection with the “social realist tradition”.

Both Milliss and Modjeska have termed the novel “dialectical” – in Milliss’s case in the specific sense meant by David Caute’s extended essay on literature and commitment, *The Illusion*. Peter Craven likewise drew attention to its “ambitious” use of Brechtian and modernist tropes. In his review of *The Reading Group*, Stephen Knight felt that while *The Morality of Gentlemen* did absorb Brechtian elements, it also suffered the same limitations as Brecht encountered in his time:

*The Morality of Gentlemen* offered itself, quite legitimately, as a Brechtian novel. A novel about political actions, it removed from itself the danger of being sucked into the maw of bourgeois practices by the Brechtian stiffening of self-conscious form into a pattern that was exhortative, de-sentimentalising, notionally epic…But because it also retained the materials of expressive realism – dates, people, events in sequence – it ran the risk of being recuperated into a narrative sequence and also, by using popular materials, like much of Brecht, the risk of falling back into the passivities of folk tale.

Leaving aside the arguments contained in this assessment for the time being – though I do agree that something like a conventional plot still operates in the novel as an instrument of suspense that may preclude estrangement in points – it’s clear that Knight is trying to examine the project of the novel in its own formal and political terms, as is Diamond who found the “narrative jumbling” in the middle of the novel likely to “disarm the reader rather than enable him or her to gain some purchase on events; disbelief here has the quality of being an exile at home.”

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But other critics saw the Brechtian devices as largely irrelevant, despite their being explicitly foregrounded in Lohrey’s blurb. For Laurie Clancy, who very much liked the book for its ‘page-turning’ quality: “Either Lohrey or her publishers call the novel ‘Brechtian’...but it is not more Brechtian than Brecht. There is a List of Characters. There is a narrator...but in fact these and other devices hardly impede the drive and sweep of the action and the novel is extremely absorbing”.107 Geoffrey Dutton, on the other hand, positively reviewed the novel but asserts that it is: “basically an old-fashioned novel given some contemporary, post-Brechtian flavour” while running form and content together into one by suggesting that it constitutes “a valiant attempt to get the social-realist novel rolling again”.108 (P.R. Hay also called The Morality of Gentlemen “a faithful work of social realism” in an aside in his review of The Reading Group; another reviewer vaunted it as “uncompromising social realism” and expressed scepticism about “the intrusion of occasional typographical experiments”.109)

This may mean that reviews tell us more about critics than the objects of their attention, but it also reminds us that there is no such thing as ‘pure’ or utter innovation in form: residual elements of older forms continue, as Jameson puts it, as “sediment”.110 Also, that Lohrey’s novel departs from aspects of so-called postmodernist literature in many ways (not least of these being its radical and explicit political commitment but also in its loyalty to narrative itself). Lohrey herself has said: “In a way [it’s] a classic novel. It’s got a beginning and a middle and an end and lots of Victorian-type characters who are clearly drawn. And there are climaxes and courts scenes and demonstrations and...action galore.”111 The nineteenth-century narrative form, despite important disruptions, has not been entirely abandoned so much as displaced and reconstituted. And the very prevalence of ‘postmodern’ pastiche forms in the late twentieth-century may be partly why these devices are not seen as impeding or disrupting the narrative suspense (let alone whether they ever did so, even in Brecht’s theatre).

The Interrogatory Text and Multiple Points of View

Catherine Belsey has contended, in her critique of developments in literary criticism from notions of expressive realism to Leavisite theory and New Criticism, Frye’s formalism, and reader-reception theory that the “classic realist” text is characterised by “illusionism, narrative which leads to closure, and a hierarchy of discourses which establishes the ‘truth’ of the story”.112 Classic realism relies upon a privileged discourse – not those
narratives conveyed through dialogue or first-person but omniscience, or, seemingly, “history”, whereby “the events seem to narrate themselves” – that reigns over all others in the fiction. (Belsey doesn’t consider the possible implications of free indirect discourse/style in her analysis.) The movement towards closure is also seen as a reach for “harmony” and “the reinstatement of order”.¹¹³

Taking up contributions by Saussure, Barthes, Lacan and Althusser, Belsey’s book synthesises these into a deconstruction of that much-contested notion ‘realism’, which she takes to mean a literary work that “offers itself as transparent”¹¹⁴ Belsey finds the term useful “in distinguishing between those forms which tend to efface their own textuality, their existence as discourse, and those which explicitly draw attention to it”.¹¹⁵

For Belsey, influenced both by structuralism and psychoanalysis, the “classic realist” text is complicit in the (re)production of ideology and defending the status quo by concealing “the real conditions of existence” and existing social relations (though, following Macherey, not by direct replication but “by presenting partial truths” and omissions); it is also necessarily involved in the address – interpellation – and “hailing” of the unified static subject “in conjunction with the expressive theory”.¹¹⁶ It is clear that both Althusserian Marxism and the work of Pierre Macherey are central to her analysis, and, as I hope I have established, I find these theorists at points too formalist and insufficiently attuned to the “social” – and, for that matter, material – character of literature.

Nevertheless, Belsey’s scholarly work gives us a foothold on why and how Lohrey is able to utilise multiple discourses and points of view to divide the reader’s sympathies, while her political commitment not only remains intact but is strengthened into a dialectical portrait of the process of struggle. While I do not entirely agree with Belsey’s view that “classic realism cannot foreground contradiction”, and I think her assessment once again suffers from formalist limits, her notion of the “interrogative text” describes The Morality of Gentlemen almost exactly.¹¹⁷ Where classic realism might be considered “declarative”, the:

[Interrogative text, on the other hand, disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation. The position of the ‘author’ inscribed in the text, if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory. Thus, even if the interrogative text does not precisely…seek to ‘obtain some information’ from the reader, it does literally invite the reader to produce answers to the questions it explicitly or implicitly raises…Further if the interrogative text is illusionist it tends to employ devices to undermine this illusion, to draw attention to its own textuality. Above all, the interrogative text differs from the classic realist text in the absence of a single privileged discourse, which contains and places all others.¹¹⁸]
Significantly, given the present analysis, Belsey argues that the interrogative text “refuses the hierarchy of discourses” by “refus[ing] a single point of view, however complex and comprehensible, but brings points of view into unresolved collision or contradiction”.\textsuperscript{119} It seems necessary to pause and note that multiple narrators – including an overarching ‘omniscient’ narrative that can vocalise point of view – have been part of the novel from its inception and are not in themselves implicated in undermining closure or point of view: in many cases precisely the opposite. The use of a narrator to frame the novel was often, as in the case of early French fiction-memoir, and in Defoe, used as a framing device to validate rather than undermine the realism and authenticity of the novel’s claim to truth (bolstering its status as historical fact), while nineteenth-century novels such as Wilkie Collins’ \textit{The Woman in White} used multiple narrators as part of a complex narrative structure that ended in closure.\textsuperscript{120}

But \textit{The Morality of Gentlemen} not only utilises multiple narrators (Jaz, the Narrator) and styles of literary expression (journalism, epistolary correspondence, the political pamphlet) alongside political speeches and newsreels, as well as shifting point of view: the ‘omniscient’ narrator here vocalises the perspectives of many (not only from Doolan to Moseley, Quinn to Eyenon, Jaz to Rachel Conlan, Fergus Llewellyn to the Narrator, Menzies to the Archbishop, Crane to Travers, the detectives, and so on). Lohrey engenders dramatic irony in the contrast between what characters imagine others think of them and what they indeed do, and between various characters’ views of one another. The ‘omniscient’ narrator indeed vocalises utterly irreconcilable perspectives and “structures of feeling” that cannot be brought back together in any whole that is not dialectical. The cutting between first, second and third person enhances this contested and dialectical form. And it is a proliferation of clashing Foucauldian discourses – not merely individual subject positions – that collide: from the language of parliament to the judiciary, or the hegemonic expressions of the newspapers, to the churchy sombre hysterias of the followers of the ‘Movement’, to the ribald militant expressions of working-class resistance. Consider for example, Llewellyn’s ideological attachment to Catholicism:

\begin{quote}
 God’s grace is not denied to any man. It is always at hand. Without it, the divisions between men would be unbearable. There is something violent and animal-like about the working man and that something can only be redeemed by faith. There is something in Marxist-Leninism that seizes on this body of Adam and strips it of baptismal grace, like a human hand tearing out the heart. Llewellyn grimaces at the thought. No wonder they call themselves Reds.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}
The ideological investments here are stark compared with not merely Communist sympathisers, but even the point of view of people on his ‘own’ side. Consider Moseley’s idiosyncratic summary (“the prick of piety against the Communist cunt, eh!”) or Leo Eyenon’s scoffing hostility to religion (“the churches are the enemy of the working man…they divide the working man against himself”), which culminates in his philosophically perspicacious denunciation of prayer after his granddaughter explains she was encouraged to pray for God to damn the Left (“Why ask for prayers?” says Eyenon…‘It’s a peculiar idea that God should need any incentive to act on his own behalf’).122

Shifting point of view means the narrative can capture not merely the class position and language of waterside workers – such as during Charlie Button’s speech, “This Menzies government is a mob of jackals. It’s a bosses’ government, pure and simple and we’ll oppose it by whatever means we can. How much longer can we be expected to go on working and feeding our families while old Pig Iron passes one bit of anti-working class law after another?”123 – but also the investments and divisions of the ruling class:

Lady Heinze, at her desk, compiles a privileged mailing list of people she’s touched before. Her sons and daughters-in-law gaze benignly on her fervid absorption, listen to her diatribes at dinner, check that their shares in BHP and CSR are unaffected by these bêtes noires and leave their mother to get on with her selfless if eccentric fundraising. Someone has to do this kind of work.124

Once again, this collision involves the depiction of class as an active and complex relationship of material interests, cultures and rituals within 1950s capitalism and hegemony. In a 2004 interview, discussing Belsey’s Critical Practice (which she had not read when she wrote the novel), Lohrey asserted: “That was what the Brechtian techniques were about. Estrangement techniques deployed to induce the reader to stand back from the text, not to wholly identify with any of the characters, not to immerse their subjectivity”. The focus on a working-class industrial dispute where relations of ideology, class and commitment are primary is what makes Lohrey’s particular use of the “interrogatory text” so powerful as a committed work of art. As Ian Syson claims, in the context of a discussion of socialist realism: “Writing in the novel form about the revolutionary proletariat is itself – given the historical absence of this class in European and Australian literature – an innovative enterprise which is in the process of changing at least some of the ‘conditions of art’.”125

It was a unique, a novel, experiment in Australian literature, which has not been since repeated. Anne Diamond suggests The Morality of Gentlemen “provides its own
homiletic tale of the political discovered at the door of private life, not forgetting, as the
double-take occurs, that this door is *working-class* and too often, in the fiction of
Australia’s history, shut tight*.126
Chapter Four: “History is what hurts” or “The future may not be worth it” – The Reading Group and dystopia

The Reading Group has mostly been reviewed as a dystopia or satire. In this chapter I wish to explore the novel’s relationship to the formal elements of modern (late twentieth and twenty-first century) dystopia and posit that it is in fact an “incomplete” dystopia, a hybrid ‘near future’ text. I will examine the significant ways that The Reading Group departs from generic conventions of the dystopia and the implications of these formal disruptions, while also emphasising the permeability of genre boundaries, the dynamic, rather than static understanding of the evolution and formation of genre, and its porous, cross-pollinated and changing nature (particularly in those dystopias written since the Cold War period). After sketching out some of the historical-theoretical studies of science-fictional form I will suggest that The Reading Group is both an account of the cooption of the social dreaming and (essentially political and radical) utopian impulse of the campaigns of the 1960s and 70s into the numbing compensations offered by liberal democratic market capitalism (shopping, sexual possession, the pursuit of the new) and an unmasking of the “fake” – the term is from Darko Suvin – utopia of the market. That is, the novel is a critique of aspects of Australian political life in the eighties (pronounced economic inequality, environmental devastation, unemployment, homelessness, parliamentary labour parties) and, for reasons connected with the amnesia and lack of resistance I explore in Chapter Five, a symptom of hegemonic ideologies, especially those pertaining to the ‘end of history’ in the period.

Precisely because Lohrey’s novel, set in an unspecified ‘near future’, blends generic expectations and conventions (not only has it been interpreted as a satire on the Left intelligentsia, it was the subject of threats of defamation litigation, accused of injurious portrayals of a real-life politician), and because ‘utopian studies’ as a body of theory has developed complex and sophisticated understandings and debates about dystopia, it is worth beginning this investigation by testing the proposition that The Reading Group is a dystopia.

Science fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, Anti-utopia
It has become almost de rigueur to begin an analysis of science fiction with the assertion that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) or HG Wells’ *Time Machine* (1895) are somehow between them the ‘parents’ of science fiction, an analogy replicating presumptions of the primacy of the nuclear family of which many dystopias and utopias posit the end. I do not want to revisit the complexity of the term or attempts by scholars to separate it from – or connect it to – genres of fantasy, horror, the ghost story, nor to analyse its relationship with older genres.³ I am less interested in establishing some absolute definition of dystopia and slotting *The Reading Group* into it, than I am in charting how the formal characteristics of Lohrey’s novel affect representations of history, and shape, even inhibit, the critical and progressive elements of her work, and how the form she uses emerges from history.

Jameson argues that science fiction began to flourish as a genre under capitalism just as the historical novel was waning in popularity.⁴ Darko Suvin notes that these fictions involved, from the time of the industrial revolution, the shift to worlds forward in *time* rather than simply in enclosed mysterious other spaces – utopias – or *space itself* (Verne et al) or voyages to other lands.⁵

I am not trying to delineate science fiction absolutely from realism or naturalism, which would doubtless be misguided and fruitless. As Suvin notes, “once one begins such considerations, one comes up quickly against the rather unclear concept of realism – not the prose literary movement in the nineteenth century but a metaphorical stylistic principle”.⁶ Instead of trying to set science fiction ‘against’ realism, or becoming trapped in an endless series of generic definitions, I merely wish to summarise the formal framework according to Suvin, before proceeding with an analysis of Lohrey’s novel as a dystopia.

According to Darko Suvin, both utopia, and by extension dystopia, rely – in necessarily and crucially different ways – on the science-fictional element of ‘cognitive estrangement’ (a term that traces back to Brechtian *verfremdung* and the Russian formalist notion of literary language as ‘making strange’).⁷ Estrangement occurs when the point of view taken “encompasses a new set of norms”, which forces a reader to see the society they inhabit anew, so that the familiar now seems unfamiliar, even shocking.⁸ According to Suvin, estrangement has “grown into the formal framework of the genre”⁹ produced by the Novum (the “strange newness” of the imagined world that is, despite its innovation or novelty, still rational, plausible or possible).¹⁰ The central literary device of science

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fiction is thus to be by identifying “a locus and/or dramatis personae that are radically different or at least significantly different from the empirical times, places, characters of ‘mimetic’ fiction”. Moreover, the Novum – Suvin has borrowed the term from Bloch – is characterised by innovation, a historically specific concept if ever there was one. (Think of how laughable attempts to represent new technology become when viewed from some later and technologically more sophisticated vantage point.)

The Novum is to be found in the “unknown”, the “other” or through the depiction of “a change of the whole universe of the tale”. The Novum can be as limited as a “new invention” or as drastic as “the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus), agent (main character or characters) and/or relations basically new and unknown in the author’s environment.” The Novum is “born in history and judged in history”.

The political and philosophical question of the extent to which the Novum is ever ‘new’, whether we can ever indeed imagine the future and a radically different society, or if science fiction in general and the utopia in particular, often, as Jameson posits at points “serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment”, cannot be addressed here. In any event, I wish to add to Suvin’s “poetics” of the genre, Jameson’s perception that:

For the apparent realism, or representationality, of SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us images of the future – whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily precede their “materialisation” – but rather to defamiliarise and restructure our experience of our own present and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarisation.

Raymond Williams says of the “anticipatory” nature of science fiction, that the ‘future device’ is: “usually only a device for nearly always it is obviously contemporary society that is being written about”. For dystopias – to which we now turn – this is even more pronounced, as they are so frequently and consciously extrapolated from tensions, fears, oppressions, states, tendencies, or problems in the material conditions of the present from which they emerge.

Unlike the utopian text, which gained its name and early form in Thomas More’s foundational sixteenth-century Utopia (“eutopia” a pun on ‘no place’ and ‘good place’), the dystopia (‘bad place’) is usually identified as originating in the early 1900s, on the heels of a flurry of utopian texts, and its later voluminous production interpreted as “largely a product of the terrors of the twentieth-century.” Darko Suvin has theorised utopia as a “sub-genre of science fiction” (despite the former predating the latter!) while
Moylan also notes the dystopian form’s roots in Menippean satire and nineteenth-century naturalist and anti-utopian literature.20

Moylan suggests the dystopia is distinguished, along with other subgenres of science fiction, by its “ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic”, its “unfashionable capacity for totalising interrogation” and its ability to criticise contemporary conditions or nascent threats.21 Dystopia operates, in a representational mode, through extrapolation or the analogue model. “The dystopian political imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle, the canary in the cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible socio-political tendencies”.22

E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909) and Jack London’s The Iron Heel (1908) are seminal fictions in the genre, whereas, according to Moylan, 1984, Brave New World and We “have come to represent the classical or canonical form of dystopia” (an assertion that will be complicated by the discussions of the critical dystopia and the anti-utopia below; Fredric Jameson argues 1984 is an anti-utopia).23 Kingsley Amis coined the phrase “new maps of hell” to describe the tone of dystopian fictions in the wake of the Second World War (and the horrors of Stalinism and Nazism), and Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini both observe the revival, even boom, in dystopian writing during the 1980s and 1990s, and a shift in focus, in this period, from anxieties surrounding the state and bureaucracy (often totalitarian), to prophecies regarding the insidious, oppressive power of the contemporary corporation.24

Baccolini and Moylan, amongst others, have also developed and theorised the notion of the ‘critical dystopia’, exemplified for them by the writing of Le Guin, Butler, Cadigan, Piercy, Stanley Robinson and Charnas (for Baccolini, working from a feminist framework, also Atwood’s Handmaid’s Tale) and flourishing in the late-1980s–1990s onwards, particularly in American fiction.25 For Moylan and Baccolini the notion encompasses those politically engaged critiques that “maintain a utopian impulse” despite their apparent pessimism, and that retain a “militant or utopian” stance both in content through the portrayal of resistance, which is not crushed, or eulogues of hope, and in form, via the use of ambiguous, open endings, self-reflexivity and genre blurring.26

In formal terms, Lohrey’s text clearly displays some elements of the critical dystopia, although as I go on to argue in Chapter Five, the absence of any meaningful resistance or recuperation of history mitigates the potential “utopian impulse” at play in
her work. Elsewhere, Moylan describes the critical dystopia as “a textual mutation that...also offers explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance” a definition that Lohrey’s novel clearly falls outside of.\(^{27}\) In any case, the dystopia in general “is an exercise in a politically charged form of hybrid textuality”.\(^ {28}\)

I would like to emphasise an important distinction, made by both Tom Moylan and Lyman Tower Sargent before him, namely to reserve the term ‘anti-utopia’ “for that large class of works, both fictional and expository, which are directed against utopia and utopian thought”. In Lyman Tower Sargent’s definitions in ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, anti-utopian texts as those intended by an author to be perceived by a reader as a “criticism of utopianism or a particular utopia”.\(^ {29}\) Jameson adds a fourth subset to the dystopia, distinguished perhaps by degree, namely the “apocalyptic” text, portraying “visions of total destruction and the extinction of life on earth”, as popularised in Cold War science fiction, the work of John Wyndam, or, more recently, Cormac McCarthy’s bleak prophecy The Road.\(^ {30}\)

Meanwhile, dystopia, “as an open form, always negotiates the continuum between the Party of Utopia and the Party of anti-Utopia”.\(^ {31}\) Thus dystopias can be critical and progressive (“self-consciously warnings...that impl[y] that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible”) but they may also be more conservative and pessimistic, suggesting that there is no alternative, or that the world depicted is somehow inevitable, a product of human nature, devoid of oppositional agency, and stripped of any prospect of collective change.\(^ {32}\)

Turning to the utopian literary form, Jameson’s now extraordinarily influential, and controversial, position on the utopian text is revisited in Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions. Jameson constructs a methodology that de-centres the focus on surface content of the utopian texts in order to understand them fully in the realm of ideology and history: “our perversely formalist approach to Utopia as a genre has thus displaced the inquiry away from content”.\(^ {33}\) His groundbreaking contribution involves insisting that these texts ought not to be interpreted as “blueprints” for ideal societies, as their immediate content might suggest, but as a “meditation on the impossible”: testimonies to “our inability to imagine the future”, which retain a certain “critical negativity”, and power to “demystify their opposite numbers”. Indeed, through their very failure, such texts operate by “forcing us to think
the break itself”; through their form they are “meditations on radical difference, radical otherness” that force us to concentrate on “the unrealisable in its own right”.\footnote{34}

The literary utopia – at least in its early incarnations – is to be discovered via a journey or travel, and is divided from the remainder of the world by space (an island or other inaccessible realm, or, in the novelisations of the seventies, an enclave) or time (in twentieth-century utopias, often to the future). The dystopia is constructed through strategies of anagogical narration or extrapolation from existing, by inference harmful, tendencies in our own time and can thus be interpreted as supplying a warning, in the fashion of the Heinlein story (titled ‘If this goes on…’).

The classical utopia shows the interaction between a wide-eyed visitor from another world and his or her philosophical ‘tour guide’ who explains the utopian system and answers the foreigner’s queries or objections. Such texts (for example Morris’s \textit{News From Nowhere} and Bellamy’s \textit{Looking Backward}) in Jameson’s view possess formal characteristics of stasis (because they posit the “end of history” or, at least in their earlier incarnations, an “epoch of rest”) and closure (through their “radical secession”, their self-contained distance from and break with the rest of the world, their drastic refusal to be incorporated into the existing society we know).\footnote{35} The situation is perhaps more complicated in the counter-cultural self-reflexive ‘critical utopias’ of the nineteen-seventies – which ranged across the ecological, feminist and pacifist, and where the very desirability of utopia was tested and interrogated by the text, and the closed ‘trenches’ providing the boundary of utopia gave way to something more fluid.

Compared with these time-honoured devices of journey, secession or enclave, the dystopian text, as Moylan and Baccolini asserts “usually begins directly in the terrible new world”.\footnote{36} Moreover, Jameson suggests that “the dystopia is generally a narrative, which happens to a specific subject or character, whereas the utopian text is mostly non-narrative, and, I would like to say, somehow without a subject position” (emphasis mine).\footnote{37} Moylan and Baccolini concur, writing that, “The [dystopian] text is built around the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance.”\footnote{38} In \textit{Seeds of Time} Jameson also prosecutes the rather controversial notion that the “dystopia is always and essentially what, in the language of science fiction criticism, is called a ‘near-future’ novel”.\footnote{39}

What then is the dystopia in literary terms? Although there are a plethora of divergent attempts to clarify this, Lyman Tower Sargent has defined it as: “A non-
existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space
that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than
the society in which that reader lived.”40 Anne Cranny-Francis modified this broad
account with the suggestion that a dystopia operated as “the textual representation of a
society apparently worse than the writer’s/reader’s own”.41 Given the previous analysis
of the science-fictional text’s function restructuring our view of our own present – and
making it history – in some ways Tower Sargent’s definition begs the question: for isn’t it
precisely by exaggerating, allegorising, extending and reframing or reformulating aspects
of our own time that the dystopia gains its force?

I want to now consider The Reading Group as a dystopia in light of this definition,
while also recognising that any conclusions can only be prima facie until an analysis of
form as well as content is made. Clearly no absolute generic demarcation will be
attempted here, as both Lohrey’s work and the dystopian form in the last twenty years,
has been hybrid and complex; in any case developments in literary theory would suggest
such a pursuit is likely to lead into a blind alley.

The Reading Group as an ‘Incomplete’ Dystopia

I want to suggest that The Reading Group is what I choose to call an ‘incomplete dystopia’
which, while partly relying on science-fictional devices and constructing a future world
extrapolated from tensions in the 1980s, is also self-consciously embedded with
deliberate and concrete, often quite explicit allusions and resonances to events, cultures
and habits that belong to the [then] present (early-to-mid-1980s) and the recent past
(mid-70s). These reformulate elements of realism, while subverting, even inverting,
aspects of dystopian form.

The minimal reliance on Novum in the work and its incorporation of many
elements of the Australian landscape in the eighties, means that Lohrey has not created a
fully realised dystopia, where everything from sexuality, transport, the state and
technology is reinvented, but rather, as Michael Heyward suggests, through a range of
techniques, Lohrey “deform[s] and dislocate[s] the realist ambitions of the prose”.42 For
Knight this is attained primarily by the use of allegory:

Lohrey re-establishes the bourgeois fictional mode in a destabilized form, a form that is rendered
unbalanced by the starkly allegorical character of contextual events...the terrain is one of
concept not the intellectually debilitating mimesis.43
Yet the use of allegory is partial rather than systemic in *The Reading Group*, which has nothing of the intense state control and surveillance of the classical dystopias, or even the repression and struggle of the ‘critical dystopias’. *The Reading Group* may have more in common with Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Gold Coast*, which, at least in Tom Moylan’s analysis, uses strategies of genre blurring and thus creates a “deceptively normal narrative” that is nonetheless a dystopia.44

Does *The Reading Group* present a non-existent society and is this imaginary place apparently worse than the world the novel’s readers inhabit(ed) (Australia in 1988)? This line of enquiry – which is meant to eventually lead us to an examination of representations of history – unexpectedly draws us back to the complexities of time. For Lohrey began her novel in 1982 and it was published in 1988, almost twenty years ago. What was non-existent or terrible in 1988 may not be so in 2007. As Walter Benjamin notes: “What is at issue is not (merely) relating the works of literary art to the historical context of their origin but representing the time of interpretation (i.e. our time) in the time of their genesis. Thus literature becomes an organon of history.”45

These questions raise precisely the problematic of extrapolation, allegory and realism that emerge even more forcefully in my examination of representations of history in the novel (Chapter Five). The declared future setting also conjures up and represents elements of the contemporary landscape. Is the novel constrained or undermined by realism, a lack of Novum, or is this part of the sophistication, the argument, indeed the historical specificity of the novel?

It is not my intention here to fetishise a particular definitional question but rather to foreground the hybridity and complexity of Lohrey’s form and to foreshadow how this formal construction might impact on the way history is rendered.

On one level Lohrey’s novel is undeniably articulating a non-existent society, one still, as it were, ahead of us. The novel declares itself to be set in the future (the blurb pronounces it “set in an indeterminate future at the time of a political crisis in an unnamed city”). No date is given in the novel but a loose framework can be established by deduction: in one scene, during a political speech the ‘year 2000’ is still referred to as a benchmark in the future. As Stephen Knight notes, we can assume the book is set “some time very soon” as, with some important exceptions, the world conveyed is disarmingly familiar.46 For example, the novel opens with a character at a real estate inspection, there are debates about logging, a goodbye ceremony for a labour politician, replete with pale
applause and awkward jokes, and a political party riddled with factionalism and indecision. Another reviewer argues: “it’s set in the future but not systematically so; by this I mean [Lohrey is] not constructing any working models of future states (like Orwell and Huxley) but rather offering images of decay”.47

One can speculate about what year the novel is set. The major characters (one-time members of the reading group) reminiscence about their youthful activist days protesting the Vietnam War and marching for equal pay. Presumably in their early-to-mid twenties in the mid-1970s – Sam directly recalls being twenty-ish in the seventies – the novel’s protagonists are now middle-class professionals (two teachers, a lawyer, social worker, home-maker, academic and arts administrator) in couples, some with young children, in their thirties or very early forties, situating the novel in the very late eighties or early nineties.

A number of reviewers assume the novel’s real subject (not just allegorically, or by extrapolation or analogy but nakedly and literally) is the [then] present. Andrew Reimer, for example, writes: “This image of the future is therefore a replica of the apparently quiet, unspectacular, indecisive Australia of the present”.48 Reimer makes the observation that: “Lohrey’s world is very much the present. The world she creates displays the familiar ordinariness of Australia in the 80s. And this is one of the things that makes this an interesting novel.”49 Katherine England is more circumspect, considering it a “perhaps marginally futuristic Australian society”.50 Knight presumes Lohrey to be “looking at next year, next decade” and the fictional world to be “apparently beyond late capitalism”.51

While I do not consider The Reading Group a simple ‘replica’ or expression of the eighties, it is apparent that its “conditions of possibility” are to be found in the decade of global reaction, the rise of the corporation, the decline of the welfare state, the growing inequality in living standards, and so on. Undoubtedly too, some of the concrete features of the society in The Reading Group (the machinations of the factionalised moderate social-democratic party, the economic instability and high unemployment, the defeat of the Left) are drawn from Australian political life and history.52 But as Suvin writes, the poetics of science fiction “impl[y] not only a reflecting of but also on reality. It implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author’s environment”.53
What sort of future society is represented in the novel? At first glance, simply a liberal democratic one, despite increasingly authoritarian measures directed at the lumpenproletariat and the public posturing of an ascendant New Right. There is what appears to be a free press (even if one replicating hegemonic discourse, and permeated by advertising and PR spin) and a hamstrung, prevaricating Coalition state government (elected, one can only presume, through the usual bourgeois parliamentary measures). The state sees a social-democratic Party with links to the union movement and the erstwhile working class – which has virtually disappeared from the novel – trying to hold on to power. Little is known of the guardians of power federally, or indeed in the rest of the world, for this is quite a localised portrait.

There is, to all intents and purposes, a recognisable Western legal system, whose operations are kept separate from the executive; and at least the appearance of the opportunity for a formally ‘fair’ trial, as implied by Andrew’s representation of a Metropolitan Indian in court. The state is obsessed with its own novelty (there’s a New Nation campaign, New patriotism, a New army, and so on), while the organisation of the economy, and global context is not conveyed.

The future is still filled with the mundane branded consumer products of the West (Myer, Datsun, Pizza Hut, Elizabeth Arden, Cartier, ‘save the whale’ stickers). The representations of space, transport, employment, education system, press and landscape are recognisable (at times identical to those spaces in the world of Australia in the 1980s)’. Characters read Jane Austen, Antonio Gramsci, Marx’s Capital, Doris Lessing, The Pritikin Diet or House and Garden. These nominally ‘realist’ representations are aestheticised and inflected with a cyberpunk-esque fascination with the barrenness of steel and glass, the grimy and fire-blackened, in a dark rendering of a city ridden with the disease imagery of satire.

An ominous sense of unease, menace, lingers. The city is ringed by bushfires that rage and cinder, turning the sky black, always on the verge of engulfing the urban space. Several of the characters find this threat exciting, even arousing, a source of abandon in their stultifying worlds.

Consider the “images of decay” in the first few pages of the novel. The unnamed city is clogged with smog and seedy tenements; the construction boom drawn in the novel is matched by visions of a “boarded up electrical shop” and other abandoned
buildings and enclaves. Robbie notes “the heat and the squalid streets”. Later, the housing estate is described as set in “grey concrete wilds”; it “has a mundane nightmarishness about it”; the high-rise flats emanate a “prison air and institutional smell”.

Throughout the text, the arid countryside (“dry roadside grasses are eaten down to a bare, yellow stubble…the trees have a grey brown tinge: their splayed and crooked shapes look old and oddly fragile, as though when touched they would disintegrate into a fine powder and blow away”) and the fires (“across the bay, grey wisps of smoke waft up from patches of blackened scrub smouldering on the hills”) are contrasted with “the squat towers of steel and reflector glass” of the city, “the widened street and grey industrial sites”; pollution promises “a kind of toxic fairyland”.

Even in space itself there is a latent fear of repression from the point of view of the middle-class characters. When Robbie and Lyndon play tennis, the latter thinks “down on the floodlit court there’s a strong sense of being in a roofless cage” and that the courts “have a weird quality…the bland sunstruck heart of suburbia, transformed into electric menace” while Robbie can’t help seeing them as “like a concentration camp.”

The fires leave burnt-out cars covered in white ash. When Renata takes “the elderly poet of the Right” into the territory of the fires, they look at “a severe silver ribbon, blanketed in white ash and bordered by the low black stumps of what was once a crash barrier. Behind the twisted road signs, deformed by the incendiary heat, are the blackened and burned out remains of a petrol station and roadside café.”

The fires are given an emphasis, an effect on the landscape, which goes beyond their literal, naturalistic, presence. They are endowed with a “thrilling apocalyptic glare”. This symbolic or allegorical device begins to express, or stand in for, the looming systemic economic and political crisis, which, while on the horizon, never eventuates. (Capital is quoted on the tendency for capitalism to lurch from one crisis to the next.) The fires also become testament to the main characters’ complacency and complicity and invites comparison with the post-apocalyptic dystopias’ images of ravaged natural worlds and environmental disaster.

In a decidedly non-naturalistic and sinister fashion, the novel also alludes to an urban lumpen underclass of ‘Plague Bearers’ who roam their ghettos. They patrol housing estates and parks after dark, go through rubbish-bins, sleep on the doorsteps of
shops playing their “harsh music”. The Plague Bearers are portrayed as young, jobless, homeless, mostly male, and nominally frightening. (Robert who goes out to the Estate has the prescience to carry a baseball bat in the boot of his car for fear of being attacked by them.) They have no political agency – Glenn, the only character we see in any depth from the group, is illiterate and intermittently drug dependent – and it may be no coincidence that their shorthand description is also the term for the desperate poor who buried the plague dead in seventeenth-century London during the Great Plague and who were forced to live as outcasts in the parish churchyards because of their susceptibility to catching and spreading the disease. Paul Salzman has raised the question of whether the notion of plague here functions as a metaphor for AIDS. I treat it as a symbolic extrapolation of the severe unemployment in Australia in the early part of the decade. It is worth nothing that the Plague Bearers constitute one of the few signs of the Novum in the novel.

This is one of the only times Lohrey employs an estranging or unfamiliar vocabulary in her brave (not so new) world (two other instances are the offhand mention of the Loved Ones, and the title given to the apparently anarchist middle-class pranksters: the Metropolitan Indians). This is different to the frequently ironic, reconstituted or inverted use of language in other twentieth-century dystopian and anti-utopian accounts: 1984 has Newspeak, the Two Minutes Hate and numerous other unfamiliar expressions (or familiar expressions used to describe unfamiliar events or activities); The Handmaid’s Tale has Salvagings, the Wall, unwomen and Aunts, Eyes etcetera; We introduces the reader to the Green Wall, Onestate, the Tables of Hourly Commandments and humans known only by their numbers in a system; Brave New World has a Fertilising Room, and so on.

The term has an alliterative resonance as well as a substantive one with Orwell’s ‘proles’. None of the central characters is a Plague Bearer, although a minor character does observe that Bearers are made rather than born: he knows it is possible his children might be at risk of joining them.

To return once more to our definition of dystopia, there are several other signs this society might, at least at first glance, be prima facie worse than the hypothetical reader’s, at least in the 1980s. The Committee for Public Safety is strengthening its appeal. The state government is on the verge of introducing New Emergency Powers and trying to duck a decision on the Public Safety Act, which, while never articulated in
detail, is rumoured to involve the issuing of free movement passes to Plague Bearer
crimes, increased punishment for political omissions, and other incursions on civil liberties. The
CPS, led by a Right-wing poet who warns of the dangers of democracy, is agitating for
even more extreme measures to repress the Bearer. There are other elements conducive
to these intimations of totalitarianism. Hay describes the society as “a moribund political
system, its ossified liberalism losing out to the seductive pull of totalitarianism”.64 The
Reading Group mentions the possibility that house arrest has been introduced as a penalty
(though this is never dramatised, nor is it utilised against any of the characters); one
character claims her husband, a weapons inspector was murdered by the government,
although she is seen as mad; there are murmurings of undercover Security Police and bomb
threats; and a throwaway line about “vigilante groups [which] are being trained in civil
defence by army volunteers”.65 The climate is hypernationalist and populist with a ‘New
Nation’ campaign in full force. The police beat and injure those petty criminals who are
poor and homeless.

The sense of a society about to come asunder is also generated by the pre-
apocalyptic decay and degeneration of the natural world: drought, fires, blackouts, power
droughts, the prospect of curfews. Yet none of the actual elements dramatised (not even
the discontented homeless) is unimaginable, even unlikely, in liberal capitalism – it is only
the mildly estranging presence of the allegorically charged fires and the Plague Bearer
take us any distance from Lohrey’s contemporary world at all – and this may indeed
be Lohrey’s point: in laying bare Suvini’s ‘fake utopia’ of the market and exposing the
violence of social democratic capitalism (even in the first world homelessness,
unemployment, environmental collapse, economic instability) through the eyes of
characters who are not its victims, who have little to lose, she foregrounds the invisible
and often accepted, if unacceptable, costs of economic rationalism. (Indeed in 2007 the
encroachments on civil liberties recorded in the novel seem, if not benign, then
remarkably toothless compared with the right to hold citizens without arrest for days at a
time in Australia, Guantanamo Bay, and the ‘extraordinary rendition’ torture flights
conducted under the auspices of the United States Government.)

In Chapter Five I consider the amnesia concerning the origins of the existence of
the Plague Bearer and the repressive government measures, right now it seems
appropriate to observe only that there is no single precipitating incident or set of forces
that is remembered as a cause for the current state of affairs, implying that it is the
invisible humdrum daily violence of social democracy, rather than a central ‘event’ (revolution, seizure of state control, coup, invasion) or clearly demarcated distortion, which is the real cause of oppression in the world of the book. The novel’s amnesia and lack of resistance do enhance its pessimism and the danger of its lapsing into a more universalising hopelessness about the prospects for social change, as if Lohrey set out to show us what the “end of history” might look like if Fukuyama was right, what liberal democracy as the end point of human civilisation would really mean, what a society without working-class struggle (or any other kind of struggle for another world) might resemble: chilled wine and watercress soup for the lucky, a lifetime of irrelevance, petty theft, hunger and despair for the rest.

The Reading Group, Dystopia and Form

But the ostensible or explicit content in Lohrey’s novel is not a sufficient or even the most useful way of ascertaining its status as dystopia. Tom Moylan argues that it is important to read science fiction – and by extension dystopia – on its “own formal terms” not those of an “assumed realism or mimeticism”.66

Fredric Jameson, as outlined earlier, has distinguished the dystopia for its capacity for narrative. Yet in The Reading Group the repressive measures are not dramatised in any sustained way, and all of the multiple points of view encompassed, except for Glenn’s, which is peripheral, belong to cynical middle-class characters for whom the totalitarian measures seem to have little (personal) significance. Aside from mostly token, misdirected and disparate resistance (from the neo-Anarchist Metropolitan Indians’ habit of burning bonfires of consumer goods to Sam’s involvement with a planned demonstration that is called off – “we bad planned it for last month but…” the closest thing to a “counter-narrative” is the counterpoint encompassed in what is being read, the embedded quotations from books and the self-reflexive references to Marx, Gramsci, Gorz and Bloch. (“The book. The book. A blind icon. A talisman.”)67

Unlike many classical and critical dystopias, the narrative of The Reading Group “operates through a set of political deferments” and brief instalments that do not reach a climax or resolution.68 By the end of the novel the Party adjourns discussion of the New Emergency Powers without reaching a decision. Planned demonstrations against the new measures have been postponed. The Committee for Public Safety’s rally has collapsed
into a riot but little flows from this. Glenn is jailed and Robert is more cynical. Plague Bearers try to survive.

In other words, as some reviewers have noted, the novel "is effectively plotless...though things happen very much more in the way of event is hoped for". In Christina Thompson's view, "Lohrey refuses to produce a climax, while all along knowing that this is what we want". Katherine England observes that "in the final section of the book it is disconcerting to find that things have changed only in detail not in essence or in degree [the novel itself]...is never completed, never resolved".

While *The Reading Group* is clearly not a utopia, nor does it correlate with Jameson's notion of a dystopia as characterised by its capacity for narrative and its focus on a specific subject. Lohrey builds on and disrupts dystopian conventions: she takes a form that utilises cognitive estrangement and then applies estranging devices within that form.

Lohrey's agent, writing to her about an earlier draft of the novel, also commented on this lack of plot resolution: "The narrative is thoroughly gripping also, with tension always hovering beneath the surface, building up to something evil, possibly cataclysmic. Or so it seemed until I got to the end and then I was thoroughly baffled. I expected something Big to happen and nothing did."

In Lohrey's own diary notes, kept while drafting the novel, she expresses her intentions and anxieties regarding narrative. Following quotes from Althusser, Brecht and Bloch on utopia and disassociation, the chronicle and the tragedy, she records her intention to use a "series of tableaux" structure and has kept notes on Barthes' notion of tableaux and the absence of a final meaning: "nothing but a series of segmentations each of which possesses a sufficient demonstrative power". Alongside some moments of frustration and despair with the writing process, and draft scenes, Lohrey states: "This should read like a novel that has first been plotted and then had the plot taken out – the novel is what’s left – decentred".

The ending of the novel is ambiguous and open: perhaps implying that the legislative vote is not the central or definitive decision, the party has already capitulated. The lack of closure does leave open the prospect that the increasingly totalitarian direction of society might be arrested and thus the text is not anti-utopian but the ending is equally open to a reading that the time for action, for struggle, has already passed and that the insidious encroachments are now passé, part of the fabric of everyday life.
In the second-last section, after a decision on the legislation is postponed, there is a glancing reference to why Robert cannot catch a bus (“The buses are banked up for blocks by a crowd that is heading for Plaza”) which could mean either that the progressive demonstration is finally occurring – or, equally likely, that the CPS is holding another populist rally.²⁴

The novel is not a unified parable or self-contained science fictional world that strives for coherence and unity. Rather, it harnesses techniques of disjuncture and disruption. The perspectives of eight characters are spliced together to narrate the novel in a series of linked tableaux. Many of the scenes or chapters are unusually short (some only a single paragraph in length). Only Glenn (who is telling the story of his life to Marguerite’s tape-recorder) and Lyndon (champion of a utopia of the present) are in first-person (aside from Claire’s brief entries into her diary). The novel switches point of view in third-person present tense throughout, with some past tense sections. The shifts between points of view are sometimes abrupt and the text also incorporates letters and diary entries. Chapter headings range from the temporal, descriptive and polemical to the propositional. There is one (authorial?) interpolation that comes from outside the pre-existing voices in the text, in a chapter that opens “It wasn’t always like this/In An Earlier Time”.²⁵

The use of shifting point of view is less effective here than in The Morality of Gentlemen partly because the characters, bar Glenn, occupy a shared socio-economic position and are all, to some extent, coopted into the regime and the (commodified) compensations it can offer. By jettisoning the strategy of conveying a single individual’s reactions (Jameson’s “specific subject”) to the new bad times, Lohrey subverts, splinters, generic expectations.

While the inclusion of various narrators in the novel may be an antidote to dystopian and anti-utopian narratives that predominantly lament the crushing of individual freedom and privilege individual subjective experience in isolation (a single person’s voice collected in the form of diary or testimony bearing witness), not one of Lohrey’s characters is a threat to their society; only Glenn is threatened by it, and perhaps marginally, Andrew, who has received death threats concerning his representation of clients.²⁶ Mostly they are not personally affected by the authoritarian measures, which are directed at the Plague Bearers; instead they respond with complicity (Michael, Lyndon) or largely passive concern (Andrew, Robert, Sam, Renata). The intense surveillance, state
interference, control and repression that typifies life in many dystopian novels doesn’t exist. *The Reading Group*’s characters are co-opted by ideology, assimilation and defeat rather than force and suppression. Claire purchases antique furniture while Rome burns.

The other significant formal devices concern the embedded self-reflexive quotations from Gramsci – and, as we shall see, even Ernst Bloch who found the desire for utopia everywhere in daily life – as well as a rather mysterious and puzzling ‘disguised’ documentary realism where (as I examine in the next chapter) there are passages adapted from articles and books published in the late 1970s and early 1980s and unacknowledged quotes from Santamaria and James McAuley. When the origins of the phrases and speeches become apparent this breaks, if not undermines, the futurism and Novum of the novel, refusing its conventional appeal to possibility and plausibility. They tie, or jolt, the reader back to the ‘now’ of the novel’s construction and publication and to the past. The quoted material operates as a kind of estrangement within estrangement.

In her hybridity, Lohrey is surely not alone. The contemporary dystopia is a changing rather than a calcified, static form. Both Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini assert the dystopia’s capacity to blur genre conventions: “working between these historical antinomies [utopia and anti-utopia] the dystopian text is an exercise in a politically charged form of hybrid textuality” and they also argue that many ‘critical dystopias’ “blur the received boundaries of the dystopian form”.77

Moylan and Baccolini have said of dystopia: “As opposed to the eutopian [sic] plot of dislocation, education and return of an informed visitor, the dystopia therefore generates its own didactic account in the critical encounter that ensues when the citizen confronts, or is confronted by, the contradictions of the society that is present on the very first page”.78

In *The Reading Group*, there is no “critical encounter” partly as a result of the ‘plotless’ tableaux structure, deferrals and estrangement devices, but also due to the characters’ middle class, co-opted social positions. While several of the narrators seem unnerved by society’s lurch to the Right, and want to assist the Plague Bearers, this predominantly means chiselling away at small reforms or promising actions in the future: Robert is a social worker at Colony, Andrew represents the Metropolitan Indians in court and receives death threats, Michael, a cynical bureaucrat and Ministerial advisor in the state government, leaks the occasional piece of information, and Sam, who is still in the Party, talks about organising a demonstration but becomes peripheral in the book. Even
those committed to nominal reform also seem to embody the perspective of the Minister’s wife in the novel: “To be made perpetually aware of the misery of others, to have poverty and corruption and evil adulterate your pleasures at every moment, was something she wished she could undo...It was better to make the small immediate area you could influence a more pleasant place”.

It is notable that whereas in many dystopias protagonists become victims of the regime, in Lohrey’s work the central characters are either complicit and implicated in it, or impotent, prevaricating, unthreateningly reformist. For some this involves abandoning politics for lifestyle pursuits or sexual conquests where their own desires become searches for the perfect form.

Stephen Knight observes in his review: “Complete futurism, in a novel, imposes theory as a mode, either scientific or political, sometimes both (as in Le Guin); but by adopting the immediate future, which, in many languages, is expressed through the present tense, Lohrey is able to employ without straining the form, many of the techniques and concerns of the contemporary, even conventional novel”.

Although I think Knight’s focus on the significance of allegory is a correct one, the absence of Novum inhibits the estranging power of the novel to some extent. Lohrey’s is a particular kind of limited dystopia, perhaps in part because of its (very) near future setting.

*Lohrey, Commitment and Dystopia*

Lyman Tower Sargent has suggested that the author’s intentions may give some preliminary, or *prima facie*, insight into whether a given text is a dystopia. Lohrey apparently saw her novel as a kind of chronicle or elegy for the death of the utopian hopes of the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies and their collapse, appropriation or cooption. Of *The Reading Group* (speaking at the ‘Writers In Action’ series) Lohrey commented:

> It may not be terribly obvious when you read it but there’s a great strain in film and the novel since the 60s of what you might call post-1960s disillusionment...Some of us were young at a time when there was a great Utopian vision and didn’t want to grow up to be Yuppies...This brief flare in the 70s...And then it all imploded...How can we pursue both a private Utopia, in which we have a good time without feeling guilty about it, and at the same time not do this at someone else’s expense?...That very question in *The Reading Group* manifests itself in a phenomenon which can only be described as the privatisation of the Utopian impulse, so that it goes inwards in those characters. Having once been political activists, not outrageous radicals but fairly active, they've now decided to pursue private Utopias...It's a kind of pessimistic optimism.”
And, as retained in her manuscript archives, Lohrey answered a letter from a reader in 1988 by describing *The Reading Group* in the following way:

One of the things I wanted to do was to chart some of the ways in which the idealism of the seventies has been affected by the new pragmatism of the eighties but I didn’t want to set it in the recognisable present where current political debate is blanketed by economic rhetoric: levels of inflation, deregulation, the exchange rate and so on...The fires are there to stand in for crisis, since in any year or any political era there is always some crisis or other...As one crisis is resolved another is developing – that’s why there’s no ‘climax’ or resolution at the end of the novel...If I had to sum up in a sentence what the novel is ‘about’ I’d say it was a meditation on the utopian impulse of the sixties and of reformist/radical politics generally...and the perversion of that strain under the stresses of our current situation.\(^\text{82}\)

Although it is now long-established that an author’s intent cannot be the only – nor even the primary – starting point for a literary critic, this gives some political and ethical context for *The Reading Group*.

**Utopia in The Reading Group**

The novel suggests that the increasingly repressive society and government, and the ascendant Right, as much as they attempt to lay claim to utopia in their own name, have emerged not from the existence of utopia but from our failure to reach it, from its abandonment. Indeed the book laments the loss of the new social movements of the earlier utopian struggles and thus is not an anti-utopia. It is not directed at them, even if the claim that the movements have failed to radically transform society is not contested but universally accepted. Rather the pragmatism of the unnamed Party, and the lack of real resistance from below become symptomatic of this defeat.

Indeed the novel reflects on the failure of intellectual Left liberalism when progressive movements are on the wane and chronicles the complicity of parties once thought to be committed to social progress, equality and working-class self-activity.

There are many allusions to utopian texts and desires throughout the novel. Louise is studying Plato, Rousseau and Montessori (“more ideal forms” she muses) and the poet Grainger uses Plato’s ideal society (in *The Republic*) to bolster his neo-totalitarian calls for the “lower orders to live by a set of ten civic commandments”.\(^\text{83}\) The classical text is now employed to strengthen the arm of the intellectual elite over the mass of ordinary people, and particularly the lumpenised Plague Bearers. Grainger lays claim to utopia in there ‘here and now’ of the novel while shedding the anticipatory hopes of liberalism: “We need not confine ourselves to dreaming of a better future. We can
reoccupy the present. Liberals, perpetual dreamers of utopia, are always taken by surprise.”

Minor characters find their own ‘New Age’ utopian releases and diversions (Robyn’s past lives) or spiritual enclaves (the advertising executive who takes to the hills, gets involved with the Rajneeshee and writes, “Rejoice for heaven is of this earth”).

The reference to that notorious social dreamer, writer and artist William Morris (News From Nowhere) comes from Claire, who purchases wrapping paper in a Morris design print. Her purchase illuminates an element of Suvin’s “fake” utopia where commodities become forms of compensation, a motif throughout the novel. And these twin elements – the cooption and reclamation of the utopian impulse for the Right and the redirection of utopian desire into the numbing ‘consolations’ of the marketplace for the new middle class – underlie the corrosion of the political utopia (platform or process) in the novel.

Another utopian melody, as it were, haunting the book, is the allusions to Ernst Bloch. Bloch, whose Principles of Hope enunciated what Jameson calls the “irrepressibility” of the utopian impulse in everyday life, found utopia (the anticipatory element of the “not-yet conscious”) at work in the most unlikely places in class society: fashion, daydreams, film, etcetera, could not be a more apt figure for Lohrey to fleetingly quote.

In fact in the novel, characters’ dreams operate predominantly as dire warnings (filled with contagious diseases, or ominous and inexplicable texts), but Bloch’s anticipation is present, beneath the surface, throughout. Notably, there are “fake” literal Novums engineered by the state: the claims to reinvention of the “New” Army, “New” nation and “New” patriotism, but also the anticipation of the new engendered by the hunger for commodities.

Even the fantasies Renata constructs to entertain herself during the set-piece farewell to a Labor party-esque Senator, involve images of Marx and other revolutionary figures transformed into contemporary capitalist products: Engels T-shirts, Mao Tse Tung dresses, a G-string embossed with a hammer and sickle, a woman handing out “Mao badges and Eureka flags and all the paraphernalia of utopia”. Desire, dreaming itself, has become branded, commodified.

For Lyndon and Claire the utopian wish now quite directly involves the pursuit of personal, individual utopia, a search for “perfect forms.” An early scene of the novel sees Claire viewing a property and she spends much of the book either buying or
thinking about buying furniture for her house, which she both anticipates finishing renovating and never wants to complete, or shopping for clothes and presents. “Ah, the consolations of shopping” she thinks, noting the gendered inflection of her experience when she recognises a woman at an auction: “‘While their husbands move increasingly into public prominence, their lives intersect meaninglessly at the level of commodities’.88

When she is asked by her father why she is so determined to create a complete and authentic style in her home, Claire is initially speechless, then recovers, recalling “the integrity of her ambition, the aesthetic necessity of staying true to form”.89

Seeking “a bridge to the past”, the longing behind the renovation is somehow implicated in Claire’s distancing herself from her working-class background, providing a connection to a history of her dreams, a past that never happened, a nostalgia for the Victorian-era that never was, ripped from history and devoid of meaning.90 Her project is bound up in an ahistorical and now utterly commodified imitation of a Victorian past: “Given time she will return it to a perfect replica of the past, an ornament of its period”91, yet by the end of the novel Claire strips it all away for a new minimalism (another “fake” novel), desiring “timelessness” and a style “without anything that has the slightest historical allusion”.92 In liberal capitalism, for Claire at least, political and collective struggle has receded and what is left in its place is desire that can never be fulfilled, the “hyperglycaemia”, as Jameson elegantly puts it, of consumption. Claire’s wish-fulfilment is only temporary, and the unjust society she lives in is not only able to accommodate it but indeed thrives because of it (or so we are led to believe although production itself is absent from the world of the book).

Meanwhile Don Giovanni quoting Lyndon, who once put up anti-war posters, is searching to find the perfect fuck, the ideal woman, amongst the schoolgirls and married housewives he’s attracted to. Women here are conquests, pursued and then rapidly abandoned. Thinking of Mary, a student at his school, Lyndon rather rhetorically reveals his penchant for immediate action and gratification: “In a year the world could cease to exist. Before the apocalypse I’ll have had her. I’ll have tasted that honey-brown flesh all over. The thought of this now makes me groggy, stunned by an image of the sweet pink of her vulva.”93

“My ambition” observes Lyndon “is to make an intense moment of the present” and he revels in Ashe’s memoirs recalling the perfect shot in tennis, the ideal instant in time.94 Lyndon, like Grainger, insists on the imminence of utopia, the satisfaction of
immediate gratification. While he sees Robert as a “prisoner of his own good deeds...denying himself daily in the cause of a utopia he knows he’ll never see”, Lyndon opts for “an ascending ladder of the instant” (this is a quote from Fredric Jameson on Bloch) where “the subject (me) and the object (a woman) are perfectly adequate to one another”. His scorn for Robert (“the kind of person who could see capitalism in a piece of cheese”) and Michael (“It’ll all be the same in a hundred years”) suggest both a suspicion of liberal self-sacrifice and moralism as well as an ideological outlook framed by hedonism, ‘bad faith’ existentialism and hostility to social change aimed at exploiting the status quo. It is as if, for Lyndon, we ought only anticipate that which we are entitled to expect.

In the closing lines of the novel he asserts: “I don’t sneer at utopia. I’d never be that crass. It’s just that I live for a utopia of the present.” Having moved on from his sexual liaison with Claire, Lyndon has in mind another ‘ideal’. This utopian dreaming is never final or finished as the moment “is incomplete”; it “tends to what it might be.”

Lyndon’s crass chauvinism becomes, in Freudian terms, the displacement of other wish-fulfilments and different desires.

This passage raises some very interesting and important questions about sexuality, gender and the shape of desire in _The Reading Group_ that are unfortunately beyond the scope of this exegesis. But the declarations also attest to the substitution of the never-ending, never realised, pursuit of personal satisfaction for the collective struggles Lyndon (and millions of others in the extra-textual world) once participated in.

The final strand of the utopian impulse, the power of anticipation in everyday life, is evident in a most interesting inversion. For not only are many of the characters indifferent to, or pragmatic about, the Plague Bearers and attacks on civil liberties, and seemingly paranoid at points about some future horror, a number of them are entranced, even aroused, by the bushfires and the sense of menace, and coming crisis.

In the closing pages of the novel Robert listens to an art teacher leading a discussion of an oil painting. “‘They had a fascination with disaster, you see. How would disaster _look_ they asked themselves?” Indeed the anticipation of disaster as an antidote to boredom and stasis recurs. After imagining a bomb going off in a hall at a public event, Renata discovers her “face is hot and flushed; her stockings cling moistly to her thighs. She’s thinking: ‘for a moment there I almost got excited.’” Even Robert is almost longingly “waiting for a flare in the sky.” For Robert the expectation is
mitigated by a sense of paranoia “It’s as if he’s getting ready, as if he’s reading for something, in training for some as yet unidentified event”.103 Sam and Renata’s sex life is revived as the bushfires grow closer. He has “come to life” thanks to the fires and pressures on the coalition – not politically but sexually – while Renata recalls her “heart hasn’t pounded so hard in a long while”.

The bushfires seem to hold the prospect of both Armageddon and salvation for the citizens of Lohrey’s society:

Out in their gardens they sniffed the smoke and suppressed their arousal at the prospect of something momentous, something awesome that would consume others and spare them. Awe. It was a quality missing from their lives.105

It is as if many of the characters, to borrow Rosalie’s phrase, have moments where they occupy “an ecstasy of dread”, when they are, however, briefly, “disaster tourists”.106 This does not seem reliant on particular outcomes or political commitments but merely the anticipation of rupture, of stasis transformed, the irrational pull of the event, the rushing toward oblivion. In the final section (tellingly titled “The After and the Now”), which leaps forward a significant period of time, Robert has come to believe, perversely, that some of the young men who he sees “want to get their heads kicked in”. Musing on this he bitterly reflects, “there are all kinds of fantasy trips”.107

But, for the most part, utopia is history, yesterday’s struggle. The pursuit of utopia is like the reading group itself: gone, uncool, dated, the uncomfortable echo of a different time. There are no radical utopian movements that are not already absorbed into or recast by the prevailing order, the present system.

I argue in the next chapter that the significant pessimism, which the lack of genuine resistance to the regime, amnesia or “waning of historicity” and any exploration of “causes rather than symptoms” engenders, inhibits a systematic critique from flourishing and to some extent blunts the political force of the novel. For these reasons, while I concur with Stephen Knight that the novel operates “to point naggingly towards the need for commitments that reach beyond the vague remembrance of the reading group”, the novel does not seem to me to belong to the canon of “critical dystopias” that Moylan and Baccolini have formulated.108

We have seen that Lohrey’s text intervened in the hegemonic liberal capitalist order of the early 1980s: that it laments the trajectory of disabused radicals who have long since left behind the prospect of real social change to embrace liberal reformism, consumerism and hunger for a revolution “of fun”. But in what ways does The Reading
Group also emerge as a symptom of this period, and a product of it? In what significant silences and gaps does the dominant ideology ‘speak’ in her work? Chapter Five, by looking at history in the novel, the novel in history, explores these questions.
Chapter Five: “Ours is both a remembering and a forgetting” – History in The Reading Group, The Reading Group in history

Phillip Wegner argues that dystopia has predecessors in the naturalist novel, “which establish a pattern that will haunt the tradition of dystopian writing throughout the twentieth century: desirous of a radical change of affairs but unable to imagine any mechanism by which such a change might come about”. The Reading Group is a critique of some of the ideologies of the 1980s (consumerism, corporatism, individualism, the turn away from class amongst the Western intelligentsia even on the Left, hedonism, nationalism, the fetishisation of the free market), which contests the politics of exclusion and disenfranchisement inherent in policies of corporatism, the decline of the welfare state, and growing divisions between rich and poor.

At the same time, through its significant silences – amnesia, the absence of any collective working class, the book’s refusal to depict any meaningful challenge or resistance to the regime – the novel is symptomatic of the pessimism of this period. It is as if Lohrey had sought to articulate what society would really be if the hegemonic defenders of mixed-market capitalism were right: if class really had disappeared, if liberal capitalism really was the final destination of teleological history, if the last decades of prolonged radical protest in fact had signalled the endpoint for the prospects of revolution or radical economic and social transformation. References to utopian political struggles of the past and the apparent bankruptcy of the political system and strategies of the middle-class characters in The Reading Group undermine this portrait and interrogate it. Yet the novel’s refusal to suggest potential sources or forces for any challenge to the system also reinforces it as inevitable.

In this chapter I will examine history, memory, and the paradox of amnesia and historical specificity in The Reading Group in the context of the Australian political landscape of the 1980s.

The Reading Group in history: the novel and the 1980s

Moylan and Baccolini have argued that by the 1980s, when The Reading Group was published, a subgenre had developed: a “refunctioned dystopia as a critical narrative form that worked against the grain of the grim economic, political and cultural climate”. At
least in America, they argue, in this period, “in the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification, sf [sic] writers revived and reformulated the dystopian genre”.

Fredric Jameson reminds us that, whether conservative or progressive, critical or nostalgic, hostile to utopia or desirous of it, the dystopian form allows us to see our world now as a kind of ‘history in the making.’ He has perceptively observed how science fiction (and by extension, dystopia) “enacts and enables a structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history...irrespective of the ‘pessimism’ or the ‘optimism’ of the imaginary future world.”

The Plague Bearers, and glancing phrases about house arrest or breaches of civil liberties aside, there is almost nothing in Lohrey’s portrait of the future that significantly departs from the cultural and political practices and norms in Australia in the 1980s and much that either specifically concords with the eighties (the nationalism, drought, debates about logging, historic compromises of a labour party) or is not discordant with those years (the normal parliamentary and legal processes remain intact, professional occupations are recognisable, the city is familiar, with shops, malls, parks, plazas, buses, fast food corporations, sex shops, TV, advertising, plastic boomerangs, New Age impulses).

The limited Novum in Lohrey’s work and her setting in the very near future combine to create the effect that it is the (then) present that is inevitable and unchangeable rather than the future.

The novel was written during the neo-liberal triumphalism of the Reagan-Thatcher era globally and the conformism of the Australian Labor Party locally. In the early-1980s Australia, as elsewhere, experienced the collapse of many progressive campaigns or their redirection and a conservative backlash. The Fraser years involved economic recession, high unemployment, wage freezes and pauses and high inflation. Much of this continued and triggered the ushering in of privatisation, deregulation of banking, the floating of the dollar, and restructure of wage negotiations and industrial relations under the Hawke-Keating administration.

Baccolini presumes that while dystopia has a “complex relationship to history”, it is also “immediately rooted in history”. In an article homing in on Ursula Le Guin’s The Telling, she asserts:

Dystopia, therefore, is usually located in a negatively deformed future of our own world. In this respect, it clearly appears as critique of history...Thus, dystopia shows how our present may
negatively evolve, while by showing a regression of our present it also suggests that history may not be progressive…Paradoxically, then, dystopia depends upon and denies history.7

The Reading Group is both a projection and a diagnosis. However, it does not rely for its defamiliarising effect solely on exaggerating or taking to their logical extreme elements of Lohrey’s own society but rather by using the estranging power of allegory in an otherwise marginally realistic series of representations so that the invisible assumptions of democratic market capitalism are revealed. Yet by remaining so close to the bone – to home, to the lived experience of the 1980s – the novel risks presenting the status quo as permanent and unchallenged, thus proving that which it wished to contest.

The relationship between allegory, realism and anagogic writing, as Orwell reflected regarding his novel, 1984, is complicated: there are certain challenges involved in “a novel about the future, that is, it is in a sense a fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel”.8 Yet unlike some anti-utopias and dystopias, The Reading Group disrupts and interrogates naturalism.

The mass homelessness in The Reading Group resonates with the economic crisis and high unemployment besetting Australia in the early 1980s, as do Roy’s repeated concerns about small business, inflation and high interest rates. The fragile Party coalition, the descent of the party faithful into number crunching, factionalism and disenchantment, the apparatchiks’ attempts to duck and weave under pressure, to balance the demands of business, the state and the expectations of their traditional supporters, are redolent of those social-democratic parties that, like the ALP, have a long history of connection with the union movement. However, I do not endorse the approach some other commentators were willing to embark on, merely reducing the events of novel on some corollary level to the debates and fragmentation of the Tasmanian ALP during the early 1980s Franklin Dam dispute.

It’s true that many elements of the novel appear to have been borne directly out of empirical observation or that speak uncontroversially to the existing conditions of the 1980s (for example, the Party is still made up of union officials and Senators who once came “from the Western suburbs” and have shed their Left “firebrand” heritage, despite the fact the working class is virtually absent from the novel).9

Lohrey had some concerns about how to develop the form she was seeking. Noting in her diary that she had at various points intended it to be a “paranoia” novel “somewhat in the Joan Didion mode”, she also records her wish to write a “sustained
nightmare/fantasy of a political kind’.10 Beneath this, Lohrey added an addendum: “my realism destroys this mode”.11

Certainly for particular reviewers, the estranging, allegorical or extrapolated devices were not sufficient to prevent a rather literal reading. (The novel was not marketed as a dystopia, perhaps in continuation of that presumed ‘high-brow’/ ‘low-brow’ demarcation between ‘literary’ fiction and ‘science fiction’. The blurb asserted that Lohrey “portrays a world that is recognisably ours”). Some reviewers apparently looked past the ‘near-future’ setting for the novel and treated it as literary realism or satire. Michael Heyward rightly describes the novel as “more or less contemporary in its setting” and his review reinforces a point already made, namely that: “Instruments of danger, instability or oppression are constantly present but also seem removed from the preoccupations of the major characters”.12 Diana Simmonds’ account of the defamation threat against Lohrey and Pan Picador ignores the fact the novel never names the city in which it is set and she equates the Party directly with the Labor party. She argues: “That Lohrey should write fiction set in Tasmania and the everyday intricacies of local Labor politics is not surprising”.13

The question arises differently in other reviews. P.R. Hay, who did analyse the novel as a dystopia, contributed to the controversy regarding the depiction of a minor character, which led to accusations of defamation from Terry Aulich, a settlement with a gag clause for Lohrey, and the pulping of more than a thousand copies of the novel. He wrote: “Unlike most novelists fictionalising fact, the author here makes no attempt to disguise the factual underlay of her work: on the contrary she goes to great lengths to ensure that character and place can be identified...There may be some entirely fictional characters in The Reading Group but I doubt it...Many of the incidents of plot are...reproduced from the byways of Tasmanian political history...Why has she done this?”14

Without replicating the assumptions of some reviewers about the novel’s ‘truth to life’, the reliance on the familiar/recognisable more generally and the present-future setting, especially given the absence of estranging devices to signal the projection forward in time, the distance of history or the historicising function of memory, mean that The Reading Group can be said to both paradoxically critique the (then) present and the obfuscations and hegemonic practices that disguise relations of power, and also to assert it as our inescapable destiny, a future that has already arrived.
One further caveat must be noted, however. Historicising a dystopia within the conditions of its production (1982-8) and reception in the nineteen-eighties is the main focus of this chapter but of course I am examining the novel from the vantage point of 2007. All literary works are open to multiple interpretations (as Eagleton has argued, literary theory and analysis involves not only reading but effectively “rewriting”) and their analysis, reception and meaning changes with altered historical conditions. This also applies to The Morality of Gentlemen. My own location in history and the effect of this on interpretation becomes particularly pronounced or noticeable with dystopias, whose claims to imagine the future almost always appear quite different in the future.

And so it is with The Reading Group. From 2007 the novel is almost testimony to our inability to extrapolate the future (and here I am echoing Jameson on utopia’s incapacity to imagine the future). If many dystopias appear dated or misguided in their anticipations, The Reading Group’s concerns and tropes (the crisis in social democracy, language, discourse, psychoanalysis, desire, power, post-Whitlam ennui) seem to speak deeply of certain ideologies or discourses of the eighties. Indeed – aside from the prospect of house arrest – the repression of the Bearers and others by such mechanisms as new transport regulations or legal trials and police intimidation hardly begins to imagine our own era’s actual atrocities of Abu Ghraib, extraordinary rendition and confessions obtained under duress and torture. A literary text (if published in these times of commercial imperative and economic profit-turning) has an ongoing and changing field of reception and thus it is always being reinterpreted. I don’t attempt to consider either of Lohrey’s novels at each moment in the decades that have passed since she wrote or published them but need to acknowledge the complexity of the historicising project in this context.

Amnesia in The Reading Group

While the novel has fleeting references to characters’ memories of their experiences in the 1960s and 1970s, there is little recollection of recent history. The immediate conditions and circumstances (economic, material or cultural) or general trends or movements that have led to the existence of the Plague Bearers and the incursions on civil liberties in the world of the book are neither explicated nor remembered. The drastic inequalities between the Bearers, who live in ghettos and survive on petty crime (muggings, minor thefts), and those middle-class characters who eat brie and brew
freshly ground coffee – not to mention the absence of any blue-collar working-class – are not represented as the product of any drastic rupture but rather ‘business as usual’.

There is no indication of how and why the vigilante groups have been formed or their social composition, no explanation of the substantive content of the New Emergency Powers or why the national government (itself a mystery) wants to usher them in. The origins of and background to the Committee for Public Safety, or Grainger’s hostility to liberalism, are never articulated. The characters’ abandonment of politics is implicitly attributed to a shift in the political climate after the mid-seventies and the tedium and lack of imagination attached to the number crunching and factionalism of the unnamed Party they all joined. But they do not recall the process of their social mobility (a number of them grew up working class) or their trajectory out of grassroots political activism.

Nor does the third-person narrative account for the rise of the Plague Bearers and the attacks on civil liberties, except, by inference, as the inevitable result of economic crisis, the illusions of social democracy, and the defeat of the Left. Consider this lengthy passage on the Party towards the end of the novel:

The Premier’s party is historically a moderate but progressive one. It is Michael’s own party. It contains elements passionately opposed to the legislation, who have demonstrated in the streets and threatened prolonged civil unrest. But the Party is also the representative of more cautious interests who feel the force of necessity. It is about to become entrapped in the snares of consensus. In the past, in times of prosperity before the Plague Bearers and the fires came and spilt everything, things had not been so difficult…Panic. Disorder. Civil strife. It’s easy, they say, to talk of heroic resistance, to be liberal when you don’t have to be responsible, when you don’t have to make the real decisions, when you are the fantasists of licence and demagoguery, the street-peddlers of utopia.  

This is the closest The Reading Group ever comes to explicitly providing an explanation, account or recollection of the circumstances surrounding the crisis and the pragmatism of the Party, the destruction of the natural world by fire, the arrival of Plague Bearers and Hawke’s “consensus” here is vividly and starkly exposed and recontextualised.

The memories of activism are alive, the world has changed, but what has happened in between? The novel is silent on this question. The point is presumably that parliamentary democracy, due process, voting do not intrinsically guarantee any collective economic security or freedom from tyranny. Even the middle-class characters think “whenever you feel safe, you feel locked in, so it’s not worth feeling safe”. Yet beneath, or alongside, this portrait of a compromised political party enforcing order are fleeting references to death threats and bomb scares, anarchist pranksters and utopian retreats
into groups that threaten bioterrorism (the Rajneeshee), a ring of fire and accusations of government-ordered murder. Threads of the apocalypse.

By the time The Reading Group opens, Lohrey’s characters have mostly abandoned or renounced their political commitments. While the forgotten history between the mid-nineteen-seventies disappointments and the eighties tide of reaction connects the world of the book to that waning of struggle, it nonetheless implicitly obliterates the possibility of any alternative future. For readers – now or in the eighties – the insistent appeal to struggles of the past is not nostalgic per se, but only because this history is depicted as irrevocably superseded or crushed.

This absence of recent history (the very time that might make readers of the eighties see the world that Lohrey was writing from repositioned as ‘history’) contributes to a sense in the text that the status quo (the ‘now’ of the eighties) is inevitable and irreversible. This pessimism, even conservatism, is compounded by a lack of resistance (despite planned public demonstrations, the Metropolitan Indians’ playful stunts, and peripheral references to the Loved Ones). There is no building counter-narrative to the status quo, no moments of concrete struggle for the future. History is not contested. The regime does not need to rewrite or obfuscate history to control the present. Everyone seems to agree that the utopian impulse from the Left has been crushed, or its time has passed.

As Raffaella Baccolini argues “historical amnesia therefore leads us toward Anti-Utopia”. She quotes Adrienne Rich who asserts that “historical amnesia is starvation of the imagination; nostalgia is the imagination’s sugar rush”.

In dystopian fiction the world of the dystopian future is often presented matter-of-factly: the exploitative and horrific is initially conferred with a veneer of naturalness and accepted by the dystopian protagonist as familiar if not perfectly innocuous. As Samuel R. Delany wrote of science fiction, the “taken-for-granted background (the setting)" is the foreground. And, as Moylan observes, “The protagonist (and the reader) is always already in the world in question, unreflectively immersed in the society”.

In other words, the lack of a literal and undisguised account in the novel of the historical shifts that produced Lohrey’s ‘near future’ is unsurprising. As Kathleen Spencer notes, in her useful analysis of the formal and stylistic description of science fiction, the fabric, rhythms, space and quality of the “non-existent” society is frequently referred to incidentally or “obliquely”, conjuring up “the fuller absent paradigm of the alternative
world” by hearing the voice of someone “from inside” the speculative, imagined world. The new, the different, the challenging, even the horrifying is thus often rendered at a “level at which we might, in mundane novels, refer without elaboration to McDonalds”.21 (And it is a sign of just how incomplete, or ‘close’ Lohrey’s dystopia is that her novel does also, in fact, mention McDonalds.)

It is arguable that to critique the novel’s refusal to remember, dramatise or historicise causes is to apply conventional expectations of realist works to a particular subgenre of science fiction. But within the conventions of the form, many ‘critical dystopias’ and ‘feminist dystopias’ of the latter part of the twentieth century (and some ‘anti-utopias’ also) do historicise the production of dystopia. In Margaret Atwood’s near future dystopia, The Handmaid’s Tale, for example, the protagonist recalls the precise transition into the Republic of Gilead, the economic, environmental, political and reproductive crisis that preceded it and the social forces that gained power to usher it in:

It’s strange now, to think of having a job...All those women having jobs: hard to imagine now thousands had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing. Now it’s like remembering the paper money, when they still had that...I guess that’s how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once without anyone knowing beforehand. If there had still been portable money, it would have been more difficult. It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency.22

Indeed the novel is suffused with Offred’s memories of the time before. From the opening pages, the protagonist recalls the old space (“I’m remembering my feet on those sidewalks in the time before”, “I once had a garden; I can remember the smell of the turned earth”), entertainment (“Lilies used to be a movie theatre, before”) her child and partner, the gradual loss of freedom (“Nothing changes instantaneously, we lived as usual by ignoring”).23 Whereas, as Jameson has suggested, in anti-utopias like 1984, memory has either been evicered or functions purely nostalgically as imaginary compensation, in Atwood’s novel it creates the foundations for resistance and the prospect of social change.24

And Andrew McGahan’s comic dystopia, Underground, similarly exposes historical explanations and causes in its narrative, quite explicitly linking them to the rise of Islamophobia and Howard’s government:

I could go back years and years, no doubt. My current fate, after all, is linked to a much wider history. I could go all the way back, ten years and more, to September 11 and the Twin Towers...Truth is, I could go back even further than that. But I won’t. I’ll go back just over two years. I’ll start with the dreadful events in Canberra.25
Many post-apocalyptic Cold War science fictions, and more recently the apocalyptic, highly allegorical *The Road*, share the absence of an account of the events that lead up to the dystopian present in the novel. Perhaps for this reason *The Road* is almost unbearably bleak and seems to combine, or draw on, social critiques from both the Left and the Right into a devastating denunciation of human nature. In McCarthy’s novel, as in *1984*, while one of the characters can vaguely recall life before the world-on-the-brink-of-ending, these memories are dim and shady, incoherent and incomplete. Moreover, any explanation of the stark vision of burning land and people, cannibalism, starvation, squads of men who rape and torture, is simply not attempted. But in *The Road*, unlike Lohrey’s text, the allegorical framework or Novum is far more developed and the characters who are directly affected by the terrors engulfing them assume a mythic status. The future world is more fully realised and thus more estranging so that the symbolic resonances and implications are more textured and complex. In *The Road* as in *1984*, there is at least the impulse, the struggle, to remember ‘before’, whereas in *The Reading Group* there is no sudden or brutal shift separating the extrapolation from existing conditions, which makes the critique subtler and more condemning but less defamiliarising.

“Allegory suggests the absence of realism” according to Stephen Knight, who argues that the “austerely symbolic element of *The Reading Group* interrogates its expressive realist aspects”. It can be inferred that such an interpretation presumes that it is in the very nature of allegory as a device that the symbolic is not ‘explained’ or “historicised” so we ought not to expect the origins or history of the rise of the Bearers or the CPS to be articulated. The tensions between the allegorical and the familiar do recast and reorient the reader’s view of ‘democratic’ Australian society. But the incomplete nature of the allegory prevents the novel from providing either a symbolic/metaphorical or a narrative explanation or exploration and contributes to an amnesiac pessimism.

A paradox is evident in the novel’s construction. Many of the textual allusions and embedded quotations come from material published in the late 1970s and very early 1980s. Yet the novel omits any account of the events that brought the current situation into being; this nightmare of a burgeoning Right and pragmatic “moderate” party overseeing steady incursions into basic human rights has no narrative bridge to the past.
There is a tension between the extrapolations from the political climate of the 1980s – the novel’s description of Coke and Chilean craft shops – which suggests the dystopian text may operate as a warning, and the concurrent historical amnesia, which invites an interpretation of the text as permeated by pessimistic inevitability and inexorability that anti-utopian literary works often embrace. As Andrew Milner observes: “Both Williams and Jameson had grasped the central political dilemma of dystopian fiction: if its serious purpose is in its warning, then the more grimly inexorable the fictive world becomes, so the less effective it will be as a call to resistance.”27 The Reading Group is not an anti-utopian text but it is pessimistic.

Memory and the 1960s and ’70s in The Reading Group

Some dystopias manage to engage tropes of memory to situate the dystopian regime’s existence concretely and to retain a horizon of hope and the prospect of resistance. In Baccolini’s view, “memory helps break hegemonic discourse” and while anti-utopias often fall into mere nostalgia, for ‘critical dystopias’ (she especially foregrounds Le Guin) “history is central and necessary for the development of resistance and the maintenance of hope, even when it is a dystopian history that is remembered”.28

Unlike the ‘critical dystopias’ of the late 1980s and 1990s and some of the classical dystopias/anti-utopias of the twentieth century, none of the characters recalls how the present repression, the sense of eternal crisis and incursions on civil liberties began, where it came from or why, although it can be assumed that they can remember (that is they are young, or old, enough to have witnessed the transition, the rise of the Plague Bearers and so on), since they share a common, now disavowed past as ‘products’ of the 1960s radicalisation. They were not born into the dystopian regime. There is an implicit link between the book’s increasingly neo-totalitarian but contrarily ‘democratic’ paramilitary ‘present’ and the failure of the utopian movements of the 1970s and their redirection, in the lives of the main characters, from systemic political critique to an insipid reformism, blithe withdrawal, nominal residual Left liberalism or opportunistic pragmatism.

While much is not remembered by the characters of the reading group who are not at risk from, or especially oppositional to, the regime, Glenn – the illiterate and drifting young man Robert tries to help at the Colony – doesn’t remember much either, despite being invited by his teacher to tell her the story of his life. Whereas Glenn is
terrified of accidentally glimpsing his own reflection, Sam hangs a mirror behind his office door in “blimpish vanity”. Glenn mentions his suicide attempt in jail – cutting his throat – but simply observes, “I can’t remember what it felt like”. The middle-class characters primarily recall their previous political engagements, their working-class childhoods, and the reading group itself but somehow draw few conclusions from these reflections regarding their lives in the present. Stephen Knight, correctly I think, argues that the book exposes an “underlying triangulation of the characters’ past politicisation, their present personalising triviality, and the continuing decline of real political processes”. Paul Salzman makes a related point about “the entanglement of the political and the personal and the resultant tainting of the latter when the former becomes corrupt”. Yet the characters are presented quite sympathetically: these are not the ridiculous fools of caricature or the simple targets of social satire. We are taken into their internal lives, their insomnia, their dreams, their infidelities and lusts, their failures at work. It is as if the novel reaches in two quite different directions, one fairly earnestly examining the day-to-day personal utopian impulses and infatuations of the ex-reading group members, the other implicitly but savagely critiquing them for what they have forced themselves to ignore or forget.

The central characters have begun to withdraw from or abandon politics (and not any politics but the historical period of utopianism associated with the seventies social movements and the creation of utopian texts):

It was so hard these days to know what you felt. Once it had been straightforward: Get out of Vietnam, higher wages, a better deal for women. Then it had got so complicated; it was all economics and what seemed at first abhorrent could be portrayed as only a short-term evil leading ultimately to better things…

Or, as Lyndon recalls elsewhere: “Don’t misunderstand me. I know what politics is. I was ‘political’ myself once…we used to talk for hours, trying to get ourselves focused; circling, with what we thought was brilliant finesse, around some point of illumination”. (Emphasis mine.)

Of all the narrators, Lyndon most explicitly wishes to distance himself from the past, from his tacking up anti-war posters and being excited about Australian republicanism and hostile to people with conservative values or Liberal loyalties. He begs Michael, “spare me the protest songs”, and chastises Robert about what he wears: “radical chic went out in the seventies".
Sam also remembers his radical aspirations, reminding his student of the route the moratorium marches took, and continuing to organise opposition inside the Party, while becoming distracted by the bushfires and his sex life with Renata. He is eventually peripheral in the novel. Although he maintains some connection with activism, or so we are told, he has still been drained of utopian (political) anticipation:

Once, in his twenties, he had thought of himself as a suburban guerrilla, but in the vain formlessness of that time, everyone’s expectations had dissolved. And the boldest had disappeared, picked off by invisible snipers or laid to rest in suburban comfort, the second marriage and the job well done. Whatever happened to vastness of scale? The broad sweep, the grand gesture?36

Even Michael, now a Ministerial advisor in the Party, remembers once being involved in mass campaigns: “He’s been careful not to join any committees or put his name to any paid advertisements of protest against the introduction of house arrests and harsher penalties for political offences. He’d marched long ago with thousands of others. But not lately.”37

Tom Moylan and Raffaella Bacolli, inter alia, have emphasised the way in which a subject’s memory of the past is frequently depicted in dystopian texts as a fount of recuperative energy; the process of remembering is sometimes even a strategy of inoculation against ideological hegemony or a catalyst for personal resistance, and a potential source of power or inspiration for radical political engagement in a counter-narrative against the order of the regime.38 This was the case even in the 1980s, during which, as they state, in the realm of literature and science fiction, there was “a fashionable temptation to despair” in science fictional texts.39 Even within dystopian conventions, The Reading Group’s forgetting, what it does not speak of is notable and significant.

Moylan, writing about the importance of language as a weapon in dystopian resistance, has drawn attention to “the reconstitution of empowering memory” and how the recovery of language permits “the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and ‘speak back’ to hegemonic power” in a manoeuvre that counters the dominant state of affairs or the norm in anti-utopia where “dystopian subjects usually lose all recollection of the way things were before the new order.”40 Moylan goes on:

Whereas the hegemonic order restricts memory to nostalgia for a fictive golden age that embodies the ideological attributes of its own system, the dystopian protagonist often reclaims a suppressed and subterranean memory that is forward-looking in its enabling force, liberating in its reconstruction of the official story. 41

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Baccolini maintains: “History, its knowledge, and memory are therefore dangerous elements that can give the dystopian citizen a potential instrument of resistance. But whereas the protagonists, in classical dystopias, do not get any control over history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of history is an important element for the survival of hope.”

Memory in The Reading Group operates quite differently, since all the characters concur that the optimism and energy involved in their past political engagement is gone.

The historical periods the novel repeatedly references are the Great Depression and the civil rights movements and anti-war marches of the '60s and '70s. The novel can be read as suggesting that it is in the defeat of the last wave of struggle in which the cause of the dystopian present can be found. These memories do not, however, create compensatory or depoliticising nostalgia in the novel, since the characters have by now moved away from the activism and political commitment of that era and find their residual liberal reformism hopelessly inadequate to the present state of affairs. (Robert is somewhat of an exception until the end of the novel where, cynical at last, he is attracted to a woman on the basis of her “glowing immunity that he would like to smother”.)

It is not only the political events of the late 1960s or characters’ personal memories that are scattered into the textual fabric of the novel but cultural allusions and rituals (protest songs, “dated sixties figurines”, ‘save the whale’ stickers, sexual freedom, books from “student days”, parties celebrating republicanism) that conjure up a lost time, a doubling of vision and continuous haunting.

Stephen Knight has noted that by placing the formation of, and participation in, the reading group in the recent past, Lohrey’s management of time has the effect of engendering the novel with “a recurrent structural irony, the sense of a whole set of absent practices.” The reading group is itself a memory, a ritual from the past, that functions as a reminder of what has been left behind, although without ahistorical nostalgia since the group is recalled by its members as uncool, embarrassing – “the reading group is a sort of joke with them all now, something that belonged to a naïve phase of the past”.

There is an intense self-reflexivity, a heightened awareness of the construction and consumption of language and a self-conscious drawing of attention to the book’s own status as a text inherent in the reading group. The intertextual allusions and quoted material that underpin the narrative frequently operate as a belated echo or ironic subtext
to the plot, such as Gramsci’s theory of capitalism as a system in perpetual crisis while the city threatens to be torn asunder by its own economic and environmental crisis, a reference that is both a diagnosis and a warning. The ‘warning’ of the written text is a recurring image in characters’ dreams (from Glenn who is forced to read at gunpoint to Michael who desperately needs to read a parchment warning of a looming crisis but finds it is in a foreign language).

During the time of the group, some of the characters are already losing interest in their remaining political commitment (to the Party), or becoming entwined in its bureaucratic machinery, “obsessed with the minutiae that clog the labyrinths”.

Their recourse to the reading group appears symptomatic of their withdrawal from politics from below and mass movements into parliamentary organizations and electoral, factional activities or impotence and apathy. In this it has become another substitute. Here Lohrey may well be satirising the ideological shift by sections of the middle class or Left intelligentsia in Australia the late-1970s and early-80s from radical critique into ‘lifestyle politics’ and identity politics, where the reading group is effectively a bridge into political retreat and disengagement from struggle or activism, a compensation all of its own. They, like the image of Blake’s chariot in the novel, live in a certain purgatory from which their feeble commitments cannot release them.

The practices and symbols of writing and reading (like those of activism) constellate in the novel, yet remain seen by most of the protagonists as pastimes best left behind. Only Robert continues to read regularly and believes literacy might give Glenn some hope of liberation. In 1984, The Handmaid’s Tale, Fahrenheit 451 and other anti-utopias and dystopias, control and ownership of language is harnessed to bolster and promote state power. Their protagonists struggle to retain a natural and organic connection to language through recuperative memory, recovery of the previous, obliterated language and hostility to the new or by reading banned material. But whereas in these novels books are prohibited, censored or burned, in The Reading Group the characters – by and large – abandon them voluntarily if not utterly.

Indeed the rejection of reading for some characters also embodies an ultimate rejection of politics and, as explored in Chapter Four, the bleaching away of hope and disenchantment with the pursuit of utopia. “They used to have a reading group. It had been a waste of time, really, an old-fashioned idea that no seriously active person would ever bother with.”
And again: “[T]hey felt there was something faintly ridiculous and Victorian about the reading group. Reading groups were for fanatics or Trotskyists, people who were fringe or impotent, or for middle-aged housewives who had nothing better to do with their time. Reading with other people was unsophisticated, uncool: reading was something you did alone.”

This discarding of reading and politics is brought together when Renata and Sam’s framed lithograph of The Communist Manifesto has the phrase ‘cancelled’ scribbled across it in red texta at a party. “Sam had pronounced it fair comment and said he thought they should leave it there.”

Graffiti, literally the writing on the wall, similarly demands: “Cancel the political.” Memories of the reading group can be seen as analogies for activism: its abandonment and its necessity.

Personal memories of childhood in the novel are often connected with class when they are not conjuring up the lost utopian moments of the 1960s-70s. This device is curious precisely because the working class is so invisible in Lohrey’s dystopian vision of the future. Aside from the “union men” at Tronti’s party, Claire and Robert’s father and Roy, the Minister’s driver, there are no working-class characters in the novel and certainly no collective industrial struggle.

Perhaps this signifies the historic break between the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ in the novel’s imaginative world: class divisions once mattered because the proletariat could be considered at least a potential viable force for progressive social change. Now, as the characters have left these family class backgrounds behind, there is an enormous underclass of atomised, self-destructive homeless (Negri’s multitude?). There is nothing approaching a genuine union movement or challenge to the regime. Yet Renata, Michael, Claire and Robert come from blue-collar working-class backgrounds.

History is constantly reduced to the personal. Claire’s reconstruction of her vision of Victorian splendour is compared favourably with “her own past, which was banal and tawdry on a post-war housing estate”. She displays relief at her social mobility. Viewing the house with a real estate agent she observes:

Exactly the kind of garden she had wanted as a girl…In every way the opposite of her father’s block, a bleached quarter-acre on a flat, treeless housing estate, sun-scorched lawn and ragged weed and prickly native shrubs. And in the middle, a featureless timber box, identical to all the other boxes on all the other lots.
Claire maintains a link to the past by retaining the cuckoo clock, a family heirloom from her grandmother who survived the Depression. She defends its presence at first as a welcome “flaw” in her search to recreate the ideal – but not stiflingly perfect – utopian form. The sentimental association is not nostalgia for the ‘better times’ or a longing for an idealised past, however, since it seems more a symbol of her grandmother’s grim endurance with stomach cancer, an unemployed husband and dependent children. Claire and Robert’s father identifies as working class. “As a child she’d learned the way to get close to him was to ask him about politics, to open up his Party vein. His hatreds were flatly stated and uncompromising. Some of them she shared. Still.”

This is a surprising revelation for so much else of so-called traditional politics has been relegated to the dustbin of history, as it were, by the protagonists and because there is no working-class movement or struggle of any kind in the novel. This is one of the few moments where The Reading Group achieves the dispersal of oppositional “structures of feeling” through multiple points of view that The Morality of Gentlemen captures so successfully. During the reading group, the characters shove aside economic analysis for intellectual currents such as psychoanalysis (“Freud over Marx”, “the psyche’s the thing, mate”). Claire’s father, on the other hand, sees things materially and economically. “‘The money’s always drying up’ he says. ‘A man’s got to be cunning if he’s going to find new ways of getting his cut. They'll always find some excuse to keep the workers down.’”

Claire’s brother Robert also reflects on these experiences although views them with less hostility, more whimsy and optimism:

The Lawson Estate reminds him of the housing estate he grew up on … [sic] the sparseness … [sic] the boredom…He must make a move now or there he’ll be, lying in the dark and thinking of his father, and his childhood, and the images of then will be luminously present, vivid and sharp as they can only be in the closed-eye movie-house of insomnia.

Too late. He can see the harsh light from the white sand. The blue sea. A suburban beach. His father is with him, tall and lithe and sunburnt. They go there in the early mornings before the nightshift: the long day of sweltering prone on the beach, neglecting the house with its high, yellow weeds. While his mother sits upright in the typing pool under a bladed circular fan, dabbing at the sweat between her breasts…So much light, so much sun. So much white haze and blue suburban sea. Open, exposed.

Re-runs in the movie house.

Michael also recalls his father, an immigrant worker, showing him the copper mines where he was employed. But none of these memories have much import in the novel except as a residual loyalty to a class analysis in a society where the working class has apparently ceased to exist, replaced by a comfortable middle class peopled by intellectuals and marginally sympathetic reformists, and an expanding ‘diseased’ lumpenproletariat.
Historical Specificity and Embedded Quotations

Aside from characters’ own memories, the impact and effect of the multiple embedded references to, quotations from, or adaptations of other texts is another link to history and the present. While there are evidently moments when the material being read by the characters either underpins or acts as counterpoint to the narrative of *The Reading Group* – that is operates ironically, diagnostically or dialectically – I will restrict my discussion of this material to its implications for representations of history and the question of historical specificity.

This arises out of my previous claim that *The Reading Group* was at once amnesiac and historically specific, and emerges from the way in which Lohrey relies on material that seems to moor the world of the novel to a particular time.

What is the effect of including not just books from the past in a novel set in the near-future, but indeed of using excerpts from article and manifestos from an earlier time as the basis for the characters’ dialogue and speech? Moreover, what is the impact of (contra *The Morality of Gentlemen*) isolating the sources from their political and historical contexts of some of this material? If authors remain unidentified to enhance the futurism of the work, why include their speeches and excerpts from books at all? Are these intended to contain an implicit political agenda and if so, why are they incorporated so seamlessly that without detailed research their authors and origins could not be identified? Does Lohrey’s utilisation of such ‘found text’ function as a reminder of our inability to even imagine the horrors of the future? Is there a meta-narrative within this sometimes hidden, sometimes overt material? Unfortunately I can only hope to foreground aspects of these issues in this exegesis and acknowledge the difficult formal and political questions they pose.

Some examples may elucidate the situation. For instance, although it isn’t explicitly acknowledged, in the section where Grainger is speaking on television, the final lines originate with Australian poet James McAuley (who, like ‘the elderly poet of the Right’, Grainger, was a conservative Catholic, “ex-Colonial” administrator, organist and academic). “[Here then is the gravity of the situation]: the shapeless cannot give shape, nor the formless form, nor the unbelieving belief, nor the meaningless meaning, nor the irresolute resolution”. 56 McAuley died in 1976. Grainger’s speech on page fifty-four is
from B.A. Santamaria’s obituary article celebrating the life of McAuley, which was published in *Quadrant* in 1977.\(^5^7\)

There are also numerous references to elements of Autonomist Marxism (and *operaismo*, theories of working class action) in Italy in the late 1970s: from mentions of a ‘socialist’ Tronti figure, to oblique connections with the jailed Radio Alice activists, via the portrayal of incarcerated Metropolitan Indian McConnon.\(^5^8\)

A final example concerns the quotes from utopian (and Stalinist!) Ernst Bloch that are scattered throughout the novel, and which – like Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, state and civil society – provide a theoretical counterpoint to the unfolding narrative, to the complicity and passivity of *The Reading Group*’s characters. Lyndon’s final speech paraphrases Bloch (and Lyndon acknowledges his contribution “[is] not original; just a little something I picked up in the reading group”).\(^5^9\) Robert also reads Bloch. This last example as a device has interesting parallels with the ‘external’ appendices and “second endings” of Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* and Orwell’s *1984* where the protagonist’s voice and world vanish to be replaced with the historical notes of the Gileadean Symposium, which has formed after the regime’s collapse in the former work, and, in the latter, the Newspeak glossary appears in the third-person past tense.\(^6^0\)

The difference with Lohrey’s work is that she is quoting, or including sections from, published texts that exist in the contemporary world, many of which had publication dates in the late nineteen-seventies. It’s a strange device, unsettling, and has the unusual, not altogether satisfactory effect of reminding a reader that this novel about the future is indelibly bound to the past.

I have been arguing that this mix of the familiar, the allegorical and the forgotten has the effect of foregrounding the dystopian harms (homelessness, mass unemployment, poverty) that exist even under social democracy in a class-based society. But if the novel shows the subtleties of insinuation that mask the reality of capitalist society, even under a “moderate and progressive” party, the silence of history functions to make such a political and material dystopia seem inevitable.

*The Reading Group* encapsulates some of the ideological and political tensions and concerns of the period, where the forgetting, the static and passive sense of history is at one with the book’s incapacity to dramatise resistance. In the next section I argue that the novel in its silences also articulates or affirms aspects of the dominant ideology – or hegemony – of the 1980s.
“The true picture of the past flits by”61: The Reading Group in history

Amanda Lohrey began writing The Reading Group in 1982–3 before the publication of The Morality of Gentlemen by APCOL. She worked on it periodically, balancing the demands of a small child, and travel for her husband’s work.

Pan Picador accepted the novel for publication sometime in the period 1986–7. While drafting the novel, Lohrey had spent a year in Berkeley with her husband Andrew, who held a seat as Tasmanian Senator for the ALP until 1986.

Lohrey grew up in a pro-union working-class home in Tasmania. But by the late 1980s, when her second novel was published, she was effectively part of the middle-class, her blue-collar upbringing and background was mostly history, although she retained – and retains – a commitment to the Left and working-class struggle. By 1988, Lohrey was a published writer who had worked as a visiting Lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney.

In an essay on politics in fiction she has expressed the feeling that the phrase “the personal is political” had become, in the 1980s, depoliticised: “In the late eighties the personal half of that equation has receded, or rather been recast into the Reagonite apotheosis of yuppie individualism.”62 This climate also affected committed writing, in her view. Referring to Jameson’s analysis she said:

‘Political writing’ has for many years been banished to the aesthetic margins. Literature is supposed to ‘transcend’ public issues, to be about ‘fundamentals’, love, death, and the family, and of course the landscape. True poetry is how the light is reflected in a rockpool, the outline of maidenhair ferns at dusk; not what the fascists did at Nuremberg; this is ‘didactic’ and it ‘dates’.

The Reading Group marks the endpoint, or transition out of Lohrey’s own practice of committed fiction (which is not to say that Camille’s Bread and The Philosopher’s Doll do not have necessarily politically and critical positions nor that the realm of the domestic and the local/familial are devoid of significance). Speaking at the Writers in Action series she acknowledged that “The Reading Group did grow out of a great deal of personal pessimism”, and said she had found the “Fraser years a drought of the land” and the heart. Anticipating her shift towards explorations of spirituality and diet in Camille’s Bread, she stated that: “in order for me to be personally optimistic I’ve really got to start writing about something outside of politics in the capital ‘P’ sense”.63

Australian society was deep in recession and the Left isolated when Lohrey commenced her project. Outrage regarding the coup against the Whitlam government
had predominantly settled back into a resigned pessimism, the movement from the streets to the ‘ballot box’ had seen Fraser elected as Prime Minister. When the Hawke-Keating government came to power they opened the country up further to free market forces (floating the dollar, privatising the banking arena, ushering in the Price and Wages Accord and a two-tier system of industrial bargaining based upon the ostensible economic “consensus”) as well as developing ‘user pays’ public services (such as HECS in 1987 for tertiary education) and retreating from progressive social policies (the abandonment, for instance, of its opposition to uranium mining). For those traditional supporters who had held illusions about Labour’s ability to deliver – though the ALP had long dropped mentions of socialism from its platform and its long attachment to the White Australia policy hardly recommended it as a mainstay of egalitarianism – the “light on the hill” was rather dim.64

The early 1980s saw a protracted drought that played into the general economic crisis. Resistance did not, of course, collapse completely in the eighties, but mass movements and strikes on the scale of the sixties and seventies, not to mention the optimism and heterogeneity of the 1970s, was nowhere to be seen.

Some of these elements – inflation, interest rates, mass unemployment – are addressed directly in the novel and form part of the fabric of its world. The critical depiction of a “progressive but moderate” unnamed electoral party with ties to the union movement, and an increasingly disinterested or cynical rank-and-file (“no-one would be converted” states Renata, while most of the Reading Group’s characters have already left the Party) is one obvious example.65 The Plague Bearers, living in dire poverty, digging through bins, resonates with the actual mass unemployment of the early 1980s. Roy alludes to difficult economic conditions, while expressing his desire to leave his job chauffeuring the Minister to open his own business; he bemoans the interest rates on government bonds, and lambasts the “corporations” that can “do a flit” if “the economy looks rocky”.66

I argue below that the significant omissions and absences of the text show The Reading Group does not merely contest the dominant ideology, or hegemony, of the 1980s, but is a symptom of it, reinforcing Thatcher’s infamous claim that there is no alternative while trying, despite itself, to find those enclaves or embryonic beginnings that might prove itself wrong. The novel exposes what liberal capitalism might mean if there really was “no such thing as society”.

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The year after The Reading Group was first published, 1989, the same year of its reissue, saw the publication of Fukuyama’s essay on the ‘end of history’, which concluded that liberal democratic capitalism was the end point of civilisation, the ultimate horizon for history. Consonant with Thatcher’s assertion about the inevitability of secular capitalism as the only – if not the ideal – system now possible, I argued in Chapter Four that the novel projects the sinister implications of just what the end of history might really involve.

On one reading, the novel is undoubtedly a critique of the dominant ideology or hegemonic experience of the 1980s, even, indeed, of the hegemonic process itself. Yet its relationship to ideology is more complex than this.

I am speaking here of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, and the distinction between the “coercive power” of the state and the more mediated and insidious elicitation of “spontaneous consent” from the mass of the population within civil society under capitalism has been tremendously important for cultural studies and critical theory. Indeed, as I have emphasised, it is Gramsci’s analysis of the role and function of intellectuals in class society that underscores – in articulation like the voiceover of a documentary film, or in counterpoint as the Brechtian placards in a theatrical performance – scenes of ‘everyday life’ for the characters in The Reading Group, some of whom, like Sam, are self-identified intellectuals.

Much remains contested and open to interpretation in the theoretical implications of Gramsci’s work. Most pertinent here is his argument that the “general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” is taken up ‘willingly’ or ‘passively’ by the bulk of ordinary people in a class system, and that this is occurs because of the “prestige” the dominant group has historically enjoyed because of its control in the world of production.

In other words: “Hegemony is not simply an expression of dominance but also its precondition…Nor is the establishment of hegemony simply a matter of imposing an ideology. A potentially hegemonic group always attempts to absorb and transform the ideology of allied and even rival groups.”

This is different to, though operating in concert with, “rule” or the domination of the repressive and openly forceful/controlling institutions of the state – the penal system, the legal system, the army, the police force and so on – as it functions not merely through overt repression but the solicitation of agreement, acceptance, the
‘internalisation’ as it were, of the dominant ideas and the status quo as well as the general organisation of social life.

As suggested in Chapter Three, a number of Marxist critics – including Raymond Williams – have concluded that hegemony is a more useful, sophisticated and flexible formulation than the notion of ideology, permitting more complex accounts of the development of culture, including the concomitant layering of oppositional, residual, reconstituted and emergent forms and practices. For Williams:

It is distinct in its refusal to equate consciousness with the articulate formal system which can be and ordinarily is abstracted as ‘ideology’…it sees the relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living…It is a whole body of practices and expectations…a lived system of meanings and value.70

An exegesis of this length could not possibly hope to uncover and examine the competing and contradictory hegemonic practices of the 1980s and their relationship to a literary work such as The Reading Group. I hope only to provide an outline of the ways in which the text both contests and reveals certain hegemonic norms.

For Williams, one of the advantages of Gramsci’s analysis, from which Williams goes on to develop the concept of a “structures of feeling” as a substitute phrase for the term ideology that captures its social and ‘felt’ elements, is that hegemonic practice is capable of being resisted, contested and remade:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or structure… it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own. The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in society.71

In struggle, counter-hegemony arises, and for Williams, the term can “speak better” to the experience of contemporary capitalism, with its technologies, advertising, popular culture, notions of private life and leisure.72 Hegemony displaces the arguably mechanical and outdated formulations of superstructure. For Williams hegemony differs from what he perceives to have been the dominant assumption of ideology in that “it is seen to depend for its hold not only on its expression of the interests of a ruling class but also on its acceptance as ‘normal reality’ or ‘commonsense’ by those in practice subordinate to it”.73

(Emphasis mine.)

The Reading Group contests the claims of freedom, prosperity, equality and universal rights attached to conservatism in the nineteen-eighties through its unmasking of the “false” utopia of capitalism, as well as its account of the symptoms of this very system: redirection and appropriation of the utopian impulse into commodities and

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consumption, in some instances, and sexual desire. Tom Moylan summarises Darko Suvin’s important insight: “[He] offers a reminder that utopian hope for what Bloch terms the ‘not yet’ is negated by the false utopia that the new market offers as the prime site for individual experiences of hustle and success”.

The main characters’ complicity, reformism, or hesitation in the lure of the looming crisis also shows the operations of hegemonic practices and cultures – how quickly the erstwhile radicals become accustomed to the Plague Bearers and the demands of pragmatism. The proliferation of snapshots of mass cultural practices, like the TV speeches distributed throughout, also reference hegemonic cultural production, dissemination and experience. An example can be found in the ideological obscuring of class relations that occurs in the television discussion a reporter has with a ‘marketing consultant’ who assesses the Prime Minister’s electoral appeal: “He needs to be humanised” the expert of spin concludes, in order to come across “as a battler, someone ordinary people can relate to”. The passage continues:

‘But he’s a rich man,’ says Nicole artlessly.
‘Look, sweetheart, we’re all battlers one way or another.’

The ‘New Nation’ campaign advertising executive who has helped design the latest kit, full of plastic mass-produced ornaments (just the items for Linna’s New Nation Festival, which admonishes and coaxes “Advance Australia! Advance the nation!”) eventually plants some of the items in a potplant and pisses on them. The spectre of endlessly repeated novelty in the book – the New Nation, New Patriotism, New Army, and so on – is another echo of what Jameson has termed the “cultural logic of ‘late capitalism’”. Appalled at his own creations (including “red white and blue plastic cufflinks in the shape of a boomerang” and a “presentation plaque…with the inscription For Patriotic Endeavour in gold”), the ad man flees to the countryside.

Both of these incidents attest to the production of a dominant culture, the artificality of what is then imbued as acceptable and natural, commonsense (nationalism, the identification of wealthy politicians with ‘ordinariness’, the appropriation of working-class identity into the category of the classless battler).

That culture itself has become a form of commodity (Claire’s pursuit of the “authentic” in her renovations, for example, or the existence of a trendy “Chilean craft gallery”, which attracts middle-class customers), is a point made earlier in relation to the compensations, the pleasures of purchase and consumption.
The Reading Group contests the hollow claims of the ‘market utopia’ and reveals its divided, even violent realities, where whole sections of the population, in this space of affluence and plenty, are jobless and homeless. Contesting hegemony, recording and relaying the practice of hegemony and dominant ideologies, yes, but also, as I argue below, symptomatic of them.

Lohrey’s novel is, through its silences and omissions, a product (not an unmediated reflection) of this hegemonic experience, particularly in terms of how the text speaks of the pessimism the Left in the 1980s and the diagnosis of the end of class and industry. Several of these silences have already been isolated, such as the lack of any real resistance or the historical amnesia that haunts the novel.

Pierre Macherey’s A Theory of Literary Production, first published in France in 1968, was informed by structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis. Prefiguring Fredric Jameson’s argument relating to the ‘political unconscious’, Macherey argues that a critic must pay attention to the silences, absences and omissions of a text. “It seems useful and legitimate to ask of every production what it tacitly implies, what it does not say”. Per Eagleton: “These absences – the not said of the work – are precisely what bind it to its ideological problematic: ideology is present in the text in the form of its eloquent silence”. The ‘unconscious’ of the text then, rather than a surface analysis of its explicit content, is the realm the critic must attend to. “It is these silences which the critic must ‘make speak’. The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things.” Or, in Macherey’s own words: “The silence of the book is not a lack to be remedied, an adequacy to be made up for. It is not a temporary silence that could finally be abolished”.

Sharing with Althusserian philosophy the notion that literature has a particular “distance” from ideology that it indeed “congeals” or “stages” ideological discourses rather than replicating or expressing them, Macherey’s view is that the text ultimately “reveals the gaps in ideology” by foregrounding its silences, contradictions, omissions and absences. The text is primarily parodic and “imitates the everyday language” of multiple ideologies, while at the same time being apart from ideology, without being ‘free’ of it. “The work has in its beginning a break from the usual ways of speaking and writing – a break which sets it apart from all other forms of ideological expression.”

According to Eagleton, Macherey’s notion of ideology is not “as a determinate structure of ideas, but…the shapeless, amorphous stuff of everyday experience”, and
this, in Macherey’s understanding, is the “raw material” which the producer then “works” into literature. By “fixing” or “concealing” ideological discourse that is “normally in flux”, the text in fact can be “made to turn against itself” as it “implicitly criticises” its own ideology by revealing and exposing the contradictions, dissonances, conflicts and gaps of ideologies. As Eagleton summarises:

Because literature is a formal affair...the work does not so much reflect ideology as ‘stage’ or ‘produce’ it, lend it a definitive shape and outline. In so doing, however, it highlights those limits, absences and contradictions in the ideology which are not so visible to us in everyday life, where ideology is, so to speak, too close to the eyeball to be objectified.

Or, as Selden argues:

Ideology is normally lived as if it were totally natural, as if its imaginary and fluid discourse gives a perfect and unified explanation of reality. Once it is worked into a text all its contradictions and gaps are exposed.

Writing against not only the empiricism or expressive theories of ‘traditional’ literary criticism but also the aesthetic privileging at work in Lukács, Macherey brings together a complex and engaging synthesis of elements of Russian formalism, Brecht, structuralism and Freud. The literary text is always centred: it is dissonant, incomplete, dispersed, ruptured, diverse and incoherent. In Macherey’s view: “the work is never – or only apparently – a coherent and unified whole”. As Eagleton suggests in his introduction, this means that: “The literary text is not to be thought of as an ‘expression’ of the human subject or as a ‘reflection’ of reality. It has no depth, centre, unity or singular point of origin.”

Although particular elements of Macherey’s methodology are crucial to my approach to The Reading Group, there are important qualifications to my use of his analysis. Firstly there are aspects to the theoretical framework Macherey posited (he has since moved away from many of the claims in Literary Production) that seem to me insufficiently specific or historical and that do not account for literature as part of a “whole social process” and set of practices in language, not only those of production and creation, but reception (reading, reviewing, distributing, consuming).

Perhaps more importantly in the present discussion, much of Macherey’s focus was on the (often canonical) realist novels of the nineteenth century, which did indeed prima facie “attempt to create a coherent and internally consistent fictive world”. He thus reads them ‘against the grain’. But I apply some of Macherey’s important observations to a literary work that formally and aesthetically foregrounds its own fragmentation and artificiality. The Reading Group is self-consciously centred in formal terms and politically
committed. The novel has been presented as form of protest or intervention, rather than any self-proclaimed ‘reflection’ or organic whole that attempts to efface or deny its own political and ideological connection. Lastly, in *A Theory Of Production* Macherey presumes a general relation between a literary work and ideology, which I do not share.

While much of Macherey’s analysis focuses on the contradictions of ideologies, the way in which they undermine and resituate one another in a particular text, I am here focusing on how Lohrey’s work, despite a conscious contestation of the dominant ideology of the 1980s, is also in its *silences and omissions* symptomatic of it. The text both contests and reveals it. Unlike Macherey’s examination of Jules Verne, or Catherine Belsey’s contrasting of Conan Doyle’s privileging of rationality, scepticism and science with the mystery, enigma and silence surrounding his depiction of women (who remain peripheral and inexplicable as “the classical realist text had not yet developed a way of signifying sexuality except in a metaphoric or symbolic mode”), I will not here attempt to convey the way in which multiple ideologies conflict or to account for all the different voices and discourses in which Lohrey’s text ‘speaks’.93 (However I do think there would be a fruitful investigation here, considering the various ideologies of Left liberalism, psychoanalysis, the intelligentsia, post-structuralist concerns with the role of discourse and language, the subject and desire, gendered sexuality, and so on).

I suggest that the text’s incapacity to imagine resistance or a genuine or viable source of oppositional struggle, and the pessimism this engenders, are intimately related to its historical circumstances – its “conditions of possibility” in Australia in the 1980s. It shares the Left’s impotence, or the abandonment of Left politics for a layer of intellectuals, and the Left’s frustration in the face of the “capitalist restructuring of the economy, the conservative restoration in politics, and the cultural shift to the right” the period brought, without being able to imagine any alternative.94

Jameson argues that “science fiction corresponds to the waning or blockage of historicity” particularly in the postmodern period. He suggests that dystopian or catastrophic novels and other “imaginary near futures” cannot effect the same sense of “horror of otherness”.95 This is connected to another speculation: “Perhaps, however, what is implied is simply an ultimate historicist breakdown in which we can no longer imagine the future in any form – Utopian or catastrophic. Under those circumstances, where a formerly futurological science fiction…turns into mere realism and an outright
representation of our present, the possibility that Dick offered us – an experience of our present as past and history – is slowly excluded”.

In The Reading Group the pessimism of the 1980s and the triumph of the Right feed into a static future that resembles both the present and the end of history. The “structures of feeling” of this period can be felt in terms of what the text does not express, articulates only partially, or leaves out. Resistance hovers at the margins of Lohrey’s second novel, never entirely obliterated but not consequential either. The opening page of The Reading Group sets up an opposition between Sam, who is involved in a “protest group”, and one of his students, who hasn’t joined the group but follows his teacher “with the hunched anxious air of the hostile supplicant”. Sam suspects he may be involved with Security Police but this tension is not developed in the novel and the protest group is never portrayed. Indeed, Sam’s commitment to participating in rallies becomes overwhelmed by a storyline concerning his partner Renata’s entanglement with the visit of an internationally renowned, Left-leaning poet. As Rodney Smith argues, in a short sociological analysis, “none of the protestors gains victory or suffers defeat in The Reading Group” and “no large-scale protests against the emergency powers are actually depicted in the novel”. For Smith, this means that the novel:

At least partly sides with those who dismiss the possibilities of effective political protest against economic necessity. It does so on two levels: imaginatively or ideologically, as the economic forces become incomprehensible to the reading group and socially, in its depiction of economy’s apparently unstoppable production of the Plague Bearers.

I think the depiction is both more subtle and more complex than this, as it reveals the limits of Left liberalism, while still retaining a space for genuine resistance, even though this does not occur in any way that challenges the system in the novel. The protagonists are passive (Claire and Lyndon) or participate in notional, reformist acts that ‘civilise’ the worst elements of the present society.

The Plague Bearers lack the cohesion, confidence or social power to resist. They are lumpenised: unemployed men living on the streets or around the new estates, sometimes violent, carrying bats to protect their territory, periodically imprisoned for minor offences, beaten up in the cells by police.

Lyndon seems on the surface to be revisiting the possibility of change through determined effort in his final speech – “the last one’s not this one, right?” – but in fact this is ironic, as he is hostile to the prospect of lasting social change and reiterates his attachment to a utopia of the present. He spends the novel repeating himself: unable
either to achieve utopia or to strive for it in ways that could succeed by shattering his endless replaying of the same anticipatory impulse.

Lohrey’s diary notes suggest her concern with the lack of resistance actually dramatised in the novel. Indeed, she connects it with her own political experience, writing in her notebooks: “I should have something upbeat and optimistic at the end but how could I? – We’re incapable of it, weaned on expectations of defeat.”¹⁰⁰

Aside from amnesia and the lack of resistance in the narrative, what other significant silences exist within The Reading Group? As Macherey asks: “Can we make this silence speak? What is the unspoken saying? What does it mean? Can something that is itself hidden be recalled to our presence?”¹⁰¹

The organised working class – so integral to the agency, meaning, practice, remembrance, and politics of history in The Morality of Gentlemen – is almost entirely absent or invisible in this novel. I say almost because the text does contain scattered mentions of union men (once in the past, at the ‘Republic party’, and twice in the present). But the presence of these minor, peripheral characters with residual, almost unintelligible connections to labour, or, in Roy’s case, aspirational hungers for social mobility, combined with the Party’s seemingly incidental connections to a (now dead?) never-explored ‘labour’ movement serve to reinforce just how significant this omission is, how notable it becomes for its absence.

The trade union movement and class-conscious workers play no role in the novel (a few bureaucrats from blue-collar unions appear at the ‘Republic party’, some anonymous ‘union men’ hassle the Minister for undisclosed reasons at the dinner party at the Villa Tronti, ‘union men’ say their piece about logging). So far as we can tell neither the union movement nor individual workers resist the attacks on civil liberties or have anything at all to say about the Plague Bearers. Although Roy expresses his cynicism about corporations and the CPS counts the managing Director of a trucking company amongst its party faithful, the heads of big business or other representatives of the ruling class barely feature.

While Knight assumes the novel is set sometime “apparently beyond late capitalism” the economic organisation of society is revealed only at the point of consumption.¹⁰² In another deafening silence, the globalised world has vanished, the focus is significantly localised to a single city in Australia – unlike 1984 where the international situation, through perpetual war, alliance and negotiation, is a perennial
horizon; *The Handmaid's Tale* where Gilead is a single republic in Cambridge, at war with other parts of America; or *Underground* where the US alliance and Australia’s military and economic relationship with the United States is in fact the subject of the dystopia, a feature consonant also with Rodney Hall's 1988 *Kisses of the Enemy*.

Knight argues the problem of presenting politically committed, positive, working-class characters is solved “simply by negation” as “neither [of these elements] is attempted”. He observes: “there is, in such a novelistic structure, no productive working class of any importance, and Lohrey’s emphasis on a bourgeoisie acquisitively watching a derelict proletariat seems in its representational resonance thoroughly in tune with the current politics of all major parties in Australia.” In Knight’s view, then, this absence, the missing, is a device that connects not only with the critique of the Labor Party but the politics of contemporary capitalism more generally. I think there is more significance in this portrait than Knight allows, and that the absence is produced by the bleak “conditions of possibility” (i.e. endless diagnoses of the end of class in the period and the diminishing levels of strikes and struggle) of the 1980s.

The working-class vanishes at the same time members of the reading group, except Robert, turn away from economic analysis (“the shoals of productivity crisis abandoned”).

She remembered Andrew and Michael having a slow, painstaking discussion about productivity crises and Robert saying, “Fuck economics, we’re never going to get past primary school on this one. Let’s talk about the psyche…” And laughing.

And Lyndon saying, “The psyche’s the thing, mate, is it?”

“That’s it. The psyche’s the go.”

There are important reverberations with the direction of theoretical analysis in literary criticism in the 1980s – the turn to post-structuralism, post-modernism, psychoanalysis, discourse and so on – but I do not have room to explore them here.

One interpretation of the absence of any significant working class characters – indeed the entire class itself – would be to read this lack as a symbolic vanishing pertaining to the economic crisis: the logical endpoint of growing unemployment. Or, one could presume it is not the working class that has disappeared, but any perspective that takes account of class. For many Labor followers it was the Hawke-Keating era that truly spelled the party’s betrayal, its separation from both working-class followers and Left-leaning professionals who had seen the Whitlam era as a source of inspiration and possibility.
Glenn’s fear of accidentally catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror, his unwillingness to literally ‘see’ himself might be interpreted as a metonym for the lack of class-consciousness more generally.

Yet this does not seem a sufficient or satisfactory account, especially as the incidental phrases concerning union men and the scene at the ‘Republic Party’ seem to refer back to infrastructure, an old Left, that no longer really exists in the novel (a world of unions, industrial activity, class affiliation to the Party). There is a sense of the residual, even the quaint (like the effect of dropping in 1950s cars or drive-ins), in these moments where organised labour is referred to as if it continues to inhabit, or contest, society in a meaningful way. This lack of a collective working class (defeated, coopted or in action) certainly contributes to the novel’s logic of inevitability and its bleakness and resonates with the various pronouncements so intimately bound up in the ideology of the 1980s of ‘post-industrial society’, the death of class, the ushering in of a system that could put an end, once and for all, to history. And this not only at the level of ideas but of material reality: the Australian working class was pushed back in the early-mid 1980s, unemployment did function to inhibit industrial struggle, manufacturing did decline while the ‘service industry’ swelled. The Stalinist Communist Parties of the West had collapsed and campaigns for social justice continued but no new radical currents with any kind of mass following emerged in their place.

Race is another silence that speaks in The Reading Group, although there is not absolute quiet concerning it. Glenn refers several times to “wogs” and “boongs.” The girl he has a crush on is “dark”, “a wog”. Despite the pointed inclusion of an appropriated and repackaged boomerang symbol, now incorporated into the propaganda of the New Patriotism, Aboriginality, ethnicity, race or racism form no part of the political landscape. There is no mention of an Aboriginal culture or political movement. The presumption seems to be that the major characters are white; or at least, since their racial and ethnic background forms no part of their identity or outlook, that racial politics are not important in their worlds. While Michael is declared to be the son of an immigrant his ethnicity is never explicated and he appears to have retained no linguistic, familial, religious or ritual connections with the land, culture or language of his father whatsoever. No racial dimension to the composition of the Plague Bearers or the volunteer vigilante groups is described (nor, we can only assume, in the case of the latter,
is there a racist undercurrent to their grievances) and thus race is, in this novel, disturbingly both ‘transparent’ and missing.

This lack of any portrayal of Aboriginal movements or people is all the more curious because the novel satirises the paltry jingoism of the ideology of nationalism. The hyper-nationalism of the government is one of the central forms of hegemonic control it exercises via the New Nation campaign

The Reading Group seemingly extrapolates from the nationalist ideology in the eighties generally and anticipates the hyper-nationalism of 1988, the year of its publication, the bicentenary, and of one of the largest Aboriginal rights rallies in Australian history. So excessive was the nationalist furore in the eighties that the government attempted to patent the terms ‘1988’, ‘200 years’ and ‘Australian’ in the Australian Bicentenary Authority Act just to prevent Aboriginal activists making T-shirts printed with the statement: ‘200 years of suppression and depression: 1988.‘

Paying attention to the silences, allusions or contradictions in the novel in some ways forges a link with the earlier consideration of an ‘incomplete dystopia’ and the discussion of extrapolation the Novum and the ‘future-present’ setting of Lohrey’s book, which was explored in the previous chapter. When elements of the contemporary landscape are embedded in, or superimposed on, an allegorical and symbolic projection or extrapolation, without illumination of the systematic whole, certain assumptions about the ‘realism’ or ‘truth to life’ of the world imagined can be made. Lohrey’s novel meshes the discordant and the familiar, the recognisable and the horrific. Perhaps much of the power of the novel results from this. But in the context of the silences and omissions of the text, what is not said, or is merely implied, begins to inhibit estrangement and blunts the Novum.

Many of the omissions in Lohrey’s book are to do with the possibilities for agency (class, recent history, collective resistance) or the detailed systemic nature of the imagined world (race, the international situation, the economy), and the ultimate effect of these gaps or oversights is to strengthen the sense of inevitability and pessimism this dystopia creates, or relies upon. At the same time, the fact that resistance is countenanced at all, and not utterly destroyed, prevents the novel from approaching the terrain of an anti-utopia.

To conclude this exposition of Lohrey’s The Reading Group it may be prescient to turn once more to consideration of form. The Morality of Gentlemen, it has been suggested,
was an ‘interrogative’ text that portrayed an invested, dialectical portrait of history that also captured various “structures of feeling” for the working-class characters who lived, contested and remembered class struggle. But the devices borrowed from Brecht and Dos Passos did not necessarily retain their estranging power in the context of Australian writing in the early 1980s and the rise of postmodernism.

Knight puts forward the notion that The Reading Group – by jettisoning elements of “expressive realism” (what Belsey and Lohrey call “classic realism”) develops Brechtian devices more successfully:

The Brechtian manoeuvre is here achieved more successfully than mere Brechtian imitation could have made it: Amanda Lohrey recreates in contemporary forms the kinds of challenge, formally and politically, that stimulated Brecht in his own context. Unlike Knight, I think that while there is powerful critique in The Reading Group its silences and omissions attest to an incapacity to imagine real resistance or agency, or even to place oppression at the centre, rather than the margins of the work. Knight may be correct to see some of these elements as the result of conscious formal decisions – for instance Lohrey’s aspiration for a ‘plotless’ novel, her use of tableaux, her insistence on foregrounding, in a way that anticipates the arguments of Naomi Klein’s Shock Doctrine on disaster capitalism, just how essential crisis is to the system. Yet these elements also bear witness to the impotence and frustration for the Left in the 1980s and to some extent reinforce these. Such difficulties concern what I call the ‘problem of pessimism’, which I will discuss further, in terms of my own creative writing, in my conclusion.

Much work of political commitment recently has been in the genre of science fiction and dystopia, where the “poetics”, as Suvin sees it, of the form often enable a systemic critique. The Reading Group is not a wholly realised science fiction but a hybrid, not set in the future, but in the almost-now, the imaginable present. It reveals the emptiness and disenfranchisement behind the glossy image of liberal capitalism, debunking its cooption of utopia while the text remains incapable of articulating or even gesturing towards the genuine article. It is a novel riddled with paradoxes: poised between remembering and forgetting, realism and speculative fiction, critique and product, satire and symptom.
Conclusion: “Everything that happens is history in the making, really. It hurts his head to think about”

The connection between my own attempt at a novel and Amanda Lohrey’s first two published novels was not that Lohrey provided ‘models’ to me, nor even that I adapted from her particular literary devices and techniques (the use in my own work, for example, of multiple narrators, while probably not entirely coincidental was not either, as I shall go on to discuss in this afterword, any conscious strategy to imitate or revisit the notion of contested point of view or Belsey’s “interrogative text”). Rather, the relationship as I have conceived of it has been much more in the nature of a problem, of articulating and addressing the challenges, the difficulties, the parameters of certain types of literary expression.

The problem of pessimism, which I have already spoken about in regards to *The Reading Group*, was an ongoing issue in my own work. I encountered difficulty when attempting to present ‘marginal’ characters authentically (Louise is an unemployed ex-heroine addict, the girls’ mother abandons them, their father is a drunk) without making them hopeless. I didn’t want the sentimentalist workerism of aspects of Australian socialist realist novels but nor did I want my characters to be monstrous, to allow the novel to become some kind of excursion or tour guide into the misery and lack of solidarity of the poor. I had concerns that *Enough* was too dark and I felt that I was not responding to contemporary Australia, that somehow an earlier literary model or mode was at work behind the scenes. This leads onto the second problem, that of representing class, politics and the world of work.

*The Morality of Gentlemen* took the Waterside Workers Federation as the subject of its story. The whole plot arc, the twists and turns, the betrayals, the denials, the dramas, come from, or are brought together by, a particular industrial dispute. Much more directly, then, in *Enough* I learned from *The Morality of Gentlemen*. In my novel the school closure had been, for some time, incidental background material. But this was static and – formally and dramatically – peripheral. It seemed tacked on. I eventually shifted Alice’s union activism to stop her school closing from the periphery of the novel into the overall matrix of the novel’s plot and interconnected it with the other narrative through-lines: the relationship with Jon, the growing admiration for Sarah, the rapprochement with
Louise. Even Alice’s climactic discovery of her mother’s picture is found in the union newsletter.

When I first began drafting this novel, I had an instinct I wanted to write about the divisions of social class, but found this a challenging artistic and ethical endeavour. Ian Syson has described Christos Tsiolkas’s Loaded as perhaps “a working-class novel when it is not possible to write one”.

It may not be too unkind to my own experiment to say this phrase also captures elements of my work of fiction. Indeed, initially, my characters weren’t really working class but disenfranchised, disengaged and poor. For a long period my writing foundered.

I’d begun with a dirty realist style, characters who were bored and cynical, anaesthetised. But this quickly proved to be static and frustrating. (The fact that I felt this constraint may also imply a certain attitude towards the meaning of ‘realism’, a question that emerges more than once in the body of this thesis: over and over I found the conflation of realism as a set of literary techniques in a particular period and realism as an entire theory of reflection and connection of art to the world, little wonder that Brecht once spoke of the “breadth and diversity” of this term and that Williams in Keywords observes there has been “so fierce and often so confused a controversy” over the term’s meaning.)

The next step was to refocus and try to retain the pared back aesthetic, the lean sentences, while developing a plot and storyline that involved movement, momentum, rebellion. But I suspected representations of strikes or campaigns might appear unconvincing and I wasn’t sure how to dramatise these, to make them stories not just so much heavy-handed ‘setting’. I was increasingly drawn towards subject matter that led away from such optimistic portraits, such as abuse in the family, abandonment, and sexism.

I had previously written stories that focused on the experiences of gender and sexuality and poverty but what about the mass of relatively affluent white-collar workers who make up a huge proportion of first-world populations today? Could I create characters who were engaged without also being proselytising? Committed without seeming martyred? When I wrote about being unemployed, how to make characters plausible enough to be forceful – to make a reader uncomfortable – without their appearing so dissonant with most ordinary people’s experience that they became the exceptional and irredeemably ‘other’?
Yet I was also afraid – in my desire not to romanticise poverty or alienation – that I was reinforcing stereotypes of working-class or unemployed people and presenting them as hopeless, incompetent, unable to take collective action, lacking in agency, and torn asunder by the divisions of sexuality, gender and race that continued to make their ongoing exploitation possible.

My writing had often involved tropes of memory, trauma and the suffocations, even hatreds, of family life. *The Morality of Gentlemen* demonstrated that it was possible to make questions of politics and industrial action *dramatic*, to create real stories out of them, for the dispute itself to be a central plotline. This embodied a break with almost all assumptions about the ‘didacticism’ of writing about union struggle or those involved in political campaigns. I chose to write about Alice’s experiences as a teacher and to explore a fairly minor struggle within that specific local context.

My sustained impulse with the novel was to capture how, even in the most personal and private realms, economic deprivation and poverty could damage people; how the impersonal and systemic economic cycles of a society and the divide between rich and poor could express itself in individual psychology or interaction, in humiliation. I tried to make Alice’s political affiliations nuanced and conflicting rather than utopian (and to make sure they were not my own): she is naïve, at least initially, about her Principal and his intentions in the union dispute; she deflects Louise’s calls for a rally with an appeal to moderation’ she fails, at times, to be responsible and attend union meetings; she is often scornful about the students she teaches; she is hard-hearted about her own father’s predicament even as she sympathises with Sam; and yet, in the collective struggle against the school closure and her own new relationship with Sarah, she discovers a certain optimism she has long been keeping buried.

At the end of my journey, now, rather than the start, I think I will take up science fictional or dystopian forms as shapes for my next experiments in social and ethical writing.

Since I have spent this exegesis writing about history and form in Lohrey’s novels, it follows I might spend a brief time here, considering these elements in my own work.

The use of multiple narrators in my novel originally emerged from the dissatisfaction I experienced with the narrowness of Alice’s first-person voice. I did not have a theoretical analysis of the “hierarchy of discourses” or the decentred subject, nor a
Brechtian aesthetic in mind. (As Macherey rightly notes, “the author is not someone who ‘practises stylitics’...he [sic] encounters certain specific problems which he [sic] solves as he [sic] writes.”) It was at Christos Tsiolkas’ suggestion that I first decided to incorporate the point of view of Jeremy. I wrote the ‘Jeremy’ sections in vocalised third-person quite rapidly and finished them (up to his death in the fire) a great deal earlier than the final ‘Alice’ sequences. The second-last chapter of the novel (Jeremy’s death) was drafted a year and a half before I finished a first draft. I then cut these sections into the contemporary plotline, hoping that the clues left in the ‘Jeremy’ sections could pay off with the accumulation of knowledge gained by Lou’s investigation. Although I wanted to build the sense of tension and menace, I was also conscious that even as the novel presented as a thriller, I did not, ultimately, wish the resolution — an account of how Jeremy died — and discovery of the mother, where she is, how she left — to provide a conventional catharsis, so the mystery element is, in the final draft of the work, somewhat frustrated.

The decision to write from Louise’s point of view was motivated by an interest in the dramatic irony of Lou’s view of Alice, versus Alice’s idea of herself. In some ways frustrated with the deadpan cynicism I had engaged for Alice, I felt Louise’s voice needed to be — at least initially — hallucinatory, impressionistic, off the leash. Her perceptions in her first appearance, then, were to be the thoughts of someone on ecstasy. I cannot recall now why I wanted to write Louise in the second person. I only have vague memories of reading some novels where the second-person was employed and becoming curious about the effect of this on a reader and on questions of ‘address’. Although there were periods when I wondered about the second-person’s capacity to carry a narrative, I did not experiment with shifting Louise into third or first person. I do remember having to tone down Louise’s dishonesty as I found the doubling of a second-person narrator and an unreliable narrator too destabilising, and, technically, beyond my reach.

The effect, analysing this choice now, of multiple narrators on the novel is at least threefold. Firstly, this meant that the novel could be more than the sum of its disparate parts (the accumulated stories of Alice, Louise and Jeremy became more than each of their individual perspectives). Secondly, to some extent this fragmented — in voice and in time — form expressed the characters’ atomisation and isolation, their incapacity to make connections. This also had the advantage, for me, of blurring
memory, experience and truth, of formally foregrounding the subjectivity of personal history. Lastly, we got to see the major characters from ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ – that is their self-perceptions colliding with others views of them – even as the ‘outside’ was not objective but partisan. We see Lou’s view of Alice as a child, Alice’s memories of Lou, Jeremy’s sense of them both, all three children’s feelings towards their parents, and so on.

What then of representations of history in Enough? The title was an echo of an important historical moment in the book (in pig Latin, noughneway, the word that could end the danger game, and it is, of course, the danger game that Jeremy is playing when he dies). It was also a reference to the idea that ‘enough is enough’ as an expression of political frustration, and, as my supervisor suggested, an implication that the world around them will have to be ‘enough’ for Alice and Louise: digging around in the past cannot set them free.

The two time frames in the novel (Jeremy’s death in 1991 and the ‘present’) are bookended by historical events: the first Gulf War (which Jeremy imagines at first is a golf war) and the war on Iraq (which Alice reluctantly allows one of her students to write about).

The use of the present tense in the sections that were chronologically in the past (Jeremy’s point of view) while utilising the past-tense for Alice in the ‘present’, as well as cutting the forty-eight hours before Jeremy’s death into the much more malleable and elastic contemporary time period Alice and Louise occupy, was also meant to create not merely a juxtaposition between event and memory, but the also to convey the idea of the present in dialogue with the past, history alive as memory. The relentless sense of menace and foreboding in the Jeremy sections was mitigated by the outcome already being known. Jeremy’s father’s incapacity to remember that his son is dead is a symptom here of a much more significant amnesia, his forgetfulness of his self-confidence as a working unionist, the daily self-deceit that allows him to survive. His obsession with his lost job (he “for whom history was a trick, for whom each month and year somehow led back to that moment when he was told that the factory was closing”) is by contrast pathetic. (In some drafts of the novel, Alice had a counterpart in her old university friend Timothy, whose mother had Alzheimer’s and who, remembering who he was, was chronically disappointed since she did not know what he had become and upon receiving this information, registered her disapproval. However his role in the narrative was reduced.)
Alice, of course, also teaches history and I realised – and not without a degree of wry surprise – that while I had been deconstructing references to the 1970s in The Reading Group, my own project, Enough also shared some of these references. Alice’s doubt in her own commitment recurs in her understanding of her job: “Most of the time I didn’t do much for any of them but give them bits of history – tastes of old struggle.” Similarly, her interest in what she perceives as a “1970s” bumper sticker reinforces her concern about her own passivity:

There was a sticker on the outside of the car that read: ‘If you’re not outraged you’re not paying attention’. One of those slogans that survived the seventies. It bothered me. I couldn’t guess whether Sarah had put it there or if it was a benefaction from the car’s last owners. I stripped apart and reconstructed the phrase in my mind.

Alice contrasts herself to Louise:

And I was in my dirty flat, stuffing pretzels into my mouth and licking salt off my fingers, looking at the half-painted banner she was making, with the slogans stencilled in, and the placards she’d glued together with balsa wood. They said: School closures: Just say no and Education for all, not just the rich. Louise was paying attention. Her instincts told her to.

Alice’s vexed understanding of her own investment in social change also emerges when she gets frustrated at her students’ incapacity to move beyond passivity or self-destruction, and then wonders if she isn’t just the same.

As a history teacher, Alice’s first confession that her brother had died is bound up in a seemingly much more impersonal paragraph about history, where, for emphasis and change in tone, I allowed Alice to speak in the present tense, observing her student teacher presenting a unit on apartheid South Africa:

She cleared her throat and stared back at the doleful eyes of the students. She wrote ‘Population Registration Act: 1991’ on the board.

1991, the year the first Gulf War was waged under the first Bush presidency; the Soviet Union finally collapsed; the Birmingham 6 were freed; Rodney King was beaten by police; Sonic the hedgehog was created.

In 1991 Freddie Mercury dies of AIDS, Alexis Indris Sontana, who posed as a self-taught orphan from Utah and enrolled at Princeton University, is exposed as a fraud, Joh Bjelke-Peterson is tried for perjury, there is a Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody and New South Wales has a general strike. All history.

And in 1991 my brother died.

Within the novel, there are brief glimpses of a history of resistance in Australia, as well as brutality such as when Alice, thinking of Jeremy, catches sight of the murals in Redfern:

A man had been shot dead in his sleep the year my brother died. He was a black man who lived in public housing. He was not the suspect the police had been looking for.
I bought a drink from the supermarket. One of the giant murals stretching across the wall near the train station read: 100,000 years is a long, long time. 100,000 years is on my mind.

There were still traces of the bicentenary protests, the rage against Expo '88, a time when surviving meant resisting.

Even the moments before Jeremy’s death are, in an important sense, backward looking. He is overwhelmed by memories of positive experiences with his father (some readers found this scene too ambiguous as it does not spell out whether Jeremy intentionally commits suicide because of his fear of his father’s reaction or whether he is merely immersed in the notion of finally participating in the danger game, but this uncertainty, to my mind, is precisely its strength). Here I tried to capture the literal-mindedness of a ten-year-old’s view of history:

The newspaper taped across the broken louvre windows has come loose. Jeremy can only read half of the headline, the first part with big block letters. He tilts his head: ‘History in the Making’. The photograph shows three women with grimy faces standing in front of a grey building. Everything that happens is history in the making, really. It hurts his head to think about.

More optimistically, the challenge and circularity implicit in Alice’s final phrase – and the very last line of the book – returns the focus to the future. “Let’s start,” she says, and the novel stops.

Two of the most tantalising theoretical elements that I was not able to fully explore in Lohrey’s novel seem now to bob up, admittedly in utterly different ways, in my reflection upon my own creative project. Although they recur, I can’t give these more than a fleeting series of observations. The first of these precepts is representations of gender and gendered relationships. Once more I am limited to brief asides on this topic in relation to my creative practice. I would say that, in its central positioning of constructed gender identity, sexism, and in Alice’s discovery of a new, potentially liberating, sexuality, Enough is just as much about women’s oppression, women’s experience and heteronormativity as it is about class. (Even the way Jeremy is bullied is implicitly connected to his lack of ‘boyish rough and tumble’, his intellect, his fear, his physical diminutiveness.) Thinking about how the experiences of femininity and struggles against these categories and discourses was portrayed in Enough made me aware of just how often the characters compare their lives to other cultural artefacts and practices (mostly television and movies). For example:

‘So… the things you think you’ll never do, I did. I had an affair. I let my son die. I left my kids.’
Alice tells her ‘If you were a woman in a movie, you’d have to die now,’ but she
doesn’t have a sense of humour, this ghost of your mother, and instead she flinches.

In the theoretical discussion of postmodernism I was not entirely convinced by
Fredric Jameson’s broader contribution of the notion of postmodern art as the cultural
expression of a particular period in the evolution of capitalism. And yet I am amazed, at
this point, looking back to see just how many times the characters compare their
experiences to other forms of representation, less allusion than perhaps what Jameson
calls “blank parody”.

The section excerpted above is one such example, but there is also: “I put my
hand over my mouth in an ugly parody of a silent movie actress”, “He opened his arms
in an arc, a sad gesture of a forty-year-old man who would like to be a dejected lover in a
suave French film.” Or even: “We kissed but it felt performative, self-consciously a
ritual, as though we were rehearsing a scene in a film”. In Louise’s eyes: “Alice’s
boyfriend doesn’t seem real to you: he’s a minor character in a movie, an actor whose
important moments happen offstage”.

Or, in relation to their mother: “If you found her she was meant to be sexy,
sassy, a TV-movie actress with a fag hanging out of her mouth and a satin slip.” And so
on.

This exegesis outgrew its parameters and many of the questions it provoked
remain unanswered. Along the way I am indebted to the complexity and sophistication
of Lohrey’s work, which has necessarily led me to read and learn a great deal about
theory, commitment and form. As a critic of my own work I would say Enough is the
beginning of a creative process trying to track the journey from atomisation to
collectivity.
NOTES

Introduction

1 Throughout I capitalise the Narrator when I am referring to him as a character to distinguish my meaning from when I am referring to narrators or narrative voice more generally.
2 Amanda Lohrey, The Morality of Gentlemen (Hobart & Melbourne: Montpelier Press & Vulgar Press, 2002), 93. I refer throughout the exegesis to the 2002 edition as new scenes were added with the Picador reissue in 1990 after the 1984 APCOL publication. For reasons that aren’t immediately apparent each of Lohrey’s published novels has a character named Eynon (in The Reading Group the spelling is ‘Eynon’.)
12 Ibid.
18 Amanda Lohrey, "Interview with Amanda Lohrey by Kalinda Ashton," (29 November 2004).
20 Ibid.
Chapter One


4. Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 16.

5. See, for example, Moretti’s argument about ‘distant reading’ and literary history in Franco Moretti, Graphos, Maps, Trees (London & New York: Verso, 2005) or his two volume study of the novel. Both Moretti and Jameson raise the difficulties of isolating individual texts for examination (as is necessary in this exegesis) while Eagleton notes Marxist criticism is not averse to “close reading”.

6. Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 3.

7. Ibid., 46.

8. Williams, Marxism and Literature, 3.


12. Williams, Marxism and Literature, 46.


15. Ibid.

16. Williams, Marxism and Literature, 75.

17. Ibid., 95.

18. Ibid., 78.


22. The 1859 preface is usually quoted as the starting point for an understanding of Marx and Engels on base and superstructure. See Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1911), Karl Marx, Engels, Fredric, On Literature and Art (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978).
23 Jameson, "Base and Superstructure," 120.
24 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 55-6.
25 Quoted in Ibid., 58. For the full context see Karl Marx et al., The German Ideology (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970).
26 From “Letter to F. Mehring, 14 July 1898”, quoted in Williams, Marxism and Literature, 65. Also see Marx, On Literature and Art, Raymond Williams, Keywords (London: Fontana Press, 1976).
27 It should also be acknowledged that Eagleton’s notes recognise the complexity of the term and that such a definition is inevitably an oversimplification. Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 5.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 6.
30 Ibid, xiii. Elsewhere, in the same work, Eagleton asserts ideology “is not in the first place a set of doctrines.” (15)
31 Raymond Williams has written on the complexity and history of such terms and concepts as ‘culture’ and ‘literature’. See Williams, Marxism and Literature.
35 Ibid 233-4
37 Quoted in Hans Bertens, Literary Theory: The Basics (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 86. See also Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays.
38 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 59.
39 Ibid, 62.
41 Ibid, Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 50. Williams, Thompson, Anderson and Eagleton have all detected a particular context and trajectory for Marxist criticism in Britain, although with significantly diverse perspectives.
42 Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory, 64.
43 Quoted in Ibid, 83. See also Althusser, For Marx, Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays.
44 This is the view at least expressed by Terry Eagleton in his preface, in Macherey, A Theory of Literary Production, ix. See also Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology.
46 Ernst Fischer, Art against Ideology (London: Allan Lane, 1969).
47 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 53.
48 Although his How to Read a Poem (2007) retains a literary focus as, to some extent, does After Theory.
50 Eagleton, Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism.
52 Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, xv.
53 Macherey, A Theory of Literary Production, 8.
54 Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 3.
Chapter Two

5 Ibid., 150.
6 Watt is quoting F.M Forster but his discussion of the management and character of time in Defoe Richardson and Fielding is very useful. There is also an engaging discussion of realism. See Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Middlesex; New York; Melbourne: Penguin, 1957), 23. The early novel and realism is also examined in F.W.J Hemmings, The Age of Realism, Pelican Guides to European Literature (Suffolk: Penguin, 1974).
7 Aside from newspaper articles and court proceedings pertaining to the Hursey dispute, also see Bull, Politics in a Union: The Hursey Case.
8 Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 19. This suggestion is made in the context of a discussion of nostalgia film, see also his chapter on 'nostalgia for the present', pp279-96.
9 Jameson uses the phrase in a discussion of Doctorow's Ragtime, Ibid.
11 Lohrey, "Interview with Amanda Lohrey."
12 Ibid
15 Ibid.
16 Rick & Tom O'Lincoln Kuhn, Class and Class Conflict in Australia (Sydney: Longman, 1996). For more on the relationship between class and culture in Australian history see Connell, Ruling Class: Ruling Culture.
18 Ibid, 298.
19 Ibid 77, 132-4.
20 Ibid, 297.
Ibid.
24 Ibid, 115-27.
26 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 118.
29 Ibid.
30 Tas Bull includes a number of original news articles in his account of the dispute. Bull, *Politics in a Union*.
32 The term 'omniscient' is problematic as should become evident in the following chapter with the discussion of Belsey and the interrogative text; however it is necessary shorthand to distinguish the third-person narrative sections from the remainder of the text.
34 Ibid, 102-108.
37 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*.
38 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132. Williams also offers the alternative definition of “structures of experience” and emphasises that his conception is a complex and flexible one that aims to capture how things are in process rather than fixed and foregrounds relationship and the social character of art, culture and language.
42 Ibid, 59.
43 Ibid, 93.
44 Ibid, 184.
46 Ibid, 272. See also Barnes's attempted explanation in the courtroom scenes of “industrial hatred” for a humorous exploration of the clashing structures of feeling.
48 Ibid, 61.
49 Ibid, 137.
50 Ibid, 40.
51 Ibid, 41.
52 Ibid, 78-9. Interestingly this sentiment is echoed by Robert in *The Reading Group* in a similar tone. Tommy Quinn’s reflections on the falling out with Jaz and Leo Eyenon “He recalls this now, without feeling. It’s like a silent movie, seen in childhood” is similar to Robert’s “re-runs in the movie house” remembering his father.
55 Ibid, 14.
56 Ibid, 64.
57 Ibid, 53.
Chapter Three

1 The phrase is courtesy of Eyenon, Lohrey, *The Morality of Gentlemen*, 125.
2 Quoted in Colin Counsell, *Sign of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth Century Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 103. See also Brecht and Willett, *Brecht on Theatre; the Development of an Aesthetic*, 144, 204.
3 Also translated as the A-effect or in the Germanic V-Effekt
5 Lohrey, "Interview with Amanda Lohrey."
6 Lohrey, "Writing the Morality of Gentlemen."
7 Lohrey, “Interview with Amanda Lohrey.”
8 Ibid
9 Ibid
11 Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion” in Jameson, Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism, 204.
12 Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion” in Ibid., 205. Jameson also notes how these debates “spring from contradictions within the very concept of realism”.
13 “Bertolt Brecht: Against Lukács” Ibid., 75.
14 Jameson, Aesthetics and Politics.
16 Ibid.
17 “Bertolt Brecht Against Lukács” in Jameson, Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism, 76.
18 Ibid, 81-2.
19 Counsell, Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth Century Theatre, 94.
20 John Willett, Brecht in Context: Comparative Approaches (London: Methuen, 1998.)
22 Peter Brooker, “Key Words in Brecht’s Theory and Practice of Theatre” in Glendyr Sacks and Peter Thompson, Cambridge Companion to Brecht, 209.
23 Eva Rosenhaft, “Brecht’s Germany 1898-1937” in Glendyr Sacks and Peter Thompson, Cambridge Companion to Brecht, 3-22. Brecht’s relationship with Stalinism was deeply ambiguous, as can be seen in his exchanges with Walter Benjamin. In the late 1930s he said frankly: “In Russia there is a dictatorship over the proletariat. We should avoid dissociating ourselves from it for as long as it still does useful work for the proletariat.” Yet in 1953 he refused to speak out as the workers uprising in East Germany was viciously put down. His own practice ran counter to bourgeois realism and was discordant with theoreticians of Stalinist socialist realism, his Me-Ti writings were critical of Stalin, yet he felt obliged to write a poem for Stalin and did not publish his responses to critiques of modernism by Lukács. Early collaborators and friends were persecuted in Russia and in conversations with Benjamin he expressed grave hesitations about life in Stalinist Russia (confirming he considered it “under personal rule”). Notoriously Brecht told Benjamin that his critics in Moscow “are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. They want to play the apparatchik and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat”. See “Benjamin With Brecht” in Jameson, Aesthetics and Politics, 86-99.
24 A discussion of Brecht’s relationship with both the aesthetics and politics of modernism, and with the Soviet Union and practical and theoretical socialism is outside the boundaries of this (Brecht claimed Marx as the only audience he ever really wrote for.) But see Lunn, Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno.
25 Brecht and Willett, Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic, 77.
26 Ibid., 30.
27 Eric Bentley, for example, wrote: “If you ask me what effect Brecht had on the world politically, I would answer very little and not always of the influence of the kind he sought” (193), although it is important to note Bentley’s own political investments in such an analysis. Manfred Werketh, on the other hand reinstates Brecht’s notion of commitment in the context of theatre in the nineties, that ‘for art to be ‘unpolitical’ simply means only to ally itself with the ruling group’. Werketh writes: “In particular, where illusions such as the one that theatre could confidently change the world all by itself failed to work out, some of us replaced them with other illusions: the illusion for instance, that theatre can simply abdicate from changing the world.” (19) See Visser, Reinterpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film.
29 Bertolt Brecht “epic theatre and dramatic theatre” in Brecht and Willett, Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic, 37.
31 Quoted in Belsey, Critical Practice, New Acents, 92. See also, Althusser, For Marx.
32 Counsell, Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth Century Theatre, 101.
Communist Party or later scholars) to embody those techniques and traditions in fact did so is an open question.

65 Lohrey, “Interview with Amanda Lohrey”.

66 David Carter argues: “The history of socialist realism in Australia is complex, as the diversity of novels by Prichard, Devanny, Harcourt, Waten, Hewett, and Hardy suggests. First, until the late 1940s, socialist realism was only one option—or an array of options within itself—for radical artists… Only in the Cold War years did the Communist Party of Australia give socialist realism a full policy weighting.” He goes on to suggest “more orthodox” modes of realism were favoured in the forties and fifties. See David Carter, "Documenting and Criticising Society," in The Penguin New Literary History of Australia, ed. L. T. Hergenhahn and Bruce Bennett (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988), 378. See also David Carter, "Reviewing Communism, Communist Review," Australian Literary Studies 12 (1) (May 1985): 93-105, Jean Devanny, Sugar Heaven (Melbourne: Redback Press, 1982), Carole Ferrier Jean Devanny, Point of Departure (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986), Nicole Moore, "Remember Love and Struggle? Reading Jean Devanny’s Sugar Heaven in Contemporary Australian Contexts," Australian Literary Studies 21 (3) (May 2004): 251-63.

67 Selden, Contemporary Literary Theory: An Introduction, 26.

68 Gorky, Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union.

69 Selden, Contemporary Literary Theory: An Introduction, 26.

70 Carter, "Documenting and Criticising Society."

71 Quoted in Carole Ferrier, “‘These Girls Are on the Right Track’: Hardy, Devanny and Hewett” in Lee, Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment 74.

72 Syson, “It Just Isn’t Trendy at the Moment!: Thinking About Working/Class/Literature through the 1990s,” 13.


75 Ibid, 300


79 Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism


83 That these artistic and literary characteristics were frequently ascribed to modernist art has not escaped Callinicos’s critique (Against Postmodernism). Cf Jameson’s argument about modernism in Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Hutcheon makes yet another argument, Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New York & London: Routledge, 1988).

84 Philip Edmonds, "More Than a Mere Story: Social and Political Markers in Australian Short Fiction of the 1980s" (PhD, Deakin University, 1997), iv.

85 Ibid.


87 Jameson, Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, xvii.

88 Ibid, xix

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid, x.

91 Ibid, xii.

92 Ibid, 15, 51, 16, 17, 11, 277, 2.

93 Ibid 6

94 Callinicos, Against Postmodernism, 1.

95 In Callinicos’s reading “postmodernism, then, is best seen as a symptom”. Ibid.
Chapter Four

1 The first phrase is courtesy of Fredric Jameson, the second from Lyndon in Lohrey, The Reading Group.
2 Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, 81-2.
3 Both Jameson and Suvin, for example, attempt to distinguish fantasy ethically and generically from science fiction, not altogether convincingly.
4 Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions.
5 Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction.
6 Ibid, 4, note 1. A reappraisal of the meaning of realism and modernism is also the subject of Jameson’s analysis of the texts in Aesthetics and Politics.
7 Ibid, 4.
8 Ibid, 6.
9 Ibid, 7.
10 Ibid, 4.
11 Ibid, 63-84, Suvin also coins the term “irrealistic realism”.
12 Ibid, 64.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 81.
15 Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions.
16 Ibid, 286.
18 Plans in other forms for ‘more perfect societies’, ideal forms and blueprints for good government predated More’s famous island commonwealth and the Utopian form has had revivals and transformations, towards the end of the nineteenth century and again as part of the social and political radicalism and ‘counter-culture’ of the 1960s and 1970s.
19 Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, ix.
20 Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction.
21 Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, xii.
22 Moylan and Baccolini, Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination, 2.
23 Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, 121. Cf Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, 182-211.
24 Quoted in Moylan and Baccolini, 1.
26 Moylan and Baccolini, Dark Horizons, 7. It should also be acknowledge that the term “critical dystopia” has been explained differently by other critics (for Lyman Tower Sargent it is the phrase apt for those texts that combine utopia and dystopia, for Constance Penley, those works that “suggest causes rather than reveal symptoms”).
27 Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, xv.
28 Moylan and Baccolini, 6.
29 Quoted in Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, 72.
30 Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, 199.
31 Moylan and Baccolini, 6.
33 Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future.
34 Ibid, 12, 211-33, 289.
35 Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future.
36 Moylan and Baccolini, 5.
38 Moylan and Baccolini, 5. They diverge from what they perceive as Jameson’s “hesitations about the nature and virtue of dystopian narratives”. Instead they are, “it is precisely the capacity for narrative that creates the possibility for social critique”. (6)
40 Lyman Tower Sargent “The 3 Faces of Utopianism Revisited” essay quoted in Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, 74.
43 Knight, ”A Writable Future,” 204.
Quoted in imprint page, Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.

Knight, “A Writable Future”, 203.


Ibid.

Katharine England, "Art Which Imitates the Life It Condemns," *Saturday Advertiser* June 4, 1988. Also in Box 5, Lohrey, "Manuscript Collection/Papers for the Reading Group (Usually Restricted Access until 2020; Viewing Permission Granted)."

Knight, “A Writable Future” 203, 206.


Lohrey, *The Reading Group*, 12.


Ibid, 161, 162.

Ibid, passim.

Ibid, 104, 103.

Ibid, 172.

Ibid, 41.


Hay, "Fiction or Fact?,” 70.

Lohrey, *The Reading Group*, 122.


Lohrey, *The Reading Group* 177, 87.

Knight, “A Writable Future”, 206

Thompson, "No Climax in Class Crisis."

England, "Art Which Imitates the Life It Condemns."

“Letter from Caroline Lurie (Australian Literary Management) to Amanda Lohrey: 20 July 1987.” In Box 5 # 27 Lohrey, "Manuscript Collection/Papers for the Reading Group (Usually Restricted Access until 2020; Viewing Permission Granted)."

Ibid, Box 3 # 21 (notebooks).

Ibid.

Lohrey, *The Reading Group*, 266.

Lohrey, *The Reading Group*, 144.

Lohrey's draft notes and diary entries in her manuscript collection suggest she had considered a different sort of dystopia, a version of the novel involving resistance from the political Left. Other notes suggest she wanted one of the major characters to be assassinated or ‘disappeared’ by the regime, or involved in terrorist activities. Box 3 #21, Box 2 #10: Lohrey, "Manuscript Collection/Papers for the Reading Group (Usually Restricted Access until 2020; Viewing Permission Granted)."

Moylan and Baccolini, 6.

Ibid


Knight, “A Writable Future”, 203.


“Draft note of letter October 20, 1988”. Box 5 #27. In Lohrey, "Manuscript Collection/Papers for the Reading Group (Usually Restricted Access until 2020; Viewing Permission Granted)."

Lohrey, *The Reading Group*, 48,152.
Chapter Five

1 Phillip E. Wegner, “Where the Prospective Horizon is Omitted: Naturalism and Dystopia in Fight Club and Ghost Dog” in Moylan and Baccolini, Dark Horizons, 173.
2 Moylan and Baccolini, Dark Horizons, 3.
3 Ibid, 2.
4 Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future, The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, 288.
6 Raffaella Baccolini, “A Useful Knowledge of the Present is Rooted in the Past: Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula Le Guin’s The Telling” in Baccolini and Moylan, Dark Horizons, 115.
7 Ibid.
8 Quoted in Raymond Williams, Orwell (Glasgow: Fontana Press Harper Collins, 1991), 95.
9 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 16.
10 Box 3 # 21 (notebooks) and Box 2 #10 Lohrey, "Manuscript Collection/Papers for the Reading Group (Usually Restricted Access until 2020; Viewing Permission Granted)."
11 Box 2 #10 Ibid.
13 Diana Simmonds, "Writers at War with the Law," The Bulletin 21 August 1990, 98.
14 Hay, "Fiction or Fact?", 70. The defamation suit never made it to court: Lohrey’s publishers settled with a
gag clause despite some controversy and a number of literary festivals and individuals devoted to
speaking out on the subject of freedom of speech. See, eg Christopher Jay, "Reading Group Queues for
River’s End," Australian Financial Review 11 December 1992, 1, Robert Pullan, "Bleating, Squawking and
Precious," Sydney Morning Herald 14 February 1989, Robert Pullan, "How a Tasmanian Poet, English
Teacher and Senator Became a Killer of Books without Even Noticing It," The Australian Author 20, no. 4
(February 1989): 4-6, Robert Pullan, "Tightening the Gag," The Australian Author 21, no. 2 (Winter 1989):
16 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 252.
17 Ibid, 83.
18 Raffaella Baccolini, “‘A Useful Knowledge of the Present is Rooted in the Past’: Memory and Historical
Reconciliation in Ursula Le Guin’s The Telling” in Baccolini and Moylan, Dark Horizons, Dark Horizons, 119.
19 Quoted in Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, 5.
20 Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, 148.
21 Quoted in Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, 52-3. The question of the politics of realism also re-
emerges in Moylan who quotes Fitting on the notion that in “realist novels the ending almost always
resolves the ‘tension and disorder’ of the unfolding plot in some passively consoling manner” (55).
23 Ibid, passim.
26 Knight, “A Writable Future”, 204, 205.
27 Andrew Milner, "Framing Catastrophe: The Problem of Ending in Dystopian Fiction" (paper presented
at the Centre for Contemporary Literature and Cultural Studies seminar, Monash University, 21 September
2005). See also Andrew Milner, Matthew David Ryan, and Robert Ian Savage, Imagining the Future : Utopia
and Dystopia (North Carlton, Vic.: Arena Publications Association, 2006).
28 Baccolini, “‘A Useful Knowledge of the Present is Rooted in the Past’: Memory and Historical
Reconciliation in Ursula Le Guin’s The Telling” in Dark Horizons, 115-6.
29 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 9.
30 Ibid, 187. Glenn’s first-person is through the device of a tape-recorder, which Lohrey returns to in
Camille’s Bread
31 Knight, “A Writable Future”, 204.
Gelder and Paul Salzman (Sydney: McPhee Gribble, 1989), 262.
33 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 32.
34 Ibid, 101.
36 Ibid, 73.
37 Ibid, 43.
38 Moylan and Baccolini, Dark Horizons.
39 Ibid, 2.
40 Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, 149, 150.
41 Ibid, 150.
42 Raffaella Baccolini, “‘A Useful Knowledge of the Present is Rooted in the Past’: Memory and Historical
Reconciliation in Ursula Le Guin’s The Telling” in Baccolini and Moylan, Dark Horizons, 115.
43 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 262.
44 Knight, “A Writable Future”, 206
45 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 129.
46 Ibid, 33.
Ibid, 52.
Ibid, 90.
Ibid, 10.
Ibid, 32.
Ibid, 166-7.

The section in square brackets is in Lohrey's novel but not the quote from McAuley. The rest of the phrase appears in McAuley, James, *Poetry, Essays, Criticism* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1988, 31.

Indeed the quoted material is from McAuley himself, from the 1950s: B.A. Santamaria, "So Clear a Spirit," *Quadrant* 21 (3), no. 116 (March 1977): 53. Article also collected in Box 2 #11 Lohrey, "Manuscript Collection/Papers for the Reading Group (Usually Restricted Access until 2020; Viewing Permission Granted)."

For a history of this movement see Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonominist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). Lohrey had also researched the Red Brigades according to her manuscript papers and research notes.


See the argument made by Milner (cf Jameson) Milner, "Framing Catastrophe: The Problem of Ending in Dystopian Fiction". See also Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, 200.


The Reading Group, 110.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Williams, *Keywords*, 145. Williams also argues, in *Marxism and Literature* “the true condition of hegemony is effectively self-identification with the hegemonic forms” (118).

Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 47.


Ibid, 45.


Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*.

Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, 89.


Macherey, 93.

Ibid, 69.

Ibid, 62.

Ibid, 68.

Ibid, 60.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Seldin, *Contemporary Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 41.

Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, 46. Macherey’s general argument about the author as producer is perhaps more problematic but such an argument can’t be taken up here.


See Williams on “structures of feeling” in Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.  

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93 Belsey, Critical Practice, 115.
94 Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky, x.
95 Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 286.
96 Ibid. The comments are made in the context of a particular discussion of Dick’s Time Out of Joint.
97 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 9.
99 Ibid, 269. These are the final lines of the novel.
100 Box 3 #21 (“Notebooks”) Lohrey, "Manuscript Collection/Papers for the Reading Group (Usually Restricted Access until 2020; Viewing Permission Granted)."
101 Macherey, 96.
102 Knight, “A Writable Future”, 206.
103 Ibid.
104 Lohrey, The Reading Group, 35.
105 Ibid, 32.
106 The characters’ dismissal of subjectivity as “out of fashion”, for example, or their interest in the politics of “pleasure” and psychoanalysis, not to mention the sexual politics of the novel would all be rich research areas.
107 See, for example, Jaensch, The Hawke-Keating Hijack.
110 Glenn’s speech on how he isn’t ugly – but “Boongs” and “Abos” are – gives the only slight hint of a racial dimension to the expression of his alienation; however, he also likes Teresa (whose father is “a wog” Glenn tells us).

Conclusion
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57 (3) (Spring 1992): 78–89.


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