Water’s Edge

A novel
On the bird-shaped island, a legendary woman once taught the arts of war.

Serena, whose family past resonated in the rough tongues of that island, would come to believe that nobody needed to be taught to kill.
The band of lighted windows shone through the darkness. She
looked up from the car park and saw the figure pacing at the
central pane.

– You’re late, Serena. The taxi driver, her regular driver,
tuned in her station and shrugged when he heard ‘The Sound of
Silence’ rather than dead air.

Rain set in and she lifted her face to feel the water as she
approached the entry. She hummed: her old ritual for when the
dark scared her, until the automatic floodlight picked up her
movements and washed over her.

– About time, the evening announcer hissed, stalking
away from the window and meeting her in the corridor. His real
voice was shriller than his radio voice. He pulled a Dead-head
cap over his greying hair.

– The truckies are waiting to phone-fuck you. That’s
what management gets for putting a chick on midnight to dawn.

She pushed past him and made her way to the studio.
The heavy door swished at her back. Thirty-eight seconds of
nothing was broadcast before she could push in the cartridge of
the next commercial. It was for a dating service. Who else
would advertise in the graveyard shift of a low rating Classic
Hits station? Soon the on-air light flashed like a billboard outside her door and she had to speak.

Nobody out there would detect her boredom: with her training she could manage to put a false smile into her voice. Digital numbers counted her down to the music cue. Red lights blinked on the telephone.

- Hi pretty girl.

She gagged noiselessly. With one arm she cleared the desk of the empty noodle box and the Stolly bottle left by the evening jock.

- Chat with me while the songs are on. I got a picture on my sun-visor, reminds me of you.

Hers was not a talkback program; this was no *Love Shack* or *Pillow Talk*. But every shift involved fending off caller after caller. After her first mid-dawn, she had waited around for her boss, the Program Director, to haul himself into his office at nine. She asked for the secret in avoiding the lunatics. They come with the territory, the P.D. had answered, shooing her away with one of his bacon-pink hands. She had to keep the lines open for emergency reports, and the listeners knew the number by heart since it was the same number they dialled for on-air competitions and requests during the day.

She hung up on the sun-visor creep, pulled a sheet of live copy from a clipboard, cleared her throat and prepared herself to read without sounding as though she was reading.
You know what I’d be doing if I weren’t stuck here? I’d be raging at Beatle Beat Nightclub. It never closes. And if you rock up there in the next hour you’ll get half-price entry and two free drinks. Sounds great. I might put on the autopilot and get myself to Beatle Beat. Only kidding.

She finished with the address, the part that never sounded authentic in live copy, followed up with ‘Hard Day’s Night’, and dropped her head onto the panel desk.

She was tired of this job, and just plain tired. Tomorrow would not bring a sleep-in, thanks to her mother who was to visit in the morning. She knew she should have suggested a better time. It was not as though they met often. But what her mother had said, and the unfamiliar tone in her voice, softer, thinner, had stopped Serena from arguing. The memory of that change in voice made her miss Pam, and she was not used to missing her mother.

For now she had work to do, she told herself, as if the work of the shift itself were not enough. From her backpack she took her teacup, a fatly stuffed large envelope, three books checked out of the library at closing time today, and a folder with the station’s logo printed on the front. Magazine clippings spilled from the envelope onto the footstep-absorbing carpet. She put the distinctly thin folder with the logo in the middle of the panel desk and read the words marked in big black letters on the cover: NOSTALGIC VOICES PROJECT. Inside, the P.D.’s
photocopied memo was dog-eared from the number of times she had flipped through it. She still had not come up with a word, even a note scribbled on the back of an envelope, to add to the folder.

She yanked out the memo, one of his self-consciously quirky memos that matched his cartoon ties and socks, screaming out that management can be fun and creative. Maybe her interest would be sparked with one more read.

MEMO
TO: ALL JOCKS
FROM: GRAEME CARP, PROGRAM DIRECTOR
RE: NOSTALGIC VOICES PROJECT

As discussed at last week’s production meeting, all on-air staff will participate in a brainchild of my own. We, the Production team, will aim to win an award in Community Service and to bring in bucket-loads of advertising sales with the...

NOSTALGIC VOICES PROJECT!!!

The Project will revolve around a listener competition. First prize will be a vintage jukebox stacked with Classic Hits music. Listeners will call or write with anecdotes and stories relating to the NOSTALGIC VOICES theme. Winning entries will be produced on a saleable CD, the proceeds of which
will go to charity! That's where the Community Service part comes in.

And the advertising bucks? NOSTALGIC VOICES will make this frequency sizzling hot! Nostalgia sells ... warm fuzzy nostalgia peddles everything from takeaway food to electric blankets to real estate to pre-paid funerals.

And how do the jocks fit in? Each of you will take your turn at getting the NOSTALGIC VOICES ball rolling.

Each jock is to select a topic relating to the NOSTALGIC VOICES theme, and to present a segment as part of his air-shift, once a week, for the duration of the competition. Your segment may be live-to-air or pre-recorded. Remember, we're talking nostalgia, so don't be shy of making the listeners misty-eyed and keying them up to tell good yarns of their own!

At the end the announcers' names were printed beside a column for recording each topic.

She remembered that last production meeting, going long into the afternoon, right up until the station's happy hour. At first she had liked the idea of NOSTALGIC VOICES: taking part in a research project would allow her to jazz up her C.V. and maybe that would lead to a decent job at a decent station.

It was making a documentary back at high school that had kick-started her career in radio. She had run to libraries all over the city to get the details right for that project. When she had gone to a local station to record the documentary, a
producer had liked her voice and referred her to a trainer. But then she had always liked to play about with her voice.

The little girl voice lilts into a sexy big girl voice.

- Stop it and talk properly, Pam snaps. - You sound like a hussy. What'll next door think if they hear you carrying on like that?

At the meeting the P.D. said that a bit of effort, a jot of research, would not go astray for any of the jocks. Amid the groans and protests, they came up with plenty of short cuts. What they needed could be ripped off the Web. Anything else could be made up. She kept quiet, relishing the thought of that embellished C.V. Of course they still had to discuss topics.

The radio star, the breakfast-show comedian, was first to speak up. He would do an autobiography in comedy-sketch format. The other jocks fired out their topics: Music of the Seventies, War Stories, News Cuts, School Days. One idea concerning fond memories of Mind-Altering Substances brought on a half-hour's wake of gags. Lastly, the PD had swung his navy-suited beer-gut in Serena's direction. As the lone female voice of the station, he said she had her work cut out for her. She was to keep the ladies happy. Serena was to cover
NOSTALGIC VOICES for the female demographic. He checked his notes. Fashion? Home and Décor? Movies and Models? She shook her head to each topic. The rest of them fell silent, waiting, she knew, to see how long she would be difficult. Then Gus, it had to be Gus the evening announcer, suggested she cover Sex. The breakfast comedian tipped his chair over backwards with his guffawing. Serena nodded, looking to get a rise out of them, keeping her face serious. Yes, why not Sex? She could, she said, talk of the sexual revolution, the invention of the Pill, free love, the multiple orgasm, the discovery of the G spot, and of course, she would cover feminism. The boss gaped. She could just about read his mind through his mouth: a chick, on mid-dawn, talking Sex and feminism to the loonies? He shook his head. No, they had pretty much covered the sixties with the blokes' topics. He clapped his mouth shut for a minute.

Tell you what, my wife’s right into family trees. I want you to talk on Family. Family history, family trees, pioneers. Genealogy.

Genealogy, she thought now, reading a string of community service announcements. That would be a winner with the truckies. Still, she supposed it was fitting to be talking of the long-gone in the dead of night.

The deadline for the first instalment was a week away, and she had less time if she chose to pre-record her segment
rather than to present it live-to-air. She had skimmed through piles of library books, and so far she had no angle. But she had narrowed down the topic. The boss said he wanted a personal slant rather than a bunch of facts and figures. Serena's own ancestors were from Scotland; her NOSTALGIC VOICES segments would focus on Scottish pioneers. And since the P.D. had said he wanted her to keep the ladies tuned in, the voices that she would write about were those of female pioneers. The research was challenging. Few history books discussed women in detail.

She bent to adjust the bass levels and noticed the endless flashing of the telephone. She leaned forwards into the awkwardly ergonomic knee-rest of her stool and talked for a while to one of her regular callers, a quavery-voiced man who liked to tell her about the travels of his youth.

- Where are we tonight?

- Deserts.

She dispersed his talk of sandstorms and dunes through music and commercials and her on-air monologues.

- I come from the desert, her new flat-mate Joseph had said when he applied to share the place.

She ended the desert sojourn, playing a travel song as the caller always requested. It was Hoodoo Gurus tonight, the song about trying to sleep in airports.

Joseph stirred, tracing a curve with a finger in the dark air. He sat upright and the sweaty sheets fell from him like damp cardboard. The snake drew him along a fine line from dream to drafting table. He stretched, flicked on the radio, and to the rhythm of her voice drew in the outlines of the first decorative segment. He transferred the serpentine design directly from the body of the snake that was assembling itself as he woke. The inside of the top drawer of his cabinet glimmered like a jewel box when he slid it open and withdrew a single miniature tile. Silvery green, it glittered, snakeskin or glass, the same in this three a.m. moonlight. He slid the tile into place on the paper and drew around its edges.

Even before the arrival of the memo, she had liked to read during her shifts. Her reading was good for the station, she told
herself; it kept her relaxed and her voice even-toned. And reading the recruitment pages of Broadcast News kept her from walking out and leaving a New Romantics ballad to fade to static on the worst of nights. Reading passed the longest hours of her shift, lyrics and scraps of copy splicing the paragraphs of what she read.

Today, with little time to spare, she had picked up the phone and used her most pleasant radio voice to convince a librarian to help. She rushed by the library minutes before closing time and checked out a heap of books. Here the books sat in a pile beside the music log. She opened the top one, flicking away the fossilised remains of a silverfish.

The closely set print of the book blurred before her. But this book did include a chapter on women, albeit a short chapter. She read aloud, sending up the bombastic tone:

Since knowable time and probably beyond it, from the first days of human settlement, the nurturing hand of husbandry had been woman's. Her arm wielded the sickle and turned the quern-stones or small-millstones.

If she spouted that into a microphone she was sure that the myriad insomniacs who tuned in would have their problems solved instantly. And the next gem she found could summon crowds of her female target audience to gather in the car park and demand that she be strung up from the lightning rods on the roof:
there were farmtowns which were dominated by
formidable mistresses; they indeed, were a hardy
breed, in the direct line of their ancestors, those tough,
leathery-skinned women... They were wives and
rough-tongued mothers who took to their marriage
beds without great ceremony, child-bed without much
wonder – and even then, often not till they had
finished the milking or the feeding of the hens.

At least that one carried hints of her vetoed topic of Sex, she
supposed. Yet the project was about voices. She heard only the
growing of mould in these books.

- Relax and Reminisce with Classic Hits, she chanted.

Fumbling for a snippet of trivia to use as filler, she
reached into her large envelope full of magazine clippings and
grabbed the top item. The clipping was one that she had
recently fished from the back page of a newspaper. She read the
piece into the microphone. The Cuillín hills, the most dramatic
of the landforms on Scotland’s Isle of Skye, were for sale. Their
owners, the Macleod clan, needed funds to pay for multi-million
dollar roof restorations at their castle on the western coast of
the island.

As she read she recollected her own memories of the
Cuillins.
The Cuillins, brittle and edgy, are the first landforms that she sees as she crosses the water at the narrows. She checks the lines of the map in the guidebook. Until now her perspective has been bird’s eye, her gaze trawling maps and photographs. Now the verticality of Skye strikes her. She sees pinnacle and ridge and tower. Granite pokes like nubs of raw bone through the ground. The land is taut, stretched to breaking point up to the needle-like pinnacles of the Cuillins. The prickly gorse, the bruising granite, the peaty ground prone to land slips: Skye speaks in rough tongues.

Joseph paused. On the cover of a drawing pad he found his list. *Isle of Skye*, he added to the end.

In the lounge room, the glass of her sea pictures must be shining like pools in the dark. He had observed them on other nights, taken aback by the illusion of windows where there were none. She had travelled overseas before returning to Melbourne to rent this flat. The travel photos she had chosen to frame shared a watery element; they were of beaches and cliffs and shores and lighthouses. Could it be that all of the images were details of islands?
She was in only one of the pictures. She stood tall on a rectangular rock, a tower lapped by pale blue sea, her long inky hair glowing in the light of the overcast sky.

Speaking, tongues, voices: the project returned to her thoughts.

She remembered what had drawn her to visit the Isle of Skye during her travels of two years ago. It was the thought of a portrait from her childhood home, the portrait of a woman named Marian who came from Skye.

But years had passed since she had looked into the face of that portrait.

Marian's eyes are dark and wet even in the sepia tones beneath the thick curved glass. Serena's father also had dark eyes, and some people say that she looks like her father, their gazes distant as they try to remember his face. Since his death, nobody living in the house has had dark eyes other than Serena. Now, here are the dark holes of Marian's irises. With Serena's father's eyes in mind, drowned eyes, seal's eyes, she thinks of Marian as a sea creature immersed in a deep oval of water.
She was eight the day Pam brought the portrait of Marian into their weatherboard house. An elderly relative, the last inhabitant of the old family homestead in the goldfields, had died and left everything to Pam. Pam hung the portrait and stood back to check that it was straight. Marian and her husband Dugald had been the homestead’s first dwellers, Pam explained. They were Serena’s great-great-great grandparents. Dugald’s portrait had gone straight into the linen press. — No need to look at that sour old bugger, Pam said.

But Marian’s portrait was in an oval frame of dark wood that Pam liked.

— This woman was a real troublemaker in her time, she said.

The dark eyes almost matching Serena’s had made the portrait into a kind of mirror. In Marian she found someone to look like herself. And she found someone to look back at her; for it seemed that Pam no longer liked to look at her little girl.

At last Serena thought she had a peg for hanging her NOSTALGIC VOICES contribution. Her radio segments would attempt to bring Marian to life.

Nobody who had known Marian was still alive. But the family land in the goldfields with its disintegrating homestead had been Marian’s.
That old house of logs and mud had a silence pressed in by the exterior noises of wind in ironbark leaves, distant thudding of kangaroo tails, calls of magpies and rosellas, and the rusty jangling of left-behind wind chimes. Serena had not been there in at least five years. The house, she thought, must be nearly dead like an old horse forgotten in a pasture.

She moved through the first four hours of her shift, shaping her project. She had taken paper from a shelf in the studio and was jotting hesitant notes, eking together the little she knew of Marian, still not sure if the P.D. and his family-tree-hugging wife and the listeners would be bored to death by her ideas.

Yet she sensed a story: one that shifted as land slowly sinks into water.

The red phone lights flashed for what seemed the hundredth time since midnight.

— You’re not cancelling tomorrow, Pam said.

Pam, the insomniac, Serena thought. She grabbed her notes, ready to pick her mother’s brain about the family history. Pam, however, had only one issue, tomorrow’s meeting, on her mind. Her voice carried no hint of last time’s softness.
When she could get in a word Serena mentioned NOSTALGIC VOICES, bringing up Marian and the ancestral homestead. After a second’s pause Pam talked over the top of her, overriding, a habit of her mother’s that Serena hated. The call was over quickly, with Pam showing what her daughter thought was a spectacular lack of interest in her project. She asked herself why she had expected a different response, and shoved the NOSTALGIC VOICES folder aside.

Pam could not bear to hear her daughter talk about that dilapidated house in the bush – not tonight.

She rested her elbows on the polished desk in her dining room. A tidy pile of manila folders lay in front of her. She had to process a number of deaths before she could think of going to bed. Soon she would switch on the laptop and input the toddler with a heart defect, the man crushed on the freeway works and the sales manager found dead in an elevator.

She was an expert in impersonal relations, her boss had once said: skilled at ushering a father into a windowless waiting room to be told the news that had already crumpled his face, or at escorting a wife with iccd-over eyes to the viewing screen of the morgue.
She knew that for too many years her crying had been done at night in her bed, where she spent the least amount of time possible. But if fate went her way for a change, tomorrow could mark the end of her need to cry. She hugged herself—daring to wonder what a certain young woman might be like.

Tash peeled away a layer. Shimmying in only her micro-fibre bra and hotpants, her ruby nose ring, and the mehndi, or henna tattoo etched on one upper arm.

The space swallowed her. Spat her out. The music pulsed in her. Like riding an undulating plateau of orgasm. She spread the palms of her hands in front of her eyes. Her skin did not end at its usual edges. Melted into whatever she touched. She slipped a scrap of paper under her tongue, swigged cool water, poured it over her head. Lifted her arms to swim up the fountain she had made. A woman in a cat suit kissed her open mouth, a slash of bindi between her eyebrows.

The mobile phone at her waistband rang out, rang out again.
A window lit up in the darkness on Serena’s left; a light had been switched on in the production studio. Pam was still in her head. When she was a teenager and was angry with her mother she had often climbed through her bedroom window, not scared in the night once she was outside the square of four walls, and had gone to wake a friend, a boyfriend if she was angry enough. And it was true that her playing up with boys could get a reaction from Pam better than anything else. The number of boyfriends escalated as she grew older and angrier.

The blonde head of one of the production engineers appeared. It was jerking back and forth. She watched, as an early eighties track, ‘Man Eater’, drooled from her speakers. He moved to different music. His hair swung. He jerked his head around to face her, his eyes green and bright. He was motionless for a second and then waved, a delicate hand joined to a man who was otherwise large and muscular.

She nodded and pushed in a commercial cartridge. She listened to the fade of the song. She felt his eyes on her, but when she looked his head was tilted forwards in concentration.

She put on another track and picked up her teacup. Outside his studio she paused, the cup dangling from one finger, then she opened the door.

The volume shocked her but she went inside. His eyes were closed, his hands poised over the controls. She reached to
touch him, and his hand leapt from her, a lizard dropping its tail. The music was trance-like: rave music, visceral noise never to be on this station’s play list. The music fitted him as closely as his reddish skin.

He moved to turn down the volume. She was there before him, sliding the knob higher, distorting the sound. He thrust his sliding chair back on its metal rails. She had always liked his way of moving that chair from one piece of equipment to the next, putting together commercials and promos. Tonight the grating of metal was inaudible over the music. Yet the music could be heard only inside this soundproof room. He waited, still in the chair, as she moved slowly, touching the black metal of the sound gear, slipping dark ribbons of audio tape between her fingers. His blonde hair was coarse after the feel of the tape. It was not freshly washed and was not as soft as it looked. But she bent to sniff it, surprised she liked the mossy smell. He drew back his thin lips. His yellowed incisors were long and pointed fangs. She licked one, letting its pointy end prick the top of her tongue. She twisted herself to look at a clock and slipped away to put on the next song. She took another lucky dip inside her large envelope of clippings. At the end of the song she relayed a fact about the Seychelles.
Joseph reached for the list. She had not mentioned two in the one night for a while.

He was not sure why he bothered. He had known her for only a month. Yet he had tuned into what seemed to be a kind of secret of hers. He was mapping her island travels, following her unpredictable mentions of one island or another, waiting for a meaning to reveal itself.

While she read the weather forecast, the engineer stood at the window of the production studio, leaning against the frame. His jeans were unbuttoned, his shirt crumpling towards his chest, showing the gold hair on his stomach.

This time he was waiting just inside his doorway. He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her to the edge of his panel desk. She straddled him, not minding if he was rough. Since she had worked here, his harsh voice and the jagged ends of his badly cut hair had often aroused her. But his fine-boned fingers grasped her skin lightly while he guided her hips over himself. His eyes were out of focus. She was only part of the noise, of his music. Pam's voice, the override tone, pushed into
her head. She moved faster, harder, until his eyes popped open. She finished him off, his penis limp and looking dead.

She ran back to her studio, barely making the end of the song. His rectangle of light vanished. She spoke, cold and clear as glass.

Her voice is crystalline tonight, Joseph thought.

He set an alarm to wake him for work in a few hours. He would be asleep before her taxi pulled into the driveway.

He remembered the slice of blue agate in the bottom drawer of his cabinet. The agate was a gift to him like the snake in the dream. It had arrived in its own bag, not plastic like the other bags in the drawer, but of old worn paper, texture of moth wing. He had found it, dust-speckled, behind her bookcase.

The agate was a clear frozen sea with the blue-tinged face of a woman inside.
Running home along the docks, Tash screwed up her eyes to block the glare of the sun on the oily water. She pulled out her phone. Shit. Messages. She would try to sneak in without wakening the whole joint. Too early to deal with a row. But even as she swore to herself, she ran faster. Sick at the thought that something bad had gone down in that low-rent cottage of hers.

Serena filled in the studio journal, reporting missing cartridges and faulty equipment, and piled her gear into her backpack. As she packed the history books she imagined a woman standing on the patch of land in the goldfields. Marian was shifting under her glass. She was framed by an unscarred summer sky. Blowflies buzzed. A high sun burned into her tightly bound scalp.

The studio's spotlights were hot on Serena's hair as she signed off. She would love to sleep long and dreamlessly through the day. But Pam would come early with the big news that she said she had to tell.
For twenty-one years, Pam had waited for the letter now lying out on her dining table. Through every one of those years her mind’s eye was locked in tunnel vision towards this time in the future.

She pulled her dressing gown close, her eyelids swollen from a sleepless night. She reached for her bedside photograph of Serena. What had made her daughter talk about the old homestead last night? Serena had trod carelessly through her mother’s phone call – but she could be forgiven, Pam thought – since she did not know that an almighty bombshell was about to be dropped on her. That bombshell had started ticking way back in the past, inside the mud and timber walls of the shack in the bush. Pam picked up another photograph. When she put the pictures side by side, the two faces made her as ready as she would ever be for the talk with Serena.

She got up, drank a cup of coffee, and waited until it was late enough to go.
Serena woke to find her tabby cat curled beside her and the sun streaming through the balcony doors. Already her mother was parked out the front. She scrambled for clothes among a pile on the floor. As Pam came up the stairs her daughter had a top pulled halfway over her head and was wondering if now was too late to crawl back into bed and hide under the doona.

She sat her mother down in the lounge room and searched for a jar of coffee in the kitchen cupboards. Pam was brimming with her news. So full of it, she was like a rainwater tank in the tropical wet. Serena had come up with a few possibilities since Pam had first mentioned the big news. Was she taking off around the world with a young lover? Becoming a Hare Krishna? Had she won first division of TattsLotto? But now that she saw the look of her mother she was sorry for making light.

Pam took a minute to look at her daughter. Serena's hands rested on her knees. Small, lovely hands. Pam could reach over and hold them while she spoke. Instead she fingered her old brooch – following the twisted rim – and glanced at the opening of her suede briefcase, seeking out the edges of the photo tucked inside a manila folder from work.
The first bit would be the hardest. Nothing was going to soften the shock – she just had to open her mouth and speak. Get it out quick.

Before she could lose that thought she blurted out the words while Serena was busy sipping her tea.

– You have a sister.

Serena slopped the tea down her front and did not appear to feel the burn.

– She’s four years younger than you.

– Where is she?

The voice was tiny.

Pam told herself to keep going. She had to start from the beginning if she was to keep her head straight. So she started – dipping in and out – telling only the parts she could bear to say aloud, only as much as she wanted her daughter to hear.

– I had just found out I was pregnant when your father died. He never knew about the baby.

Her grown-up daughter held her gaze, but like flicking a switch Pam could imagine her at the age of four.

Pam flips back the nylon lace curtains and watches Serena pegging tea towels on her toy clothes hoist in the backyard of their weatherboard house. She takes her oven mitt from a hook and slides out a rack of cupcakes in frilled paper cases,
whistling, wanting to make a happy sound like winding a hurdy-gurdy for a child. Indeed it is for a child she whistles — not only for Serena, but also for another.

The slip of paper is stuck on the fridge with a magnet in the shape of a gingerbread man. She reads it again, and dances over to the sink with the rack of cakes balanced on the one oven-mitted hand. She has known for two hours and is bursting to tell someone. She has been playing the fool — singing it out to the enamel gingerbread man's grinning face — and now she puts down the cakes and holds up the oven mitt to make her announcement to the pink pig printed on the palm of the mitt.

On the way home from shopping she had called into the clinic, not even expecting the test results to be back yet. But the doctor saw her coming up the footpath — Serena skipping beside her — and presented Pam with the slip of paper at the door. Pam was six weeks pregnant. She could wheel around, piggyback Serena to the post office and place a call to the dive centre in Queensland. No, she decided, letting Serena climb up for the piggyback anyway. Her husband would be home at the weekend and telling him in person would be much more fun. As Serena wriggled down and the two of them raced along their street between the sprinklers on the nature strips, Pam pictured him on the reef — his flippers propelling him through bright water.
By the steaming cupcakes she glances through the window at the spinning of the tiny clothes hoist and the flapping of the cloths, and smooths her sundress over her flat belly. She pours two glasses of milk and giggles like her little girl while she tries to balance them and a plate of the warm cupcakes spread with golden syrup in her hands.

Tap, tap, tap on the wire door at the front.

She sloshes milk onto the lino.

She has left the main door open to let in the breeze.

She sings out, coming.

She puts down the feast.

She is licking a drop of milk from the back of one hand.

She sees the two policemen on her verandah.

All they have found of him – all they will ever find – is his divers’ watch, the sea-green glass intact.

The lino sticks to her sweating feet she fumbles with the latch of the back door it will not seem to open broken different it gives way she falls through slips on the mossy steps rips her sundress grazes her thighs with the heavy thump of her backside on the path the fall might have killed the baby dead already gone with its father she closes her eyes and inside she spins like the toy clothes hoist her daughter runs to her screams for her mummy Pam half-opens her eyes the fig tree
with the roots that crack the path looks closer and larger than before her arms are as heavy as the roots she wraps them around her little girl stricken by the feel of the sun-browned skin the thin child bones the downy hair in plaits with ribbons the skittering beat of the heart against her own breasts she desires to shoo the child a runtish stray animal wanting her to care for it.

- I wasn’t myself after he went.

Her husband’s funeral is in the tiny chapel in the goldfields. Aunties and friends of the family fuss over her sickness, blaming the shock. None of them knows she carries his baby like a lead sinker low in her belly.

She can hardly bear to look at her four-year-old – face pale, eyes tightly closed to the empty coffin in the aisle. The smell of the floral wreaths turns Pam’s stomach until she must hold her breath. The weather is sultry – it is midday but the overcast sky dims the chapel and colours the flames of the altar candles luridly orange.

When the voices rise for the hymn, ‘Amazing Grace’, Serena blocks her ears from the low rumble of singing, and Pam rushes outside to vomit under the pine trees.
She sits on a bench outside the bush chapel. She cannot hear the droning of the minister who never knew her husband. Wind creaks the pine branches over her head, but it is a northerly and will not douse the heat. This person and that comes to the door to check on her and she waves each away one by one. She picks up a pinecone. A spider webs up the gaps inside.

Now that the sea has swallowed her husband, she has a clear view of a pattern her grandmother saw a long time ago.

– Hardly any of this family dies naturally, the old woman would say. – And those of us who miss out on that part of the curse live long lives of keening for who they’ve lost and how.

Pam’s bloodlines are poisoning her as sure as a river gone bad. She imagines a deadly tributary leaking into the sea where her husband swam.

She stands up. She avoids the doors, crosses the chapel garden, gets into her car, and lets the wheels roll down the hill before she starts the motor. Slowly she drives past the cemetery that dates back to pioneering days. Her parents are buried there, along with her grandmother and the others from the past. The newly dug grave has fake turf set around it, covering the mound of stony dirt. She cries at the sight – but what would be the good of sticking around for the interment of a box? She turns the car. The slow-moving cortege leaves the
chapel as she moves onto the highway and speeds up.

— You left me with Dad's parents, Serena said.

The days of arriving and leaving her grandparents' house were murky in her memory, yet she saw herself finger-painting in an unfamiliar kindergarten.

Her hands are buried in dark pigment that she piles onto paper, building and flattening mounds. Her tongue lies heavily in her mouth. She speaks only when she knows she must say please, thank you, or goodnight. Near her grandparents' back door, a thermometer in the shape of a little house is set high on a wall. When the weather is to be cool a man in a raincoat pops out of a doorway, and when it is to be fine a woman with a basket of flowers pops out of another doorway. Every morning she checks who is in and who is out.
Pam drives for hours. When she stops to change out of the hot funeral clothes in a public toilet she is well over the border of New South Wales. She smokes a cigarette down to the butt and counts out change for a phone box.

Serena’s father’s mother snaps down the line. – The girl’s lost her father and she needs her mother.

Pam holds back a retch and tells her mother-in-law she will be staying with a girlfriend in Sydney for a while.

– I’m crook, she says. – Not feeling right in the head.

Best if I stay away from Serena until I’m better.

She crosses her fingers that the friend still lives at the same address.

The rain pelts down and she leans over the wheel to peer through the windscreen that the wipers can barely keep clear. She tries to keep track of the route she has marked with a pen on the street map bought at a petrol station on the outskirts of Sydney. It is through this wet semi-circle of glass that she sees the bare windows of the house at her girlfriend’s address. A real estate sign has been stuck into the overgrown lawn. The time is four in the morning. Pam wraps herself in a picnic rug from the boot and reclines the driver’s seat.

By next afternoon she manages to find her girlfriend – someone she has known since high school. But the girlfriend no longer lives in a house. The girl who had kicked up as much as the rest of them in catechism now resides in a convent as a nun.
in the making, a postulant with a few years on the usual ones
straight out of Catholic schools. She did have an older sister –
a girl she and Pam had envied for her long legs and the
boyfriends they attracted back when the three of them were
plotting ways to shorten their tunics without the nuns’ catching
on.

That night Pam moves into the older sister’s unit, falling
asleep to the sound of furious whispering from the kitchen. It
will be weeks before they give up on trying to talk her into going
home. But they will not call anyone – will not interfere.

She has not lied to her mother-in-law. She is thin and ill
and is to experience troubles throughout every month of the
pregnancy.

Five times – thinking the baby is lost – the postulant and
her sister take Pam to the hospital where the postulant
volunteers. The baby hangs on. Pam lets them bundle her into
the car and rush through traffic, but it is as if she is a passer-
by watching an ambulance drive away with someone else inside.
She does not expect that the pregnancy will go to full term – no
way she can see herself sustaining a life without managing to
snuff it out sooner or later. As though they have been given an
orphaned lamb to rear, Pam’s two girlfriends take over. She sits
at the table while they serve up meals and measure out tonics.
She lies on the couch by the strip heater and sees them rub her
skin with creams from the chemist – their hands are on her but
she cannot feel a thing. Often, she thanks them. She knows
those spilling words are not hers, but are put in her mouth by
someone else who is clued into the fact that Pam is not fit to
mother any child.

After the sisters leave for the day, she washes the
breakfast dishes and returns to the spare room. She lies on the
single bed under the silver cross hanging from the picture rail.
Beside the bed is a lamp, a gift from the postulant to her sister
– a plastic figurine of the Virgin Mary with her halo lighting up
when the power is switched on. In the last months bursts of
noise in Pam’s head pummel her unless she lies supine – the
weight pressing down on her front – her eyes out of focus most
of the time.

After the last time that she appears certain to lose the
infant, they come home from the hospital and the sisters sit
beside her bed and pray for her and the baby. She has not
prayed since they giggled together in school. None of them
laughs tonight. She grasps their hands and places them on the
baby’s kicking feet, makes them smile. She hopes their prayers
can help the baby.

Pam sends no letter or card to Serena, and makes no call
after the first one from the phone booth. She keeps her
distance and waits to find a way to keep those she loves safe
from the family curse.
The baby swells, pushing the hump closer to the spare room ceiling. She shuts off the lamp and lets the halo die. In the dimness she can just about see her grandmother, walking stick clasped ready to hook the nearest person’s neck.

Pam thinks herself into the dusty corners of that wretched homestead that never had electricity or running water. How long it has been since she thought of the heavy dining table in the room where the old portraits had hung. She never saw anyone eat from that table. But on separate occasions she did see two corpses lying dead on its top. As a small child she was made to kiss the faces of the dead and say her goodbyes although she had hardly known either relative.

She hears her grandmother’s talk of the curse. She was too young – only eight – to link the curse with her own mother’s death. She rests against the crisply pressed pillowcase and lets herself see that morning.

Pam wakes up and tiptoes out to check the brass clock. She is late for school – the bell will have rung before she can wash her face or comb her hair. Her father is away working on the railways and her mother has slept in. In her parents’ room, the eiderdown is bunched up over her mother’s head. Pam holds the brass clock in one hand and calls – Mum – from the end of the bed. She creeps around to the side, meaning to fling back
the ciderdown and wake her mother with a kiss. Mum will fly up, flapping and scurrying like a chicken when she sees the hands of the clock on such a late time. Her arm is hanging down the side of the mattress. The colour does not look right. The arm is the same violet shade as the frilled sleeve of Mum’s nightgown. And when Pam pulls away the cover her mother’s face is violet. The clock falls, the glass cracks. She shakes her mother, kisses her. Mum smells of lemon, sugary lemon. Later Pam sits beside her father in a courthouse while men discuss her mother’s accidental death from choking on a lemon sweet from a tissue-lined tin found on her bedroom floor. Afterwards Pam moves in with her grandmother in the old house in the goldfields.

She sits and pulls up the blind. She failed – she tells herself – to connect her losses with the curse even when her father died four years after her mother’s death. The grandmother had shut her mouth tight about the old rumour the day her son – her only child – died. Pam was not told much about the events of that day. But her grandmother saved the local newspapers that covered the death, burying them in a boxed album of brown photographs. The minute Pam was left alone at the homestead, she dug out the album and read the papers. Her father’s skull had been smashed during a pub brawl he and a couple of
cobbers from the railways were trying to quell. His corpse was not lain out on the table for farewells. His mother spent years weeping in her small room. All that kept her from following him – she told Pam – was the need to care for his daughter. She never mentioned the family curse again.

Now the curse is in Pam’s mind.

– I was too scared to keep the baby.

She brought up one hand to cover her mouth.

– Nobody knew about her except my girlfriends and the hospital staff.

The older sister is at work when Pam’s waters soak the sheets of the single bed.

The hospital nuns attend to her, not sending for her postulant friend although she keeps asking for her. The ward is smotheringly quiet. Pam bites down on her lips – the inside of her no longer feels detached from the outside and she works hard to give birth. The baby ends the silence with a bellow before she is snipped away. They swaddle the child and then the nun holding her moves to leave the room. At a sound from Pam she pauses and lets Pam take a look at the baby’s face before she takes her from the ward.
- I made the arrangements for the adoption long before the birth. I wanted the baby to go somewhere safe.

She has barely been stitched together when a tray is pushed in front of her. Paper crackles and she looks down to see the final adoption papers ready to be signed. The staff will hear of no delays. With the goldfields cemetery in mind, she signs.

She is to see the baby girl once more. A nun walks Pam to the nursery and raps on the glass pane, signalling the matron to bring forward the child’s crib. The wide-open green eyes look directly at Pam from under the thick auburn hair. Such a healthy baby, she thinks, and presses her palms against the glass. She longs to touch her. But the nun bars Pam’s entry into the nursery. Against regulations, she says. Pam begs to be allowed to hold the baby girl, and the nun starts talking about a sedative. Pam is quiet for a minute or two and then before she can stop herself she tells the nun she wants to keep the baby. The nun pats her back and agrees to see what she can do. She guides Pam to her bed and motions to another nun who comes over with a hypodermic in a kidney dish. Together they promise to bring the papers back once Pam has had a sleep and calmed herself down.
Serena drew her knees close, curling up, intent on her mother.

- I had changed my mind, Pam said.

She sleeps, believing she will take the baby home. Pam dreams of her husband. Her hands wring the hem of the green hospital sheet. He comes to stand by her bed and he holds his arms out for the new baby. The dream drifts on to the night when Serena was born and he was let in to see her. He cuddles Serena, his strong tanned arms cradling her in a bunny rug. But now – his arms keep reaching, empty – for the new baby. Pam wakes with a searing pain about her middle. The baby is gone, taken to a new family while Pam was sleeping.

- The nuns said it was better they hadn’t let me dither about a decision already made. Better for me not to go through the upset of saying goodbye. Better for who?

But one nun – the postulant who was Pam’s girlfriend – comes across the hospital sisters readying Pam’s baby for discharge. At first she cannot find a voice to speak with as she leaves her
book trolley and enters the nursery. She thinks of how she helped to keep this baby alive. Despite the glares and the commands that she return to her book rounds and keep her nose out of others' business, she says what she will to the sisters. She tells them about Pam's bereavement. But they already know – they have sent for Pam's medical records and have seen the entry about the husband's sudden death. And they know about the daughter that she has neglected these past months: that has come through hospital gossip. An important client – a person known to be an excellent adoptive parent and a kind hospital beneficiary – has been assigned this baby for months. Pam's friend holds the baby's hand for a moment before she is shoved away. She does manage to save something, and that she brings to Pam late in the night. Into Pam's hands she puts the hospital wristband that she has slipped away from the infant's skin.

- No way they'd let me have the baby back after she was gone. Things were different then, adoption was meant to be forever. So, I came home and got you, found a job, and that was that.

It takes time for her to find a job, weeks of typing application letters on her mother-in-law's portable typewriter. After a while
a return letter arrives in the box at the weatherboard house. She sits at the table in the kitchen and her little girl claps her hands and smiles when Pam explains that she has been offered a job. No other offers are coming her way – she never finished high school and has never had a paid job.

Pam sews herself a smart set of clothes. She threads the needle of the treadle machine and thinks that it is another twist in her cursed life that the only job offered to her is at the coroner’s offices.

The first case she is given to type up and file is a family murder-suicide. She makes several trips to the ladies’ to cry before she finishes typing the case notes. But she needs the money, for in her mind she is working to provide for two children. Soon she teaches herself to focus on the clacking of the typewriter keys instead of the meanings of the words. After a while her misery becomes easier to file away as if in one of the wooden filing drawers lining her office.

She thinks of the baby girl every day.

The baby’s birth certificate lies in a lace-trimmed box on top of Pam’s wardrobe. On each of the November birthdays, she shuts herself in her room after dinner and takes out the certificate. Sometimes she makes a cake and sneaks a slice into the bedroom where she tops the cake with a birthday candle and lights it.
Those nights: Serena remembered the closed door, the light shining through the cracks. She had never understood why her mother shut herself away and was likely to be angry, slap her even, if she banged on the door and pleaded with Pam to come out and watch the television or to share more of the cake she had made.

In her little girl Pam sees two girls. The doubled child reminds her that she has a job to do, that being a mother in this family means something more important than hugs and smiles and games. She puts her old self – her stupid self – with cupcakes and golden syrup and piggybacks and sprinklers – into the past, into the time when she had failed to see that the safety of her family was precarious.

Pam draws her life close to herself. She works long hours and puts money into the bank. She locks her doors and keeps a close eye on who comes in or out. As Serena grows older, protecting her is more difficult. Pam screens friends and sets
curfews. Boyfriends are not allowed, not until Serena is eighteen.

Her focus on one day in the future keeps her on her feet and moving forwards. She knows she will be reunited with her younger daughter. When Pam sees her again, she will let herself relax. She will believe that the curse was only a superstitious rumour or that it has moved on from her household.

Serena watched her mother fiddling with her old Celtic brooch while she talked. The knotted ring of silver represented the endless repetition of life cycles.

She could not forget the strict house rules nor the friends kept distant as though they harboured germs, disease, disintegration. Yet boyfriends had upset Pam more than anything else. Had a teenaged boy been the worst imaginable threat to her daughter? Or was it pregnancy that Pam had feared: the possibility of a child who must be relinquished, Pam’s loss repeated in a cycle?

Her closed, closed mother was prising herself open. Serena did not want to disturb her with questions she may not be able to answer.
Pam leaned forward, ready to tell the best part.

- I've been trying to trace her since she turned eighteen.

Last week the agency sent me a letter. They've found her, and she wants to meet me.

- Her name's Natasha. She lives in Tasmania.

Serena drew in her breath and slowly let it out.

- Funny, Pam said. - I know you really like Tasmania.

She pulled the manila folder from her briefcase.

- The agency sent a photo. I sent pictures back, for Natasha.

Serena watched her speak the name. It did not fit her mouth, a foreign word to her.

Pam put the photo on the coffee table, and Serena leaned over to place her hands like a frame around the image of this sister. The woman in the picture had razored hair, a couple of centimetres long all over; its auburn shade matched Pam's. The bone structure was identical to Pam's: heavy-set cheekbones, a
strong but not large nose. The green eyes were just like Pam’s eyes that bored into Serena now.

- It’s like seeing myself as I was years ago.
- In your wedding photos. Your hair was longer of course.

This woman was unmistakably her mother’s daughter, unlike Serena with her father’s eyes and her black hair that everyone said was a throwback to somewhere as nobody else in the family had hair that dark.

Natasha was slightly turned away, her edges blurred. A faint mark was visible on the left side of her nose. A hole for a nose ring, Serena thought. She took in the knitted brows, the parted full lips: was that a half-smile or a grimace? If Pam’s face had ever let that much emotion show at once then Serena had not been around to see it.

Serena looked into the face: not calm, not cold, not sterile as she knew Pam appeared at times; this younger face was sensual, even sexual, the hair fiery, the eyes bright and provocative.

- I’m flying to Hobart to meet her next weekend.

The plane took off in Serena’s mind. While she was a sea away, the two women came together at the Hobart airport, extending hands to touch for the first time since the cord was cut.

She could think of only one way to change the situation.
She touched one of Pam’s wrists through her jacket sleeve.

– Can I come with you?

Pam would be unlikely to remember the last car trip she had taken with her daughter, let alone fathom the two of them getting on a plane together and making this particular journey.

After a minute, Pam patted Serena’s hand and said she would contact the agency to ask if that would be all right with Natasha.

The lounge room was quiet. Both of them drew their hands back to themselves. The tabby cat leapt into Serena’s lap and she cuddled him close to her neck. It was time for Pam to leave.

At the door Pam glanced back inside, wondering not for the first time why she never felt comfortable in her daughter’s home.

I never let her go without, she thought.

But into her mind flickered a moment once seen through a crack in a door – Serena lines up her dolls, tallest bride to finger-sized baby.

– None of you are lonely-onlys, she says, you’re my sisters.
She had given her daughter only the bare outlines and had kept the details to herself. Maybe if she had said more, Serena could have bothered to meet her mother's eyes after hearing it. Pam got into her car and slammed the door shut.
The more Serena thought, the higher the lies stacked up. It was not only her life from now on that would be different. Her mother's words had changed the past.

The secret, she understood, was barely submerged in the house where she grew up. No shouts or screams had rattled the boards of the house. No disagreement had ended with both of them in tears, hugging and talking. In the earlier years Pam ended any ruffling with a slap. Pursed lips and silence came later. Pam must have felt her past lurking close; she never risked losing composure and slipping out that secret.

She could picture Pam in their kitchen, her wedge-soled shoes on the green lino. Serena had crept close to the chopping board to watch her mother looking right through her, eyes glazed, as though Serena were invisible. She had waved her hand in front of her mother's eyes but Pam did not blink. Serena twisted around, looking for whatever Pam could see. Was it the record player, the spread newspaper with dirty shoes on top, the Raggedy Ann doll on the floor? But she was not exactly looking at any of them, just as she never seemed to look exactly at Serena, not any more. Serena called her mother twice before her eyes cleared and she went back to pounding the meat for dinner. This was not the first or the last time Pam
had looked through her daughter at whatever it was that
Serena could not see.

Pulling a chair over to her wardrobe Serena climbed up and
searched through the boxes and files at the top until she came
to a particular box. Inside she found her china-faced bride doll
with matted hair, a broken-backed edition of Grimms' fairy
tales, a toddler's beribboned dress. Nestled in a corner she saw
a package tied up with a padding of newspaper sheets. Here
was the gift that her paternal grandmother had given her years
ago. She could hold the wooden house in both hands and see
the man and woman inside, ready to pop out when the
temperature demanded. She set the weather-house on a hook
near her bedroom window, and stood back. The woman swung
forwards.

As she replaced the other items in the box on top of the
wardrobe, the dark red spine of a book caught her eye. She had
forgotten about that book. It was a journal that she had
purchased in a general store doubling as a gift shop on the Isle
of Skye. The red book was the remnant of a travel journal,
stashed at the bottom of her pack after she had found little time
to make the entries, and then stuffed into this storage box when
she arrived home from overseas.
The journal, the size of a small paperback novel, was bound with padded leather. She picked it up and the covers fell open. A creased ticket from a folk museum floated from inside, down to the floor. On the first of the pages she had noted an array of items: a story told to her in a pub at the foot of the Quiraing, the letters of the Gaelic alphabet, a report of a drowning incident of 1812, and the outline of a Skye legend.

She skimmed through her scribbled notes, then paused at the last entry, the legend.

Scatha (or Scath or Scathach), pronounced sky-a by some, was a dark goddess, Mother Death one of her aspects. Another of her names, Scotia, was used in naming Scotland itself. Some say that Skye was named for Scatha and that the isle was her mythical realm. On the island, Scatha taught the arts of war to the famous warriors of Celtic legends.

Scatha. Serena whispered the name, remembering how she had liked the legend when she read it from a display in the folk museum.

She stepped down and nearly dropped the book, the pages flying up into a sea, blank and unwritten after those scattered entries.

She wanted the book kept out of the box, and not only for the material it could supply for her radio project. The truth, she thought, had been papered over from the day when those adoption papers were signed. Fresh, new entries needed to be
made in the family history. She stepped down from the chair and placed the journal carefully on her bed. The journal with its red skin sank into the bedding.

She grabbed her pack and left the flat for a late afternoon's walk on the beach. As she crossed the canal she said her sister's name to herself. Now that she knew she had a sister in the world, she thought she must have always sensed her existence, and had missed Natasha, dreamed of her. As a child she imagined she had a sister, almost but not quite the image of herself. Sometimes she was older, and brushed Serena's hair, and other times she was younger and liked to listen to Serena reading from the book of Grimms' fairytales. Sometimes she was a twin and they dressed identically, only the two of them knowing for sure who was who.

The mosaic was to undulate in a path up the middle of the main thoroughfare of the university, from the front gate to the library. The mosaic was abstract. Yet Joseph liked to work with a
picture in mind, and for this project the picture was a snake.
One of his mother's snakes, an eastern brown or a red-bellied
black, he supposed. He envisaged the cool scales merging into
fantasy patterns, fancy motifs. At the thought of his mother he
stopped for a breather. He was near the gate, a fence of rope
and plastic poles propped around him and the work. The fine
curled tip of the path was in place and he had finished laying
the framework for the decorative segment in shimmering green
that the dream had revealed.

He bent low to look over what he had done, visualising
the outlines of the rest of the mosaic, summoning the snakes of
his mother's hospice. He would fill the middle section with red
tiles; put a fire in the belly of this piece of work.

The *Spirit of Tasmania* departed through the neck of the bay.
Serena leaned back on the bluestone seawall and sifted gritty
sand from one hand to the other. Wind dented the sea. Her
sister lived on the other side of that stretch of water. Just last
month Serena had sat here at Point Ormond and dreamed
herself across the Tasman to come ashore and change her life
as easily as changing her clothes. Tonight she looked out with
another perspective: for years she had lived on this side of the water, oblivious to her sister’s parallel life on the other side.

With the Spirit out of sight and the gulls settling in the twilight she imagined Natasha at a window, craning her neck to see outside, pressing her face to the glass. At least Natasha could have known to look, aware that she had another family somewhere.

Serena walked back through the darkening streets. She let herself feel the twinge of excitement that had been inside her since Pam had gone home. She had a sister: it was time to invite her into her life. With Natasha’s return, she resolved to make her welcome and to dismantle the scaffolding she and Pam had constructed between them even if she had to bulldoze it.

At that moment it seemed possible.

The streetlights flickered on as Serena neared her flat under its canopy of plane tree branches. A shape on the bitumen, a little further along, made her start running, hands at her mouth.

It was her tabby cat. He was cold to touch. His fur bristled from his body. When she tried to lift him, his body was
stiff and distorted, and she dropped him, then made herself pick him up again.

At the top of the stairs she sobbed, the cold cat held against her chest. She flung down the backpack and banged on the door, hoping for Joseph to answer.

She banged again, but no lights were on. She unlocked the door and in the front passage put the cat on top of a pile of newspapers. His eyes were narrowed, the slits shiny with still fluid. She covered him with an old towel and he was a baby-like blob underneath. She rested her hands on top of him and sat for a while.

The loss of animals was all she knew of grief, she thought, unlike her mother with her whole archive of lost loved ones.

Running through the darkness, away from the fire-lit sitting room where her mother talks to the old people, she passes the portraits of ancestors on the walls. The eyes rise and sink like portholes in the crumbling timber. She leaves the house and runs along the crooked path edged with geraniums. She creeps around to kneel beside the old people’s border collie. He shies away, dragging at the worn blanket in his kennel. The dirt is spattered with blood. He pulls the blanket closer, and under its fringes she sees three bleeding kitten heads. She screams, first
imagining a cat born with three heads, not out of place on this land where the old people live with dull lamps for lights and where dead cars in the back paddock spy on her with empty headlight eyes. But a tiny tail leads her to the backends of three kittens further under the blanket. The old man, his bad leg dragging behind, appears at the back door, come to see why she screamed.

The loss of her father was obscured as though by eddies and whirlpools. She knew only that he had been lost at sea in tropical waters. Sometimes she imagined his flesh bloomed into coral branches even though people said bodies lasted only a day or so in the sea. She had no memory of the day he died. If she concentrated she could call to mind a small number of fragments about him: his arms warming her, her name spoken in his voice, a strong forefinger pointing to a moon encircled by a pale ring. She sensed him as a missing part, a part taken from her before she knew it properly, a tail or a wing, a fleshy piece she could barely remember but wished she could have kept.

Later she lit a tea light candle and looked up the number of an all night vet, following instructions and putting him in a box although she wanted to carry him like a child in the towel. In the box his front paws curved delicately towards his chest.
She wrote a note for Joseph, breaking the news, then took the cat's china food bowl, picked up a toy mouse with a bell inside, his collar and his name tag, and packed these possessions of a tabby cat into the back of the cupboard under the kitchen sink. She dressed for work, the nap of her velvet skirt hackling under her fingertips.

She left him with the vet before travelling on to the radio station.

As she watched the taxi driving away from the car park, she had a thought that she shook off quickly. A newcomer in her family and the death of a pet on the same day? Putting them together like that, she told herself, made her life sound like one of the urban myths that the listeners of the station loved to hear.

Tash crouched on her porch under the single bare light bulb, the photos strewn on the wooden boards.

Her mother, Pamela, had been quick to send the pictures through the agency. The nicest picture of Pamela was an enlarged one of her standing next to the other daughter.

The sister. Tash hurt when she looked at the sister. She was too familiar. Too close. Yes, Pamela looked like Tash, and
she liked that. But the sister looked like someone else.

— Mum. Tash heard the faint cry from her child’s bedroom.

The sister’s looks were too close to Tash’s child’s looks. And that was as close as she would get to him. As close as anyone would get until she sussed them out. Until she knew who she could trust to be near to her own child.

She took the photo, biting her thumbnail down to the quick. She folded the picture in half. Roughly creased it right down the middle until the sister was gone and she could see only Pamela. She took her shoulder bag and felt around for her little round mirror. With the mirror lying next to the crease in the picture, she leaned over and looked at herself beside her mother.

Serena put her envelopes of clippings in front of her, expecting them to get her through the shift. Already her throat was sore from her earlier crying. Even her old stand-by elixir of a mug of warm water was not soothing the croakiness. She pulled out a handful of snippets. Announcers read all kinds of magazines and newspapers and web sites, seeking trivia to fill in airtime. This part of the job, the trivia and the gossip, bored her. But
she knew she was only a voice in the dark, not a celebrity or a guru. Her listeners wanted to know the whereabouts of seventies rock stars, to be reminded of retro fashion fads, to hear about places that they had always meant to visit.

Finding that trivia was a drudge. She preferred another kind of fossicking, the kind that made the work of every radio announcer unique. Trace an announcer’s air shift over an extended period of time and a thread will appear. The average listener may never notice. But she had experimented. Gus, the evening jock, was transparent with his near-nightly waffle about the Grateful Dead and their contemporaries. The afternoon announcer liked to reel off war statistics, his voice cramped with the weight of his own memories of Nam. Once she met a punk jock who padded a community station’s mid-dawn with talk of rabbits: Angora, Dutch, Beatrix Potter. Maybe only a sentence or two could be picked up, a short spiel, regular or irregular: but the thread was sure to exist. Every announcer had a personal frequency that rang out from the noise pollution of the rest of the trivia. And Serena’s frequency was the sea. She liked to think of her broadcasts as fringed with the wrack of tides and waves, sea weather, ship tales, beach oddities, lighthouse stories. To relay a sea snippet could cheer her at any time of night. Tonight, she did not want to be cheered. She stuck to the noise pollution.
- One a.m., she announced, and reminded the listeners of her name, the name of the person *taking you through the night*.

Her note lay, crumpled, a pebble of glossy paper on the coffee table. Joseph clenched his fists on the arms of his chair.

After a while he spread his hands and sifted through the plush pile of the chair arms. Cat hairs appeared and stuck themselves to his fingers. He counted out three and arranged them on a square of notepaper from the telephone table. He went to his bedroom, holding out his right hand as though a butterfly perched on the fingers rather than the remaining tangle of cat hairs. With the other hand he pulled a zip-lock plastic bag from a packet in the bottom drawer of his cabinet, and slipped the hairs into the bag. *Tabby (black)*, he wrote on a label that he stuck onto the plastic.

He found the cat's bowl behind the drainpipe in the kitchen cupboard. He knew she would not have thrown it away, yet neither would she have left it where she would see it every day. He turned the bowl in his hands, studying the design of black cats on a white china background. He wrapped the bowl in thick paper and smashed it against the floor. Peeling the paper open, he studied the remains: the fine dust,
the jagged new shapes of the china. He slid it all into the plastic bag with the hairs, and then added the pebble of her note, smoothed the zip-lock closed, and patted the bag before putting it in the bottom drawer of the cabinet.

The project had already been brought to Serena’s attention since she had arrived. Clipped inside the midnight to dawn logbook she had found a barely legible handwritten rave from the P.D.

To my lady of the night...
I’m sure you’ve noticed the brand-spanking new promos for NOSTALGIC VOICES, on air now! The production studio is churning with the first instalments from our team. As yet I hear no word on the topic of Family. No worries, just have something terrrrrrific to show me come Monday’s meeting.

Graeme Carp.

She had not heard the promos and as far as she could see none were scheduled for mid-dawn. He wanted her to carry on with a contribution that it seemed he did not expect anyone to hear.

She knew where her NOSTALGIC VOICES folder lay at this minute; it was beside her bed where she had left it along with the history books. She was in no mood for nostalgia.
The station was hers alone for this shift. Nobody called in: not the production engineer, to her relief; not a journalist come to research a breaking story in the newsroom; not an executive nutting out a strategy on a computer; not an early morning cleaner vacuuming the floors. Even the callers were quiet. She had the run of the place, and the last thing she wanted was to be alone. She knew her friends’ plans, everyone would be sleeping or partying at this hour of a Saturday morning. All she could do was talk to the air about the weather.

Her voice barely held out through the last recital of Relax and Reminisce with Classic Hits, and then once she was out of there and had walked up her stairs at home to find no tabby cat waiting, she could cry.

Outside her bedroom door she found a square of notepaper. So sad about the cat, she read in his handwriting, the individual letters wide, open, embracing. Taped below the message were three tabby hairs. She stroked the sealed-in hairs and slipped the note into a clear pocket of her purse.

She slept long into the next day, and returned to her bed after an early dinner in Barkly Street. But at around three a.m. she found herself wide awake, a familiar story in the life of a
Monday to Friday night worker. She noticed the full moon and silently sympathised with the rookie jock who was on the weekend mid-dawn gig. A full moon and a warm Saturday night would bring out the worst of the callers. She left her bed and sat by the balcony doors, listening to a song, 'No Aphrodisiac like Loneliness', that filtered in from a party down the street. A dream of Natasha had woken her. The recurring image of Natasha with her face at a window, looking for her birth family, had put Serena in mind of a little girl called Melanie who had been a regular in her childhood bad dreams.

Serena is seven just like the little girl with brown pigtails and freckles whose picture the policeman on the television is holding.

- This is Melanie, he says. - Last night she was taken from her bedroom while her parents slept. Signs of forced entry were found at the window. Police have no clues as to her whereabouts and are appealing to the public for assistance.

They show Melanie’s bedroom. A single bed with a lace quilt is under the window and a doll with pink wool hair lies with her head on Melanie’s pillow.

Serena wishes she had a lace quilt on her bed. And she likes all kinds of dolls.
Later that night Melanie comes to Serena. Her face is pale except for the freckles. At first she wants to play. Her pink-haired doll is tucked in her arms. Serena’s voice will not come out when she tries to ask how Melanie took her doll from the bedroom after she had been kidnapped. Melanie pulls at the end of her bedspread. Serena holds tightly to the top edge and Melanie pulls harder. She pulls the bedspread until Serena’s fingers hurt and she must let go. The bedspread falls on the floor and Melanie hides.

Serena cries out for her mother.

- Children are hardly ever kidnapped by strangers, Pam says as she tucks in her daughter. - I’ll bet there’s fishy business with the parents, she mutters to herself.

- Melanie saw me from the TV, and now she’s in the window.

Pam opens the curtains, and only the reflections of their two faces appear. She leaves on the light and goes back to bed.

Serena listens to her mother settling under the blankets. Pam will snore as soon as she falls asleep, and with no sign of the snoring yet she curls up and sleeps, knowing her mother is listening out for her.

But Melanie comes back. She stays in the window all night. She is not on Serena’s side or on the other side but is inside the glass like a pressed flower in a frame. And she has a long chain of flowers that goes around the rectangle of the
glass. Birds with sharp beaks are pressed on either side of her face. She is smiling but she is as still as her photograph on the television.

Now Natasha was the missing female in Serena's mind.

The red journal lay beside the bed while Serena put together her new sister and her old dream. If she had looked, she would have seen that already the journal appeared thicker. You could say that it looked and felt full even though she had wads of pages to write on, years of story to put inside. This journal could absorb more than ink. Melanie, for instance, was not only pressed in the window. She had pushed her way into the red journal, fusing herself onto a sister called Natasha, the two of them beside one another like cut-out paper girls.

The journal's skin was bloated with the stories of past, present and future. The journal knew more than Serena could know.
Pam was closely acquainted with dreams and awake-dreams. Her acquaintance had begun many years ago.

My little girl Serena doesn't need to sleep to dream, Pam thinks. Sometimes she gets stuck in one long awake-dream. I know the look on her face when she does it.

- You don't have to think the pictures, she says. - They think themselves. First one picture comes, or a noise, maybe, or a voice that talks to me. And then whatever it is won't stop: it turns into other things, all the time getting scarier. Like I saw Melanie on the telly and then her picture thought itself into my bedroom and thought itself into a real little girl. I couldn't stop that.

She talks fast to get the words out. I know what she's doing. She does it if she's describing a bad dream when it's still night-time. She says the words quickly as if the dream is able to chase her out of sleep as long as it's dark outside. With the awake-dreams - the pictures that won't stop - she thinks she can set them going again if she puts them into words.

I've had pictures in my head too - ones that never stop running over. I don't tell her, of course. That would really scare her - that the pictures come for me - sometimes even on the same days and nights when they come for her.
In the weatherboard house Pam catches on to Serena’s fears after the first Melanie dreams, and she becomes good at keeping such news stories from her daughter.

Melanie is not the only child to disappear that year. No traces of her are found, but other children turn up dead, mutilated, raped – little girls are torn open and photographed and little boys wander about with their heads shaven and their eyes wild with heroin – an entire family of siblings disappears from a beach – and a father of international fame has his children taken away after his paedophilia is discovered by his children’s nanny.

Pam’s insomnia starts and never leaves after the time spent in Sydney. Her night terrors come only when she is awake. Her womb – that she imagines as empty as death – hurts for years after the baby is gone. She has visions, the worst of them making her clench her body until her muscles knot into cramps. She sees herself with a fully developed foetus lying – dead – inside her. She would sit smoking a cigarette in her bed, reminding herself that her baby was born alive. She had sent her somewhere safe with the best of intentions. When her older child stirred and called from her room, she would go to her and soothe her fear.
Pam hates the beach but Serena makes her go, crying and whining and stamping her feet until Pam marches her to the car, flinging a beach towel and a deckchair into the boot. One day in bright hot sunshine Serena learns to make the dreams and awake-dreams go away without her mother’s help.

She paddles and swims to the yellow patch out amid the waves. She hears Pam call. She climbs onto the sandbank and only then turns to her mother. The shore is far away. Pam has come to stand at the edge, hands on hips. Her feet must be getting wet and she is wearing her good shoes. Serena sits on the sandbank for as long as she wants. Pam’s mouth opens and closes, fish-like, but she cannot be heard out here. When Serena’s shoulders are pink with sunburn, she slips into the water. She lets herself sink, way over her head, and shuts her eyes. Under the water, she hears the sea in her ears and mimics the sound: hums and hums until she must burst through the surface and gasp for breath.

That is the secret of darkness. She must hum, hum loudly enough to dull the thud of her heartbeat and the voices spilling from the dreams and the noises made by the night. She pretends that the night is the sea. Nobody can see or hear her. Nobody can get her, not even Pam.
Serena left her balcony doors and went to the bathroom and sat on the toilet, moonlight flooding around her. The blue porcelain tiles above the bath glistened, the white shower curtain cool and soft. She wanted to bathe in this light.

She lowered herself into the bath and let it fill around her. When she pulled the shower curtain across, the fish printed on its fabric floated near her in the breeze from the window she had opened. She emptied a stream of rose bath lotion under the taps and moved her legs to disperse the fizzing bubbles.

-Serena? Joseph spoke at the crack of the door. - I was worried you mightn't be coping with the cat. Sorry I didn't catch you earlier.

His footsteps were hesitant, and he kept swallowing as he spoke. She swirled her toes in the bubbly water. She hardly knew him, she reminded herself. But the note, after the note, she trusted him. Maybe she wanted him.

-The shower curtain's pulled across. Come in.

She expected him to say no, but after a moment he entered, he moved in slowly to stand beside the bath. The shower curtain fish fluttered next to their reeds. A night bird
flew close to the open window. She turned her head towards him, and made out his frame, like a tall statue in a garden. He leaned against the hand basin; his chest was bare and he wore soft pants with a drawstring low on his hips.

He would leave in a second. She willed him to stay, talking; if she talked he might not leave. She decided to tell him about her mother’s visit.

As she described the little she knew of Natasha, Joe placed the sister on a mental map of Tasmania. He considered where Natasha’s island might be located among the islands Serena mentioned on air in the nights. He breathed in the rose fragrance. Does she even know she is broadcasting this far-flung archipelago?

When the bath cooled he left and she dried herself and walked down the passage. She passed his room, still hearing the light tones of his voice. She had not been in his room since the day
he had moved in. He kept his door closed. She went on to her bed.

He sat for a while, close to his sketches and mock-ups, thinking in the quietness. Of course she was not on the radio tonight, and he had no desire to switch it on.

In the Mallee he would listen to the national classical station, his mother's favourite. He had never been one for pop music, knew the tunes from discos at school, but never the lyrics, never the titles. The music Serena played was not what stopped him moving the dial from Classic Hits to Classical F.M. It was her. Not just her sound, her cadences: but the way she threaded her shifts together like a series of cryptic messages. He listened, just for a while, every time she was rostered on. He had not told her he listened. She would be embarrassed. Maybe she would think him strange. But he knew that come her next broadcast, he would wake himself and switch on the radio.

Besides, he was not sleeping well. Worrying over the recent past had him thrashing and sweating between the sheets.
The first promo was on air when she walked into the station early Monday afternoon.

**STATION PROMO**

**KEY NO:** NVP-1A

**DURATION:** 15 SECS

**TITLE:** NOSTALGIC VOICES TEASER

**SOUND COLLAGE OF MUSIC CUTS INCLUDING**

'MEMORIES', 'WHEN TIMES GO BY', 'SUMMER OF '69', SPLICED TOGETHER WITH SFX: MAKE SELECTION FROM CHURCH BELLS, BABY CRYING,

SCHOOL BELL, FAMOUS NEWS CUTS, EG:

ARMSTRONG'S FIRST WORDS ON MOON,

CHURCHILL'S WAR ANNOUNCEMENT.

**VOICE:** THE VOICES OF NOSTALGIA NEVER FADE.

**STAY TUNED FOR NOSTALGIC VOICES, A SPECTACULAR RADIO EVENT COMING SOON.**

**TAG:** RELAX AND REMINISCE WITH CLASSIC HITS.

The P.D. had chosen a fifteen-seconder, a teaser, to start the campaign. The details were about to be revealed at today's production meeting, due to begin in an hour.

Serena made her way to the production studio. The station was different during the day with the knots of people in
dressy office clothes, the chatty conversations in doorways and the frequent announcements over the PA system. The place even smelled different, with the perfumes and body odours and with the percolated coffee and the microwaved lunches in the tea room. Monday was the day when she was required to come into the station and attend the weekly meeting, complete paperwork, and voice any commercials assigned to her.

In the production studio a pile of copy waited in a tray, a week's worth put aside for the station's only female voice. She shuffled through the offerings; today she would put her voice behind an ice-cream parlour, two hair salons, five chemists, a paint store launching its Autumn Afternoons colour range, and a double-glazed window company wanting to experiment with a soft-sell. It was all part of her job, no big-namers' private deals with mates for a nobody mid-dawn announcer.

Thankfully the production engineer of the other night was not scheduled to record her today. Another engineer slid back and forth along the metal rails between the sound equipment. By the time the voice tracks were down and ready to be mixed with background music or jingles or sound effects, the production meeting had drawn near. She slipped into the conference room after the P.D. and took a seat near the door, half-tuned to his performance.

- These promos, the P.D. droned, are loaded with the works: special effects, character voices, sound bites, music.
Every savvy company out there will want to have their name in the promos.

Judging by the array of tapes and notes lined up around the table, it seemed to Serena that each announcer except her was ready for action. All she had was a portrait with a name in her thoughts.

Once the promo spiel was over, the jocks continued the show and tell. First the morning announcer whom everyone called the man with the golden voice placed his tape in the deck. His timeslot of nine until noon was nicknamed Women’s. Why, Serena thought, was he not assigned the female demographic for NOSTALGIC VOICES? His piece on a history of radio was thunderous with BBC-style news themes. The meeting went on, but at least she was not the only one with little to show. War Stories and School Days were still deep in the formative stages. She made her idea sound feasible. She would be going live to air with Family, and she reeled off almost enough details to satisfy the boss.

—I want to see something on paper by the end of the week, he said. —Fill in the gaps and get an intro together.

She went to the announcers’ lounge, glad to find it empty, and logged onto a computer. She clicked on the web browser and typed Isle of Skye.
As Serena does her sums, Pam opens the mail and fans through a booklet a distant relative has sent along with an invitation to a family reunion. In the booklet many names and dates are typed, a family tree, Pam calls it.

- That biddy in the portrait came from a place called the Isle of Skye, she tells Serena, showing her the placename on a page. - Cold old place that'd be.

- The Isle of Skye, Serena whispers.

She turns to the inside cover of her maths book and doodles the name. *The Isle of Skye.*

She waited for the search results, then looked at the short list of web-sites: a craft shop, a computer business, and two that sounded more interesting. She clicked on one and watched a set of images down-loading. This Scottish Tourism site offered a virtual tour of the island. She went from link to link, viewing the thumbnail images of seascapes, lochs and rock forms that she had seen during her own travels. She turned on the printer and made prints of a selection of the sea and rock images and of a picture of a tree bent low with its bare branches sweeping in one direction only half a metre from the ground.
These windswept trees are leftovers of warring times, she tells herself as she stands over a lone tree one day on Skye; the blood of clans is no longer shed but in the faces of the Skye dwellers I can see the constant battle against the elements.

The other web-site she visited was part of an antique map archive. She printed an old map of Skye and looked over the ragged coastline. She had walked on this island, but the details had been out of her mind for a while. She had travelled to many places on that overseas trip. Her visit to Skye was swift. Like many tourists to Scotland she had simply wanted to visit a place with family connections. At the time it had seemed to be a whim. That was until the last night, the blue night.

The Vikings called Skye, with its many peninsulas, the winged isle, she read from the map site.

She could see the bird-shape in the island of the antique map. The island was a bird in flight, shadowed on the sea. And in the curves and inlets she thought that she saw the body of a woman. Was it Scatha, Mother Death? Or Marian? Or another?
The power was out on Thursday's mid-dawn.

Thunder rattled the windows and the emergency generators kept her voice on the airwaves. She stood in the tea room, looking out at the lightning forking the sky, listening to Boy George singing 'Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?'

Pam had not bothered to call; it was Serena who had contacted her mother tonight to ask whether Natasha had agreed for Serena to go to Hobart and meet her on Saturday. Pam said that Natasha's answer had come through late this afternoon. You could have phoned, Serena said. Her mother was silent, wounded.

Serena's breath steamed the window. The first word between the sisters had been passed on like Chinese whispers.

No.

For the first time she considered that her sister's re-entry to the family may not be smooth and untroubled. Was she not a stranger? The thought grew before she could stop it.

Here is Natasha killing Pam at the airport. She slashes her with a long silver knife, patterning Pam's chest with fine scarification, a gleaming red bird of prey with finely feathered wings. The bird of prey embeds in the skin and passes through the body of the mother. Pam topples over, her torso in ribbons.
Serena watched men in a crane working with the powerlines below, lightning and thunder and rain all around.

She headed to the studio. On the panel desk lay the prints of the Skye map and the island scenes. She had to write the NOSTALGIC VOICES introduction before dawn, even with all that she had on her mind.

Her NOSTALGIC VOICES folder had thickened. A sheaf of notes filled it now. But making the segment live to air meant she could use no padding of sound effects or music unless she made it a complex live-production number that she would have to orchestrate alone. She had to give her segment spunk in other ways.

She had a go at writing an introduction.

Last century a young Scottish woman set off from her island-home for the colonies of Australia, after suffering the hardships that arose after the collapse of the highland clan systems. It's likely her emigration was forced by famine and by failures of agricultural industries, and she may have been enticed by the talk of gold to be found.

Serena scribbled over that, hearing its tone echoing the dullest of the history books.
She was out of notepaper. Feeling around among her pile of logs and books she touched soft leather. It was the cover of the red journal she had found last week.

She placed the red journal on top of the island map.

The broadcast went on and she sat with her hands on the controls. She spread the print-outs and looked again at the place her ancestor had left behind. Beside a glinting seascape, she read the caption: The sea is visible from everywhere on Skye.

On Skye you can look at the sea from anywhere, is the refrain of the locals. She rides her hired bicycle with the glimpse of blue or grey always in sight.

She had an idea. On the first blank page of the red journal she wrote with a pen that had Relax and Reminisce printed on the barrel. She was writing a beginning. Yet it read more like an ending, a goodbye to a part of a life.
My first goodbye is from the ridge, looking
down on the sea meeting the rocks that from
here look as small as pebbles.

I have viewed no sea other than the
narrow waters separating Skye from the
mainland and the sounds between Skye and
the outer isles. Today I am to begin my
travels, soon to board a steamer and to ride
strange seas for four months.

The wind sweeps my hair loose from its
bundle, sending in a gale to push me off the
island if I will not leave willingly. It need not
bother. I am keen to depart. Shielding my
face from stinging sea spray and the
whipping of my hair, for a time I study the
row of trees on a nearby hill. These trees
could not be said to be standing. At the
height of my waist, the trunks contort, for the
wind has bullied them to grow creeping and
cowering, keeping their ears close to the
ground.
Serena leafed through her books and print-outs, and let what she saw filter into the writing in the journal. As she worked she went back and crossed out pieces, added in new words, sentences, paragraphs, then moved on. Silly, she thought, to put so much work into the project. She was driven, though, by a feeling that she could not yet identify.

No mist prevents my view of the Cuillin peaks. My last memory of Skye will be of a cold, clear day with no hint of my home's guise of the isle of mist. I count this as good luck, as a mist could cause me to feel melancholy and to wish to linger.

If I were to stay, I could freeze to a brittle pinnacle. My demeanour has been brittle indeed in recent times. I was born too late to witness the battles where both my grandparents were killed, followed by the clearances of clanlands and then the failures of industries, such as the kelp, that were to keep the crofters alive. But I have witnessed
much death, starting with that of the potatoes.

Was this a diary? Would Marian have been able to read and write? Would she have known only Gaelic? Serena pondered the questions. The best name she could think of for what she was writing was a life, an imaginary life of Marian.

She looked again at the page before her. What she had written put her in mind of the tale she was told in a pub in Flodigarry, the village at the foot of the Quiraing rock forms on Skye's Trotternish Peninsula. She leafed through the sparsely filled first pages of the journal to find where she had written down the tale. The highland accent, the smell of heather beer on breath, came back to her and she remembered much of the story without needing to read the scribbled handwriting.

A cairn of rocks stood in the Quiraing, rarely sighted by anyone other than the most experienced or thrill seeking climbers. The story was that a man had disappeared while taking the air last
century. The man was missing for a number of seasons. Some said he had taken his own life for despair of the hardship following the clearances. Older folk spoke of fairies, of other unexplained disappearances throughout the Hebrides. The man's best friend paid no heed to the talk. He provided the best he could for the missing man's wife and bairn. Late in the day he would walk and search for a trace of the man. Eventually the missing man's family was awarded passage to Australia on the strength of the daughter being of marriageable age. More than a year passed after the man's disappearance, and then his friend came across a skeleton by a burn with dangerous surrounds. It appeared that the man had fallen to his death from the rocks. The ground was unstable and known for land slips. The man knew by the effects lying close to the bones that these were the remains of his old friend. To move the remains from the site would be folly. He lowered himself and buried his friend where he lay. For a long time afterwards he returned again and again and gradually built a cairn of stones to remember his friend. The man was famous for his efforts, the legend of his labour spreading throughout the Hebrides.
Thinking of the Quiraing story, Serena experimented, trying to write Marian from another perspective.

   The family works the narrow strip of field.
   The father heaves for breath as the foot-plough strikes rock, more rock. The weeks pass and he tells his wife and daughter they are sure to do well from the potatoes, it shall be the area’s finest crop. He meets the other men in the evenings and brings home talk of new tools and methods and ways of bettering the harvest. One morning his girl Marian cries out that snowdrops have fallen on the potatoes. This is not the season for snow. He drops to his knees at the edge of his tiny croft. The potatoes have turned to a stinking black mess that shines here and there with the white spot of disease.

   With the rotting of the potatoes, he begins to rot. He puts his head to the dirt, and will not rise until a kinsman is called for and comes to drag him to his feet.

*Phyto Infestans*, Serena thought. That was the disease of the potatoes. If the white spores could kill the spirit of a man, then they could lead to the shipping out of a wife and daughter. She moved to another page, wanting to write in the I-voice again.
My father has told me that roaring seas run in our veins. It is certain I am not to lay eyes on the local seawater again in my lifetime. I press on against the wind, edging down the steps cut into the ridge.

This migration to the colonies, taking leave of the greedy isle that has sucked my family’s breath for too long, was my suggestion. I have learned to read and write, you see, and to speak English as well as my own tongue. I have read of the colonies, of soil from where one can turn over rocks of gold with a plough. I made my pleas to the Highland and Island Emigration Scheme and my family’s situation has appealed to their judgment. I am strong and clever and of marriageable age. I thought it best not to mention that my mother says I shall never marry until I learn that headstrong is not a quality desirable in the wife of a decent man.
We have been selected and our passages
loaned.

On the last rocky step, level with the
water's edge, I sift sea foam through my
fingers, let it froth over my knuckles in a
series of glittering rings, and dare to see the
foam turn to gold and diamonds, the likes of
which I have never seen.

I hear a voice in the stretch of pale sea.
I will not be seen here again, the voice
declares, and then it farewells me.

It is true then. The sea has never lied
to me.

My mother shouts from the ridge. She
can barely be distinguished from the row of
stooped trees. I see her as another deeply
rooted tree that has bowed low to hold its
ground.

She sat with the end of the pen in her mouth, juggling
commercial cartridges and a cup of tea she had run out to get
between ad breaks. When she took up the journal again, she imagined how Marian's mother's back had grown bent.

The woman wades from the waist-deep water, laden with kelp. Another woman helps her to adjust the basket, hoisting its handles across her shoulders. She bends low, her child strapped to her chest, pulling her down while the kelp pushes from behind. She plants one foot in front of the other, keeps her balance only by moving on and not stopping to rest. The hide handles gnaw through her tunic and rub her body raw, cut into the tough skin that has been gouged and healed over many times before today.

She opened books and checked her details of the kelp, of the potato famine, of the Highland and Island Emigration Scheme. She crossed out pieces and wrote new sections. The writing had a jagged look about it. She liked that. She left gaps, making some sections dense and others sparse.

She returned to Marian.
My mother is dark in her mourning
garments, her flapping shawl a fringe of
leaves. Never shall I bend as she does. Nor
shall I allow her to shrink until she grovels
on the dirt. Her life will be better in the other
place. And when she keens for her family, I
will comfort her. I move quickly up the ridge.

– You’ll do no good looking into that
fool sea, she says in the old tongue.

But it is not the wind putting the
weeping into her eyes. She mutters her
farewells to each tree, rock form, burn and
house we pass.

Loved ones have told me I should get
on my knees and thank God for my mother
and her good intentions.

We come to our house, the thatching
grown nearly to the ground. The green
wooden chest banged together by my mother
is packed and shut.

– We’ll not live here with his ghost, she
says.

We make a last sweep of the earthen
floor. – A bitter, sad ghost is of no use.
My father has not been seen for a good many moons. His corpse has not been found, but people believe he has sinned, taken his life, not the first nor the last to take such a course in these regions. I see only the bare walls of a house. If I were aware of my father's ghost, I might never leave.

My mother walks to the door and spits.

— Remember, she says, the island is not to blame. I will not have you thinking ill of your home when we are gone. Here was never any famine but for a famine in the kindliness of people.

I disagree silently. The island is pushing us out, sick to the death of our struggles. I am content to leave and to seek a place that may not turn potatoes to death, fathers to air, and mothers to trees.

On boarding the steamer that will take us on to our port, I force myself to turn away from the shore, the peaks of Skye looming high as murderous waves at my back. I am gone
from there, yet my weeping is as relentless as my mother’s.

Serena breathed easier while the red journal lay open.

The journal she had rediscovered on the day when Pam told her news was now part of NOSTALGIC VOICES, and that set Serena thinking. The Marian story was far more than a work project.

She felt as though she had twisted around and caught sight of herself dressed in clothes she had never worn, placed in a landscape where she never been, and flanked by a family she had never known. Serena needed bearings. To direct the course, if only within her small book, of a significant family story, just could help her to relocate herself.

The phone flashed. She took a call from the power company. The storm had settled.

– Power’s back on in this part of town, she announced into the microphone.

At dawn she signed off and went to work in the announcers’ lounge. She typed up part of what she had written and put it in
presentation form for the P.D. It was not exactly mid-dawn material, but that was his problem. And Marian, the Marian she was creating, did have the feel of someone who knew the inside of a dark night. She expected her boss would be pleased. Just in case, she tried to sweeten his opinion by printing out a cover sheet with NOSTALGIC VOICES PROJECT in a bold font followed by four exclamation marks.

Later that morning while she slept, light glared through the balcony doors to lie across the red binding of the journal. The story to be told was emerging.

On Saturday, the woman with the basket of flowers was outside her doorway in the weather-house. Pam’s flight had been due to leave before daybreak. Serena was awake. She had plans for a trip of her own, a day trip to a place where she could put the recent family events into perspective. For that she could think of no better place than the oldest family landmark she knew.

She called the railway booking line.
Joe listened as Serena discussed train times on the telephone.

He had not been to the country since the day when he packed up his car and drove down the corrugated driveway without saying goodbye to his father. He had followed the highway to the city, the address of an interested employer in his wallet and the accommodation pages of the *Age* on the passenger seat. A drive to the bush today, even if Serena’s destination was a long way from his own family territory, could be what he needed. The risk was that Serena’s place would bring up feelings he wanted to settle like dust after a Mallee willy-willy, a whirlwind riling up the topsoil. But the thought of seeing eucalypts and country dirt made him put aside his doubts and go.

Soon she had her backpack in the boot of his car and was giving directions.

She had a stop to make before they left the city. Joe waited in the car while she moved through Pam’s house to the spare
room. She was to look at the document she remembered: the family tree that said Marian came from the Isle of Skye. Pam had been quiet when her daughter called last night, but she had agreed to leave a key for Serena.

She had been inside this house only a handful of times. It smelled of fresh paint. The spare room was set up for guests; this was a new house purchased off the plan and had no rooms once occupied by children. But Pam liked to collect old things. In the spare room with the crisp new comforter on the bed, a chest that was a century and a half old stood against a wall. This was the chest that Marian had brought from her island.

The lid opened soundlessly. She bent to sniff the interior, smelling dust of paper and wood, and the mustiness of lavender sachets. Sifting through the layers of family mementoes, she found the document she wanted.

She passed each page through her mother’s fax machine to make copies, then returned the papers to the chest.

The portrait of Marian in its oval frame with dulled fishbowl glass hung in the front foyer. The dark eyes looked straight at Serena, not letting her in any more than they ever had. She noticed that the hands were badly rendered. They had been etched in inks and were the pointy claws of a storybook witch. How close to the truth, she wondered, would be her own rendering of Marian?
Tash tore away the paper taped to her skin, flexed her right bicep, and swore when she saw that the henna paste was smeared. The smear, right over the peacock’s head, must have happened during the night. She had slept fast as usual. But he hassled her before she went to bed. Keeping her up and saying she had to cut down her late nights and clean up the mess in the place. Like he could talk. With a beer halfway to his mouth and a day’s worth of greasy dishes piled next to his beanbag. They were still sitting there now as she searched for a bowl to fill with vegetable oil. And now the head of the peacock had smeared. That had to be his fault for making her tired and unable to concentrate.

She squeezed a cotton ball, made sure it was well soaked with the vegetable oil and then scrubbed hard. Scouring away the dark glossy ridges of henna paste. Most of it shattered easily and came away in pieces on the cotton. The heart-shaped motif in the middle of the tail clung on. She scrubbed harder. The heart was stuck fast. She took the palette knife and scraped, chipping away the hardened paste bit by bit. The blade dug in too deep. A drop of blood beaded up, bright red amid the dull earth of the henna. She dabbed at the blood with a fresh cotton ball. Now she had wrecked the heart motif as
well as the head. With the thick black paste gone, the peacock’s image was left stained in brown on her skin. She had drawn it on herself yesterday. Squeezing the paste in slow lines from the tip of the metal cone. The vegetable oil set the colour. She bit down on the inside of her mouth when she looked at that blurry head and heart. Her nanny Sumi had taught her better.

You take care with mehndi, you keep one eye to the gods, she remembered Sumi saying in her sign language. Tash still knew every gesture of that language.

To bring the luck, to enhance the protective qualities of the henna, every stage of the preparation must be carried out with love. Sumi steeps the black tea. Presses the dried henna powder through muslin until it is finer than sifted flour. Blends the paste in the glass bowl held between her knees.

Tash started dressing while her skin absorbed the oil. Her outfit was hanging up clean and ironed on the end of her clothes rack instead of on the floor with the rest of her gear. She had picked up the plain dress and jacket from the Salvos. Her going-out stuff was all shoplifted, but since she was meeting her mother she had made an effort and spent a few
dollars from her dole. She scrubbed her nails. Washed her feet under the bath taps. Pulled the wide silver rings from her big toes. Found her Docs under the bed.

– The peacock, Sumi tells her, is a symbol of love, passion, luck and most importantly, protection.

Those peacocks painted on the girls in the big house never stopped what went down over the years, Tash thought. Not until the day the shit hit the fan. She sees the day again. The glass bowl drops from Sumi’s lap, smashing on the ground. The thick dark paste splatters over the legs in front of her.

– You got a real mother in the world, Sumi’s hands had told her before they waved goodbye. – She’s coming back for you.

It would be cool to tell Sumi she was about to meet the real mother. But Tash did not swallow any ideas about sending messages to people when you did not know where they were or even if they were dead or alive.

She put on long earrings to soften her hairstyle. When she tried to smooth her spiky hair she found a knot at the back. With a comb she tugged out a tiny burr. She thought of the sister. Be careful of her, she told herself. That too-close face
could stop Tash from concentrating on her plans. Make all go awry in no time. Before now, she had wondered about brothers and sisters. But she had put up with enough siblings over the years. Only her mother interested her.

Tash put on her jacket. She touched the right sleeve. Underneath, the peacock stood with its tail spread and preened.

Whatever her mother Pamela wanted to hear, she would be told. Except the truth. Tash was not going to risk scaring her off. She was brilliant at bullshitting. All her life she had come up with stories about her biological family, saying she was the daughter of a movie or rock star. For a few years she had people sucked in to think she was Nick Cave's love child. Now, no worries, she could do the opposite and make up an adoptive life to please her birth mother.

She checked her look in a long mirror.

—I'm your perfect daughter, she told the photo wedged into the mirror frame. —Your real blood daughter.

Serena left the car to open the gate of the family land and waved Joe onwards while she walked along the dirt track by herself. From here the homestead looked almost lived-in. She
peered beyond to the black trunks, ironbarks, at the back of the property.

By the time she reached the cracked garden path, Joe was running his hands over the walls of the house. He tapped at the mud between the logs. Vandals had riddled it with gunshot holes that along with weather and time were slowly killing the house.

Only two rooms were left intact, once the dining and the sitting rooms. She went around to where screens of latticed timber now long gone had once closed in a kitchen. Jars of preserved fruits, apricots and blood plums, had lined the kitchen shelves when she was a child. The dirt floor was split with weeds; it had not been swept for twenty years.

She crossed the floor to stand where a screen door had hung, and shaded her eyes to look at the kitchen garden.

A ring of dark purple lilies bloomed, rubbery stems standing tall from the overgrown beds. She walked over, sinking to her ankles in prickly grass. The lily petals looked like old tissue paper, yet when she touched one the texture was of cool skin. The red journal was inside her pack. She could pick a lily, maybe it was Marian's lily, and press it flat between the pages, scent the words with a flower that may have outlived the woman who planted it. But the ring of lilies was perfect. She left it alone.
This place, she thought, is swollen with the past, fat as bottled blood plums.

The wind clanged a cowbell next to her head. The bell was tarnished darkly, but it still hung from a branch of an apple tree with fruit gone sour. She picked up a strong stick and started hitting the bell, sounding it over the yellow dirt and the weedy paddocks, through the porous husk of the house.

The harder she hit, the more she felt that this was her place. Belonging to a place, to a family, surely could not be changed even by the appearance of a sister.

Pam dragged her overnight case from the baggage carousel. She tucked her briefcase – stuffed full of photographs – under one arm. In the ladies’ room she misted herself with perfume, thinking she would kill for a cigarette. She checked her hair and went to look for the café where she was to meet her daughter.

— You will be meeting a stranger, the adoption agency had told her. — Natasha may be hostile or withdrawn or she may not turn up.
Even with the bell's noise filling her ears, or maybe because of it, Serena could not stop from imagining the meeting between mother and daughter.

She sees the café where they meet as coloured red, a red room, red womb. The two come together, and it is hot inside, perhaps a fire burns behind a grate. A whooshing percolator drowns their voices and they have to raise them to hear one another. The place is small, with only a few tables. They sit at the back. But first they embrace. They may embrace.

Pam saw the face through a window, the face that could be her own youthful one. The young woman sat at a table inside a café, open-plan and bright. She was chewing on her fingernails as though she were starving.

Pam went inside. The young woman stood up.

Natasha tried to smile but it seemed she could not.

Pam moved close – without needing to think, she remembered later – and put one of her arms around Natasha's shoulders. When she had Natasha wrapped into herself, her
belly warmed. Her body knew this daughter. The agency was wrong. This was not a meeting between strangers.

All the way here she had told herself that the right words would come once she saw Natasha. But the words that did come were different from what she expected and were not what she would have thought was appropriate before this minute.

- I love you, she said.

Natasha looked away. - I need coffee, she said quietly.

Even with that being the only answer, Pam felt that her words had been the best ones to say.

By the time they were sitting down with coffee on a table between them, neither woman could keep her eyes off the other and the conversation moved thick and fast. The briefcase filled with the photos that Pam had bundled up to fill silences lay under the table.

Natasha could not take in enough of the similarities between mother and daughter, Pam noticed. She could see more than Natasha could from a single glance. In the angle of Natasha’s head – the tilt to the right shoulder – was a trace of Pam’s own mother, for instance. But she kept talk of the past to herself. Not that she would have minded talking about the past. While they spoke of their everyday lives, she had pictures flickering in her head – the pregnancy, the birth, the gaze of her baby girl through glass. She followed Natasha’s lead, and let the conversation skip lightly.
And why not, she had to ask herself. Her wish had been for her daughter to be adopted by a family who would love and protect her. Here she was – in one piece – dressed up neat and clean – a smile on her face. Today it was enough to see and touch her, to listen to her talking about the here and now.

Pam absorbed the spiky hair, the Doc Marten lace-ups, the fast-talking voice. She remembered herself – younger than Natasha – in the time before she was married. Her boyfriend, soon to be her husband, waits while she glues on false eyelashes, rolls up white stockings and teases her hair.

Early in the afternoon they walked arm in arm to Natasha's dented Citroen.

Pam sensed a locking together. She told herself that over her dead body would this new link ever be broken.

From the trees ahead of him a flock of screeching parrots scattered. Joe listened to the bell clanging and headed for the trees, the ironbarks she had mentioned during the drive. The trees were darker here, not the pale trunks of his mother's eucalypts. He leaned close to one, inspecting the crumbly black bark. It had come away in places, showing the deep red timber beneath. Black-red sap seeped from a crevice, running out of
the heartwood. He stood back and mentally framed a section of ironbark to remember.

All the while she whacked that bell.

With all the eyes of its tail the peacock looked out for Tash.

She drove Pam into Hobart and led her around town. Mount Wellington loomed over them. So far, so good, Tash thought. She was keeping the smile on her real mother's face. Pamela was perfect. She had expected that. She just had to show Pamela she was her perfect daughter.

When Pamela asked what Tash did for a job, the peacock strutted its stuff. She said she was a teacher for deaf kids. Made that up on the spot. It was not the worst lie she had ever told. After all, she did know sign language. She had been waiting forever to put on this show for her mother. She hated to think of the old days, but as they walked towards Salamanca Road the memory of one day from back then crept up.

She is at the farm where drought has broken the dirt and starved the cows to bones. Adoption day. The whole lot of the kids are lined up. Smiling and calling. Mouths open as widely
as baby birds'. Two carloads of people pull up and start picking over what they want. Tash hangs back. Mouth firmly closed. She knows even then who it is she needs.

Today Tash was the one with her mouth open and fixed in a smile. Yapping away. Scared to shut up in case the truth worked its way into a quiet second.

Seeing the mountain casting a shadow like a dirty look over her, she waited on a bench while Pamela went into a gallery in a sandstone building on Salamanca.

Pamela came out carrying a paper bag. From the bag she took a wrapped package and gave it to Tash. Tash said thank you. But whenever people gave her things it meant she owed them. Probably more than the gift was worth to her. A gift from her real mother could be different though. And whatever the worth of what was nestled inside the soft paper, she thought that it could not match what she owed Pamela for coming back.

She unwrapped the package and found a glass sculpture of an Antarctic seal.

- The man I bought it from blew the glass himself.

Tash lifted the seal up to the dim sunlight and looked at the tiny cracks in the glass. She carefully re-wrapped the gift. Hoping she would not drop it from her shaky hands. She put the package into her shoulder bag. She was going to set the
seal up high in her bedroom. Where no-one could get at it and where she would see it whenever she woke up.

Pamela opened the paper bag again. Lying in the bottom was another parcel of the same shape and size as the first one.

- That’s for your sister, Serena. I thought seals were right since you both live by the sea.

Tash fought to keep a steady look on her face. She could not manage to look Pamela in the eyes. People said that temper of hers caused the strife she had managed to find all her life. Gifts always meant trouble. Should have known that. She could not keep her old life out of today. It kept poking itself in every chance it saw. Back then a gift was always given right after she arrived at a place. They nearly always gave identical gifts to the lot of them. Tried to make out they were siblings. Family. Everyone except the suckers and the babies knew that was not true.

She pretended she was tired, and rubbed her eyes with her hands until she felt the mood settle. The rules were different now, she told herself. She had to learn bit by bit. Her real mother was not the same as the people she remembered. She turned to Pamela and felt the peacock shake its tail-feathers into place.

They walked to Pamela’s hotel.

- I’m doing up my house, Tash said, or else I’d love you to stay there.
She remembered her mobile phone, switched off in her fringed shoulder bag. Soon, she promised herself. She could make the call after dinner. She ignored the twinge inside.

Serena clanged the bell until she had a splinter in one hand.

She went to look for him, walking past the old cars that had sat like scuttled ships in the paddocks since before she was born. When the two of them met at the edge of the ironbark copse, they laughed at how she was breathless and sweaty from giving the bell such a whacking. They walked further into the bush.

Both stopped abruptly at a clearing of the ironbarks, a rise looped with scraggly grasses. Right ahead of the toes of their shoes a deep, wide pit fell ten metres, as though a huge bite had been taken from the soil. A fringe of grass hid its edges.

She knew about the mineshafts left from the gold rush days, but this was not a mineshaft. A story came back to her, of how Pam and the old people living in the house had warned her she was never to wander into the bush.
The old man speaks of the hole.

– Never walk off into the bush on your own. A long time ago, more than a million years, I’d reckon, a rock from outer space hit the dirt back there and made a mighty big hole. You fall in, you’ll be hurt bad, maybe you’ll die. You won’t be the first.

Now that nobody lived on the property, the grasses had grown long, leaving no warning. Only a rotten scrap of fabric tied to a shrub marked the edge of the hole.

They sat down and rested for a while. Joe took up a handful of quartz and chalk and arranged the stones in a path leading to the hole.

He found a reddish piece of chalk stone and on a pale slab of rock he sketched the outlines of a snake-like shape and filled its centre with heavy red marking. He told her about his mosaic.

She saw the chalk colour his fingers. He had never told her he could make a mosaic, had said only that he was doing landscaping work at the university. She leaned against her backpack; the padded cover of the red journal inside was a pillow at her back.
Pam gazed at Natasha sitting at a table in the hotel room, eating the complimentary chocolates and asking her first questions about the past. Natasha’s voice stayed light while she asked about her birth – how long the labour had lasted, if she had arrived on time, if she had cried or had needed to be slapped on her bottom.

Pam had the answers. But surely she had to explain about giving Natasha up. Explaining – that was what she had practised in the years of waiting.

She could keep talking for the rest of her life – and Natasha’s life too – and never run out of breath until she made her daughter understand why she had given her up and how she had regretted it. Pam had told all she could manage to Serena, but the way Pam saw it was that talking to Serena could be like facing a battlefield. Now what was the use, Pam thought, of upsetting Natasha when she had made no demands?

Still, she would ask, just once.

– Do you want to know why I put you up for adoption?

The first silence of the day set in, and Pam thought of the photos in the briefcase, brought for such a moment.

Natasha said nothing, just looked away as if maybe she had not heard.
Pam reached for the briefcase and rifled through the photos. Her favourite picture of her late husband came to the top of the pile and right then she wanted to introduce him – to bring in the rest of her family. She could still see him on that day – summer – the three of them in their shorts, Serena splashing in a wading pool.

He kneels beside the pool, his hands snapping like crocodile jaws and chasing Serena under the water. Pam points the camera – calls his name – catches his grin before he turns back to check on their little girl.

Natasha glanced at the picture. Then she took it into her hands and brought it close to her face, staring.

A knock sounded at the door. Natasha jumped up to answer it, giving back the photo. Pam put it away and shoved the briefcase against a wall. She could kick herself for being pushy. From the look on Natasha’s face, anyone could see she was not ready for pictures.

Natasha brought in the pizza they had ordered. Pam knew she ought to stop herself – but after they laughed about this being festive food for such a special occasion, she went ahead and blabbed about the birthday cakes she had made.
On the family land, sunshine outlined the leaves on the ironbarks. Lightning flashed overhead, and big ants zigzagged over the ground under strange yellow light. Birds settled noisily in the tree branches as the first drops of rain plopped around her. This kind of heavy rain would not let up in a hurry.

She unlocked the house and they went into the dining room, the rain pelting the roof as they sat on the bare wooden floor and talked. After a while she stood up and looked through a crack in a boarded-up window.

The red room café loomed in her head.

— My mother would have met Natasha by now.

Tash opened her mouth. Waited for something, anything, to babble out. Sumi had been right. Her real mother had thought of her for all those years. But this in-between stuff, the years between when she was born and now when they were together again, better to shut that out. She did not want to get Pamela’s back up, though. She had to give back something that would
satisfy her mother. Something about where Pamela wanted to think she had been.

- I remember this one birthday party. I must have been seven or eight. They made a cake. Chocolate. Like your cakes. We had place cards for all the guests and my mother wrote a place card for you. *Other Mummy*, she wrote on it. She said you would always be here even if I couldn't see you.

Tash waited for the smile. The teary eyes. She had done well. Not that it felt good. Lying had a different sensation to it now that her real mother was the one being lied too. No thrill. Only a heavy feeling. Loathsome, even. But Tash came up with answers to the questions that followed. Pamela could not help herself once she thought Tash had given her the go-ahead.

Yes, of course her adoptive family was great. They were supportive of her meeting Pamela. In fact they had asked her to pass on their love to her mother. They lived overseas now, she explained. And when Pamela asked, for a second her mind was blank and then the peacock opened its beak and spoke for her. India, it said.

- My adoptive father is a diplomat.

This was the first skerrick of truth in the last five minutes. She told herself to take time out.

The minute she mentioned having a shower to freshen up, Pamela was on her feet and pulling out towels and hotel body lotion.
In the bathroom Tash breathed deeply, thinking she could not let anything freak her out.

The photo of the father had been first. Even now she could feel him looking at her. He was like the sister, of course. And that meant he was like Tash’s child. One day she might tell Pamela, show her even, why that photo had stopped her in her tracks. For now she had to take more care.

She took her mobile phone from her shoulder bag, pressed the first memory button, then swore silently. Turned on the shower and pulled a chain to start the exhaust fan and block her voice from Pamela’s hearing. She spoke to her son. Settled him. Shushed. Sang just a little to him. She would be staying in the hotel tonight.

She put away the phone and hunted out her little silver tin. She hauled off the shoes without bothering about the laces and padded in her bare feet to a small window on the far wall. But the smell would get into her clothes. She took off the jacket, hung it on the back of the door, and dumped her dress on the tiles below. She opened the tin, withdrew a rollie, and flicked her lighter. Naked but for her underpants and the peacock, she took a drag and looked out the window. She could see the docks from here.

I’m carrying it off, she thought. The start of it had been like nothing. Anyone could make up shit about their job and their house. All day she had seen the big questions ready to
leap off Pamela’s tongue and now they had started coming out.
She thought of the story she told about the parents going to
India. Pictured a jet bound for India and filled it with all of the
bastards who had ever called themselves her parents, except for
her real parents, and had them screaming in their seats while
the jet burst into flames and plunged into a sea before it
reached anywhere. The first to die would be the bastard who
was from India and yet not from India. The diplomat. The self-
appointed father. The pederast. Rock spider.

At the thought of him, her childhood nanny materialised
in Tash’s head. Sumi. Now she had never called herself Tash’s
mother. She had been more mother to Tash than anyone else.
And she had kept the real mother alive. Sumi who had never
known Pamela, had not known her name to speak it, had kept
the Pamela close to Tash.

She breathed in the herby smoke and prepared herself for
more conversation. No matter how perfect Pamela seemed,
Tash was not going out there to tell the truth. She would go on
cocooning Pamela for as long as she thought it necessary. You
never could tell how people took to hearing the worst they could
be told about a situation. And she had not waited around for
her mother for this many years, hinging her hopes on this one
perfect woman, only to give the cracks a chance to show.

She stubbed out the rollie on the inside of the tin.
Rubbed her teeth with toothpaste from a tiny tube on the basin
and massaged the hotel body lotion into her arms and legs to make herself smell fresh. At least her hands had stopped shaking. Thanks to the mull. She put on the dress, touched the peacock and hid it under the jacket. She went to the shower and wet her hands, ran them over her hair, and turned off the taps.

Later, while Pamela made them coffee, Tash looked down at her bare feet and saw the grubby toenails, and on the side of one ankle a burn-scar. A coin of dark pink skin. The diplomat’s legacy: he had left his mark on her body like maybe he was some kind of flesh and blood father after all. She had forgotten the shoes. She tucked her feet under herself. Shaking her head at her carelessness.

Serena stood in this family house of hers, but now that Joe was inside all that he could see was an empty frame, the faintest memory of a home. He remembered his own family home, the sturdy bricks, the mother-love thick in the air, seeming to draw the walls close and snug around the family. Even the fauna in her hospice seemed to heal fast with her care.

He looked around this other house. He had met Serena’s mother once, and in the bathroom the other night he had heard
about the new sister. But when he looked at Serena she stood alone. He could not picture a family around her.

They should have left for the city by now. He could not make her leave, not while her eyes travelled over the beams and into the corners, not resting since she had arrived. If the broken-down house offered her any shelter while her mother was where she was, then he wanted her to stay.

– It’s too late to move on in this rain, he said. – We could stay the night.

At first she thought he meant staying in a motel. But he was looking around the room, seeing the mattresses left by her cousins for when they camped here, the dry firewood stacked on the hearth.

As soon as the thought was in her mind, she wanted to stay. She wanted to spend one night in her family’s house, rather than making the drive back to Melbourne in the dark, only to wait to hear about Natasha.

They checked the chimney and made a fire, and later Joe went into the town to buy takeaway. She lay out the mattresses, one on each side of the fireplace.
After dinner, he watched her. She was quiet, thinking of the mother and sister all the while she tried to make conversation with him. He wished he could summon his own mother to make a fuss of Serena and make her feel better. He decided to talk about his mother, the first time he had spoken a word of the whole business to anyone.

- My mother died a couple of months ago. We knew it was coming. Cancer. A long time eating her away, years. I stayed on the farm right through my twenties, only leaving when I needed to for study or for a job, a mosaic or a mural or a garden to landscape. She needed me. I started off in my own bedroom in the house, but then she got it into her head that a man of my age shouldn’t be living with his parents, no matter how close we had always been. She had my father and me knock up a cabin out by the animal sanctuary. I liked that bit of extra space. I thought I could live forever in the cabin; it had the best view I could imagine. On the horizon I could see the flamingo-pink of the salt lake. That pink lake was my ocean.
She saw him walking the flats.

Salt crystals shatter under his feet while she walks the foreshore of her own sea on a day when the water is as calm as a lake.

She inched closer to where he sat by the fire.

- My family home was not large, but it was strong enough to flex and expand.

- The end came. Quicker than I expected. I'd argued with my father the night before, fought over her natural remedies. He'd watched her work wonders on the animals and birds, but he dug in his heels when it came to her prescribing remedies for herself. She needed those herbs, those flowers, to make herself feel better. The sanctuary was closed down by then, and I think she had to care for herself if nobody or nothing else appeared to need her help. I tried to tell my father that, and he blustered like I'd never heard before, asked me why I didn't get going and leave him to care for his wife. I took off into town for a day, and that's when she died. She didn't even look that sick at the time. I didn't get to say goodbye, of course.

- As if I had to tell him why she needed the bush flowers. As if I should have argued with him when he was worried for
her life. I left after the funeral, though, left without saying goodbye to him either.

She listened. If she let her mother come close, then one day she would talk lovingly of Pam as Joe talked of his mother. She could have that, she told herself.

— My mosaic, Joe said. — The image is based on a snake, a serpent. It's the largest mosaic I've ever done, and the most important. Somehow I want to put everything into it: the people, the places: everything that matters.

After a long evening of talking, Serena watched his eyes blink into sleep. She had been awake for more than twenty-four hours but did not feel tired. She listened to the creaks of the house, the trickles of water from its spouts and drains.

The walls were bare now, yet she could mentally replace the family portraits one by one, starting with Marian's. She would put that above the fireplace and bring Marian back into
this room where once she may have sat and heard the rain on her roof.

Marian could fill the pages of the red journal, writing the family memories like compiling an heirloom recipe book, passing on the secrets of the moistness of orange cake, the thickness of pea soup. But instead this book could be consulted to find explanations for the darkness of Serena's hair, the texture of a ship's deck walked across between one home and another, the danger of the deep pit among the ironbarks.

Marian's existence in this house was within Serena's reach. She had started to learn that on a particular day on Skye. Back then she had not understood the implications; she had not started to write Marian's story.

She rides past a black-house, a traditional crofter's house, with a sign on its gate. The house is a museum that she is free to enter. She leaves the bike and walks to the stone hut with its thatched peat roof.

The top half of the black-house's door is lashed open. She peers inside. Dense smoke from a fireplace piles into a chimney. An elderly woman rocks on a chair at the hearth. The woman greets her, saying that she has sat down to warm herself. Serena goes in, but she finds herself stopped on the earthen floor, unable to move from the weight of familiarity.
She has been here. Not to Skye, nor to Scotland: she has been in this house.

She had crossed the floor to wind a music box, to disturb the quietness where the fire cracks like gunshots; her great grandmother watched from a fat chair; she said the music box was hers, sent over from Scotland when she was a girl.

Serena’s feet on the dirt, the fire in the shadows, the bent woman in a shawl: she can trace her way into her childhood. The black-house is the same size as the homestead in the goldfields. The furnishings, the box bed, the quilt, the lamps: they could have been transported from the Australian house as it was before it was left behind and pared to bones.

Tonight, there with Joseph in the ruins of Marian’s Australian house, Serena understood that moment of her past travels. She, her child-self, had sat on chairs and played with ornaments that once may have been Marian’s. That the emigrants had emulated the homes they left behind was not surprising, she thought. But the proximity of time disturbed her. The house she had known in her childhood must, back then, have barely changed in a hundred and fifty years. The story was different now, as nobody lived here, nobody to keep disintegration at bay.

A loose sheet of tin flapped outside.
She opened the door. The light was filmy. The storm clouds had cleared, and the rain had turned misty. She went out, meaning to stay close, to be gone for only a minute. But at the back of the house the ring of lilies, blood-dark, engorged, contrasted with the sky, reminding her of the Celtic brooch her mother owned, the unbroken ring of the cycles of life. She stepped inside the ring of lilies. She swayed, spun around, laughing softly to herself, and kept moving until she danced.

Joe saw her spinning and heard her laughter. Her shirt was soaked, transparent, the globes of her breasts and her erect nipples showing through the fabric. His penis swelled.

He would not go to her.

She was damaged, he thought. Like him. At least his pieces were still compacted, still pressed together in a whole. She was all over the place: he could hear the breakage in her shrill laughs, see the shatter in the way she danced in the mud. If he were to love her, he knew he would not hold himself together. He may not be able to fix that kind of detritus. He knew damage. You fixed it or left it alone, but you never made it worse. He let his penis settle.
The cold of the rain set her teeth chattering. She left the lilies. With the noise she had made, could he have woken? She pulled the fabric of her top away from her skin and ran softly to the front of the house. Peeping through a rifle hole, she saw him; he was asleep. His still form on the mattress gave her a lonely feeling. She knew that she must have looked lovely in the rain and the moonlight. And she liked the look of his body lying there. It would be easy to go in and cuddle him, her wet shirt against his fire-warmed chest, her icy nipples near his mouth.

She went inside and sat down to dry her hair. She spoke his name and waited, but he did not wake up. If she stroked his feet and he responded to her, she told herself she would go on. But he rolled over just then, put his back to her before her hand reached him. Even in his sleep, he seemed to urge her to let him have space.

She sat by the fire for a long time, the rainwater steaming from the shirt, surrounded by the roof and walls that had sheltered her family for more than a century.
Just before closing her eyes, Natasha reached across the gap between the room's two beds. She touched Pam's face with one hand, a clumsy touch, finger hooking into ear, jagged nail edge catching on hair.

Pam stayed awake – not wanting this first day to end. She lay on her right side and watched her younger daughter sleeping in her dress with the blankets pulled up to her chin.

Natasha's thin arm joined one bed to the other. Pam brought her daughter's hand to her lips and kissed the bitten-to-the-quick fingernails. She thought of the first moments at the airport when even her body had recognised Natasha.

She checked her watch at three a.m. and saw that Natasha's blankets had fallen away from her feet. Carefully she sat up and placed the tiny hand on the sheet where she could hold it again when she returned.

She went to the end of the bed. If she had not looked up to smile at the way the child-like arm stretched between the beds – maybe Pam would have seen the round pink scar on her daughter's ankle. In her office in Melbourne Pam had many a file describing just such a scar – often those scars turned up in the files of certain kinds of violent fatalities. She covered her daughter's feet, and returned to her bed, clasping the hand.
In the morning, out by the car, Serena showed Joe a piece of white quartz.

- I used to think gold was found in every piece of quartz, she said. - I would smash the stones to look for the vein of gold.

He took the quartz and put it on the ground and smashed down hard with a larger stone. The quartz broke into fragments with no hint of gold to be seen. She watched him sort through the pieces, pushing them back together, and thought how much this man liked a puzzle.

In the town she went to the cemetery alone while he sat in a coffee shop in the main street.

She put sprigs of ironbark from Marian's land in a jar at the head of her father's grave. She kissed the headstone and sat by the grave for a while.

Then she walked through the older section and found the double grave she knew was there. She had saved one sprig to leave on Marian's side of the grave as wide as a double bed. On
the headstone, Marian’s name came first and Dugald’s had been added years later. *Formerly of Scotland* was inscribed along the bottom edge of the stone.

A pelican swooped above, flying towards the lake that lay south of town, and she remembered where she had left Marian, about to board her ship.

She leafed through the set of copied pages from the wooden chest, finding the parts relating to Marian. The name of Marian’s ship was *Bride of the Sea*. Marian had voyaged out in 1854. The compiler of the document had included extracts from shipping reports. None was given for the *Bride of the Sea*. Serena sat on one end of Marian’s grave and took the red journal into her lap. She pieced together the next entry, taking details from several of the shipping reports. She wove them into Marian’s story: hens, hygiene, a grumpy Surgeon Superintendent, food provisions.

Six weeks at sea and now I must keep guard over our possessions at all times. Pilfering is rampant as some persons find their supplies wanting. Many have set out ill-prepared. I
sit on our chest during the day and at night I make my bed on its top.

Esther, a girl of my age, guards her own belongings, and we take turns, one protecting the goods while the other takes the air on the upper decks. Yesterday I spied an albatross soaring over the ship.

- We are like seabirds, I told Esther, protecting our nests, one bird at a time.

She nodded, *birds*, she mouthed. I am told she is mute, but I hear her uttering words in her sleep. She is no idiot, and is good company.

Only days after boarding, my mother collapsed, pale-faced, and ever since has been in the women’s hospital. Seasickness, they said at first. Every day I go to the hospital and tend her. Her flesh wears thin, and she is a large woman grown small and mean. I have meant to put a stop to the hunching of her bones, but it seems her body has curled further inwards since we left Skye.

Esther returns now, coming under with a scrubbed night bucket. It is my turn to go on deck.
Just as I poke my head through the hatch, the Surgeon-Superintendent passes with his attendants, including the schoolmistress who translates for him, English to Gaelic, Gaelic to English.

— Filthy Gaels, he says, a pleasant smile on his face, addressing a family taking exercise in the way of marching geese. The father raises a hand in greeting.

I know about the Surgeon, I have heard the Captain discussing his situation. A red hen approaches, claws clattering on the deck, as though summoned by a cue in my thoughts. Immediately a deckhand seizes the fowl and returns her to a pen.

The doctor, I have learned from my eavesdropping, is meant to dine as a first-class passenger. Yet this has proved impossible due to insufficient supplies. Barely ten dozen wretched and mangy fowl have been provided, and many of these are dying before the cooks can wring their necks. The Captain says that the officers and paying passengers cannot be expected to suffer for the sake for the Surgeon Superintendent. He
must take the same fare that we filthy Gaels eat: weevil-ridden flour and biscuit. I can safely diagnose the Surgeon’s temper as ill. I hear mutterings about his not being right for the medical requirements of an immigrant vessel. Thank God, I have heard the Captain say, that merely a handful on board can understand English and know what the doctor is saying. Of course I learned English at school along with most of those passengers of my age: we are in no doubt about the meanings of the Surgeon’s words.

I trail the Surgeon at a short distance. He stops by three sisters who have a length of grimy fabric in their hands. He instructs the schoolmistress to tell them they must not use their bed sheets for wiping eating utensils. He glares while she speaks, and the sisters lower their eyes. The tallest folds the sheet, hiding the heaviest stains. He does not know they washed their dishes in the drinking water: not enough room to do it anywhere else.

He disappears into the women’s hospital. I follow. The Surgeon is inspecting
sores on a small girl's torso, but he looks up,
and slides his gaze over me as I weave
between berths to reach my mother's side.

The older women passengers say the
females' hospital is the worst place for single
women, as the patients are wont to be
bothered by the crewmen. My mother tells
me she will be left alone as a widow still in
mourning. Every day I tidy her bed and help
her to wash. She is rusting. She stains her
garments and sheets red and brown.

- She tricked the emigration people, the
matron tells the schoolmistress one day while
I rub my mother's back to prevent sores.

- She would've known of this sickness
before embarking. Pretended to be well, and
now we've got to suffer with her stink and her
moaning.

My mother never moans. She will voice
not a single complaint during the voyage of
little under four months.

- It's the English cholera, the matron
had continued. - You can tell from the blood
in the stools.
A number of passengers are suffering from this sickness or from one of the others that causes the shit to run. We islanders and highlanders are in the poorest health. The Surgeon says this is due to our dirtiness. The schoolmistress passes, holding her nose as I strip away my mother’s soiled sheets.

I go to look at the choppy sea. The ship heaves. Giddy, I close my eyes, and see the *Bride of the Sea* with a bridal train of rusty shit streaming behind in its wake.

I am to find a husband in the colonies. I am told my destination will be populated with many men and few women. The men wait at the docks, looking to choose wives.

With my hands firmly grasping the rail, I glance around, think of places to hide, crossing the water again to return to Skye, leaving behind the husbands-in-waiting. But beneath my layers of clothing, all my scant garments worn at once to prevent theft, I know I am spindly. I owe my mother and myself the chance to be comfortable in our new homeland. And I do wish to see these men lined up and waiting for women.
An uncomfortable wetness, my second bleeding, is seeping into my undergarments while I cling all the tighter to that rail.

The first time the blood came I fled to the hospital, insisting the English cholera had infected me. My mother slapped me, her hit sharp in spite of her sickness.

— You will not be getting any type of cholera. What I've got, you can't catch. It's not cholera or any such rot. Hunger did this to me, and that's not contagious.

— What of my blood?

— It's good blood. It means you will have babies. In times past I bled like that, before I started going hungry too often. The bleeding stopped after my troubles with your birth. You won't be going hungry, and will bear many children.

The pains begin and I find myself short of breath. Before, when it never seemed possible, I would imagine voyaging across a vast sea. But now I feel I am in a trap, that the ship is a meat-safe, gauze-walled, adrift. I am unable to touch the sea. The voyage has
become unbearably long, and we are not halfway through yet.

Night comes. I have left Esther down below for hours. A man lurks near the hatch when I descend.

In the twilight the Surgeon Superintendent is not an unattractive man with his pipe smoke wafting about his whiskers.

Was menstruation okay to mention in a radio promotion, ideas of tampon company sponsorship aside? Probably not, she thought, but for now she left the journal entry as it had turned out. Changes could be made for the on-air version, but the journal version was hers to keep as she liked.

Another double grave caught her gaze as she stood up to leave, a grave of white marble worn down to resemble almond icing on a cake. This grave was small, a child-sized grave for two. Marian and Dugald’s surname was on the headstone. She went over to look. Johanna, aged thirteen, was engraved first, followed by Flora Margaret, aged nine. Children of Dugald and Marian Cameron, the rest of the inscription read. Only one date
of death was given, a January day in 1867. Two of Marian’s daughters had died on the same day.

Serena copied the details from the headstone into the back of the red journal. This bit of mystery would make good copy for NOSTALGIC VOICES.

Halfway back to Melbourne the radio came on after a burst of static when they drove into the range of the city stations. Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox were singing ‘Sisters’. After the weekend’s traversing of old family terrain, she thought she was ready for Natasha.
The flaking of the beige paint showed up in the day. The building had been constructed as a warehouse in the seventies, and the only new part of its exterior was the radio station's logo painted on a glossy billboard on the roof. The windows gleamed at the top level where the radio station was housed. Below, the windows were dusty and many were cracked. At street level half the shopfronts were papered over, for-lease notices and gig posters pasted around them. The narrow doorway leading in to the lifts and the stairwell was hard to find.

Inside, on the top floor, the carpet was new, royal blue. The floor plan had not changed over the years, with its narrow passages, shifting levels, and island-like central rooms with no windows.

One passage led to the on-air studios. In Studio One an elderly announcer worked the morning shift. Through the double-glazed window into the passage his lips could be seen moving, but the sound of his voice came from the speakers set into the opposite wall of the passage. He announced a cookbook give-away, then blew his nose while he counted down to the end of an ad break. In Studio Two, a technician in overalls unscrewed the top of the eight-track and pulled out a scribbly mass of wires.
The next studio was for production. The engineer twisted the heavy reels of the master tape, wound them back, his gaze intent on the digital counters.

At the microphone the station’s only female announcer stood, rehearsing a commercial from the pile on a table. It was Monday, and she had her usual stack of commercials to voice.

Jumbled sound clattered out of the speakers while he wound again, searching for the exact place to slit the brown tape. He spliced the cut edges together. The master tape was ready.

He signalled her with a raised finger and she put her mouth close to the microphone and read the copy, hands steady, not rustling the paper. After two takes she lay the script in the out-tray and picked up the next one. Each script was covered with a pink slip of paper annotated with instructions for her and for the engineer, requesting tone of voice, speed of delivery, special effects, music preferences. Here was copy for a service station. *They want to bring in the ladies,* a sales representative had noted on the pink slip: *make it warm and friendly.*

The engineer bantered with her, knowing how to loosen up a voice and get the work done. On they went until the out-tray was full. If either thought of the time they had been together in this studio in the station’s other life, night life, they showed no sign of it.
He was putting a saxophone melody under her voice as she left and followed the passage to her boss's office.

- Go ahead with the genealogy bit on Wednesday's mid-dawn, the P.D. said. - She'll be right on the night.

By the time she walked out of his office, the first notes of 'I Don't Like Mondays' were tinkling through the speakers dotted throughout the station.

If anyone were looking down through the well-washed windows of the station, they could have seen the tops of the heads of two women coming along the street, backtracking twice along the front of the building before they found the entrance. Their auburn hair glinted in the sun, one woman's hair flecked with grey.

Over one arm this older woman carried a paper bag, a gift bag, by its jute handles. Her other arm was linked through the younger woman's, whose free hand fiddled with the fabric of the mini skirt she wore over hipster pants. They went through the doorway, stepped into the lift, and pressed the button for the top floor. Relax and Reminisce was printed on a sticker beside the button. They listened to the music of the station's
broadcast through a tiny speaker as they travelled upwards in the lift.

The song about the schoolgirl with the gun went on, moved into the heavy crescendo of piano. Serena made her way to the announcers' lounge. The lounge was rimmed with desks and lockers and vinyl armchairs. Racks of CDs and music cartridges covered one wall. A Coke machine stood in a corner. Framed posters signed by rock stars were hung on the upper walls. She sat under Cliff Richard and massaged her head to ease the start of an ache from the pounding music. The screen saver on the computer in front of her throbbed with spiralling bands of colour until she moved the mouse and logged on. She flicked through a magazine while the web crawler located a site from where she could download material for tonight's air shift.

She sang softly along with the last chorus. The phone rang.

When she had hung up she was motionless for a second, then shook her head and stood up, knocking over her chair in her hurry to smooth her clothes. She opened the door and looked up the passage towards the reception area.
A secretary showed them the way. Pam’s and Natasha’s arms were still linked. Pam kissed her older daughter. Serena held out both her hands to Natasha, and leaned forward to kiss her. Natasha’s flinch was a tiny movement. The room fell quiet but for the piped-in broadcast, the announcer reporting a change in the weather.

Pam talked. She told Serena about the trip to Hobart. Natasha looked around the lounge, running her fingers over the music cartridges, making the softest of smirks as she read the titles. Pam’s eyes never left Natasha. When Pam spoke, Natasha was quick to smile.

This was it, Serena thought: the moment of meeting her sister.

She had had no idea that Natasha would come back with Pam from Tasmania, and no notice that the two of them would come to her workplace today. Take it as it comes, she told herself.

In person, Natasha buzzed with energy, with youth. This youth was about more than the difference of four years of age between the two sisters. It was the kind of youth, Serena supposed, that belonged to someone who must have lived a freer life than any life that Serena had known.
The gift from Hobart was from both of them, Pam said. Natasha picked up a *Rolling Stone* magazine. Serena unwrapped the glass Antarctic seal and put it beside the computer, right by Natasha.

Serena turned her back for a second, getting the three of them cans of soft drink from the machine. One by one the cans dropped, rattling.

The see-through seal eyes stared at Tash. Just like the sister. Prying. Pretending not to stare, but busting her neck to look at the family ring-in and see what she was about. Tash brought up her hand. Touching her bitten-down nails to her mouth. Snapping away a jagged scrap of cuticle. Her elbow caught the glass seal. Smashed it hard into the side of the computer. The head broke off. Now the thing was facing another way and could go ahead and stare at the sister instead.
Serena wrapped up the pieces; they would be easy to glue together, she said.

When the two of them left she watched them go down the passage and after a moment she followed. She stood at the reception doors with panels of frosted perspex, looking through the gap at the backs of her mother and sister. The older woman's arms encircled the narrow shoulders of the younger woman. She embraced her to her bosom just before the chime of the lift sounded.

Joseph edged the wide middle section with tiny fragments of clear glass shatter, pressing it into a thin line inside the black outline. He finished tiling the section in one day, laying each red shard into the framework. He varied the reds, put in vermilion and carmine and flame and fuschia and tangerine and scarlet.

When he stood close he found his toes were dabbling at the shores of a red sea.
STATION PROMO

KEY NO: NVP-2A

DURATION: 30 SECS

TITLE: NOSTALGIC VOICES - NOW

NOSTALGIC VOICES is here! Start phoning, faxing, e-mailing, or posting your entries for the NOSTALGIC VOICES competition NOW. Take a whirl through your memories and tell us what you think when you hear the words NOSTALGIC VOICES. Do you hear sounds from your schoolyard? A song that changed your life? Wise words from your father? Your wedding vows? A moment from a movie? A news announcement that turned the world upside down? We want to hear about your NOSTALGIC VOICES! To get your creative juices flowing, tune in daily to the personal NOSTALGIC VOICES segments of our very own announcers.

TAG: Relax and Reminisce with Classic Hits.

It was after midnight and Serena was on air.

You do not become sisters in a day, she told herself.

Nothing Natasha had done had been wrong, nothing she could put a finger on. She could think of plenty of reasons why Natasha had not exactly fallen over herself to be friendly, why in fact she had not shown a speck of interest in her sister. But she
had ways about her that did not gel with shyness or nerves, like how she looked at Pam, boring into her, and her walking around the lounge: you could call that walk of hers a saunter.

– Get over it, Serena said out loud.

But next it was Pam she was seeing. Since when did the mother she knew kiss and hug and link arms with people? It seemed Pam and Natasha had managed to become mother and daughter in little more than a day.

Now she had lost her place in the log, had to fumble through the pages and all the while the digital numbers were running closer to zero. She found the right track just in time, the theme to *Pulp Fiction*. All that she could see the second she let her mind wander was Pam and Natasha standing close, their same-colour skins melding into one where they touched.

Tash sat in the middle of the queen-size bed in the spare room with the doona bunched around her like the walls of a nest. But this was no longer a spare room. Not with Tash’s jewellery on the dresser and her photo of Pamela propped against the mirror, the sister smoothly folded underneath. She had even brought along her glass Antarctic seal. She looked at it, sparkling on top of an ancient wooden chest Pamela had tried
to tell her about. Her clothes were out of her case and hanging in the built-in wardrobe with the clean white sliding doors. The musk oil she used for perfume scented the room.

Elsewhere in the house it was Pamela’s perfume that Tash could smell all over the place.

At the airport her face is against her mother’s neck. The first whiff of the mother’s perfume is like stepping into a garden. If she believed in God it would be Eden, but she does not. This is the garden of mother.

Snoring moved through the house. Loud and deep and even. Entering every room with the in-breath and leaving again with the out-breath.

That snore was her real mother’s breath.

Pamela. She would never call her Pam. Everyone else called her that. The name Pamela was just for Tash to say.

She climbed out of the doona and pulled on socks. Careful now to hide the pink scar and to keep the peacock covered. She walked out of the bedroom, the sock-feet making no sound, and closed the door between the living areas and Pamela’s bedroom. She turned on a lamp and looked in the fridge. She would love a drink, Bundy maybe. Might take a
walk outside and smoke the last of the weed later. She grabbed two chocolate biscuits and ate them. Went to tilt a milk carton to her mouth and stopped when she saw her reflection in the kitchen window. She took a glass from one of Pamela’s eggplant-purple cupboards.

The dining room Pamela used for an office had plenty of pictures on the walls and on the shelves and tables. Tash had checked out the place and found the points of interest for herself. They did not include snapshots of Serena. Or the recent pictures of Pamela. Hardly any of them showed Pamela alone. She was always posed with friends and family. But what did interest Tash was that she could see only one or two that had Pamela and Serena together. What a waste, she thought. The daughter Pamela kept did not appreciate what she had. The sister was no big threat. She could tell that from the way Serena and Pamela froze up at the sight of one another.

One picture had stuck out the first time she came in here. It was a small wedding photo in a silver frame at the back of a display by the desk. She ran her finger over the top of the frame now. Not a trace of dust on it or on anything else in Pamela’s house. Her father’s face in this picture – she could not let herself look at that for too long. She would not be distracted from what she had to do.

She was going to make this house her own. Put herself into Pamela’s life until the day Pamela started to forget Tash
had not been around forever. Pamela would see plain as day. Tash was the one person she needed most in the world.

She went back for more biscuits. Had the munchies after the smoke she had sneaked earlier tonight. When she came back she sat in Pamela's desk chair.

The snoring went on. In and out. She leaned back in her mother's chair and put her feet on top of the desk next to a heap of folders. Her mother was going back to work tomorrow.

Pamela had worried about Tash taking time off from her own job, deciding at the last minute like that to go to Melbourne. My work's flexible, Tash had said. Real flexible, she was thinking.

Pamela sleeps in the hotel. Tash slips out and goes home at dawn. All in the cottage are sleeping. In her room she digs out her old suitcase of cardboard covered in vinyl that has carried around her stuff since she was a kid.

— This might be your last call, she tells the split brown vinyl when she snaps the clasps shut.

She goes to her child’s room.

— I won't be gone long, she mouths to his sleeping form.

— This is for us. You and me.

Lingering by the door of his room, she thinks of staying. Of giving away the crazy plans and sticking close to her child.
But his father will be here. He is not what most people would call a good man. Good for nothing, many would say. She knows him better than that. He is good for little. But he is a good father, so far. Then she has her girlfriends. Whatever she has lacked in family, she knows she has almost made up for with her close friends. The circle of women she trusts. They will watch over her son. Pamela had separated herself from one of her children at a crucial moment in the past. Now it is Tash’s crucial moment. And her absence will be short. She will be contact with her child. Every day. She can sing him to sleep every night over the phone if he needs her. He does not wake as she walks away now. But he senses her. She knows it. He is a good boy. Smart. Strong. His mother’s son. He will be all right.

She is real quiet, goes into his father’s room and takes money from his jeans. But by the time she heads for the front door he is up. Cracks the shits when he sees the suitcase. He stands in front of the door. Like he thinks nobody has ever tried to block her way before.

She took one more look at the wedding photo, saw the age-spots spoiling the colour. Mostly the past was a bad trip for her.
Unlike that bloody sister. Pamela had gone on about how
Serena loved history and shit like that. Tash had spotted her
backpack today, watched over by Cliff fucking Richard in the
cheesy radio station. Half a library of books she must lug
around in that bag.

She opened one of the folders. This stuff was good and
gory once she was into it. Some old bloke had been hit by a car
in front of a 7-11 and had his brains splattered over the
windscreen. She could picture that. People walking by spewing
into their Slurpies. She went onto the next one. A couple in
the bush was killed when a sand dune collapsed onto them.
The autopsy found their lungs full of sand.

Reading these was nearly as good as watching horror
flicks.

But then a certain face, darkly bruised, had to shove
itself into her head. Would not stay where she kept it. Tough
girls’ eyes turned to babies’ eyes. All of the girls holding back
screams. She shut them out quick smart.

Her sisters. All of her girlfriends had been like sisters.
Real sisters who never tried too hard. Not all pasted-on smiles
and clever, probing stares like Serena’s.

She held her breath. Let the sound of her mother’s
breathing fill her up. Her real life had started. She stacked the
folders, cleared away her crumbs, and went to sleep long and
deep in the middle of the bed in her room.
Serena opened the red journal and spread the thick pages like the doors to a room.

She wrote, talked into the mike, wrote again. She was working with no delay, no seven second buffer as was used for talk back programs or by inexperienced announcers or by the breakfast crew who were inclined to get carried away and drop an obscenity or a libellous joke. She had a delay in her own head, though, a long distance between her thoughts and her spoken words.

She managed to push Pam and Natasha out of her mind around the same time Marian pushed her mother from her thoughts.

The dark locks of my hair plop like greasy eels onto the deck.

Moments ago the Surgeon chose me for his demonstration of banishing lice. The Captain has had stern words with the
Surgeon, and we have this to thank for the Surgeon's manner this morning, getting near to friendly, one could say. The halfway point of the voyage has been passed, and at last this medical man is treating us more like passengers than prisoners.

I willed him to choose me. He searched our gathering all a-shiver on the deck. Most likely he looked to single out the most wretched of us, the individual who would justify his previous raving about our dirtiness. I waited for his gaze to fall upon me and I held it until he beckoned me forth and bade me to unwrap my head.

He watched me pulling the wraps free and letting my hair fall to my neck and shoulders. I imagine the look of it, heavy and gleaming, though not as clean as it could be. He would find no nit, no creep of wee legs between the strands. I have escaped the creatures by binding my hair with rags.

The Captain walks by. I see him take in the nature of the activity, he retreats as though he expects lice to chase him in the way of rats.
The Surgeon's fingers entered my hair.
This touching, I was not wont to expect. His voice lowered and the demonstration turned from a berating to a gentle explaining. He lifted the hair in parts and peered underneath at furrows of my scalp. His breath on my neck was not of an unpleasant odour. The deckling swayed before me, the knots and grains sliding and circling.

Soon his inspection was complete. I knew he could not have unearthed a single errant louse, as Esther had performed a more thorough yet less lingering inspection not an hour previously.

However the Surgeon was asking for shears. Matron passed them on with the solemnness to suit a dire surgical procedure. I could have leapt from the stool. I was no prisoner and would not be shorn by force like a lamb. But I found myself caring less for my vanity and for the long hair cherished by my father, than for my wish to have the man's hands on me a little longer. Hair grows back, yet I do not know if a man will wish to touch me again.
The tremor in his hands betrays him. He is not teaching a bold girl a lesson in modesty. He wishes to feel my hair coming away in his hands.

The sea air upon my bare neck is refreshing. My head is left with a prickling of fine fur.

He carries out a final sluicing that causes me to gasp. My head is pulled back over a bucket and cold water is poured over my scalp. Stinging spirits are applied, burning me, killing off the last of those invisible parasites. Satisfied murmurs arise from the older women. I will not flinch. My neck, like a chicken's, is in his hands. His flies are close to my face, and I wonder what kind of wicked spirit, perhaps one that slipped from the bottle he emptied on my head, coaxes my vision of myself tearing off the buttons of the flies with my teeth.

The forefinger of his left hand slips along the skin behind my left ear. This wet skin is icy, and his finger warm as a tongue. He releases me and commands the Matron to
continue with the shearing and disinfecting of all those who wish to rid themselves of lice.

My head feels cold as a plucked waterbird’s flesh.

So, I tell myself, and I must say it was without shame, the doctor has taken a liking to me.

He is not an old man, although he would have been wed now if he were seen as a good husband. I think he is making his way to the colonies with the intention of marrying and settling, for it is unlikely he would make this punishing voyage otherwise. I fear he will be disappointed when he sees the crowds of bidding men. But what if he were to choose a wife before the settled men had their chance to inspect the pickings?

His eyes are a fine shade of grey, a cloud-grey putting me in mind of certain afternoons on Skye.

I know he follows me. I should behave differently if my mother were not stowed away in the hospital. I push her from my
thoughts. The cramped quarters of this vessel bore me. I move my head around as would a fancy woman after having her tresses arranged in a parlour. Yet my tresses are gone and from the rear I must have the aspect of a lad.

The Bride moves ever closer to the port of husbands. I fear being caught in the crush, murdered as the men stomp over me to reach prettier faces. A man who speaks English, a man with the skills to make a good income, may be a useful type for a husband.

— Little mouse, he calls. I pretend to understand only the cajoling and not the tongue.

He takes my hand and guides me into the officers’ quarters. I am not afraid. I am strong and will bite and kick should the need arise. He has his own cabin, a tiny room where a jug and a bowl stand on a bench under a porthole. He picks up the jug and leaves me to sit on a padded chair. I marvel at such softness put into a hard chair. Soon he returns with the jug filled, and when he dabs my face the water is warm. Many weeks
have passed since I felt warm water. He
latches the door. Gently he presses my neck
so that my head inclines over the basin. He
proceeds to wash my shorn hair in the water.
The stinging spirits float away. It dawns
upon me that I have been cold, near to
freezing, throughout the voyage.

I was born in a cold climate, to live
under storm clouds and to walk on cold
ground close to the sea. Yet, for all my love
of the sea, I believe I was not meant to be
adrift. This cold of wind sweeping over
seawater and of waves breaking on decks,
differs from the cold of my home. The warm
water on my head, the steam wafting into my
nose and mouth, this is my first taste of my
destination. The doctor shows me a
premonition of my future of living and
breathing heat for long months of every year.
I choke and cough. I glimpse hot and dusty
land.

He waves away the steam. The
smothering feeling eases and the water
soothes. He rubs my scalp, trickles the water
over me with a soft cloth, and I am aware of another heat under my skirts.

His breath is short, and this is not due to the clouds of steam. He dries my head with a length of thick material, pats until not a soul should notice my hair is still wet long after the sluicing on deck.

He takes my shoulders and pulls me to my feet. I stand only to his chest. The Surgeon cocks his head to one side, a robin I would coax to feed from my hands. He knows I will not report him and have him thrown in the brig, I can read it in his manner. He unlatches the door and sits on his chair to watch me go.

Now she had created a love interest. She could tone down what she had written if it became too racy for the project.

She was critical. The voice in the writing sounded educated, confident. She knew it was probably not authentic. But she liked the voice. No, she decided, the voice would not be changed. Where the life of Marian was going interested her
more than historical truth. Every time she finished writing she would read over the pages and see what the journal had to tell. She had a sense of rubbing her nib over a hidden texture in the pages and revealing words that had been present forever.

She put her pen down in the centre of the journal and let her long print-out of trivia snippets unfurl across the floor of the studio.

Snakes, images of snakes, were scattered over Joseph's drafting table and overflowing onto the carpet. His sketchpad was blank, pushed aside like a pale epidermis shed by one of the snakes.

He needed ideas for the last segment, the major feature of the mosaic. Should the segment be based on the head of a mythical serpent?

Her voice came in, seamless between the tracks of music. He could hear a change in her. Opening the bottom drawer he reached in without needing to look for the bag with the slice of blue agate inside. He held it up while she spoke. Still the sea in the agate was shattered and the blue-tinged woman shivered. He lay the agate on top of his radio and the vibrations of
Serena's voice made it quiver and rattle and he had to move it, put it on his sketchpad.

She had drawn herself further away; he could hear it in the distance of her tone, in the nearly noiseless breathing between her words. The voice was without face or body.

His mother had always said he was good at helping things, even saving things. But saving any particular thing was not easy. Like finding his way into the patterns and rhythms of this mosaic, he had to get to feel for how to help. If he were not careful he could kill something before he cured it.

He switched off the radio, needing to think without the sound of her curling around him.

Islands, he thought. The final segment could be an island.

He rubbed the glassy surface of the blue agate. Then he put the agate into its soft paper bag, not noticing the rip he made in the paper.

A week passes.

The Surgeon meets my eyes over my mother's berth. Afterwards he waits with his cabin door open.
Eight bells ring out for the evening change of watch. I have left Esther alone a mite too long already. Her mind is not dull. When we have been on deck at the same time due to all passengers being asked to report for news, she has kept her eyes on me and has taken in the Surgeon's fidgeting when he draws near. Her tangled tongue saves me from answering questions, I can be thankful for that.

He has warmed the jug of water and filled his basin. The water swirls, a sea I take as made for myself. Sunken in this sea is a cake of pale soap. This time, it is I who latches the door. I approach the chair, but he waves me back. He removes his shirt and vest. Before me is the muscled torso of a man, his appearance unlike that of any village boy frolicking in a lochan at home.

He straddles the chair and leans forward, curved and vulnerable to any attack I might choose to make. The cabin lurches and I stumble. Milky drops splash over the basin's sides. Rough seas are forecast. With the din of screeching winds and lashing
waves around us, I might well be underwater: silent and unseen. With a look and cumbersome gestures he begs me to return his favour and wash his hair. He still thinks I cannot understand his tongue.

Out of my depth I may be, but it is his head that my hands grasp and plunge into the water.

I begin by running water over his head, and then I entangle my fingers in his hair. At the crown is a thinning patch and I take care to be gentle over this pink area. I reach down with one hand, up to my elbow in water the temperature of feverish skin, and grasp the chunk of soap. Never have I touched soap as fine and fragrant. Nearby I spy a pile of the soap lying in a torn wrapping of paper thin enough to see the pink of your fingers through. This is a gift from a woman. I lather my hands and rub the soap into his scalp. The soap's fragrance is of lilies. I have smelled lilies only once.

Now, in my new life, it seems I may wear the smell of lilies on my hands.
I press harder. I have washed many a hound. I know how to bring out a groan of pleasure with a scratching here, a long stroke there. The man is groaning under my hands. Shutting out the reddened face of my mother is much simpler now that I am old enough to marry and am able to make children. I rinse away the soap and let a line of the water course down his backbone. He thrusts back his head, seizes my chin with one hand. I pull away, unlatch the door and leave while the soapy water streams into his eyes. With a look worthy of a drowning dog, he beseeches me to come back, explains with his grunts and gestures that he only wishes for me to wash his back. Slowly I slide the latch back into place. I see no sponge or cloth. I am to use my hands. My palms slip over him and I am hardly able to know what is skin and what is water.

But I will not forget his chafing grab at my chin. If I am to make him my husband, I will not tolerate being handled roughly except when brutality may be my own desire.
The first night of NOSTALGIC VOICES had arrived. Serena played the opening promo and set the typed pages of her earliest Marian sequence on the panel before her.

- This is my contribution to NOSTALGIC VOICES. In the next weeks I will take you into the life of Marian Macleod Cameron, a young woman who migrated from Scotland’s Isle of Skye to a Victorian gold rush settlement. She was a real person, yet I am making up most of her story. The story is written as a journal, although I am not sure that the real Marian would or could have kept a journal.

She picked up the first page and began to read Marian’s seaside farewell to Skye.

Joseph listened, turning up the volume and drifting into the lounge room to stand among her sea pictures. None of the framed pictures was captioned. It was possible that one of these scenes was of the Isle of Skye. He walked from one frame to the next, his hearing tuned to the story set on an island that
just could connect together all of the other islands she had mentioned on air.

An old woman strode across the sand at a beach in Port Melbourne. Those two down further, the two girls with gingery hair, were lighting up the beach, the old woman thought. Together they could eclipse the Sunday noon sun.

Pity about the smoke pumping from the stacks behind them, out west where the refineries cross-hatched the sky.

One of the girls crunched along the sand in black shoes that from here had the look of old-lady clodhoppers. The clothes were fit for a ragamuffin, but that was how the young ones liked to dress these days. Though the other girl’s clothes were neat but for the way she had her long skirt tucked into the sides of her panties and for the bare feet. The one with the shoes kept pushing the other towards the water, where she would splash about and then step back onto the firm line of wet sand, laughing, shaking her feet and aiming to wet the other one with the droplets. The old woman shook her head at the thought of going barefoot on a city beach with syringes all over the place.
They drew closer and she saw the whiteness of the girl's bare feet. That skin tone went with the long linen skirt. She was no regular beach walker. Now the old woman had a better look, she could see that one was much older than the other. They were not two girls but obviously a mother and a daughter. They appeared to be the best of friends. Still, that kind of face that they shared stirred something in her that gave her the willies. She turned away from them, reached into her plastic bag, and in her gumboots she squelched to the rocky outcrop.

Tash picked up a velvety scrap of seaweed and made out she was going to tie it in Pamela's hair like it was a ribbon. Pamela weaved away from her, holding her nose from the smell. Tash followed her moves. Leaning in to kiss her mother's cheeks. Between her eyebrows. The fringe of her hair.

The beach was grotty, with the factories belching shit into the air, the waves dulled by pollution. But she was amazed that Pamela lived close to the beach and never came down, had never even stepped onto this sand before today. Pamela lived halfway between here and the city, if the city started at the new casino.
A few metres out in the water, an old woman with golden skin stood knee-deep. Birds all around her. Seagulls hovered over her head or settled on their bellies in the waves, and dark seabirds perched on the rocks. The woman had a butcher's knife with chunks of red meat stabbed onto the end. She tossed the meat to the birds and then stabbed the knife into a plastic bag and brought it out with more meat.

Her black dress was faded but the yellow gumboots were shiny and new. Her dark grey hair, the exact colour of the large seabirds now that Tash thought of it, was wound into a flat bun on the back of her head with a wide barette threaded through.

They walked on and made their way up to an ice-cream van at the roadside. While Pamela ordered, Tash looked back. The old woman put her in mind of some other time. Other place. Was it the knife with the meat? The dress? The birds? She shrugged to herself. She was probably thinking of the homeless oldies hanging around the Salamanca Market in Hobart.

The old woman swung around, cursing silently at the water splashing into the gumboots. One of the dark birds with wings spread out to dry, took flight. She waded out, fast as the water
would let her, emptying the last of the meat at the water’s edge. She left the squawking crowd behind and looked up and down the beach, trying to spot the two women.

Up over the sea wall they were standing. The man in the pink van was just passing their cones through his sliding window. She rushed up the sand, in a tizz about what she should do. She could not go right up to them, had to suss them out first. She heaved off the gumboots, put on her sandals, and hopped onto her bike. She was lucky. They were walking to wherever they were going. She kept her distance while they headed in the direction of the city, back-pedalling whenever she looked like getting too close. The road was busy enough to let her blend with the traffic, and besides, the two women were wrapped up in their ice-creams and in one another.

She could not believe she had not recognised the face right away. She was blessed with little, but one gift she did have was a keen memory for a face.

The house that the two women let themselves into would be worth a pretty penny. The older one, the mother, now had her skirt smoothed down and had dabbed her feet dry and put on shoes with heels. She fitted into this house as surely as the key she held fitted into its lock.

The old woman took note of the address without a blink of her eyes, then pedalled on, not about to do anything rash. She was bursting with the joy of it, though, grinning like a fool.
At the traffic lights a car with a P plate pulled up beside her and the boys inside made loopy signs next to their heads when they saw her.

Today was too hot for sleeping. Serena pulled off her top sheet and lay back. Lunch with her mother and sister had been in her plans for her Sunday. But yesterday when she had called to suggest it, Pam demurred. Her voice was slow, languid: they were tired after a long week, she said, so much to show and tell Natasha, no use making definite arrangements for Sunday, they would get in touch with her if they felt like going anywhere.

Serena reached for the red journal. She withdrew the sea-edged map of Skye from inside the front cover and held the map above her face. Tracing her way south, she imagined voyaging close to the equator, breathing in the close, damp heat of steerage. She watched Marian sneak onto the upper deck.

The night bells ring out.
The females and bairns are quiet, but for a moan or belch from one of the many to have taken sickly since we have sailed into the tropics. We have grown used to the rhythms of our vessel: the sounds and activities are as regular as the rising of the sun or moon. Even the sea’s moods fool us into thinking they have patterns that can be relied upon. But the stench, the closeness of barn animals to where we sleep, a stench made unbearable by the warmth and moisture of this climate, increases day by day.

I get up from my chest. Esther wakes. She grabs my arm, latches on to stop me from going above. No light seeps through the hatch tonight. I have not deliberately chosen a moonless night for what I have planned but perhaps a higher power turns a blind eye by giving me the cover of darkness. Or else the night heralds my fall into hell. I prise myself away from Esther and walk with arms outstretched. I pray not to trip over a berth or a bundle and wake somebody who will cry out to accuse me of night pilfering, or worse,
will guess the truth of where I am headed and why.

His door is open, the cabin empty. The officers and crew are making merry in the air of the night and I think to turn back, a maiden stumbling upon the antics of drunken men. But a piper pipes a tune my father would sing while he worked the potatoes, luring me to stay out under the sky. For weeks the Surgeon’s mood has been placid as tonight’s still sea. I hear his whistle, a strange ditty it seems he has made mine. I follow him, a game of chase and hiding, slipping from place to place to dodge the sailors milling about with flasks at their mouths. He walks as a night beast, eyes keen to see through the dark, feet wily on his path. He pulls me into a store.

The smell of hemp draws me down to perch on a coil of rope. The store is close in the heat. Curiously the noise of the Bride’s workings brings me to earth, removes me from the sea, as though the real Bride is captive in the bowels of the ship, forbidden to rest. I sweat until I want nothing more than
to throw off my flannel petticoat and my shift, to pull away my dark hose and stretch out a pair of fresh new legs.

I am sure he is to be my husband. He lifts my coarse gown as though it were silk and moves the hot flannel of the petticoat away from my legs, tugs and pulls, until I wear only the dark air. I tell myself it cannot be wrong to let him go on and unfasten his flies when we are soon to be wed.

Feverish in the heat, ill with the noise of the Bride who must be tired with the effort and sadness of her work, I move with the Surgeon. Our relations are set to music of wind and water and heartbeat and strains of highland pipes.

The pain is sweet.

Serena spread her hands, the fingers stained with the ink of the deflowering.

Once she had walked in secret through a night and had been the one to lose her virginity.
- You'll be back before twelve or else you won't go anywhere for the rest of the holiday.

    Pam waggles her forefinger close to Serena's face.

Serena's new friends start to move away, to go without her. She agrees to the curfew and runs to catch up with them.

    She does not know if she likes the bare-chested boy in football shorts. But when midnight draws close she lets him lead her to the tea-tree he calls his special one.

    The waves lap close to the tea-tree with the squashed-down hollow like a double mattress in the middle. Mondo Rock's 'Come, Said the Boy' plays on the tape deck he got for Christmas. She breathes in the smells of the sea, the sand, him. In the prickly foliage, she sweats where his thigh is against hers. She rolls onto her side to make her chest look fleshier where it is flat under the triangles of her bikini top. He pulls her pants to one side and yanks open the velcro fly of his footy shorts. He pushes and pulls at her. When he finishes his come dribbles over her legs and dries in sticky patches.

    She wades through the foamy shallows to the line of holiday houses. The beach cottage where she is staying is strung with fairy lights. Inside, Pam and the other adults count down to zero and then sing 'Auld Lang Syne'. Her curfew passes. Instead of going inside, she sits alone on the foreshore,
and she tells herself that now the new year begins, the old one
distant and powerless.

To think that she had believed she could have power over her
mother by choosing to do as she pleased.

Pam had the power: the power to exclude, to disconnect,
to distance. The phone calls that Serena had made in past
weeks, the efforts that she had made to visit Pam and Natasha
every couple of days: these had come to nothing. Her mother
and sister never called back. They made no visits to her. Few
invitations came her way. When she did meet them, she could
not miss the touches and looks passing between the two of
them, the mentions of walks and meals and outings that had
not included her.

Inside, she was heating up degree by degree, no matter
how strongly she tried to resist it. This was an old anger with
Pam, a new anger with Natasha, and the worst anger with
herself both for expecting too much and for putting up without
a protest or even a plaintive word. But, over the years, had she
not tested Pam too many times and made their bond fragile as a
molten thread?
The grains of sand sifted from the shoes and through Pam's fingers. It was not too late for lunch. She ought to phone Serena. But she was not going to pick up the phone. Instead she would spend the day with Natasha – greedy for more of her grins and her affection. Soon Natasha would have to go back to Hobart and their lives would return to normal even if they were never quite the same. If she sensed that Serena was being left out and that Natasha was not overwhelmed with warmth for her sister – she could not bring herself to speak up about it. Not yet. The truth was that Serena was like a lover grown tiresome when compared to a new, illicit beau. Pam would have to face up to her sooner or later – she knew that – but she could not yet bring herself to do it.

Pamela smiled at Tash, and Tash saw the love. The joy in Pamela’s face. She, Tash, had put that love and joy there.

But Pamela was thinking about Serena. No lunch today. No strained conversations. That suited Tash, but she was sorry for her mother. Mothering was not easy. Must be even harder when a mother and her kid did not connect. Now, Tash and Pamela connected, Tash knew that.
She watched the sand moving through her mother's fingers. The truth of Tash's life should sift, grain by grain, into this Melbourne house. She could start the flow today by telling one little bit of truth. The best bit.

I am your daughter, and I am also a mother, she could say. You are not only a mother but also a grandmother. Simple as that. But the words would not come out. Maybe she was shy. Tash had never been shy until now. Until Pamela had started making her feel like a kid, in a good way. Now that she thought of it, Tash felt like a daughter. A daughter loved by her mother. And the funny thing was that the more she felt like Pamela's daughter, the more she felt like her own child's mother.

Tash's child is born in the centre of a circle of women. His father is late for the birth, absent. Tash's girlfriends gather around, holding onto her hands, panting and screaming and chanting and cheering. She wonders later if the child possibly could have been born if she had been alone.

She looked again at Pamela, still playing with that sand. Tash made herself hold back. If she talked now, let out all of the emotion attached to what she could say about her son, then
next thing her whole life could be spilled out in front of Pamela. And maybe all of that truth would be too much for Pamela and that would be the end. Back to Hobart Tash would go, dragging her sad, bad truth along with her battered suitcase.

A day would come when they would talk. Not like girlfriends. Like a true mother and daughter. She would tell her that their lives were alike. Both had grown up without mothers. Both had relied on girlfriends to help them birth children.

After the birth of her son, when she is alone with him behind pink hospital curtains, she whispers thank you to the mother she has never known. During her long labour, when she was sick, vomiting with the pain, she learned something. Something that she reckons mothers must pass on to children. That cannot be told in words.

Mothers will always try to do the best for their children. Mothers, even the worst of mothers, do want the best for their children.

- I forgive you for giving me away, she tells her unknown mother. - I know you had your reasons.
Tash told herself that she was a better mother than she could have been, thanks to Pamela. But look at Pamela now. Deciding not to call Serena. Not to do the hard work. And look at me, Tash thought. Miles away from my own child. She could learn more about mothering right here, in this room. She could learn what not to do. She would never be as Pamela was with Serena. Never that far away from her child.

A wooden puppet swayed over a boy squatting on the spongy boards of the verandah of the house in Hobart where he lived. He clutched a blue tip-truck to his chest and followed a spider that crossed the boards and leapt down to the top step. His dirty bare toes were centimetres away from the pointed tail of the spider. At the gate he looked for the car parked two houses down. Another parking ticket was on the windscreen. He left it for his Dad to find. He would go sick, the boy said to himself. He stamped on the spider, squashed it flat like his Dad would have done. Maybe she would come back tomorrow and see the ticket. Or maybe she would wait for next month and turn up in time for his first day of school.

The wooden joints of the puppet creaked. He aimed, threw as hard as he could, harder than Shane Warne, and the
blue truck hit the puppet's head and came down to smash its plastic headlights on the verandah. He scooped the pieces into a heap like an ant hill and filled the tray of the tip truck with its own headlight pieces. He swung open the door and went to see what his Dad was watching on telly. Dad was flaked out, his beer pooling with the brown water of a bong on the carpet. The boy went to the park, not looking except for out of the corners of his eyes when he crossed the big road. They would hate that. But they were not there to see him.

The heavy timber bed did not look right in the freshly painted bedroom. Pamela had told her that the bed had been a wedding present.

It was the middle of the day and the middle of the week, and Tash lay spread-eagled in the middle of the bed.

They had probably fucked and conceived her in this bed. She took her chance to lie here and think of her real parents lying either side of her. She nearly wet the bed with imagining herself as a kid with two parents sleeping around her. Of course she never was a bed-wetter. They treated you like a dog with no house training if you did that in the places where she had been.
She stood up and opened the wardrobe. Slid it back and forth to see how smoothly it went, working right like everything else in the house. Pamela's office clothes were hung at one end, her jackets and skirts and tops. They were lined up according to shade. Blacks through colours through whites. She pulled out a winter coat and tried it on. It fitted as perfectly as she had reckoned. Now here was a sign that Pamela did slip up now and then. The coat had not been cleaned before being put away for the summer. Wadded-up tissues were in the pockets and that French perfume of hers wafted from the lapels. Tash sweated in the wool. It was like taking a bath in her mother. She left the coat on and went to the dressing table. Checked the brass clock. Pamela would be home before long.

Serena stepped over the wrought iron gate and walked up the pavers. Straight away she saw someone moving around in her mother's bedroom at the front of the house; she saw the winter coat and it puzzled her as to why her mother would be wearing a coat on a thirty-seven degree day.

She came up to the window, meaning to tap on the glass and have Pam let her in through the front door. When she saw
who was wearing the coat she leapt back, spiky leaves of
frangipani stabbing her in the head.

Opening a drawer, Tash touched the neatly folded silky
underwear in beiges and whites. She shut the drawer and
opened the one next to it. Pamela’s nighties were inside. Long
floral ones with embroidery around the necks. Feeling around
in the drawer she felt the shape of a box. She pulled out a
square metal tin covered with glued-on satin, the lid trimmed
with lace.

This was the box Pamela had talked about, only she had
said it was on top of a wardrobe. That must have been back in
her old house. Tash pulled open the lid and searched for what
Pamela had said was in the box. She pushed aside old cards
and funeral notices until she found the yellowed and streaked
birth certificate. The creases where it had been folded had
formed splits from being handled often. Her real name, Cindy,
was printed on the certificate. Awful name. Tash, the name she
had given herself, was her real name. But this piece of paper,
worn soft as the tissues in the pocket of Pamela’s coat, was
evidence. Here was the lacy box and the certificate, just as
Pamela had described the first day they met. She put back the
certificate, getting a feeling that Pamela would not be dragging it out again now that Tash was here.

She was about to tuck the box away when she saw a hospital wristband curled like a little worm in the bottom of the box. No first name was written on it, only the word *Baby* followed by Pamela's surname. The date of birth was Tash's own. She picked up the band. Held it in the palm of one hand, seeing how she could fit only two fingers inside the plastic circle.

In the hospital, Tash unwraps her baby boy. She takes off the cotton nightie and the singlet, the plastic snib and the nappy. Now all he wears is the rubber navel clip, identity bands on one wrist and one ankle, and a stray scrap of yellow vernix on his neck. She checks the identity bands. Yes, he is hers. Not even named yet. He is identified simply as B/O: Baby Of hers.

She could not leave the tiny band behind. She needed to have this proof of the link cuffing her and Pamela together.
The wristband was stolen then, for the second time.

Serena watched this sister of hers delve through their mother's things. She tried to see what Natasha took out of that box. Even after she had taken off the coat and hung it up, sweat shiny on her face, she still had the pale object in her hands; it was probably cash or an old piece of jewellery that she meant to steal. Serena had never even seen the inside of her mother's lace-trimmed box although years ago Pam would sometimes bring out cards or trinkets from the box and let Serena touch them.

She knew Pam would not listen if she told her. She leaned against her mother's brick wall. The image of the sister in the mother's coat was set in her mind next to the image of Pam pulling Natasha into her breasts.

She would not be the one to hurt Pam. She would leave Pam to work out Natasha's caper, whatever that caper could be.

I don't know what I'm seeing, she thought. I don't know her.
The red journal would take the family wherever it would, fracture by hairline fracture.

The fractures traced the strain beginning to appear in Serena's face and the fine scratch in her radio voice that often had her clearing her throat as though she had lost track of the direction of her thoughts.

MEMO
TO: ALL JOCKS
FROM Graeme Carp
RE: Nostalgic Voices Project: Responses

Congratulations on the wonderfully successful launch of the station's most exciting promotion, Nostalgic Voices!!!

I've collated a selection of listener responses to the first instalments. Pat yourselves on the backs.

Letter: I cried into my coffee while listening to the war stories. I lost my son in WW2. I have enclosed my own memories for the competition.

Phone call: Lovely music going to air with this new nostalgia contest. We have our dial locked into your frequency. Can I request a nostalgic song just for us?
Fax: Keep the vintage news clips coming, they are SENSATIONAL.

E-mail: I tune into mid-dawn every night. I'm hooked by Marian's diary. Please tell Serena that I like her style and that I'll be listening, wherever she takes the story.

Writing of the activities on the ship took her into deeper water, leaving the Skye that she had walked on, but not yet entering the goldfields house that she had been inside. Here at sea she had to imagine every detail. Soon she would bring Marian to land in the goldfields.

As the weeks passed, she had to flip back through the journal and type each sequence when the time came to put it to air. She liked writing on ahead, then going back to select the pieces to read on air.

Every couple of nights she checked her pigeon-hole to find the responses to her Marian story. More fan mail, the boss would write on the notes he attached. The dirty phone calls were the closest she had come to receiving fan mail in the past.

E-mail: Serena, I don't get why you don't write the story in more of an historical style. But you've drawn me in. I'll keep listening.
Letter: I've written about a migrant too, she was my mother and she came from Italy in the 60s. I'd like to hear Serena's opinion of what I've sent.

Fax: Every weeknight we listen to you on mid-dawn while we work. We love your show, and now it's even better with your story about the woman from the island. We turn up the radio and gather around, have a coffee break, when the segment's on.

E-mail: Sister, keep telling that tale.

With Marian's help she had tapped into a secret demographic of people who liked to listen to her.

Serena walked along Fitzroy Street, meaning to sit in a café and relax for a while. A small thin woman came out of a pharmacy and walked a few paces in front of her. The pale skin of her upper right arm was tattooed, and she wore a strappy black dress and Doc Martens. Her hair, with an embroidered cap pulled over it, was auburn. It was Natasha. Serena stood still, shocked for a second. Two weeks had gone by since the afternoon when she had seen her sister in the bedroom.

She caught up, touched her sister's wrist, and asked her to have a coffee. Natasha wrapped her arms around herself, hiding the tattoo. She said she was about to jump on a tram
and go back to Pamela’s.

— Please, Serena said. — I’d love to buy lunch for my sister.

That one word, sister, appeared to do it. Natasha looked straight into her eyes. She nodded slowly, still with her arms tightly around herself, one hand with those badly bitten nails covering the tattoo. They went into a café.

She should have resisted. But Serena drew her like a snake charmer into the café. Seduced her. Sisters: what was she doing falling for that line? The word in Serena’s smooth radio voice had made Tash greedy all of a sudden. She hugged herself close, trying to pull herself together. If she started wanting more than a mother, then she just might push her luck too far.

Serena remembered the scene through the bedroom window. A favourite saying of Pam’s came to her. *You or I have never had to walk a mile in her shoes.*
Today the silences between them were long. But at least Natasha had stopped trying to hide the tattoo. And it did not look real. It was a bird with a flared tail, a lyrebird perhaps, and was looking ragged and faded. She asked if it were fake.


Tash willed Serena to mind her own business. But as Serena kept looking – inspecting the bloody peacock – Tash tried to relax. Even about the peacock, she could make small talk. And keep the conversation from moving closer to herself. Closer than the bird on her skin.

Serena put down her fork.

– Henna, then? Did you do it yourself?

Natasha nodded and twisted her arm to check out the bird. It looked after her, she said, and explained how both henna and the symbol of the peacock had protective qualities. Put them together, and you had a double dose of protection.
Serena drank in the slim arm with its intricate henna
tattoo. She noticed the shape of the hand and of the fingers. In
the details, again she thought she recognised the Pam she had
glimpsed in that first photograph that she had seen of Tash, a
younger, freer, more complex Pam. Serena ached to move closer
to Natasha, to touch her glossy skin. Through her, she could
come to know Pam better than ever before. And she could find
a part of herself that had never had a chance to show itself, the
part that could have grown up free of Pam’s rules and
restrictions. And most of all, if given the chance, she could
come to know her sister, Natasha.

For the two of them to have a decent conversation was a
start, Serena told herself. But in fact she was talking to the
ragged peacock. After that first look in the street her sister
would give her no more than a sidelong glance. She decided to
take a chance.

- Would you do one of those for me? A peacock to protect
me?

Too far, Tash screamed inside her head. Too close. Where she
came from, friendships took time to come about. Foster homes.
Homes for the homeless. In those places, she had learned never
to be pushy, never to be smarmy. If bonds were meant to form between people, they would do it of their own accord. Wherever Serena had been, she had not learned these rules. She could have any reason for wanting Tash’s friendship. Maybe she wanted to get between Tash and Pamela. No way. Tash would not let her in.

— No, Natasha said. — I wouldn’t.

Looking hard now, Serena could see that beyond the physical features her sister did not look a bit like Pam.

— I do mehndi for friends only.

Natasha stood up. — I’ve got to go. She walked out.

Serena rested her elbows on the window ledge. She noticed that Natasha’s plate was so empty of food she may as well have picked it up and licked it.

Going home on the tram, she looked out and saw Natasha again, in Grey Street by the zebra crossing. She hardly felt a jolt watching her sister scoring from a guy with a mandolin strapped across his back. He looked around in a panic when she did not bother to hide the notes she passed to him. Serena turned away. She was headed home alone while this sister would make her way back to their mother’s house.
Up and down Serena paced the length of the flat, the lights not turned on, and her not aware of the dark.

Finally she pressed the button to illuminate her watch-face. She still had time.

A taxi drove her along Beaconsfield Parade, past the calm sea, the tide snug to the sea wall.

Pam answered the door in her dressing gown and scuffs, her toenails painted in two colours, alternating from one toe to the next. In the nail-polish, Serena saw evidence of the love that had begun to glow between Pam and Natasha. The brightness of that love could eclipse her if she did not find her voice.

Pam picked up on the mood of Serena the minute she turned on the front light and peered through the glass door panels to see who was ringing the bell at this time of night.

She came out and shut the door behind herself – ready to take whatever Serena dished out. The only surprise was that the rot had taken this long to set in.
Both were quiet at first - listening to Natasha’s footsteps on the polished floorboards inside - the clink of her washing the coffee cups in the kitchen.

Serena started. Pam had to strain her ears to hear the voice - nothing like the loud and clear talk she saved for the radio - saved for people she did not know. To bag her own sister, she came out with a voice sounding a lot like a whine from where Pam stood.

- Natasha and I have started out all wrong. If the three of us could talk about it now, we could work it out.

On she went, like she thought Pam had not noticed the two sisters had so far barely managed to look at one another. Serena could go on all night if she let her, but Pam had plenty to let loose right back at her. She grew sick of the whining in minutes and started talking over the top.

- I put every bit of my time into taking care of you. The thought of those twenty-one years - grabbing every hour of overtime I could - makes me feel real old. I packed away the grief for your father and for the daughter I gave up - all of that I pushed aside to save it from hurting you. I soothed myself with the thought that in years to come I would have both my daughters near me and that you would remember all I had done for you and would welcome your sister.

- I want to let her in, Serena said. - But I don’t feel in, myself.
- Until Natasha turned up, I hardly heard boo from you.
You've never gone out of your way to let me into your life.

The way she looks into me, Pam was thinking, like she's
got a right to know everything, even people's private thoughts,
like I have some almighty truth I'm hiding from her.

- How hard do you think it's been for Natasha to come
here? It's enough of an effort for her to get to know me, and she
may not be ready to cope with a sister into the bargain.

She should have known Serena would stick the knife
deeper. Next thing she was carrying on - bawling now - about
thieving and drugs, knowing as she did that the one thing her
mother hated was drugs. Nothing was missing from the house,
Pam told her - ready to slap her in a minute if she did not keep
her voice down out here in the street near to midnight. And as
for drugs, obviously she had forgotten what her mother did for a
job. Pam knew drugs, after typing thousands of reports about
the harm they did to people, and she saw no sign of drug use in
Natasha.

The front door opened a crack. Natasha asked if
everything was all right.

- Serena was just saying how nice it was to see you today.
She's on her way to work.

She led Serena to the street and waited while she hauled a
taxi. - Remember, she said, you or I have not had to walk a
mile in Natasha's shoes.
She clicked the taxi door shut beside Serena and walked back to Natasha, whose silhouette was outlined in the now wide-open doorway.

As the taxi drove away, she pictured Natasha, her hip resting against the house. In less than a month she had made it her house.

The right words flowed as the taxi took her through the night; in her head she had answers for all Pam had said and she was not afraid to shout out loud. She rolled down the window and tilted her face into the slipstream, thinking of how Pam had lied to Natasha about what was being said out in the front yard. Even now, with her second daughter returned, Pam could not keep lies out of her home.

The air was as hot as smouldering ash on her face. People were still swimming at the beaches as the taxi headed east to the radio station.
Hot weather songs, summer songs, were scheduled to keep the
listeners steaming all night.

The red journal glowed like a home-fire in front of her.
Marian's story, she thought, was the only part of her family life
that was not being pulled from under her.

The port of husbands is upon us.

Along the upper deck we single women
line up. The milling of crowds can be made
out in the distance as the Bride crosses a
great wide bay. Swift winds press us
landwards.

Biliousness overcomes me and I vomit
into a stony sea. Esther takes a firm hold of
me and keeps me from fainting on the
planks. I am barely well enough to stand,
whilst my mother has recovered her strength
since the first call of land ahoy. She stands
behind me, her sighs hot and dry at the back
of my bonnet.

My mother has worn her blackest
mourning garb for my benefit. I am a
disgrace. She has made that clear, a disgrace to her and my father and my homeland and to God. Yet she cannot deny my cleverness, I am sure. For since learning I am with child the Surgeon has pledged to marry me, and the banns are to be posted soon after we come ashore. The Captain flew into a fury at hearing the news and has told the Surgeon that never again shall he be contracted to an immigrant vessel on account of his poor behaviour. This suits me as I have no wish to take another such voyage in my lifetime even if it be as a Surgeon Superintendent’s wife. By way of apology to my family the Captain has paid a good sum of money. A fine outcome. Already I must be set to prosper with this money slipped into my hose to prevent theft and with a parcel of land, to be paid off when my new husband and I have settled. The land is in the goldfields, no less.

Lightning scythes the sky over the wee range of mountains near the port of Geelong. I have been brought up with thunder as my
lullaby on Skye. Yet thunder together with scorching waves of heat has not been in my experience until this day.

So the port of husbands is no myth. A crowd of men waits for the bounty of the 
*Bride* to disembark. If the women aboard hoped for fine gentlemen suitors then we have been fanciful. For in the crush, a fine shirt or a well-brushed hat shows up with few and far between. I see a motley lot of coarse and loud men gone too long without women in their houses. The hot sun has reddened their brows and necks to the like of raw meat. No man wants to leave the port today without a young woman washed up from the motherland at his side. Women who put on graces during the voyage are their village selves once again today. They are bawdry and gay, tussling with one another to catch the eye of a goldminer flashing a handful of tiny glittering nuggets or a farmer with a cart and strong horses.

Precious little attention comes my way other than guffaws when I lose my hastily downed biscuit and beef at the feet of the
men soon after taking my first steps on the new land. The hot air is not unlike harsh cloth being drawn through my nose and mouth. Even my mother takes to gasping and to fanning herself with the letter in her hands.

Here is a surprise. Esther with her soft hair and eyes of a skittering pony is offered many a handful of gold or an etching of land. But from her chattels she has taken a notice in ink and has pinned it to the yoke of her bodice. Betrothed, it reads, to Mr John Cameron of Brackletter, Scotland.

The Surgeon tells the three of us where to wait for the cart he has ordered. Soon the cart pulls up, and I clamber up with the help of Esther and my mother. From the cart I see large numbers of the men leaving, sure to be back with the arrival of the next ship. Many are paired off however, and while I wait for my own betrothed to finish his talk with the cart driver and come back to sit with us, I spot a few dresses I know, a bonnet of an odd colour I saw on the Bride.
I close my eyes and indulge in a moment of fantasy whereby the doctor and I find gold on our land.

A knot of sound amid the thunder causes me to open my eyes. The sound comes from Esther whom I have never heard make a sound other than in her sleep. She stares at the driver as he takes a wad from the Surgeon and raises his whip to urge his horses forth.

The Surgeon walks a few steps away from the cart and then breaks into a run, his shoulders cowered over to show his poor character. He makes a slight ripple through the crowds. Then he is gone, followed by my shouts and those of my mother.

The driver harries the horses into the rain that now pours down. At the dormitory where we are to stay until I claim my land and until Esther finds a domestic position, the driver hands me a scrap of tissue. This is the very tissue the lily-scented soaps were wrapped in, to add insult to his injuries to me, with only one word scrawled onto it. 

*Sorry.*
in later days I take this note to mean he was master of me all along, not fooled by my pretence at simpleness, of speaking no English and having no knowledge of writing or reading.

My mother beats the driver's shoulder with the letter she carries, howling at him in Gaelic while he shrugs and leers and smartly takes his leave. The letter she holds is an introduction to a private agency that may help us in settling. But what help may such an agency offer to a sullied unmarried lass and a sickly widow? I sink into the filth at the road's edge before she hauls me out telling me I will disgrace her no further.

In the dormitory our pallets leave little room between our bodies but at least the roof above us is high and the rocking of the sea will cease once we have land-legs. Neither my mother nor myself cares to look at the view from the windows or to enjoy taking the air that is fresh despite its hot temperature, for we both are crook to the gullet with the thought of the doctor's wretchedness.
Esther neatly pens me a note. She tells me of Mr John Cameron, a cousin of hers, and her sweetheart since they were children. He has a brother, she tells me, inking in her Gaelic that near to speaks aloud in a pretty tone. The brother is older. He intends to settle in the goldmining districts, to farm and to seek his fortunes in gold. The brothers are to arrive on the *Derry Castle* in four weeks time.

Indeed, the southern land put on quite a show for the *Bride* that morning. I recall it now as I ride towards my property, land that I am told has a dark forest of trees unlike the coastal trees of sickly yellow pallor. Now I am a married woman. I sit, with a low full moon of belly, beside my husband, Mr Dugald Cameron.

A dark web of roots tangles inside me, deeper than the child is who lies with barely a feeble flurrying to let me know it is alive.
Yet I am luckier than most females left in my condition by a scoundrel. Dugald Cameron has seen to that.

In the days before we were wed, Esther and I scrubbed our least worn gowns. The plainness of the gowns was lifted by the wearing of a head dress each, a wreath of orange blossom for fertility. I do not miss the black joke of my wearing such an item and nor is it missed by others. Esther brought the wreaths in her chest, a spare one packed lest one were ruined by parasites. Modest celebrations followed the signing of our wedding contracts, with the tocher offered by each bride's family and the terce offered by each groom for his bride's future widowhood set out before us. Guests from the dormitory and from the hotel where the brothers were accommodated gave us the foot-washing ritual, ambushing the four of us and rubbing our feet with grease and soot and cinders to set us on our paths together.

Esther rides behind me with John, and my mother sits by them, taken poorly once again. A dining table crafted by the brothers
on their voyage out is strapped behind my
mother. My new husband is no English
doctor, but rather a farm labourer and a
prospector of clan Cameron, kin of my
mother's father. Dugald Cameron appears a
good man, despite being near to twenty years
my elder. He tells me he will fend for the
child as one of his own and will toil to pay
back the loan on my land at the settlement of
Whroo. His brother John has arranged to
purchase adjacent land for himself and
Esther.

The news of the land's being dense with
woods worries my husband and brother-in-
law, and soon it will worry me. For now I
yearn to be closed in by the dark trees.

Joseph drew freehand, the books and papers pushed into a pile
on the carpet. Fragments of tile were scattered over the surface
of his sketchpad, and he moved between the fragments, lining
and shading. He worked every morning now in the hours before
dawn, his bedroom window flung wide open to let in the fresh
air. The music on the radio went straight out the window. Her voice was all he heard.

He thought of the finished parts of the mosaic, still roped off, too fragile to walk on yet, the students of the university passing along its sides as though on the banks of a sea.

His charcoal glided the length of a curving stroke led by her voice. He paused, charcoal tip on paper, and listened to the whisper of scratchiness. She was doing a good job of covering it, using her voice techniques, but he heard the scratchiness and loved it as he loved the flaws in mouth-blown glass.

Her research travelled from Skye and from emigration ships and onto the land where Marian had settled. She found books on the settlement of Whroo, once thriving, teeming with goldminers and settlers at the time when alluvial gold was found and some believed the region to be thick with riches. She widened her reading, looking for books and online resources that addressed households and manners, clothing and other artefacts. She searched for the textures of Marian’s new life. But Marian was not so easy to find as an entry in a table of contents. The details from books and web-sites were frippery compared to how
she felt when she opened the journal and saw Marian walk her own way.

Serena knew how it was to walk about Whroo. It was no longer a town. It was bush now, state forest, with a visitor centre for tourists. Many times she had strolled among the dark trunks and paused before the remaining foundations of buildings that were gone. She had seen the scattering of graves of the pioneers. Most of the ones with headstones were children’s graves. She had not been here when her ancestors picked their way among mine shafts and grog stalls, had never seen a crowd mill between the trees, never heard the shout of a prospector come to weigh in a nugget. But she knew the Whroo that had lived on after water filled the open-cut mine and drenched the hopes of those who wished to find gold.

Tash lingered in the confectionery aisle. Scratching at her prickly hair while she looked from dark to milk chocolates, soft centres to nuts. All the items on the list were laden into the plastic basket, the list on the back of an envelope flung on top of a loaf of bread.
In the fruit and vegetable department Sumi was bent over the citrus display, scrabbling through bags of oranges. She picked one up, twisted and turned it to inspect the fruit, put it down and went onto the next. She chose the fifth bag, snapped open the infant seat in the trolley and slung the net bag across the seat.

Tash moved through the checkout, glaring the assistant into silence as she stacked up close to twenty items at the eight-items-or-less register. The chocolates, milk with soft centres, were first to be passed over the scanner. She paid with a fifty-dollar note from a tattered purse.

A picture of the toothy face of Luna Park grinned out at her as she passed the newsagency down the street. She spun the postcard rack. Chose a card to send to Hobart. Soon she would bring her son to Melbourne and take him on the ferris wheel at Luna Park.

Through an empty space in the rack, she glimpsed the back of a woman's head. Steely grey hair wound into a flat bun. Skewered with the silver bar of a large tortoiseshell
barette. The woman turned and wandered in Tash’s direction, her attention on the Tattslotto tickets she held in her long-fingered, golden hands.

The Luna Park grin crumpled in Tash’s hands. She held tighter by the second.

The old woman saw her. Just before Tash turned and ran the hands spoke her name, fluttering like a pair of birds.

Tash knocked the postcard rack into a spin in her hurry to move. Behind her the scattering cards filled the air before falling around the old woman’s sandshoes. Tash reached the end of the shopping strip. Panting. Spluttering. She kept running.

Sumi followed, slower, the bag of oranges thumping against her legs until she thrust them up against one shoulder as though she were a nanny again and had a baby to burp.

The baby’s eyes are green as two slices of cucumber. The strong arms and legs beat and kick while the nanny massages her until she settles. She nestles the baby between the
shoulder and elbow on one side of her body, frees her hands to sing a lullaby.

At the house Tash fumbled for the keys, rushing, even though she had left the woman behind. She banged the door shut behind her and ripped off her shoes, her feet chafed and bleeding. Hiding by the drapes in Pamela's bedroom, she watched the street.

The old woman came, limping, dragging the oranges on the path, a stream of juice seeping from a broken orange at the bottom of the bag. Her hair had fallen loose on one side. The barette slipped lopsided to her neck.

The barette, Tash thought. How could she have forgotten the barette? When she was the one allowed to pull out the silver bar and let the black hair, sleek with sandalwood oil, unroll and drop to the middle of Sumi's back?

She lifts the weight of the hair. Crawls underneath to rest her cheek on Sumi's back. The blanket of hair falls over her. She pretends she, like her nanny, has no hearing. She sleeps with nothing to fear in the silence on a bed under a river.
Sumi stood at the wrought iron gate, heaving for breath. Her fingers rested lightly on top of the gate. Her face was deeply lined but the hands were strong and flexible and smooth as a girl's hands.

Tash curled up in the pleats of the drapes. Sumi had always known where to find her, how to coax her out with a spiralling sweet baked in her hot oven. This time a gate and the wall of a house stood between them.

Tash wept into her hands. She remembered how she had loved Sumi. How she had never let her out of her thoughts for any length of time. Before Pamela, she would have just about leapt into Sumi's arms. But not now. The timing is all wrong, Sumi, Tash thought.

Sumi looked around herself and bent to take a handful of oranges to fill her pockets. She left the net bag leaning against the fence and walked away with the palm of one hand pressed to the small of her back.

Once Sumi had been the closest she had to a mother. But she had no room for two mothers now. Especially when one could blow the other out of the water with what she knew.

Tash went into the kitchen and tossed back a cup of coffee.
The peacock with its smudged head had a look about it that set her nerves on edge, like it did not know where to put its loyalties.

In the bathroom she went through the cupboards under the vanity basin and behind the mirror, pulling a wad of cotton balls from a dish. She ran to the laundry. She would not rest until she dealt with this bird.

At the back of the tin cupboard beside the washing machine was an old bottle of hydrogen peroxide, the label eaten away to shreds. She poured some into a bowl. The fumes had her eyes watering in a second. She put the cotton balls into the bowl and ripped off her dress. Straight onto the faint brown image she dabbed the peroxide, forgetting to dilute it. She screamed out from the pain, turned on the laundry taps and splashed water over her upper body. She howled her head off. Telling herself it was due to the pain of the burn. Making herself go ahead and nuke the peacock. She put plenty of water in the bowl and started again, scouring the mehndi until the cotton ball fell apart. When she was left with only the blotchy red burn and a smear of henna like a nicotine stain, she gave up. The turncoat bird was dead.
The kitchen was at the back of the flat. The late afternoon sun would warm and soften the lino. Serena walked in bare feet to open the back door and look over the wooden steps to the patch of lawn and the palm cocooned in overgrown jasmine. She went back to the sink and stood close to him while they washed and dried the dishes with the door open to the evening.

He stood with his body half-turned to hers. Her small talk trailed off. He took each clean dish from her hands and dried it.

She held a china mixing bowl, dripping suds into the sink, at the moment when his gaze got to her. She let the bowl fall into the full sink, making the water overflow and run down the fronts of the cupboards to wet her feet. He hung the tea towel on a peg and reached out a hand to touch her neck.

He stroked, slow, gentle, until she began to sob.

She turned and tried to lean in to kiss his mouth. With both his hands on her shoulders, he held her at arms-length, massaging her around her neck, but not letting her fall into him. She cried for as long as it took to want to stop, stop for now. The scratch in her throat, like a fish hook was lodged in the tissue, stayed fast through the tears.

She rinsed the bowl and passed it to him to dry.
Pamela lay the net bag two thirds full of oranges on the kitchen bench.

The oranges bulged like eyes that had been watching and were now inside the house. Tash talked fast, saying they were out the front when she came home and that she had better put them back in case someone came back for them.

She was too sick to her stomach to share the chocolates she had bought for Pamela. And she saw a slight frown on Pamela's forehead when she read the shopping docket before putting it into her housekeeping file. Tash steadied her hands on the granite bench-top, sure her mother had noticed the gift of chocolates was bought with her own grocery money. Then there was the shopping. The bags strewn on the floor where Tash had dumped them hours ago. She choked over a laugh she forced out.

- I must be about to crack, she said. - Forgetting to put them away like that.

Pamela was different tonight.

- It's just work, she said. - A big case, an old case, is about to be reopened at work. It'll take everything out of me in the next week.
STATION PROMO

KEY NO: NVP-2A

DURATION: 15 SECS

TITLE: NOSTALGIC VOICES - REMINDER

THANKS FOR THE SWAGS OF NOSTALGIC VOICES
ENTRIES THAT ARE PILING IN. KEEP THAT DIAL
LOCKED ONTO CLASSIC HITS AND LISTEN FOR
WHEN WE PLAY SELECTIONS FROM YOUR
NOSTALGIC VOICES MEMORIES. WHO WILL BE THE
BIG WINNER OF THOSE FABULOUS NOSTALGIC
VOICES PRIZES?

TAG: RELAX AND REMINisce WITH CLASSIC HITS.

Tash lay low. She kept watch at Pamela’s bedroom window.
She did not see Sumi come again. But by the end of the first
afternoon the oranges were gone. A sick feeling lined her belly
like poison. She could not even bring herself to make calls on
the mobile. To leave trails. To blunder. The message bank
filled. Filled with her boy’s voice. Hour after hour, she put off
calling back. Knowing she was going to cave in at just a word
from him. She was close. Close to being able to go home to
him. Just a little longer.

The noise of Sumi's nearness was a high pitch of the kind to make a dog whimper and paw its ears. In her head she could hear the hands. They sounded like chainsaws. No longer the perfect daughter, she thought, more like a freak to stare at and pity. All this, after a minute or two of her old nanny's opening the throttle of her chainsaw.
Pam was at work, but her mind kept wandering from the case notes on her computer screen.

Nobody would ever hear her saying aloud that Natasha was not perfect. But the thought of how her other daughter’s face looked lately, pinched and downcast – bewildered, even – had started to get to Pam. Sooner or later she would have to make an effort to bring her daughters closer together, even if it were only for the sake of her own sanity.

And what Natasha said did not always wash – like how she claimed to have a good job and yet took time off week after week and was forever short of cash.

Pam closed down her computer and sank into her chair, rubbing the back of her neck. She could use a weekend alone to get her head around all that was happening. She also had to get cracking on this re-opened case.

She rang Serena’s number, a plan growing quickly as she waited for her to answer. If the plan came off then she might get her weekend and make a peace offering to Serena at the same time.

Nothing was simple with these daughters. Talk about each of them doing an about-face. Here she was suggesting the sisters take a weekend away together, her shout – not that she
would force it on them. She was flat out convincing Serena to
go anywhere with Natasha – took half an hour to get her to
think of a destination. Then she phoned Natasha – ready with
reassurances about how she did not have to go – and found her
raring to go wherever Serena wanted.

Just one last skerrick of effort, Serena thought.

If Natasha chose to be a cow the whole weekend, she
would drift off and enjoy the walking at Wilson’s Promontory.

Once, she knew, the Prom formed a land bridge between
the mainland and Tasmania.

To get out of the house, out of Sumi’s range. To pull herself
together. Tash was keen on the weekend trip right away. She
could ignore the sister. No problem. Even though Serena had
to suggest a hike, with the two of them camping in the one tiny
tent, didn’t she? But even that was better than blundering
around nearly giving her game away a hundred times a day.
The P.D. called into her studio just after midnight. He handed her an audio cassette.

- Do an air check, love. You know the drill – three monthly check of your performance. Besides, I want to hear one of these famous NOSTALGIC VOICES gigs of yours. The blokes’ noses are out of joint over a mid-dawner copping all the fan mail.

He made for the door. She put in the cassette, and he heard her trying to clear her throat before she spoke into the microphone.

The boss shook his head. The air check was a formality – was the poor chick the only one who did not get that mid-dawn was dead as far as station management was concerned? Automated mid-dawn, now that was the way for the station to go, and the general manager would not keep quiet about it for much longer.

Joe had hoped to catch her but she had left for her weekend away. On the carpet in the passage outside her bedroom door
he found a piece of paper. He studied the printed image of an old map, the reproduction of an antique. *Isle of Skye*, he read from the caption. This odd-looking, leggy island: that was where she had been heading towards in the nights. He put it away, safe, meaning to give it to her when she came home.

The loose planks wobbled under the threadbare carpet of the stairs. Sumi leaned one hand against the pink wall and large flakes came away, showing the brown leakage stains beneath. She went into her fourth floor room and put down the small brown paper bag.

At the bottom of the mahogany veneer wardrobe, the pudding bowl filled with dark paste sat in shadows. She reached in and picked it up, stirring the paste gently, and brought the bowl up near her face to smell the earthiness. She emptied the paper bag into the dip in the middle of the single bed. The new metal cone and the bag of cotton balls fell out. Mehndi was popular with the young ones who came to her Esplanade market stall on Sundays. But a while had passed since she had painted mehndi for herself.

She thought of India. The mehndi rites had fallen to her charge from the beginning. With her afflictions, she was never
to marry or to bear children. She spent days on a marriage design gliding over the fingers and palms and feet and breasts and back of each of her sisters in turn. Later she painted their bellies to celebrate the births of their children and then decorated the children themselves for their initiation ceremonies.

To feel the cool paste on the skin was to hear music through the pores, she thought. Depending on the design, she could hear any tone of bell or chime or string, even birdsong. Peacocks were the loudest images. Peacocks screamed.

Spreading her hands in front of her face, she saw the hands of a child from years ago, a little girl admiring her first gift of mehndi. Now Sumi was tempted to paint her own hands, to twist a flowering vine up and down and around her fingers and to spiral its stems over the backs of her hands. If there was a chance Tash had not recognised her the other day at the shops when she had turned and ran, then the painted hands would put her in mind of the nanny who talked to her of love and mothers in a language of hands.

She paints the tiny hands, one finger at a time, dots the joints with birds and animals. The little girl with bright hair raises her hands in front of green eyes, flutters her fingers and sees the animals come alive on her hands.
Serena kept the map of the trail unfolded as she walked. Ahead, her sister tramped swiftly with the plugs of her Walkman blocking her ears. The hum of her trance music leaked out and blended with birdcalls.

Lunch was eaten without a word passing between them, and soon afterwards they reached Oberon Bay and waded through the reedy Growlers' Creek to a deserted beach where the fine white sand squeaked under their feet. In five minutes Natasha had undressed and was plunging, naked, into the shallows. Serena watched her floating in the swells and turning to dive under the breakers.

She was surprised to see this edgy sister taking, dolphin-like, to the sea. Or, she asked herself, should that be shark-like? So water was Natasha's element as it was her sister's. Serena wondered why she had thought otherwise: Tasmania was no place for a person who did not like water.

She stripped to her bathers and waded out to stand waist-deep. Instantly Natasha swam into shore and sat with the waves foaming over her legs, the sand channelling around her backside. After a while, looking straight out to sea, she began to form signs with her hands.
Serena could not look away from the woman half-buried by the lapping sea. She was like a woman in a silent film, all eyes, eyebrows, hands and lips, the eyes blind to Serena, as though Natasha really were a figure on a screen.

With her signs Tash sang the lyrics to a song from Nick Cave's *Murder Ballads*, just a couple of lines, the chorus, before she remembered where she sat and who watched. She dropped her hands.

Sumi rested her hands in her lap, remembering.

Little Tash was the smallest of the diplomat's children, and the last of them. For Sumi, she was really the only one, for she came after India, after the diplomat moved on from the embassy. It was natural, Sumi thought, for that little girl to have been her favourite. Everyone had favourites, even parents.
She is employed as a maid long before she migrates to Australia and becomes the nanny.

The embassy house in India is a sprawling white spider held aloft by its spindly verandah posts, she tells herself, straightening her maid’s cap and making her way from the servants’ quarters to the large house. The little house then, where she sleeps, must be a fly in the spider’s web.

She strips the beds of the children. After the sheets are scrubbed Sumi goes to the scullery and washes the dishes. He must be a kind man, she tells herself. The diplomat has filled his white house with children discarded by other people. She has heard talk of his international fame as a great humanitarian. Many years ago he came here to India with the first of his adopted children. He is as tall as the Christmas tree with plastic pine and foam snow that he erects in the front sitting room every December. And he is bony as the branches, his limbs long and dark in his suits. His leather soled shoes slide gently over his plush rugs.

In India she only sees the diplomat wearing charcoal silk suits and leather shoes. But after India little Tash is to enter his household and will describe a different outfit.

—You are a hard worker, Sumi’s father tells her.—People see the good in a helper who can neither hear nor speak aloud.

She is honoured, she tells her father, to work in the diplomat’s house of children.
The day comes when the diplomat prepares to leave India. That is the way of the white house: people come and go. His servants assemble on the lawn that he has used too much water to keep green. In Australia, he is to take up an honorary position, he explains. Later the servants file back to their duties, but he raises his large flat hand in front of Sumi and bids her to wait. She watches the children’s young nanny step up beside the diplomat and pull a new fan of bright red and green feathers from her tunic, a fan that ruffles her hair when she flutters it before her face. The diplomat speaks, looking into Sumi’s eyes until she blushes. He wishes her to come to Australia. She sees the words on his thin lips among white flecks of spit. But she does not understand. She is one maid among ten. Later in the day he summons her father to the embassy, has him picked up by the same chauffeur who drives his children to school. Together they drink the tea that Sumi serves, and through a window she watches her father share tea with the diplomat. By nightfall all is arranged. She is to migrate to Australia. She is to fly in a jumbo jet. She will be paid well enough to allow her to send money home.

In the last days she guides her eldest niece’s hand onto the cone and oversees her tracing of a sacred image onto the skin of an orange, practising to take over the family mehndi rites. Sumi does not imagine that this afternoon will be the last time she passes on her skills to a blood relative, she is not to
know that never again will she lay eyes on her parents or her sisters.

Her life in Australia begins with a wedding.

The bride refuses to have her pale skin painted for luck and prosperity. She wants only yards and yards of white satin and lace, a train to reach from one end of the church aisle to the other. The bride is the diplomat’s former nanny, she of the red and green feathered fan. She faces him at the altar and he casts back her veil and kisses her mouth, kisses too openly and deeply, Sumi thinks, for a place of worship and before pews where his children sit. She looks back along the gleaming satin train, but the rest of the church is empty. She had expected that this famous man would have a grander wedding and could fill a church with loved ones. Instead he is joined only by his new wife, and his servant, and the eight children remaining after many others have grown up and left his household.

His wedding gift to his new wife is a newborn girl.

The child is brought to the doors of the church by a smiling social worker. The diplomat rains pink rose petals from his bride’s bouquet onto the tiny face of the baby girl. The wife’s sobbing and her puckered mouth: later when she witnesses the damage that the diplomat does to the baby girl, Sumi will think these were clues that she should have heeded.

The wife has a gold ring on her finger. She will no longer be his nanny. But he has made his plans. He looks for the
maid who neither hears nor speaks, the maid he has brought here to be the new nanny. He beckons with one long curled finger for Sumi to come forward.

The trance music buzzed like a fat blowfly around Natasha's head. Late in the afternoon, the sisters walked to a campsite by a creek.

Serena breathed in the salty air. At least her voice was soothed after a day of not speaking, she thought. Her sound on air was becoming a worry. The quality of her work had mattered less when she was treating the mid-dawn job as something she could take or leave, a path to a better job. The NOSTALGIC VOICES project had changed her mind. Marian made the difference. And she missed Marian already. Surely she had time to take a moment to spend with the red journal.

She sat back against a tree and found her place in the pages. Marian was about to give birth.
The baby girl lies in a carry basket of quilted cloth with creamy wedding ribbons tied in bows around the handles. Sumi’s strong hands squash the fabric of the handles when the diplomat passes her the basket. The other children gather around to look at the baby while the diplomat comforts the distraught wife under a tree with heavy pods drooping towards the dirt. The baby squalls, her fists beating at her face. She is healthy, with a good layering of infant blubber to keep her warm. Between her hands and her wrists the flesh creases in lines like bracelets.

The family travels home in two limousines, the first for the newlyweds and the second for the children and their new nanny.

The Australian home is much smaller than the embassy house. Sumi goes to her tiny room with the larger room attached, the room that he has had painted in pale tones and has told her is part of a wedding surprise. In the face of the baby in the basket with the ribbons, rose petals around her head, Sumi sees the image of a dead child lain out in a coffin.

— The wedding surprise, she says silently.

For the first time, tonight she thinks of the mothers of his adopted children. Always he has spoken of discarded children, abandoned, homeless. Tonight she starts to question.
The baby finds the nipple of the right breast and sucks hard and fast. Sumi has had no lovers, has never had her breasts kissed by anyone. She watches the baby girl seeking milk. No milk comes that night, and Sumi is forced to try using the formula in the tins he has had delivered to the kitchen. But the baby refuses the bottle. In the morning she tries again, she thinks of the woman who gave birth to this infant and silently tells her she will nourish her baby girl. She refuses to think the mother could be a person who does not care, even someone no longer living. For the mother, Sumi persists, trying the nipples in the mouth. Slowly over the days and nights Sumi begins to feel the pain of the milk coming down, the milk she knew she must have. On the fourth night, late, Sumi suckles the baby girl, who drinks and drinks. The fists still and the green eyes open.

Esther loosens my wraps and on my back I enter my new land with a hot blue lid of sky. This land is indeed thick with forest but we
exclaim over the thin shade offered by the branches.

The men have hardly put up canvas between trunks to shelter us when the birth pains begin. I am made as comfortable as can be expected with my back braced against the top of the sturdy table the brothers have built for us to eat from. Tonight all will eat from basins in their laps while a child prepares to be born on the table. I lie on piles of tartans and plaids hastily dragged from the bundles on the cart before the driver makes off for the diggings. The heat does not ease even when the sun goes down and a noise of whirring insects starts up from the ground. Great ants with bodies of blood-red leap about and give bites sharp as a burn from a fire. Esther guards me from these beasts but in the pain of their bites I find a moment not to think of the cramping in my belly.

My mother has herself upright against one of the trees with soft black bark. I see by her pallor that she has taken a turn for the worse. She calls advice to Esther but will not
come closer and I fear she suffers from a fever that may be more than hunger. Perhaps that English cholera she does not believe in has come ashore with her.

Dugald and John Cameron take to looking over the land I have been granted. From afar I hear them kicking the yellow stones they find on the ground and the sparkling white pieces they call quartz. Word are spoken in low voices. To clear the strong trees and make space for a hut to be built and for potatoes to be planted, seeds to be sown, many weeks of hard labour will be needed.

When the night sky opens over us, I am put in mind of the summer nights on the Isle of Skye when the light of the north turns the sky into one with the sea. Yet here in the colony the sky is lit with more stars than I have ever been fortunate to see. As my pain turns me senseless and only the nearness of the men keeps me from screaming and the nearness of my mother from praying for a swift death, I turn my gaze to the stars. We may have a chance to find our fortunes, for if
the sky itself glitters with such riches then
the ground is likely to turn up nuggets as
common as potatoes in a field.

If my baby is to be male then he should
be named for his father’s father. But of
course this boy would be named for Dugald
Cameron’s father and all of us would do our
best to forget that ever he had another father.
If the baby is female then she shall be named
for my mother, Johnann. Already Dugald
Cameron has spoken up to say this name will
be altered to Johanna in the event of a girl’s
arrival.

— Success in the colonies, he says,
comes easier if some of the highland ways are
given away.

My mother Johnann sits straighter
beneath her tree at hearing such words. But
she knows the Cameron brothers have saved
us from our misfortunes. She will not speak
against her son-in-law.

With the moon high and the black flies
settled at last, I cannot hold back my
screams as the baby moves down and Esther
guides out the head and shoulders.
Sumi has no need of hearing to know when the baby girl cries. She senses the change of mood in the child from wherever she is in the house that the wife never cleans or in the yard with its hard spikes of grass.

The child has no name, Sumi points out to the wife when several weeks have passed. After making lists of pretty names in flowery handwriting like a schoolgirl playing a game the wife names the child Natasha. She plants a kiss on Natasha’s forehead, yet in the years that follow she is barely to glance in the child’s direction again.

When the little girl is old enough, she toddles into the kitchen and latches herself onto Sumi’s legs, and speaks her first word, speaks it in Sumi’s language. *Honey*, she says with her hands, and takes the wooden spool Sumi gives her, licks the dripping golden strands. Sumi squats down and reaches out a finger to take a drop of honey for herself.

The day Natasha speaks of honey with her hands comes long before she speaks with her mouth. When she does open her mouth to speak she tells all who will listen to call her Tash. She answers to no other name but the one she has given herself. One night at dusk Sumi watches while the diplomat
calls out for Natasha and the child sits without moving. The wife rolls onto her stomach on her couch and tells him to shut up, she can’t hear the telly, call the brat Tash for fuck’s sake. He does, he calls her Tash, but still she will not move. For him, she answers to no name. Another clue for Sumi, she tells herself in later years: a hint that he has damaged Tash, perhaps damaged her forever.

Sumi scrubbed her feet clean and readied her skin for mehndi she could hide under her shoes when first she went to the nice house where Tash lived with her biological mother. She decided to do only one foot and then to echo elements of the decoration on the inside of the opposite elbow.

- One eye to the gods, she told herself, and filled the cone. The first line of henna paste on the curved top of her right foot sang in clear, elongated tones.

She started with a cross, then made right-angled corner lines in the four sections made by the cross. She rested her weight on her smallest finger, held the cone upright, careful not to tilt it like a pencil and risk a smear. Her eyes were not as keen as in the past, but her hands were steady as ever. She moved outwards, drew another diamond to frame the first, and then a third, largest diamond. She made curled crowns at each of the four tips of the largest diamond, then drew points on the
crows to make them resemble rosebuds. Next she scalloped the edges of the diamond and added trios of dots to jewel every point of the design.

That night by the creek, a corona, a wide band of white light, encircled the moon. Serena had seen only one other lunar corona before tonight. She looked to see if Natasha had noticed the unusual moon. Her eyes were downcast.

Natasha moved to put in her earplugs, and Serena had an urge to make the hands pause in mid-air. She made herself sit still. But she was determined to keep going with her effort to get through Tash’s defences.

She guessed that talk about their mother would cause trouble. Instead she would try talking about their father. She pointed to the corona and spoke of a favourite memory.

He wraps his little girl in his Drizabone, holds her close to his chest, close enough to let her feel the beat of his heart. She looks along his outstretched arm and sees the glowing white ring around the moon.
- You've seen his picture?

Natasha shrugged, glancing at the moon for only a second to see what Serena was talking about. But at least she had not switched on the music yet, only had the plugs resting against her ears.

Baby Natasha sleeps curled into Sumi's centre. The baby is nearly hers, nearly inside her belly. Sumi has mehndi painted on her hands and she wraps the hands around the baby, a decorated shell to keep her safe. Nearly hers. Yet she prays for the real mother and wills her to come back for this baby when the time is right.

Being wrapped in his coat on that night was her clearest memory of their father, she said to Natasha's turned-away head. She still thought she was treading safe ground by talking of him.
But while she told what she remembered, she heard her mother's voice.

Serena twists her head around and sees Pam at the back steps, on her backside, her arms tight around her belly, the screen door flapping behind her. Serena turns to the moon but now it is day and her father is gone. For this is the day he left them for the sea. Next she sees the coffin; his name is engraved on its plaque. He is not inside, his body being lost under fathoms of water.

With her eyes she followed the circle of the corona, her face wet in the dark. She had not known she had a memory of that day. And recalling her mother clutching her belly gave her a warm feeling about her sister who must have been nearby at that moment, growing inside while their father was dying.

The little kidnapped girl, Melanie, came back to her now, stolen from her bedroom and leaving only a pink-haired doll with its head on her pillow.

If only Natasha had not been spirited away, kept secret even before she was born, only to come back hard and bitter and lying. How different our family could have been, she thought.
She could leave them be, the mother and daughter, Sumi considered. They had found one another. She might take her pleasure from that, rest her mind with knowing little Tash had survived her childhood and found her real mother.

But still, she felt, surely it could not hurt to look into the green eyes again, to hear the voice in the little hands one more time.

She finished the foot and dragged her vinyl chair over to the window, hauled it along with its usual screeching that she heard through the ringing of her spine. She propped her foot against the sill to help the paste dry in the sun, swinging her ankle around to keep off the blowflies.

Later, with the toilet paper over the top of her foot to protect the drying paste, she started on the inner elbow. She made the design smaller, left out the largest diamond and put in the rosebuds and the dots as though they floated over the diamond that was not visible yet not missing either.
I wish you had stayed instead of being adopted, Serena said.

Her sister stood up and stalked over to a tree where she pulled down her pants and pissed loudly on the roots.

Serena lifted her voice above the noise.

– Maybe then you would not hate me.

Natasha pulled up the pants and came back to stand over Serena.

– I don’t hate you, she said. – You’re nothing to me.

The sister stood up and put one of her soft hands on Tash’s arm. Tash held her breath for a second, then made herself shake her off. Too easy to let herself soften. Weaken. To let herself feel the emotions that Serena was pushing onto her.

A rip had snagged in her from hearing about their father. The likeness of his face to her son’s was more than she could stand to think about.

The sister sobbed like a kid. Tash fought to keep herself together. Of course she did not hate Serena. She just did not figure in the plan. The plan was simple. She was to make Pamela love her enough that she could not stand to be without her. Then she could bring everything that was hers into Pamela’s house and be her real blood daughter. Serena was
getting to her. With her soft voice. Her way of telling stories.
Tash chewed her fingernails. Felt herself unravelling. Piece by piece. She missed her son. And tonight she was having the barest flickers of knowing what it could be to have a sister. A blood sister. Her simple plan could grow fuzzy, faint. Quick smart, if she let it.

She got up and went into the tent, leaving Serena to bawl on her own. Then, she found herself bawling. Stupid, stupid. Pushing her fists into her mouth to stop the noise.

The sea whooshed close by, the gleaming white caps double-lit by moon and corona. The tears dried on Serena's face in the gusts of a hot wind. Her face tightened first, then the rest of her drew itself inwards, hardening.

Sumi set up the ironing board in the common room and switched on the heavy old Sunbeam. She unwrapped the package from St Vincent de Paul's and arranged the green dress over the board. She ironed out the creases.
Upstairs she had another package, had spent most of the money spare from her pension on preparing for tomorrow. The new notepad in its package was lying ready for her to put in her bike basket. Tash would remember sign language, she was clever. But for the mother, if the two of them even invited Sumi in, she would have to write down her words. She had even bought a ballpoint pen, had tested it for smoothness of writing on the scribble pad at the newsagent’s. The sharpened-down stub of pencil she kept in her pocket for messages to shopkeepers would not be enough.

Who knew how much she would need to write once the three of them got into a good long yarn?

Natasha slept as naked as she had swum. By the light of her small torch, Serena watched. The eyes shuttled behind the lids and the facial muscles twitched constantly. Serena leaned back on her heels and stared hard, dared her sister to wake up and tell her again she was nothing to her. Natasha slept on. The torchlight showed up a patch of blotches and peeled skin on the upper right arm. The mehndi peacock, the peacock she had to admit she had coveted, was gone.

— You’ve left yourself open, she whispered, naked and
missing your talisman.

She shone the torch lower, over the tangled coppery pubes, down to something else shining in the light. She leaned closer to see the round pink scar on the left ankle. The scarring was deep. She touched it softly with one finger, watching the eyes racing behind the lids, pressed harder and harder again until the foot shot away. Still her sister slept.

She lay down beside her, letting their skins touch for a while, knowing that would have Natasha hissing and spitting if she were to wake up. This could be the closest she would ever come to her sister.

All night the red journal lay inside the backpack between the heads of the sleeping sisters.

By morning Serena was ready for home. But they would not reach the end of the trail before lunchtime tomorrow.
She let Natasha move ahead. Serena slowed down to look over the beach debris and the metallic surface of the changed tide.

The boy in Hobart thought about how his father reminded him of a slug, a very dirty kind of slug. He slept all day, farting whenever he rolled over, thrashing about, and tipping over whatever was in his way – drinks, bongs, ashtrays, chairs, the coffee table. The boy hated his father when he was asleep. That was when he looked most stupid. His mother was pretty when she slept. She lay still and her face went soft. If he touched her she would not wake up. She had to be shaken hard. His father slept with clenched fists and he rolled his eyes like billiard balls. Still, much as he hated him when he was asleep, he did not want him to wake up.

He wished his father had gone away instead of his mother. Nobody was here to give Dad a wallop when he gave his son bruises. He always said he never meant to do the bruises. He never hit like boxers on T.V. He swatted, like squishing a fly. Instead of being squished, his son got bruises. Dad said Mum would be back. But he was full of shit. The boy had lost count of the sleeps since she had called. He wanted
her to rub his back while she sat on the porch and smoked. He would like her to paint the pictures on her skin while he helped to stir the stuff in the bowl. He would hear her say how one day just she and he would go away and leave the slug behind.

Serena rummaged for the red journal and walked slowly along the trail, holding it open and softly reading passages. She had her head down in the pages when she bumped into Natasha.

— Your muttering’s pissing me off. Keep it up and I’ll toss the book into the sea.

Serena glared at her sister.

A story formed itself in her mind. It was about two sisters who ended up sharing close quarters in a grave sealed with a slab of white marble.

— I want to tell you a story that’s to go into this book.

— I don’t give a stuff what’s in it.

Serena moved in close to the small, sullen face.

— You know what Pam said once? She said that not a mother exists who at least once has not wanted to kill her own child.
Pam is absorbed in the documentary about mothers who have taken their children's lives. Serena is grown-up, soon to leave home. She no longer dreams about being abducted. Pam speaks, calmly, conversationally.

- Not a mother exists who – at least once – hasn’t wanted to kill her own child.

Serena thinks she knows what Pam means: that children can torment, or cry or be irritable for that moment too long for a parent to tolerate. A child can make a parent murderously angry. The narrator of the documentary says that in similar words. Yet Pam’s words will be the ones that stick in Serena’s mind.

Now she stuck the words into Natasha.

The story did not have to be told. Marian had started to feel alive, her hair to grow long again, her skin to sweat in the heat of her first southern summer. The day when the daughters died would be the day Marian’s eyes turned black as deep holes. But suddenly it was clear that the story of the two sisters was the point, the place where the red journal had been going from the outset.

All were present: Marian and her daughters Johanna and Flora Margaret, and one other person who was not yet in view.
The setting was close to Marian's land. Marian could hear the first screams from where she gathered clay behind the house.

The doorbell vibrated under Sumi's fingertips. The smell of frangipani wafted over her as she stood on the fancy paved porch. She propped her notepad against one hip to make her trembling less obvious but that only made the paper shudder. She waited five minutes, too nervous to ring the bell a second time, then walked down the street. Nobody was home, she said to herself, either that or she had got herself rattled and had left too soon for them to answer.

Orderlies wheeled in a body beside Pam in the elevator. At the basement level the body went right to the morgue and Pam went left to the archives. The temperature was chilly down here, and any noise rang out under the high ceiling. Forklifts whirred and beeped. From the examination suites a bone saw whined and faint traces of music could be heard. It was Elvis Presley, 'Suspicious Minds'.
To avoid crossing paths with the forklifts she followed the arrows painted on the concrete floor. She checked her notes and found her way to the aisle filled with files from the late eighties. When she found the correct file, she went to the archivist’s counter and checked out the file, then returned to her office, alone in the elevator.

All morning she tried to read and summarise the contents of the file. You would think, she thought, I would be free from interruptions on a Sunday afternoon. But a number of emergency autopsies were being performed downstairs. Her boss had been called in to observe, and time after time Pam was summoned to deliver documents or make phone calls on his behalf.

Late in the afternoon she started making progress on the case she was working on, one that had first passed through the office seven years ago. She came to the section on witnesses, and she remembered being present at the facility on the day the witnesses were interviewed.

Pam sits on a lumpy couch in a waiting room while her boss speaks to the manager of the home. Girls wander through the waiting area, watering pot plants, dusting shelves. They wear a uniform like that of a shopgirl, a plain light green dress with a zippered front.
The place tries to look homely, Pam thinks, with the couches and plants. But the girls who live here have no other places to go. And yesterday a girl younger than Pam's daughter Serena died here.

She sees her boss walking along a passage with creaking floorboards. Behind him the manager ushers along four teenage girls. All four are slouching. Their shaggy or spiky hairstyles with various streaks of colour hang over their faces, and their ears are heavy with multiple piercing.

Through a window she looks into a courtyard with a sprinkler arcing over a lawn. A hibiscus grows against a brick wall. The hibiscus flowers are deep red in the centre and fleshy pink on the outer tips of the petals. She thinks of the dead girl, and looks away from the petals. Someone's mother would be grieving tonight, she thinks. But she remembers where she is and wonders if the girl even has a mother.

Pam sipped coffee and clicked her computer mouse, ready to make a summary of witnesses from her own typed notes from years ago. She glanced at the column of typed names.

The name that she never expects to see is third in the column. She lets out a low cry.
They were on a peak, the views of the sea mocking Marian who came to live with only a sea of trees to view.

Before, it had been the opening of the journal that made Serena strong. Today she was strong from seeing the look on Natasha’s face a moment ago: not smug now, not sure of the perfection of her mother’s love.

She spoke to the open sea.

I remember the red sky of sunset the night before. No breeze stirred under the thick clouds. The temperature would not drop even after midnight. The air was smothering as a winter plaid.

That sky was slowly bleeding into blackness. In its light my scrubbed bedding turned pink as my unborn sixth child’s skin. I gathered my sheets against my bulging belly and punched the air from them. They retained the shapes of plump women warm in my arms and then collapsed. I thought of
dying. This heat could kill me, let me bleed away into the red sky as simply as a sheet woman disappearing. For the first time in years I thought of my father and of how all signs pointed to his choice of death over emigration, sin over more suffering. It would be winter on Skye now, and perhaps his body lies under snow.

Loons screamed over my woods and I went into the house.

I dreamed of quick and easy death that night while Johanna, my Johnann, sweltered with her fever. She is my closest link in a fragile chain back to my home. She flaked one raw skin after another. The other children had recovered from the scarlet fever but my eldest was frail. She had complications first of the throat and then of the heart. How many more layers might she have shed before her bed was empty?

Sweat streamed over the both of us while I wiped her clean and kissed away her hot murmurs. She had been bedridden for many weeks, alone in the box-bed she usually shared with her sister and her three
brothers. Flora Margaret bedded with Dugald and me while the lads shared a pallet. But that night, I crawled in to hold Johanna. She twisted to face me, curl herself around my swelling belly. I could let my wee one slip away. The graveyard at Whroo was filling with small mounds of the corpses of diseased children, buried the regulation two feet deeper for carriers of infectious disease. As I slept, I no longer felt the heat of the night, only the burning shape of my daughter in my arms.

A thought of clay woke me early. I wished to model a toy for Johanna, a cool doll for her to hold against her flushed cheeks. At the corner of the land where we dug clay I broke through the parched dirt. With my hands deep in the cool mud I heard no stirring from the house. Dugald had left before daybreak to play his pipes for colonials visiting the goldfields.

My face stings at the memory of the passing morning. Years gone by dissolve into no time. I live again the summer day rising hot as hell and black with maggot-weary
blowflies. What took place is forever in the present.

A great flock of screeching rosellas, plumes obscene, flies over and hovers above with their discord needling my brain. Later I will be sure this meddling pack abetted the horror, cloaked the second when all may have been stopped. For at this second my daughters have left the house and I hear naught but birds.

With my sharp blade I cut a chunk of clay and wrap it in a cloth I have lain on the ground. Dark moisture seeps in blotches through the cloth.

A fluttering of white catches my eye. Likely it is the night-dress of my eldest daughter between the trees, yet when I turn my eyes to that direction I glimpse the white feathers of a pelican settling in the puddle of water we have left to supply the house. Shoo, I shout. All we need is a great bird muddying the water. Yet once I loved waterbirds, in my other lifetime when endless views of the sea
were mine. The bird eyes me sideways, then alights with an indignant flapping.

Later the pelican flies as an offended angel in my memory. For I watch it rise and am not to know the bird's shadow shifts over two sisters stumbling through yellow grass.

The morning rings with screech and squawk of beak and claw, every bird I have known on this land seems present today.

A different scream breaks through the noise of birds. I am on my feet and halfway to the house even before I tell myself that it is my child's scream, Johanna's scream.
Through the open half of the door to my family's house I see the empty box bed. My boys sit with bread in their hands, mouths agape at my panic. We all hear the distant screams of two girls. My eldest boy has his father's rabbit gun in his baby hands, and is next to me. I grab the gun and run, shouting at the boys to stay inside. I navigate by the screams.

Past a knot of acacias I see them, see no molester nor murderer, not yet, for now I see only two small girls wrestling. Johanna's
body flops about weakly, she claws at her
sister's pummelling fists and flinging elbows.
The blood-flush of her face is vivid as a bush orchid even from a distance.
The baby in my belly slows my run.

Flora Margaret has her big sister's head
locked against her chest. Flora Margaret is
the one to wheel about and see me. A grin
spreads over her pouty face. It is Dugald's
face I see, Dugald at his cruelest.

Almost there, arms low to hold steady
the rock of belly, and I see the closing of
Johanna's eyes, the slump against her sister.
Flora Margaret lurches at the weight of her
taller sister, but she does not fall, she leans
forward and clasps Johanna around the
waist. Then, she lets go.

Johanna vanishes. The ground seems
to open beneath her feet.

Now I have my bearings. I know where
I am. It is the hole in the earth, the deep hole
people say was made by a great boulder
hurled from the heavens. Grasses wave in
the hot wind, frills disguising the gaping
mouth in the ground.
Flora Margaret is quiet. Her hands hang at her sides. Her fair head, flower head, bows as she looks down and I look down, beside my younger daughter now.

Johanna lies in the hole, on her back, arms outspread. Her face is still red-raw. As is the front of her night-dress. A dead tree branch poking up from the ground has stabbed my child through her chest. My hands rip at my hair, my head is flooding with the blood seeping from my child. This child I fought to keep is gone. I believe her charmed for having been conceived at sea, part of her blood was of Skye and the other part was in my family’s future. And her little sister, little killer, speaks in a shrill whisper.

— I brought her to see the fairies milling about. They were to heal her, but she fell.

The murderer I have come to shoot dead with my husband’s gun, here she is beside me.

I drop the gun. The moment when I grab her is fast, over and gone before I understand what happens. I am not even in
my picture, I am removed, grown wings and taken flight.

The pregnant mother grabs her daughter's shoulders and shakes, shakes her, shakes the life from every scrap of pain the woman has ever felt.

Her first daughter is dead, rotting fruit on a branch of a tree rooted in hell. Flies crawl on her skin already.

It appears to be the full belly that overbalances both mother and daughter. The woman falls to her knees, but the little girl tumbles down after her sister. The woman moves to grasp the child's hair, but the hair is thin and soft, downy and yellow as a duckling. The strands slip through the mother's fingers. The child is convulsing as she falls, probably dead before she hits the ground with a small thud. Her pale eyes rise to gleam in the sun. One arm, just a baby's arm when you look at it, falls gently over the older sister's middle.
Any moment I can put myself on the side of
the abyss. Part of me will live forever there,
condemned to watch the deaths of my
daughters repeat endlessly. For this is my
own sentence and the punishment of no
other could be worse.

Some days I tell myself she fell. Other
days I hold the child by the scruff of her neck
and I drop her over the edge.

The sky screeches. The rosellas, blood-
stained witnesses, batter their wings over my
head for the second time of the morning.

I am poised to leap to my death. Of
course I must die here and now. But a
shuffling in my belly stops me, a whisper felt
if not heard.

Flora Margaret, she along with her sister
never leaves my mind. I loved Johanna more,
I cannot deny it. Yet Flora Margaret, mean
and taunting, she was but a child. I would
never know if she spoke the truth about the
fairies. If she lied, then I do not understand what took place. A ten year old murderer defies sense.

I stroke my belly to soothe the restless child who has been present at the deaths of two of its kin prior to its birth. I am not to follow my father's apparent path, today I have sinned enough to last me for the rest of my life.

A choked cry breaks out behind me.

John stands by the acacias. My brother-in-law, uncle of my children, has a stony set to his gentle face. He has seen everything, and it happened far too quickly for him to stop any of it, albeit that the moments between the deaths of my daughters seemed long to me. Truth is, he could have made it to the hole by the time he saw me readying to throw myself from the edge. Yet he stayed back and made me decide my fate. Now he approaches with the planting of one heavy foot in front of the other. I am sure he is wont to dash my head
against a rock. He looks down and sees the open eyes and soft mouths of the sisters, and he lets out another cry that washes over me cold as a sea.

He gazes over the holes in my face where once were my eyes that he called fine and glittering. Our days of idle flirtation are lost. He loves me, both of us know it. He will help me.

— For you, Marian, he says. — What happened will die here. The girls fell. It was an accident. Your part is that you are not to tell Dugald of Flora Margaret’s actions. It would kill him to know what his child did today.

My hands cross my chest in fits, birds’ wings, making to hold my heart inside while it swells and shrivels.

Tash hated the story. Between them she reckoned her mother and sister had a grisly store of death tales better than an all night horror-fest to be caught at a drive-in.
Hearing the story come from Serena's mouth made her take another look at her. She edged away from the precipice crumbling to the sea. Tash knew one thing. Life could be worse than death, even for a little girl. Still, she imagined flicking Serena off. Like a clingy spider. Seeing her tumble. A kid's rag doll. Down the cliff-face. Just one shove and she would go down without a fight. Maybe. But the thought hurt Tash. The longer she was away from her child, the less she wanted to think about accidents and pain and damage. The less she wanted to think about mothers or children gone bad.

The second time, Sumi stood up straight in front of the door and told herself that a minute or two of shaking in her boots was worth seeing Tash again and getting to hear about her life, about how she grew up and found her mother. For all Sumi knew, she considered now, the welfare workers could have matched up Tash and her mother years ago when Tash was still a child. She crossed her fingers at the thought.

She waited twenty minutes, ringing the bell four times. Then she went off to buy a cup of coffee. She would not go home until she had carried through what she had to do today.
The name shapes into a face caught between the fibres of the old foolscap paper. Pam stares for a minute to be sure her eyes are not fooling her. But the name – and the face – remain. Rifling through the file, she tears out the photographs clipped in the back.

The face in the one photograph that matters matches the name in the column. The mouth is twisted and the heavy eyelids are exaggerated by the downcast glare of the eyes. The hair is limp with a falling-out perm streaked with black. Between the black streaks the natural shade – the glint of auburn – is unmistakable.

Here in front of Pam was a picture of a sad girl in a home for the homeless.

Pam was bone-tired. Her body went slack and she remembered her grandmother’s rumour of the family curse. She heard distant laughter from inside herself – the cackle of her grandmother, an old woman grown cruel.

Since the death of her husband she had waited for another loss. The losses had come, but none was too close.
A cousin hangs himself from a magnolia tree, not to be discovered until his face is the same deep purple of the blossoms. A great-uncle and aunt die in a car accident on Christmas day, presents for their children spilling over a freeway. She keeps the details – magnolia blossoms and bows on presents – separate from the place where she remembers her closer loved ones’ deaths, and furthest away from the memory of the diver’s watch with sea-green glass.

When an in-law she has never met smothers her twin children after they will not stop crying, she shuts out all details – she cannot bear to think about the deaths of children.

At the burial of the cousin whose head turned to magnolia she kneels before a pew and pretends not to hear a distant relative whisper to his wife: *None of us seems to be taken naturally.*

But the years pass and nobody in her immediate family is taken. She thinks she sees that curse move on as a thunderstorm travels to crack its thunder and strike its lightning over someone else’s house.

She had never stopped believing in the curse, even though she had spoken no word of it in years. This photograph of her daughter was more proof. The curse had tunneled under her the whole time she thought she was keeping her family safe.
The phone rang on her desk. The boss urgently needed documents. Just a few minutes, and then she could get out of here. She found the papers and went down to the basement. This time she turned left to the examination suites near the morgue.

The blind was raked open to leave the large rectangle of glass bare, the view unobstructed. Above the glass a speaker transmitted the voices and other sounds from the room on the other side of the glass.

The coroner's silver pen clicked, the nib pressed into his notes, while on the other side a man with latex gloves took a scalpel from a tray and drew firm lines across a head fuzzed with fine hair. Today the sticky voices filtering through the speaker were hushed. No tears fogged the protective goggles – all in the room knew that their work was necessary and for good cause. But the usual rock music was not playing and nobody would hear a word of the black humour the assistants loved to dredge up during procedures. With the opening of the skull came no whine of the bone saw, no bone fragments powdering the caps and shoulders of the pathologists. Only a scalpel was required to open this skull, to reveal the blue-white – the opalescence – of the inner.
Pam dropped her sheaf of documents in front of the coroner and his clicking pen paused as he watched her move close to the glass.

The brain of an infant is soft, can seep out as liquid as egg yolk when dissected. The touch of the pathologist's hands in the latex was gentle. Pam could not watch them take out the eyes, a necessary part of the procedure when the infant was a suspected murder victim. She focused on the feet, the blue feet that she wanted to warm with knitted bootees. Run a bath, she was thinking, soothe the chafed skin.

She put her hands up against the glass – the glass was cold and her hands were hot and sweaty – ghostly prints forming under the fingertips.

The blue feet shuddered as the baby corpse was shifted. Running water sluiced away the fluids and debris as the autopsy came to a close and the skin was pulled together and stitched up, the baby cleaned with a sponge and put into a pastel grow suit.

Pam collected the file with the picture of her daughter from her office and rushed from the building. She scrambled around the concrete levels of the car park before remembering that her daughters had her car, that she was assigned one of the white
company cars with the coroner’s insignia on the doors. She drove home, drove through red lights, drove too fast.

She found herself back in a dim room.

Her baby shuffles inside. In the quiet she thinks everyone outside this room could be dead for all she knows. The baby has already tried to die four times inside her womb. The baby has to be separated from the mother. That will be its only chance of safety.

The blue feet of the baby shuddered again in her mind as she walked alone through her house.

She went to her own bedroom, and rummaged for her lace-trimmed box in the drawer. The wristband worn by her baby girl was gone. The conversation with Serena outside the front door came back to her. Natasha had been in this room. Natasha must have taken the wristband. But you could not call that stealing – she thought – not when the band had been stolen from Natasha’s tiny wrist in the first place.

Next she pushed open the door of her spare room – Natasha’s room. Natasha’s few clothes hung in the wardrobe. Her scuffed and childish suitcase lay on top of the old wooden chest. Next to it Natasha had put the glass Antarctic seal. Had
Serena ever glued her broken gift back together? She would have to ask her - when she came home safely. Pam looked at the full-length mirror standing across one corner. Two images of her were in the mirror. A photo she had sent to Natasha through the adoption agency was wedged into the frame. But the photo she sent was of both herself and Serena. She pulled it out of the frame and saw that the picture had been folded in half and that Serena's face had been hidden behind her own.

She left the room - a thought eating its way into her. What if the next threat to her family came from within the family?

Where the truth began and ended with her younger daughter, Pam had no clue. But her children were not here. She could not trust her instincts to know they were safe - not now.
Tonight the two sisters were the only campers here in the camping area between two creeks at Refuge Cove.

Over by the tree ferns a heavily coated feral cat crouched low in the undergrowth. A baby possum drank from an enamel bowl left under a water tap.

The younger sister made mugs of tea, sloshing the water over the edge when she put one mug in front of her sister.

The feral cat pounced. It could have killed the baby possum with one strike, one bite from its large jaws, a swipe of the claws sharpened on tree trunks. Instead it made a delicate tear, taking out one eye and part of the throat.

In the possum's pooling blood, a torch beam was reflected, for the screeching had brought the sisters running. The possum lay on its back, pink paws groping at the face. With a twig, the younger sister poked at the possum. Weakly it clawed the twig. She ran back to the campsite and returned with a rock.

- I have to put it out of its misery.

Her sister went to her pack, pulled out a sarong that she shook clean and wrapped it around the possum, covering the bleeding head.
Serena watched as Natasha, child-like with her small frame and short hair, brought the rock up over her shoulder and dashed the possum's head.

Blood soaked the sarong. It was less like soft cotton than an extra layer of furred skin. With this, she could start her own catalogue of the dead, inventory of remains of deaths that mattered to her. Already she had the striped hairs of a tabby cat, the cotton-skin of a possum, and the image of the seal-like eyes of a drowned man. No, she told herself. One such catalogue was already too much for one family.

She looked over the body at Natasha.

She was not coming back, the boy told the puppet hanging over the porch. But he would not be staying here with the slug. He would find her. He knew where she went at night, she went to parties in a big building by the docks. Maybe she stayed at the parties now, without coming home. The slug would not come after him. He would just have another beer and then flake out and fart.
Tash saw how Serena looked. Could read her mind. Judging her for the killing. After that story full of murdered kids, she had the nerve to act like she thought Tash killed possums for thrills.

She left her to deal with the body. She went into the tent. Plugged her ears with her music. Lit up a joint and bawled as quiet as she could.

Sumi rang the doorbell. The mother opened the door and hardly appeared to see the old woman in the long green dress holding out a notepad with writing on it. Sumi smiled, remembering how she had prayed for this mother.

She told herself she would go if need be. At the first sign Tash did not want to see her, she would make out she had the wrong place and leave.

_Good evening_, the writing on the pad read. _I am looking for Tash._
Already she had a bad feeling. The mother's face was swollen, her eyes dull. She showed no recognition when she read the note. Natasha, Sumi added in brackets. But surely Tash would not have gone back to that name.

- You'd better come in, the mother said, then reached for the pen as though she were not sure if she needed to write it down. Sumi indicated that she understood. She wrote again. I can come back. Or perhaps I am at the wrong address.

Serena lay her hands on the fabric and spread her fingers to see the blood.

She took her camping spade from her pack and dug a hole under the tree ferns, made it deep enough to keep the feral cat from coming back and digging up the body. She thought of her own tabby cat, of how much time seemed to have passed since the night when she carried his stiff body from the road. This body was not stiff; it was warm and limp in her hands, had the feel of something she could have saved if she had come soon enough.

She tamped down the dirt over the possum and then scrubbed her hands clean.
The tent was like a translucent insect abdomen. Dope smoke diffused through the canvas sides.

The canvas glowed orange inside. The younger sister had unzipped the wrong pack. That was her sister’s pack. The red journal was drawn out, the bitten fingernails scrabbling at the red leather. The older sister’s fountain pen was clipped to the inside front cover. Usually an old map of Skye was tucked into the front, but that was missing tonight.

The mother gestured for Sumi to come inside and closed the door once the old woman had walked into the foyer.

— Natasha’s not here, she said. She started to weep.

Sumi knotted her hands. I must go, she wrote. She backed up to the door.

The mother leaned against the door. Sumi hugged the notepad to her chest. Quickly she scribbled on the pad, asking if something had happened to Natasha. The mother moved slowly to sit in an armchair.
— Yes, she said. — Something has happened to my daughter.

Sumi turned the doorknob of the front door. This sadness of Tash’s mother was not her business to witness. But the sight of the small woman sobbing, looking much like little Tash, made her stop.

The mother showed the photograph and the name in the file. At the sight of them, Sumi hung her head. Her prayers, then, had not looked after the little girl after she was taken from her care. Just as the peacocks had failed in the diplomat’s house.

The younger sister flipped through the pages. Picking at a bit of history from this page and that page. She had never been on close terms with the past. She did not remember a whole lot of her own past. Had chosen to forget. She was not sure that she could tell it in a story as Serena or Pamela seemed able to do. For her, memories came in rushes. She had learned to shut out the worst. She could not have told anyone the story of her life with a beginning, middle and end if she had tried. Could only show a series of explosions. Shots. Her clearest memories were the nicest ones. The ones that through the years had kept her
from lying down in a street and letting herself be done over.
The worst memories – who wanted them? Physical and sexual abuse. Endless orphanages and foster homes and shelters.
Days of lining up for adoptions that never happened. Drugs.
Loneliness. She had lived through all of that. She would not go back to those places. Instead she held onto the brighter stuff.
Sumi alive with her birds and butterflies and animals and glossy hair and dancing hands. Dreams of the mother who would return to her. And the times she had with friends she made in the homes. For she had been popular. Had been able to choose her friends and keep them. Most of them. The more recent memories were even brighter, moving right up to her meeting Pamela. And of course her son shone out to form her best memories.

As she looked at the red leather book, Tash marvelled at the power Serena appeared to find in history. In telling stories. She wanted a bit of that power. She unclipped the pen and turned to a blank page.

She wrote.

She used no names for people or places. She did not care about them. She knew only that today Serena had told a story and that story had another side.
The ink in the new handwriting formed the heaviest islands to be found in the white seas of the book. The paper was ripped in places, had leaks and faults that could let in oceans or entice geysers to blow in and up.

— You're from her past, aren't you? Please tell me if you know anything about her.

Sumi waited for a second, looking over the papers scattered on the coffee table. If she could explain the beginning, tell where Tash had come from, then maybe the mother would go easy on her when she confronted her about the lies. With her strong hands, Sumi took up her pen. She started writing the scraps she knew of the little girl whom she had loved as though she were hers.

Serena pulled open the zip just far enough to let her poke in her head.
The red journal, the journal she had chosen and had written Marian's life into, the journal she used to pull her family close to her whenever she opened the covers, lay like a pool on her sleeping bag.

The journal was turned upwards to reveal the open pages.

Serena's fountain pen that always left blue stains on her right hand lay next to the journal. Natasha's left hand was stained.

Serena tore open the rest of the zip and pulled herself into the tent. The open journal was a gash, a wound, something maimed. To have another read her journal was bad enough. To have the journal written in by another was a kind of murder.

But it was not her journal, something kept telling her that. It was Marian's journal.

She shoved the thought away. She had made the journal Marian's.

Natasha clicked off the Walkman and the trance ended as though a hypnotist's fingers had snapped.

Serena picked up the journal, telling herself she was only imagining the limp texture of its usually crisp covers. Natasha's messy, girlish writing with looped tails covered the facing page.

She started to read, finding that Natasha's version of the story was most different to her own. It defied the artefacts: if
the sisters did not die then no white marble headstone on a
small double grave could exist.

A white bird was in my dreams the night
before I put my daughter underground. The
bird flew over my place, a heavy bundle in its
beak.

The other daughter was sick, red and
swollen and skun like a rabbit. We knew she
could die in the night and the next day be
lying in the graveyard already chocked with
dead kids. But I was going to hang onto this
child. She was thin and weak. I chose to
look after her.

The old man has never been good with
kids. He deals with his sons, makes them
strong. I know he does not love my firstborn
daughter, but since the second daughter's
birth he has shown a side he keeps even from
me. My husband loves this second daughter.

The younger girl looks out for herself.
You might not know it to look at her. She
has never been as needy as the older one. He calls this younger daughter his flower. When I look at her I see a thistle. Strong and spiny and hard to cut down.

I do not sleep well tonight. The bird in my brain flies over me. Not far away, another person sleeps not a wink.

The things a person will do out of love.

Yes, love makes me do it. I rise early and put myself out by the mud as we have arranged. Out of hearing of where the deed will be done. The night is barely gone when my husband leaves for the diggings. His brother crosses the property. Comes through the trees that have hidden our affair in past days and nights. I turn my back. Count slowly in my head as my brother-in-law enters the house where my children sleep.

He never tells me what he says to lure my younger daughter from the house. I never ask. No sound comes from the house, but I hear voices in the distance, coarse laughter.

The hawkers are to move on today. Bastards and unwanted souls are hidden under plaids, tied up in bags. The females
are in the charge of a woman with a row of nuggets like tiny skulls strung around her neck.

I am not there to farewell my child. Not there to see her go or to hear her cry out. I need for her to be gone. I love my older daughter and I want her to be fed and clothed and protected.

My husband believes his brother when he is told his flower child has fallen down a mine shaft. The hills are ridden with shafts and kids are often lost through falling into them.

My older daughter lies in her bed, knows nothing of what her mother has done with her younger sister.

But when the younger sister comes back she will have no time for the older sister, who can be shoved out of the picture when the sister returns and tells where she has been and what has been done to her. What it has been like to be pushed into a life underground.
Natasha spoke in a low voice.

- Being abandoned can be worse than being killed.

Serena barely heard the words. Their mother was Natasha's to share, yet she would not have this journal. Serena threw the journal across the tent where it landed upright with the red spine arched, a red-back spider. Natasha reached for it and Serena slapped her hands away. Natasha opened her mouth to speak and Serena lunged and pushed her onto her back. She sat over her. The little sister was strong, her wiry muscles wound up under the big sister's weight. The green eyes, mother eyes, shone. Serena was going to shut them, shut them the fuck up. The little sister struggled and the big sister pressed harder with her knees that pinned the arms flat. She kept her down. She put her hands on her little sister's little neck, these hands that had only ever touched another's neck in a lover's caress. She pushed them into the channels above the collarbone. She kneaded inwards, made the wait teasing and longing, until she had the delicate valley where tears sometimes well, the place that quivers under a stare. Her body was tense but for those thumbs resting soft and light on the little sister's well for tears. She buzzed from the taut muscles down to the lightness of the thumbs. The hands were a wreath around little
sister's throat, and when she started pressing, easing the breath, the voice, from her like easing the air bubbles from the neck of a hot water bottle, she smiled to see the eyes widening, to see this woman afraid of her at last. The little sister pulled together all of her strength and pressed harder until her face turned blue. A person, Serena thought, could be pushed only so far before she remembered that she had the instinct to kill. She was not sure where those words came from. It seemed that the red journal itself was saying them.

She let go.

Natasha pushed upwards and knocked Serena off, catching her upper arm with her teeth. Serena punched hard into Natasha's face. She backed out through the opening and then zipped her in.

Sumi is never deaf to Tash's cries, or so she believes.

But she has not considered the quietness of leather soles crossing floors, soles that can make a child with keen ears deaf in the night. Tash is to start school near the end of the summer. On one of the last mornings of her holidays, she comes from her bedroom to stand by Sumi's bed. Tash strokes her nanny's hair and then she goes to the end of the bed where
she can look straight into Sumi’s face. Sumi admires the tiny hands. Tash is ready to be a schoolgirl yet the more Sumi looks at the hands with dimpled skin and pudgy fingers the more she can see the child is still a baby.

Those hands speak with quick slices that cut into the nanny.

- My father wears no pants under his suit.

The hands like little knives go on.

- Last night, when he came to my bed, he wore nothing.

She lifts one bare foot onto Sumi’s eiderdown and turns her ankle on its side. The leg of the bunny-print pyjama pants is sticky, and under the cuff is a round mark of bright red, a thick raised patch of burned skin with weeping edges. Tash pulls her foot away before Sumi can touch her, almost before she can smell the honey Tash has smeared on to stop the hurt. Tash stands out of reach of her nanny. She holds two fingers up as though she holds a cigarette, only larger, for it is his cigar she is mimicking. She pretends to put the cigar in her mouth and take a drag and then she mashes the end of the pretend cigar into her leg, mashes the sore spot with her tiny fingernails until she makes herself scream. She runs to hide.

The way to the laundry out the back has never been longer than today. Sumi searches through the linen bags of each of the children and finds nothing untoward. But pushed behind a crate in a cupboard, she comes across another linen bag. In this one are items of many sizes with the Christian
names of each child embroidered by the diplomat’s wife.

Behind Sumi’s back, a shadow is cast through the doorway. Slowly she turns. The wife stands, her eyes on the limp bag hanging from Sumi’s hands. The night dresses, the underpants, they are like empty angel skins dropped onto the floorboards, Sumi thinks later. And the sight of the smallest item, the pants belonging to Tash who is not long out of nappies, brings Sumi to her knees.

—You do not understand, the wife says. —He’s done it to all of us. I was one of them, the oldest of the children he took into his home.

The wife drops to her knees beside Sumi who warns her away with a single raised hand.

—He can only get it up for kids. He has never made a kid of his own because he doesn’t screw women who are past puberty. I thought he’d be different with me. Then he gives me the baby as a wedding present. I knew I was stuffed.

She gathers the garments and stows them in the linen bag. Sumi fights for the bag and wins. She leaves the wife in the laundry and has a neighbour drive to the police station with a note she writes in a hurry.

While she waits, she brings out her cool paste and takes the little girl into her lap. She paints a peacock on her upper arm. The other children gather around. They wait their turns for their peacocks. Sumi finishes three peacocks, never letting
Tash out of her sight. The wife comes, lines up for her own peacock.

He tramps past a new row of saplings, not seeing the police car that turns into the driveway behind him. The diplomat comes to watch the painting of his children's skins.

She leaps to her feet. The glass bowl smashes on his paving stones and her dark, thick paste splatters over the trouser legs and shoes. Her hands shout. With these bare hands she brings his house down and later she sends him to jail.

But the children were never hers. The welfare people arrive and she moves to get in beside Tash in one of the cars. The woman in the driver's seat asks Sumi to say goodbye. Sumi and Tash press close together. The little girl's body is stiff and upright but she does scuttle her bottom closer to her nanny's. Sumi makes her argument on her notepad and the woman relents for now. They drive past the saplings, thin weak trees they will never see again. The television people are here, forbidden to film the departure of the children, but still they have caught the diplomat on film and tonight the whole country will see that the great humanitarian is not what he seemed.
Pam had seen that man on television back in the seventies – keeping the words and images out of Serena’s bad dreams – and all the time her younger daughter was hidden from view in the midst of the news reports.

Sumi stays with Tash for three days while the other children are packed up and sent on one by one. The officers explain that her application for the guardianship of Tash has been turned down. The child, they say, will benefit from being removed completely from the environment where the abuse took place.

Sumi holds Tash close. She has a real mother in the world, Sumi tells her. She makes herself believe it.

*I tried to keep in touch,* she wrote to Tash’s biological mother.

*But they kept moving her, blocking my way.*

With the photograph of the homeless Tash in front of her, Sumi looked down to study her hands lying limp on her thighs.
Tash lay back and caught her breath, holding one arm over the eye Serena had punched. But she had more to worry about than Serena. What she had found herself writing in the book had freaked her out. She had held a piece of Pamela and Serena's power when she held that fountain pen. The power of having a family history to write of. She had put down a past in ink. And in it she read a message to herself. This story she had written, with its spelling mistakes and its bad spirit, reeked of old times. Old places. She wanted to rip up the pages. Rip up the past and start again.

She searched through her own pack. But of course she had left the mobile back at Pamela's.

She had to call home. She had to go home. All of the reason she needed was gaping at her in her own scrawl over the red book.

The boy stood over the slug, who flung out an arm and knocked a chair over on top of himself. He did not wake up. The boy tossed a rug over the upturned chair legs. Then he chucked an armful of cushions. Next was a full ashtray. The boy stopped laughing to himself over his little game. He spilled a full bottle
of beer and watched it dripping through the mess. Nobody told him to stop, nobody swatted or smacked or hollered. He picked up a dead pot plant and tipped the dirt on top. Then he took a pile of newspapers and scattered them over the floor. He knew what he was going to do. It was what made them all angry, even his mother. His naughtiest thing, the thing that could make them all go sick at once. But this time nobody was here except the slug buried under the mess.

The boy took the small box from the table. The box should not have been left there. Since she had gone his father and his mates had stopped giving a fuck. That's what they kept saying, I don't give a fuck, who gives a fuck? He slid open the box. Inside the matches were lined up, new and clean. He knew many games to play with matches - tipping them out into a pile, or setting them up like houses or dogs or trains. But the best game was the naughtiest.

The boy struck the first match and dropped it onto the newspaper. Right away it flared up. He struck another and another. The slug did not even make a noise. He just lay under the mess, under the burning newspaper.

By the time his father woke up, the boy thought, he would not be able to catch him.
The road map lay in Sumi’s lap. Pam kept her left foot close to the brake pedal as wallabies moved in shadowy traces over the highway.

She racked her brain all the way, trying to remember the hike Serena had mentioned. But she had not listened to the details, had only wanted to know that her daughters would be together and out of her hair for the weekend. She pressed her foot harder to the accelerator. Sumi kept her gaze on the road, her hands clutching the edges of the road map. Pam willed the car to go faster.

The phone call could not wait until morning.

Tash pulled on her boots and packed up the bag Pamela had lent her, grabbed a torch and put that in her pocket. She left the tent and went to fill her water bottle from the creek. Serena sat on the bank with her feet moving under the creek water. Tash shone the torch along the trail, then turned back to make out Serena, alone by the creek. Here and now, she could start to make amends.

— I’ve got to go. The mother I wrote about in the book, I’m
just like her. I've got to make an urgent call. Do you want to come?

Serena did not look at her. Only hunched herself lower over her knees.

It was a long walk Tash made alone in the hot night.

As she walked, she thought of how badly she had handled the last weeks. She had not believed enough in her mother. She had not trusted her with the truth. Not trusted her to be a mother who loved her. Kept loving her even though she had not seen her for more than twenty years. Even though she had another child. Pamela was a good mother. But she herself, she knew, was a bad bad bad mother.

She had vowed never to give up her child to anyone. She had made him promises while he was in the womb.

He kicks. The noise of the house disturbs him before he is even born. His father has brought a din home from the pub where the lot of his mates has been kicked out. Silently she speaks to her child. Settling him with promises.

Here she was. Away from him.

When she had written in that book of Serena's, the truth that had been sneaking up on her came out and hit her like a
brick. But maybe the first hit had been when Serena told her what Pamela had said. Pamela dreamed of killing her children. It was true: such a thought had flitted through her own mind during tantrums, illnesses, tiredness that lasted for weeks. But it was only fantasy. A wish for a minute’s peace. Many ways exist for a mother to kill a child, she thought. Any mother who thinks knows them all, knows them in more precise details than those Pamela put in her files. But it hurt to think of her own real mother saying those words. Had Pamela dreamed of killing her?

Many ways to kill a child, she said to herself again. She was stupid for turning off the phone. He was not safe. She knew it. She would never abandon him, she told him. Then she had left without a word. She knew she would be back, but a child could not know that. I have killed him throughout these weeks, she thought.

She walked faster. It was almost over. She would return to him, and she would tell Pamela the truth about her past. The writing in the book reminded her of what she had let herself forget. Good mothers forgive their children anything. Pamela could stand to hear the truth. As she moved on with the cottage in Hobart beaming like a lighthouse in her head, she hoped that children could forgive mothers.
In Pamela's car Tash drove the four kilometres from the car park to Tidal River. She went into the phone box and called reverse charge to Hobart. No answer. Bats flew over the lit-up glass of the phone box, as she re-dialled again and again for an hour. She did not like the sound of that unanswered ringing. She leaned her face against the cold metal of the telephone, picked up the receiver again and pressed in Pamela's number. Only the answering machine picked up. Her mother's recorded voice. The beep came and she said nothing into the tape. She went back to the car and decided to drive back. She could not stay here and do nothing. She would go back to the city and make arrangements to fly home.

Driving along the highway she dug a ragged photo of her son from the lining of her purse and lay it on the dashboard.

The two older women drove around the camping village at Tidal River, looking for signs of the sisters. They had no idea of the trail the sisters had chosen, Sumi pointed out, writing by the car's interior light. All night they stayed awake in the front seat of the car, telling themselves the girls would turn up in the morning.
The dead baby's blue feet stayed with Pam through the hours. Her thoughts lurched through the possibilities — any possibilities — had she not seen and heard them all in her past and in her line of work? The folded photo — did Natasha mean harm to Serena? Was she fated to lose her first daughter if she got to keep her second? But Serena's voice on that last call — the call to arrange the hiking trip — Pam had heard the anger in her, fury that Pam had tried to shut out for weeks. What if Serena were the one to mean harm?

More than eye colour and bone structure could be passed on in a family. Family issues could pass from one generation to the next. They need not be passed on in spoken words. Pam had never spoken to Serena about her own night terrors. She had not spoken of the child she gave up. She did not tell her about the family curse. But Serena knew that curse. Serena was dangerous, Pam believed. She thought dangerous thoughts. She said dangerous words. She had dangerous expressions about her face. She scared her mother.
I tried to keep her safe, Pam told herself. But Serena makes me feel unsafe. At first – when she was small – I was afraid for her. Now I am afraid of her.

Natasha does not scare me. My other daughter who has been through so much is not as dangerous as her sister who had a protected childhood in my house. The happy stories of adoption never convinced me – not even on that first day in Hobart. I sensed the pain in Natasha. I waited – moving through the getting-to-know-you days – expecting an outburst to come sooner or later. I waited to be blamed – as I blamed myself – for whatever had happened to my daughter. Nothing came. No outburst, no accusation, but only friendship.

Natasha has a sweetness that reminds me of my life a long time ago. I think of my childhood – before death came – that time of sweets shared with my mother, games with my father in the afternoons. Years afterwards, I found sweetness again with my first daughter – the baking of cakes, the games and piggybacking. With Natasha, the sweetness has returned. I do not want to be scared any more. Natasha does not scare me.

She needs me. Serena does not need me as much. She thinks she does, but she is stronger than she knows. She can take care of herself in ways that I don't think Natasha has ever learned.
After the Prom had been a land bridge, Serena had read a long time ago, it drifted back to join the mainland, leaving Tasmania an island.

She sat with her feet dabbling in the creek, the brackish water taking her feelings and setting them adrift. She mulled over the moment in the tent, when the journal had seemed to tell her that knowing how to kill was instinctive. And now she remembered Scatha, the warrior woman of Skye. She fetched the journal and went back to the first pages, the entries she had made while travelling on Skye. She needed to re-read that passage about Scatha.

Scatha (or Scath or Scathach), pronounced sky-a by some, was a dark goddess, Mother Death one of her aspects. Another of her names, Scotia, was used in naming Scotland itself. Some say Skye was named for Scatha and that the isle was her mythical realm. On the island, Scatha taught the arts of war to the famous warriors of Celtic legends.

Scatha taught to kill; she was Mother Death of the bird-shaped island.

Serena knew how to kill. The right moment was all it took for the knowledge to reveal itself, like a sword drawn from a sheath that she found had been strapped to her waist all of the time.
As the night went on and Serena understood that she was alone in the dark out in the bush, she started to hum. She lulled the surrounding night into a sea that engulfed her and made her safe.

She was no longer angry. Years of anger had burst forth and drained from her like this creek into the sea.

She would like a tight knotting of flesh, a continuous flow of blood, a Celtic knot of the cycles of life, to exist between Pam, Natasha and herself. But to bring that about seemed out of her control. She would leave them to each other and go on with her life. She was losing nothing except a chink of opportunity, the chance that she thought she saw when Pam prised herself open just a little on the day when she told of Natasha.

Listlessly, she turned the pages of the journal. No current of strength pulsed between the covers. She avoided the sections containing Marian's story. Instead she leafed through the other entries she had made while on Skye. The fragments of one piece, a drowning story that she had copied from a seaside plaque appeared to speak out to her.

In the year 1812, a boat, with nineteen persons ... The boat was overloaded, and one man and two women went ashore at Lealt ... In the darkness the heavily laden boat struck the ... within a mile of their destination, capsized, and all the occupants were lost
... the only body recovered was found in the boat, his hands locked around one of the thwarts. It is recorded that all the dogs in the vicinity kept howling all night.

She knew that Pam had never been to Skye. But Pam had grown up in the homestead that itself was descended directly from the island. Pam had lived immersed in death, superstition, too-close memories of the harshness of island life. And she had tried, Serena believed, to break that dark island connection after her husband drowned and when she gave up her baby to save her. She could not have known what else she was breaking; the submerged grief, the sunken debris of the relinquishment of one child had disintegrated her bond with her other child.

Serena stood to look into the water. On another night, she had stood at midnight on a beach on Skye and had not been afraid. She had not been close to her mother. She had known nothing of a sister. Yet on that Skye beach, blue light had diffused the lines of sea and sky and land while she was solid and whole and connected.

The sea in the agate was not shattered now when Joseph looked. The shatter could be the shimmering of light. And the
woman was not shivering. She was swimming, floating, her eyes open wide to the bright sun. He loved to look at her. The time had come to join her.

He took his super-fine glass drill and made a tiny hole in the deep blue edge. He carried the agate to the lounge-room and hung it on a length of fishing twine from the top of the window where it would catch the light in the morning.

At first light Serena unfolded the map and started walking. In the car park she saw no sign of the car that they had borrowed. She sat on a damp bench and filled in the completed itinerary form she had to drop in the rangers' box. She dumped the form in the box, and went to find a bus to take her back to the city, but the bus was not due until tomorrow. At a roadhouse a big black and silver rig's hydraulics hissed. She imagined what her sister would do, Tash who lived under no rules except her own. Serena paused beside the front set of tyres for only a minute, then walked into the roadhouse to find the driver. She hitched a ride for the first time in her life.
After she had seen the itinerary form at the ranger station, Pam drove a road straight-walled as a tunnel to her home. Her worry had been for nothing. The form said the two of them had left the park. And with what she had learned about Natasha's adoptive life yesterday, obviously that daughter needed her more than ever.

Serena sat back in the bouncy upholstery. From the corner of her eyes she saw the girlie pictures tucked into the sun visor in front of him. A sticker was gummed crookedly above the tuner on the dash. *Relax and Reminisce.* Under the words a phone number was written in texta: the number to her radio station's on-air studios.

She listened to his voice, trying to place it among those of her regular callers. He could have been any one of them. The truckie talked to her breasts one at a time as he sped up to pass three cars at once. Below the frayed armhole of his cut-off shirt she saw the smudgy red tattoo of a slashed heart.

The airbrakes wailed. He swerved past a white car,
Serena looking down at its roof for a second, while he swore about women drivers. Neither of them saw the coroner's insignia on the door of the car.

His hand rested on the seat between them for a while, then the grease-edged thumbnail tweaked at the edge of her knee. She threw her knees the opposite direction and she looked into his face. Just the look of her was enough. He would not be messing with this one. The radio made the only conversation for fifty kilometres. He reached for an album and showed her pictures of his wife and kids, talked her ear off until she settled back to have a sleep, giving him one more of those looks of hers before she shut her eyes. He turned down the radio to give her a bit of peace.
At the open window of the lounge room the blue object flashed and spun on a fine thread.

Serena put down her pack and the big duffle bag stuffed with hiking gear.

Reaching up she halted the spin and looked at the object, this slice of blue agate threaded and hung. She had bought it months ago. She looked through the crystal, and the sky turned to the blue of agate, swimming blue, she would call it.

She moved to put on a CD, the soundtrack to Three Colours: Blue. So long had passed, she thought, since she had played the music she liked.

She went down the passage and into his bedroom. When he had taken her agate and hung it up to spin he had crossed into her space. Now she walked on his floor and touched his possessions. She slid open the flat drawers of his cabinet and saw his sketchpads. She fingered the mosaic tiles that sparkled like her agate. In the bottom drawer she found plastic bags with labels. Here she came across a bag labelled Tabby (black). Inside were the smashed pieces of the bowl that had been her cat’s. She glanced again at the mosaic materials packed about the room. The smashed bowl hurt her at first, but she felt
better when she imagined him making a mosaic from this china and his glass tiles, a mosaic to remember her tabby cat.

A soft white paper bag, unlabelled, lay in the drawer. It was not quite empty. The bag held the shape of the agate, a rough oval with uneven edges, the sharpness bevelled away. She noticed a tear in the soft paper.

The sound of a key turning came from the front of the flat. His toolbox clanked as he set it on the floor inside the front door. First he saw the agate, spinning madly in the wind. He kept walking towards his room and then he saw her framed by his doorway, the soft bag limp in her hands.

— Am I a puzzle to you, she asked. — Am I something you want to solve?

He ran his fingers over her bare right arm, over the circle of bruises. He shook his head.

Tash bustled in without noticing that a manila folder was up-ended on Pamela's coffee table. She did not see the typed sheets and photographs spilled over the surface.

She sang out. Nobody was home. She went straight for the phone and made another call to Hobart. The phone rang out. She called a friend, and then another. Nobody answered.
She made up her mind to wait a little while and then make reservations for her trip home. She headed for the shower. The one in Pamela’s en suite, the best shower. In there by her mother’s bedroom she washed away the salt and fine white sand. With Pamela’s fragrant shampoo she washed her hair that was now longer and softer. The eye that Serena had punched was tender every time she touched the right side of her face.

She went to drink a cup of coffee and have a smoke on the pavers out by the front gate. She had expected Pamela to be here. The quietness was getting to her. Unanswered phones. Empty house. When she had turned up planning to blast everything open.

The white car pulled into a parking space down the street. Both of the older women inside watched the small woman with her damp hair glinting in the sun, part of her face obscured by a mailbox. For a moment neither moved to leave the car, only gazing upon her through the windscreen. They walked slowly up the street.

Tash turned her head. When she saw them, she fell forwards onto her knees and crushed herself into the wire. They rushed to her, her face criss-crossed as though she were crammed into a cage. Together they lifted her to her feet and led her into the house.
The two of them wrapped themselves around her, with the mother scents of French perfume and sandalwood.

Pamela went to the coffee table and only then did Tash see the mess in the centre of the tidy house. Pamela brought the two photographs to her daughter.

Tash held up both pictures in the air. She saw herself in a green uniform at age fourteen. And she saw the darkly bruised face of the only girl she had ever called her sister, the dead girl she had kept deep inside. She gazed from one picture to the other.

The photos made her job easier. The women knew the start of the truth, knew she was not anyone’s perfect daughter, and still they were here. Pamela had this whole file like a bite into Tash’s past and she had not shown her the door yet.

She shut her eyes for a minute. If she told the truth, and they were not with her at the end, then she still had her own child. A day ago she would have expected Pamela to tell her to leave. How she felt after writing in that red book had changed her mind. Mothers could be told truths about their kids or even about themselves and they need not stop loving. It was not true of all mothers. It had to be true of Pamela.
What she had to tell, she knew, was a mother’s worst nightmare.

Pam steeled herself for what she would hear. But this daughter was alive – not blue, not lying in the sluice on a metal table. Whatever else she could learn of Natasha, it was not the worst it could have been.

- The day this girl died changed everything for me. She was my best friend. Kind of a sister. We looked after each other in that place, the dump everyone except us called a home. The guardians told the police she fell down the stairs, over the railings, the day she died. I still see her falling. I've tried to keep it out of my head for years. It’s still with me. I was on the bottom floor. When she came down it was sort of like she was flying.
The safety railing breaks. Her eyes are closed. She flies through air. No. Not flying. Not like a bird with spread wings. More like a baby bird dropped by a boy raiding the nest. She hits the floor. I run to her. All of her friends crowd around. We think we are trying to save her. But she is dead. I put my hands around her head. I kiss the bruises.

—I saw myself in her that day. If I stuck around, I'd be lying in her place before long. Bruised. Damaged. Dead. They said she fell. Or that she jumped. Maybe she wanted to die. We all wanted to die. We thought death was better than what we had. I'd had it with that place. I left soon afterwards and made my own way.

She went on. Talked and talked. She saved until last the news that she had a son of her own. And then she sank back into her mother's couch, knowing that Pamela already loved her grandchild. Knowing for sure.

—I think that your friend didn't jump or fall, Pam said. —The case has been re-opened because a carer from the home has confessed to pushing the girl.
Tash leaned into her mother and cried over the girl who had been like a sister while Pam patted and soothed. The black eye somehow made sense to Pam. The bruised face of the dead girl came together with the face of Tash. Later she stroked the bruise and asked how it happened – and it was simple – Tash explained how she had walked into an overhanging tree branch in the dark.

Sumi eased herself into the single bed in the boarding house where she had been sleeping for near to fifteen years. Stuck to the dingy plaster she had pictures of her family. She would probably not see them again, and yet after today she was not sure it was impossible. She studied the decorations on their skins, patterns painted on for the special days in their lives. Drawing back the sleeve of her nightgown she looked at her own patterns painted for the reunion with Tash. The jewelled tips, the rosebuds, the diamonds: they helped her sleep tonight while Tash and her mother made their amends. She smiled to think of how Tash had spoken out loud and clear with her hands, had never forgotten how to talk with her nanny.

The mehndi tools were packed into the bowl of her measuring scales in the bottom of her wardrobe: the cone and
the needles she used to clean it, the cotton balls and buds, the oils, the packets of finely ground henna and black tea. She had painted none of the loudest birds, screaming peacocks, since the day the household of children had ended. Tonight she questioned her belief in her mehndi. If mehndi could not protect a child, then well might she go down to the wheelie bins and dump her lifetime of believing that the imprint of henna on skin could make a difference.

Pam had spoken of the family curse she believed in, a story set in her mind strong enough to let that young mother give up her baby. But what if, she thought, the mehndi had balanced Pam’s family curse and kept Tash alive? She had to believe in mehndi, she thought. It was in her blood.

She closed her eyes, the tools and henna still packed in the wardrobe. One day soon, she thought, she and Tash would paint the little boy together, dot his fingers with animals and watch him bring them to life.

— Working out what I had to know was like solving a puzzle. But you’ve solved me, not the other way around. I needed to know how to live without a close connection to my mother. How to survive alone.
Can't you see? Serena said. I'm trying not to be alone.

He led her into the lounge room and showed her the images she had put on her walls.

You've filled your home with islands.

Serena had framed this selection of pictures with visions of sea, ocean, water in mind. But as he spoke, she saw that every one of the pictures was from an island she had visited. The one picture with her in it was taken on Skye, at the village of Flodigarry on the Trotternish Peninsula, the north east wing of the island. That beach with its pebbles and boulders had been the beach in her thoughts when she had Marian say her farewell to Skye. She had never known the exact location of Marian's origins. She could have found out, researched until perhaps she found the name of the right village. She had refrained. She wanted Marian to be from Flodigarry.

At one moment, and it was a different moment to the one captured in the framed photograph, she had found herself with her feet rooted to the rocks on that beach, fused to the island; she was the island. Whatever any unseen document may say, whatever the official records of the family past may read, she believed she was descended from that place. That moment had
taken place in the blue light of midnight.

- You’ve travelled the world to find islands. And on the radio, you talk of islands.

  No, she thought. The sea is my personal frequency, my thread through the airwaves.

  He fetched his list of her islands, showing her that he had traced the thread of a different frequency that even she had not heard.

  - I never knew you listened.

  - I thought you’d find it creepy that this flatmate you barely know tunes in like one of those crazy men you’ve mentioned. But I like to hear about the islands. You mention several in a night, and then you might go for a week without mentioning one. You always go back to islands, though. I think you’re comfortable with aloneness.

  He took hold of both her hands and lowered his face to her upper right arm. He kissed the fragmented ring of toothmarks. - You’ve survived. You’ll keep surviving, with or without your family.
She kept grasping one of his hands while she called her mother, not flinching when she heard Pam’s distracted tone, further away than ever, or when Pam failed to ask how Serena had made her way home.

- I just wanted to tell you that I’m okay.

Serena pressed the button to break the connection.

Someone brought him a box with the witch puppet inside. She had not burned. The people at the place where they were keeping him had argued outside in the passage about whether or not he should be given the puppet. He was glad they decided to give her to him. The witch puppet was not even blackened. He took her from the box and cuddled her. No-one was telling him if his Dad was blackened. They all said they were trying to find his Mum in Melbourne and that when she came home he would be told about his Dad.
The mobile was recharged now, and it rang just as Pamela pulled into the airport.

For a few minutes, Tash felt herself being swallowed deep by her mother's superstition. Her son had set the cottage on fire. Burned it to the ground. With his father inside. She could see herself at a funeral. Charred bones to be buried. A coffin nearly as empty as Pamela had described her husband's coffin. And her boy. Her abandoned boy. The caller went on. Her de facto was lucky. He had woken up and managed to drag himself from the cottage alive. It seemed everything in the house had burned except him. Their child was not a murderer. But he had many questions to answer. As did his parents.

- The child will not be taken from you, Pamela said.

Tash believed her.

And, Tash thought, at some point when Pamela had helped her to keep her son and the three of them were together as a family, then Tash would help Serena to come closer. Help Pamela and Serena to forgive one another. She was strong when her mother was near. Strong enough to let in what before had seemed unimaginable.
Serena went to air with a new strong voice in the following weeks. This was the voice Serena had sought throughout her career. The voice exercises had never resulted in this clarity and tone. She heard a voice, her own voice that had fought its way from underground, underwater, underyears.

Yet Marian's voice was absent.

She had a number of instalments that could be put to air. But she had meant to end the story with Marian's arrival on the land, the building of the house, and perhaps a hint of what was to come for the two daughters, children to be buried along with the many others in a pioneers' cemetery.

Now she could flick through the pages of the red journal as though it were only a book. The severed ends of the last pieces of writing would not be reconciled. She had her ancestor giving birth to her first child. She had two versions of the fates of that child and her sister. What could have happened between?

As the conclusion of the NOSTALGIC VOICES promotion neared, she tried to patch together the pieces. She caught glimpses of what could have been, and wrote them into the journal after leaving a block of blank white pages following the last entries.
My girl child comes to her new home, born on the wooden table at dawn, blessed with a shower of dry leaves. Here is Johnann. When she is clean and swaddled, Dugald holds her. I see promise of his being a fine father. Yet this is the beginning and I am wise to the danger of not looking out for change. A life such as mine can turn about faster than a whirling wind.

By late afternoon the beetles in the trees warble, close to deafening the lot of us huddled around the corners of the table. On that tabletop lies the corpse of a dead woman. After coaxing my mother to come to this side of the world for a better life, I find myself with my bairn strapped by rags to my bosom and my mother lying dead before she has been on my land for twenty-four hours. In bearing her namesake, have I perhaps killed by naming? Or is it the truth that nearness to me brings death as though I am
dogged by a curse?

My mother's mourning rags have turned to her shrouds. I kneel by her and weep into those dark garments, and her grandchild weeps also, her wee face pressed into the still flesh of my mother.

She spins, spins. Can I still be seasick, or is this a poisoning of the afterbirth, is this my soul drilling its way to hell underground for my mounting sins? All night she lies spinning under the trees and my baby and I are not to sleep, are only to see the stars brighten over her and light her. I can see myself gathering my skirts and climbing to perch like one of the queer black and white birds at the top of the tree's girth, looking down and seeing her spin into my brain and berate me for my foolishness.

See her bent back straighten and her bones uncurl. She is free of her burdens. The child strapped to my front grows heavier through the night, heavier than the weight of peat cutting my mother's shoulders, until I fancy my bones must groan under whatever she has cast onto me. I reach under her
garments, feel the horned ridge of scar, yet
her flesh does not yield to me. Death has
frozen her hard. Even in death she will offer
me naught comfort.

A house grows from the dirt. We camp for a
long time, the four of us and the baby, but
slowly the house shows first its bones and
then is covered with a thick and hardy skin of
logs and mud. It is a long way from the black
house on Skye, yet our house is strong and
should not yield to weather. Soon the
neighbouring house of John and Esther will
be finished and if good fortune is with us our
families will have their places to thrive and
prosper.

But this was only writing. Serena had lost the trace of the
Marian she had imagined. Soon she had to present her
conclusion to the listeners. Already she knew that the
conclusion would be a goodbye in more than one sense.
He waited for midnight, and switched on his radio. Serena greeted her listeners in the new clear-as-crystal voice. He turned her up loud and went into the lounge room. He held up the map of old Skye. He started work on his gift to her, dragging out his calico groundsheet to cover the carpet. The chairs were pushed against the walls, soft humps under the fabric that he pinned up at chest height. He carried in his toolbox and his tiles. He hung the map under the agate at the window. In the night, the agate’s blue was warm.

Tonight she was a radio star. Her voice was smooth and hot and she had the jokes and anecdotes the listeners loved to hear. The phone flashed all night and she took all of the calls. She flirted with the perverts, talked the suicidals back to life and sent the sleepless into the sweetest dreams they had never had. She was not to be found in the studio. She was on air.

She counted herself down while the NOSTALGIC VOICES promo played.

- Now for the last instalment in the life of Marian. Last you heard, Marian was giving birth to her first child. I meant to
end with her arrival on the land awarded to her in country Victoria, to finish with her voice sounding among ironbarks and gold fever. Instead I have a special ending for this story, one that voices a darker perspective of keeping the past alive.

She opened the red journal and read directly from the pages. The segments were far too long for the allocated time slot, but that was not her concern. She made no corrections, smoothed no edges.

At the end of her shift she travelled through the passages of the radio station as though they were the passages of a brain shutting down in death, spiralling her along tunnels until she reached the exit. She unfolded the two papers that she had carried in a pocket of her backpack for a week. The first paper was a memo from the P.D., summoning her to a meeting at which she was to be told important news about her position. She had heard the rumours. Management wanted automation. A mid-dawn shift with a live announcer was expensive for a low-rating station. The station could pay big money for a celebrity mid-dawner or a themed program such as Love Shack. Or, they could go for automation, paying less money to have an entire mid-dawn program broadcast from an interstate station, with no live announcer on air at Classic Hits. Either way, she would be out of a job. The other paper, a letter, gave her a second escape route.

Dear Serena,
In past months, with an upcoming position in mind, I have listened to announcers from stations across the city. I have tuned into your mid-dawn broadcasts. I like your voice and your manner, but it has been your presentation of the historical diary segments as part of your station’s Nostalgic Voices promotion that has most impressed me. The program I am planning is targeted at women, and will be a documentary and talkback spot to be broadcast in the evening time-slot. I believe that you may be the right person to pilot this program. If you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible.

The letter was signed by the Program Director of the national radio station. She was leaving. She slipped the papers back into her pack, waved goodbye to the breakfast crew through the security camera, and went out into the morning.

She had the taxi driver drop her at Point Ormond, where she had gone on that day when her mother told her she had a sister. She took the journal out of her backpack, balancing its dead weight in her hands. She looked at the closed red covers. She could do it. She could see herself tossing the journal and watching it fly, then float for a minute, the red dye deepening to blood’s colour as it took in the water. The pages would bloat
and swell, and the journal would sink from her view. It would lie submerged, leather skin burst and the sea flaying the paper layer by sodden layer. The seabed would bury the red journal.

She had imagined a cruel life for Marian. Her writing was cruel to mothers and sisters.

She walked to the flat, the journal tucked away in the pack. She knew that merely plunging the body under would not kill what had been written.
The Isle of Skye was in the lounge room.

He stood back while she followed the plumes and wings, her face mirrored in the shards he had arranged to suggest sharp peaks and jagged ridges.

They took off their shoes and stepped over the swimming blue edges of the shore, and they walked the perimeter, feet clinking on glass that could be pebbles, before turning inland.

She asked to see the rest of his mosaic and they left the flat, feet still bare.

Inside the front gate of the university, the mosaic path undulated between two rows of tall buildings. The green tiles of the first feature segment looked to be now scales and now glass. Serena and Joe traced the length of his work, the swirling path with the irregularly placed feature segments. In the middle she saw the great expanse of red glass.

_Somehow I want to put everything into it_, she remembered him saying of the mosaic; _the people, the places. Everything that matters_.

Here in the red section was his pink salt lake. Above, a gap, a neck, joined the red glass to the framework of the last segment. The space had been set with the square-link wire often used to fence paddocks in the Mallee. The island from
their lounge room would be set into that space, connected to
the rest.

All islands are connected, under water, she thought.

He too thought of the island in the lounge room. In the
shattered whole of his mosaic he saw a bloodline, fluid and
unbreakable. They moved close to one another, warm body to
warm body, then returned together to their home.

They sit facing the north east tip of Skye, the Trotternish
Peninsula. She makes up a story set in the village of
Flodigarry, merges a moment from her past travels with an
awake-dream that she is not afraid to tell.

The Northern Lights glimmer, illuminating the sky and the sea
and the satellite islands to a deep blueness.

Her lungs open to the blue air of midnight and she draws
up her arms, weighing, for this blueness has a body like
breathable water. She bends to touch the granite lip of cliff, as
blue as all else.

The sea floats, edges diffused.

A shadow seeps over her. She turns her head, and the
shadow moves to the other side.
She hears the voice sound over the water. A woman with a voice like Serena’s own speaks in an old language.

Serena’s ancestor walks into her mind.

She has searched for the fleshly Marian, thinking she inches closer with the entries written in the red journal. Here the light is enough to show a face, but it is too dark for reading and writing. And here is Marian.

Marian’s rough skirts swing at her calves. She is small, the top of her head coming to Serena’s shoulders. She stands close, looks out to sea, still as mesmerised as her twentieth century descendant. She is a girl of eighteen.

Serena lets Marian walk around her, touch her long hair that hangs free over her shoulders and down her back. For a second, the smaller woman stands in front of her and strokes her face. Marian’s fingers have the texture of water-smoothed rock. The voice sounds until Serena wears it, absorbs it along with the blue light, content to hear its resonance if she is not to understand the meanings of the words.

Marian’s face, and her eyes that are indigo rather than black, slip away into the night.

Serena, her feet on familiar rock, is as light as a swimmer in a blood-warm sea.
Notes


The passage quoted on p. 13 is from Cameron, David Kerr 1979, *The Ballad and the Plough: A Portrait of Life in the Old Scottish Farmtouns*, Futura Publications Ltd, Aylesbury. In the novel I have altered the antiquated spelling *farmtouns* to *farmtowns* to allay confusion.

The passage about Scatha on p. 51 and on p. 288 is based upon several passages from Walker, Barbara G. 1983, *The Woman’s Encyclopaedia of Myths and Secrets*, Pandora, London.

Exegesis:

The Water's Edge Writing
I certify that the thesis entitled:

WATER'S EDGE AND THE WATER'S EDGE WRITING

submitted for the degree of:

PhD

is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis in whole or in part has not been submitted for an award, including a higher degree, to any other university or institution.

Full Name: GAYLENE VELONICA PERRY

(Please Print)

Signed

Date: 7/2/01
It was as if he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller.

Introduction

Open Water

In this exegesis, I explore the nature and role of the exegesis in the current PhD thesis requirements for creative writing* in Australian universities. My exegesis has evolved into an annotated diary of my research processes and approaches, providing progressive documentation of the PhD experience. This documentation is intended to be used as a resource for future higher degree in research (HDR) candidates, supervisors and examiners in creative writing disciplines.

Kevin Brophy writes:

I think that what the supervisor provides to the research student is not instruction, not advice, not even wisdom, but an opportunity to enter into an experience: the experience of taking on a large and complex project in language, thought and feeling

(Kevin Brophy in Brophy & Perry (in press)).

*Throughout this exegesis I use the word creative in relation to its generally accepted connection to the writing of novels and stories, poems, film and play scripts and to other so-called creative arts such as the numerous disciplines of the visual and performing arts. When I use the terms creative arts, creative artist(s), creative writing or creative writer(s) I mean these in connection to the specific activities listed above. In no way do I mean to imply that other types of writing or arts activities are less creative or innovative than those mentioned. Rather I use the terms as a kind of shorthand, but wish for them to be considered under question at all times. Indeed, my specific use of the term creative writing is already parodied by my view of this exegesis as a piece of creative writing despite its (apparently) being neither novel nor story nor poem nor script. I am in agreement with Brophy who, referring to the term creative in 'creative writing', states: It has become a term with a use rather than a meaning -- we think we know what it refers to but we don't make the mistake of giving the phrase a too-literal meaning (Brophy 1998, p. 232).
At this retrospective moment of writing, I can report that my own experience of completing a PhD thesis in the discipline of Professional Writing has been unequivocally positive. In The Water’s Edge Writing*, I detail some aspects of that experience, within the context of discussions about writing and about current issues relating to higher research in the creative arts.

The two components of the thesis: a novel, Water’s Edge and an exegesis, The Water’s Edge Writing, are each intended to stand alone as artworks that in one instance form part of a thesis but in another instance are sites of writing that can be independent of that academic context.

With this in mind, I will now give a brief description of the novel, Water’s Edge, to allow The Water’s Edge Writing to be read without the creative work in some cases.

Water’s Edge has an island-like structure that resounds with the novel’s recurrent island-inspired imagery and themes. The main character, Serena, is a young woman, a midnight-to-dawn radio announcer. She undertakes a radio station project entailing her to write and present a fictional life of one of her ancestors, a woman who emigrated from Scotland’s Isle of Skye in 1854. At the same time, she learns that she has a sister who at birth was adopted out of the family but is now to re-enter the

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*The conventions for citing titles of unpublished manuscripts such as theses usually proscribe that titles be presented in plain text (Dept of Finance 1998, p. 164)). However, for ease of reading, I have used italicised text when citing the titles of my novel, Water’s Edge, and my exegesis, The Water’s Edge Writing. In the case of a creative thesis, I believe such variance to be appropriate: a novel’s title, at least, seems to demand italics, to allay confusion.
scene. The fictional life of the ancestor is moulded by present-day events, and via writing Serena discovers a certain murderous anger that she possesses and the power that accompanies that anger.

At the outset of reading for my PhD, I had conceived the roughs of this novel. Of the accompanying exegesis, I had only an understanding: a knowing that eventually an exegesis must be written and that I wished it to address issues of writing. Now, as I emerge at the end of the process and write this introduction: the final piece to be slipped into the thesis, I see that I have written both a novel and an exegesis that can be read as writing about writing.

My exegesis records the development of two pieces of writing: the accompanying novel and the exegesis itself. It is a working document, referring to my work and referring outwards. I see the exegesis and also the novel as contributing to writing theory, although this should not exclude the work from being other entities at the same time.

The term writing theory and the related yet more expansive term creativity theory have been discussed extensively at the annual conferences of Australia's professional body for writing programs, the Association of Australian Writing
Programs (AAWP), formed in 1996, and within the AAWP's fully refereed journal, Text.*

What is writing theory? Or rather, what could it be? My definition is deliberately broad: that writing theory is contained within *writing about writing itself*. It could include theories of writing such as those by the French post-structuralists Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. It could encompass other theorists who have addressed creative writing, such as the psychoanalytical theorists explored by Brophy (1998). It could include reflexive creative writing (and by this I am addressing a huge range of works, perhaps *all* works, as discussed further throughout this exegesis). Writing about writing could include writers' journals and notebooks and memoirs. It could also include writing about the practical situations for writers such as financial considerations, publishing and publicity issues, and moving on from that, writing and its relations to education, including teaching, learning and higher research.

This last possibility is picked up by Julienne van Loon, stating:

'Writing theory' then, is partly about creating a distinguishable marker for creative writing in the academy... 'Writing theory' for me tends to refer

*Text describes the annual AAWP conference as 'now the most important forum in Australia for the discussion of all aspects of teaching creative and professional writing and of current theories on creativity (Text home page: <www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/>)'
to discourses about writing praxis. Thus 'writing theory' is about approaches to teaching, discussing, documenting, creating and interpreting writing itself (Loon & Dibble 2000).

As mentioned above, I advocate that writing theory could also include any creative writing that in some way addresses writing. Such writing would include overtly reflexive works, but need not be limited to those works. Writing theory could encompass the 'research fiction' discussed by Eva Sallis (1999): work that presents a bona fide body of research material within a fictional context, but the possibilities move beyond such writing. The works of creative writing that we use for what they show us about aspects of writing – Jessica Anderson on parallel narratives, Laurence Sterne on stream of consciousness – could also be called writing theory. Writing theory conceivably may include works that are significant to individual writers. One of the aspects of writing my novel, for example, is as a reference work for myself, a site of learning, a site of research into writing. This is my writing theory, useful to me and possibly to others. The components of this thesis write into the discussions on writing theory at both personal and more extensive levels.
The ongoing discourses of writing theory within the AAWP have included interrogation of the concept of the exegesis in HDRs for creative artists.

The refrain of these AAWP discourses is that an exegesis accompanying a creative work can be one or several of many things.

It seems important to maintain the integrity of the exegesis as being connected with the creative work (whether or not a particular exegesis explicitly addresses the accompanying creative work). Kevin Brophy states:

issues of assessment in creative writing courses must remain a sore point, a place of debate and uncertainty if these courses are to retain some commitment to the unpredictability and open-endedness of creative projects (1998, pp. 242-3).

I wish to apply the spirit of this quotation to the creative work-plus-exegesis model. The structure of my thesis accords with this model, and it is the model used by most Australian universities offering PhDs or MAs in creative writing disciplines. These universities are few: a recent survey showed that of 142 Australian universities, 8 were offering PhD level studies in creative writing, and only 2 offering DCA (Doctor of Creative Arts) level studies in creative writing (Krauth 2000).

In 1998, Brophy wrote of the creative work-plus-exegesis model:
At present many Masters and PhD students from creative arts programmes in Australian universities must complete both their creative projects and an exegesis in order to satisfy university requirements that there be a traditionally recognisable research component in the final thesis. This can then involve multiple supervisors and multiple examiners, and often means that such students produce far more work than those doing standard theses. It seems clear that the question of redefining notions of academic research has been postponed at this level (pp. 217-8).

At my time of writing, in September 2000, the model is still being used: yet it seems that researchers working within the model are redefining its parameters, imploding the boundaries from within by approaching the model creatively. In this sense, researchers are moving on from Brophy's perceived postponement.

If the model is to work for creative artists, then the definition of the exegesis – that component which is currently compulsory for assessment purposes – must be kept open-ended. Putting strict provisos on its content or format may easily quash the innovative possibilities that are being explored in these early stages of the creative thesis’s existence.

In a recent article, Tess Brady (2000) made extensive analysis of what has been published in Text on the subject of the exegesis, and I do not wish to re-cover her ground. Instead
I will briefly mention a selection of thoughts that have been expressed on the plural nature of the exegesis.

Jери Kroll (1999) writes:

At one end of the spectrum, the exegesis might bring to the conscious level what a student has done in a novel or poems. It discusses origins, possible options, explains why certain paths were followed rather than others. It might set the work in a contemporary context, comparing it to that of other writers. The exegesis might explain the creative product’s weaknesses, referring to the student’s developmental stage. At the conceptual end, the exegesis might offer a coherent theoretical appraisal, proving how the student has incorporated theory into practice. It will cite others working in the field, discussing how the student’s approach varies from that of his or her predecessors.

In practice, however, students will produce these components in different ways.

Likewise, Tess Brady (2000) emphasises the possible, the opportunities to be taken:

If we take the exegesis as the accompanying document to a creative work, the need to explain or direct the reading, or illustrate skills in literary analyses, fade from essential components into possible components.

Discussing her own PhD exegesis, Brady (2000) continues with this line of thought, whereby the creativity of the approach is of most significance:
I embraced and developed a model which celebrates the creative, privileging its discourse. The model turns its back on the safety of description and definition. Like the creative product it is not safe, not comfortable, not predictable. And while it might engage with aspects of literature surveys, research methodology and findings, it does so in an open-ended manner, picking and choosing and embracing incompleteness.

Alternatively, Paul Dawson (1997) writes about the possibilities for coupling creative and critical work that may be presented together yet do not necessarily refer to one another, opening up further ideas for the exegesis.

My own first chapter of this exegesis, ‘Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis’, was published in Text in 1998 (Perry 1998), joining the AAWP’s discourse on the subject. In that chapter I suggest a number of different approaches to the exegesis, including the writer’s journal approach, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, ‘Skye Journal: Researching a Novel’.

Finally, Eva Sallis’s writing on ‘research fiction’ (1999) does not touch specifically upon the subject of the creative work-plus-exegesis model, yet her thoughts are applicable to one interpretation of the model: incorporating the exegetical material into the body of the creative work itself rather than presenting a separate creative work and exegesis.
Moving on from these comments regarding a written exegesis, I ask if an exegesis accompanying a work of creative writing must itself necessarily be a work of writing. Could an exegesis be a film or a hyper-textual document including images and animations, for instance? Could an exegesis feasibly be a work of fiction? A poem? I advocate that these are all possibilities for writers who may wish to propose them and argue for them.

At the 2000 conference of the AAWP, held at Griffith University's Gold Coast campus, discussions on the exegesis centred upon guidelines for students, supervisors and examiners. In past years, the main focus was on the creative possibilities for the model. Following on from that it seems that some of the concerned parties are worried about the consequences of creative approaches. What if a student-supervisor team's concept of what an exegesis can be differs greatly from the examiner's concept? I suggest that the existing body of research on the topic of the model could be referred to in guidelines that are made available to all parties. As I have mentioned above, this research shows that the exegesis can be one or several of many things. To help allay confusion, one stipulation could be that whatever approach is taken, the relationship between the creative work and the exegesis should be explained or otherwise clearly indicated at some point of the thesis. One suggestion discussed at the 2000 conference was
that nation-wide standard guidelines could be implemented. However, I believe that if individual institutions have the scope to experiment with guidelines, then researchers may continue to come up with interestingly variant interpretations that will vitalise the body of material coming into existence.

The design of my exegesis, *The Water's Edge Writing*, comprises a series of chapters that have been researched, written and presented as research papers at conferences and seminars throughout the period of researching and writing the accompanying novel, *Water's Edge*. Again, I emphasise that the design has evolved into an annotated diary of research. Such a record is valuable for its mapping of a process. It is not the point of this exegesis to present a specific, thematic line of argument; this would not be possible as the chapters were written at varying stages of the research process and thus are historical documents rather than parts of a single piece of work with a linear development of argument.

The material researched includes some crossing over from the researching of the novel. For example, the reading of novels while writing *Water's Edge*, mentioned in Chapter One and Chapter Three, should also be seen as research for the exegesis. Other areas of research relate to writing theory, as defined above, encompassing readings of Roland Barthes' work,
particularly *Camera Lucida* (1993) and ‘From Work to Text’ (1977a), and Julia Kristeva’s work, particularly ‘Stabat Mater’ (1986), and Kevin Brophy’s work on creativity and institutions of education, particularly *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism, and Creative Writing* (1998). The exegesis also explores writing from Jeanette Winterson, Michael Ondaatje, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Ben Okri, A.S. Byatt, Andrea Goldsmith and Carmel Bird, and draws extensively upon the ongoing discourses of the journal *Text*.

My research papers have been modified to form the chapters of this exegesis. Each chapter was written and revised extensively at particular points of my PhD candidature. Each, apart from this introduction, has been published in academic and professional publications.

Each chapter has a preface written at the end of my candidature in September 2000. These prefaces give context to the chapters by providing presentation and publication details and comments on the relations of each chapter to the others.

The creative work-plus-exegesis model has the power to encompass and to encourage extraordinary, multi-faceted artworks that cross boundaries and constantly create further possibilities for the creative arts. This does not prove that it is the only model conceivable or even desirable, but compiling the
exegetical component of my thesis has been useful to me. It has opened up new genres of writing: a place to experiment with different styles of writing, to combine the academic and critical with the autobiographical and the fictive until all genres are destabilised and in flux. The exegesis has been a space for me to create articles suitable for publication in refereed journals, thus enriching my academic resume and indirectly leading to teaching appointments: a career path that I had in mind from the outset of reading for my PhD. And to reiterate the beginning of this introduction, the writing experience of both novel and exegesis is what I have come to value most about my work within the creative work-plus-exegesis model.

The development of my confidence in tone and style of writing from the first chapter, ‘Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis’, to the last, ‘The Double Life’, is lucidly evident. This may be seen as a testament to the value of the PhD experience.

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Chapter One

Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis:

Preface

This chapter is comprised of the first research paper written for my PhD, at the end of nine months of my candidature. It was presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Australian Writing Programs (AAWP), held at RMIT University in Melbourne in October 1997. The revised paper (Perry 1998) was published in Text, vol. 2, no. 2, October 1998.

I note that the tone of the piece is hesitant and at times naïve. It illustrates the beginning of my research process. At conferences and seminars throughout my candidature I have often heard comments indicating that students find the reading for the exegesis difficult to enter. Students may feel overwhelmed by both a lack of models and guidelines and simultaneously, ironically, by the huge breadth of possibilities to choose from. I see this chapter as documentation of such a phase in candidature and of the movement onwards from that phase.

My interest in the discourses of research in the creative arts began with this chapter. The chapter enters the territory, feeling the way, and emerges with the traces of a number of
ideas and images that will be further developed throughout the exegesis.

I start with an image of writing in the dark, desiring the creativity that takes place from within darkness. I then consider whether or not the exegesis can be compatible with that process of writing in the dark. By the end of the chapter, I now see that I was beginning to recognise the creative possibilities of writing an exegesis, although I was not aware of that recognition at the time of writing the chapter.
Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis

When required to couple a creative piece with a critical exegesis, a postgraduate researcher may be tempted to subvert the notion of the exegesis, to rupture it by slipping in subjective writings. Sometimes I write in the dark, by moon- or street-light. This reminds me of writing myself into a new work, into darkness. I think - is it - of Julia Kristeva's 1983 essay, 'Stabat Mater', which attempts to subvert scholarly writing with a personal text written around, into and through the theoretical material necessary for me. An exegesis may appear to frame or direct the reading of the creative piece, to switch on the overhead light. The student may feel trapped in a space between the impulse to create, when I come, and the institution. This paper considers the misgivings surrounding the exegetical requirement, seeking positive approaches to writing my exegesis?*

The words writing in the dark have multiple meanings for me as a writer of fiction working within a university. They have personal resonances, conjuring up my own environment of inspiration: waking at night, images and ideas flowing on in the

*The sections in bold format can be read as one continuous sentence.
dark. I waver between getting up, switching on the light, and writing before the inspiration dissipates, distorted in sleep and dreams, or in lying still and letting the flow spend itself. I have found the latter most fruitful. Recently, my computer screen was faulty, and as I was in a fertile writing period, I resorted to typing with a blank screen, unable to see my text until I printed it. I wrote a segment that I loved, about two people forming a silent connection in front of a cinema screen. This writing into darkness reminds me of writing myself into a new work. It is an atavistic stage of writing, something originating a long time ago, an immersion in story, in imagination, that at first has little connection with marks on paper.

I am writing a novel as the major component of a doctoral thesis. The other component is a mandatory exegesis drawing upon literary theory that must relate in some way to my novel. The exegesis seems distant from the processes of writing I have just described, an anomaly in my personal concept of creative writing. This enforced requirement is one indication of the contentious position of the creative writer within Australian postgraduate research degrees. Here, I will discuss issues and questions relating to the creative-work-plus-exegesis model, and suggest possible directions for the future of such a model.
Writings

Paul Dawson points out that 'the text produced in a Creative Writing class is not just a “first order” practice available for critical scrutiny. It is already a dialogic engagement with theory, with language, with a range of social and cultural discursive formations' (Dawson 1997, p. 72). However, most Australian universities require a creative work such as a novel to be accompanied by an exegesis when submitted as a higher research degree thesis. The postgraduate researcher's creative text is acceptable only if it includes further treatment by its author in a more traditionally acceptable scholarly form.

Psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva considers the creation of literature to be a rupturing of the semiotic world into the symbolic, or the individual into the social or institutional space (Kristeva 1984, p. 62), and this can be usefully compared to the reception of creative writing in academic institutions.

When I first encountered the exegetical requirement during my honours year, I was attracted to the idea of writing a theoretical piece that had a writerly focus. I thought that to rupture my own theoretical text with creative writing would be a way of maintaining my focus as primarily a writer of fiction. I came across Kristeva's 1983 essay, 'Stabat Mater', a scholarly piece about the cult of the Virgin and other maternal
discourses, with a personal text written around, into and through the theoretical material. It was noted for its physical presentation, with sections in bold and italics cutting into the text. I have used the essay in writing my introductory passage for this paper because Kristeva's essay is an overt example of a hybrid text, and I believe it demonstrates a point by Paul Dawson, about creative writing being used to further privilege theoretical writing over the creative (Dawson 1997, p. 72), which I will come to in a moment.

I now find 'Stabat Mater' unsatisfactory as a model, because the personal text is ultimately subordinate to the scholarly. It is clear from Kristeva's other writing, such as *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), that the personal writing is the interruption into the perceived dominant mode of writing, and not vice versa.

Kristeva claims that the semiotic – the distinctive, the subjective – can only be voiced from within the symbolic – the social, institutional space. For Kristeva (1984, p. 62), in literature, 'what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic'. This appears to place the semiotic in a powerful position, demonstrated by the associated volcanic imagery: rupture, eruption. But, to quote Elizabeth Grosz, for Kristeva, 'Only men occupy this position because only men can acquire a guaranteed unified and stable position within the symbolic order' (Grosz 1990, p. 164). Kristeva's conception of
this feminine rupturing can only be allowed in from the inside, and, for Kristeva, women have no real place there. Feminist theorist Luce Irigaray questions why women’s writing must be seen as rupturing men’s writing, heard only ‘as an undertone, a murmur, a rupture within discourse’ [Grosz 1990, p. 174].

These viewpoints, in the context of creative writing and universities, may now be seen less pressing since many women are writing in numerous genres and forms and indeed many women hold positions in academic institutions. It should also be noted that some contemporary viewpoints of theory question the notion of anyone’s accepting a stable and guaranteed position of power. However, here I am using this problematic material to illustrate a similarly troublesome situation in creative writing disciplines at HDR levels. Specific instances of the application of the compulsory exegesis may cause the creative writer to exist as a hole or rupture in a discipline such as literary studies, cultural studies, textual studies, or communication studies when a creative work-plus-exegesis model is introduced into such a discipline’s HDR structures (As I revisit this chapter at the end of my candidature, I would like to point out that the theory basis of the exegesis now is seen as somewhat looser than in the early stages of the creative work-plus-exegesis model’s use. In the beginning of the model’s application, exegeses tended to be strongly linked to whichever disciplinary areas were offering the model. If the model were
offered within a literary studies discipline at one university, for
instance, then an exegesis at that university would most
usually but not necessarily draw upon literary theory, and if the
model were offered within communication studies at another
university, then an exegesis at that university would usually
draw upon communication theory, and so on. As HDRs in
creative writing have developed, this situation has altered, as
evidenced by the discourses charting the progress of the
model's usage in *Text* and as discussed throughout this
exegesis. Now, exegeses draw upon very broad disciplinary
materials, and the hole or rupture situation that I speak of at
this point has become less of an issue.

I do not wish to unproblematically equate the creative
with the feminine, but it is interesting to compare this
perception of literature as rupture to creative writing in our
universities. The writer can submit a creative piece for
assessment, but this must be presented in a so-called scholarly
framework; it must be accompanied by or include theoretical
writing. Yet most of us now see that all writing is subjective,
and by extension, all writing is fictional, and this makes it
difficult for the literary researcher to continue assuming
superiority over the literary author in a research situation*. 

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*I recognise that from this assertion rises a problematic point. If all writing is fictional, then
perhaps there should be no resistance to the creative writer's being required to submit an
exegesis, as that exegesis may be seen as a creative work that simply falls into a genre variant
to that of the candidate's other creative work. By the end of my PhD candidature I recognised
the creative possibilities of the exegesis. However, as I have argued below in Chapter 3, the*
Paul Dawson writes:

If the breakdown of critical and non-fictional modes as meta-languages, and a rejection of epistemological relationships between these modes and an unquestionable truth, has seen them recognised as also involving 'creativity', this has not evened the intellectual plane between literary criticism and creative writing; it has further promoted the critical subject over the writer of fiction (Dawson 1997, p. 72).

This appears to be well supported, considering that higher degree candidates qualified primarily in literary studies sometimes submit theses that comprise a major creative component. The literary researcher may use creative writing to illustrate theory, such as in 'Stabat Mater', or simply decide to change their focus to creative writing at postgraduate level, despite that researcher having no formal qualification in creative writing or equivalent publication and experience.

Conversely, the researcher in literary studies is never required to produce a creative piece in addition to the main body of the thesis. The student researching contemporary poetry is not asked to write a set of original poems, for example.

Certainly, it may be argued that a creative writer might find writing an exegesis a rewarding experience that will feed into the creative work. Yet the weakness of this argument is compulsary nature of the exegesis remains problematic, perhaps because of the apparent assumption that the genre of exegesis is somehow more reliably truthful and authentically
revealed when the situation is reversed, and the suggestion made that a literary theorist might also find it fruitful to complete a component of creative writing as part of the thesis. While the suggestion has merit, most candidates at higher research degree levels wish to concentrate upon their chosen area of specialty and not necessarily branch out to related modes of writing that may indeed feed into the major component of the work and yet are equally as likely to be distracting.

Conversely, such a reversal indeed may reveal a weakness or an opportunity to pursue in HDRs for disciplines other than creative writing. There is room for more insistence on students' producing creative work (as defined in the introduction to this exegesis) within disciplines such as literary studies, history, cultural studies, philosophy, and even disciplines outside of the humanities. Instances of such crossings-over in genres of writing certainly exist: see the popular histories of Robyn Annear, for example, which show the use of novelistic techniques to colour historical narratives, and see Tim Flannery's works, most pointedly *The Future Eaters* (1994), which includes richly evocative language and poetic chapter titles that vitalise a thesis in the discipline of ecological history. In literary studies, the sub-genre of ficto-criticism is one overt example of the ways rhetorical practices are used within the
writing of literary criticism. However, I do recognise the reasons for why certain discursive practices are more readily accepted by universities, while others are resisted. The historical traditions of university research must be considered, and more recently, increased competition for funding and resources can be expected to affect the attitudes of academics when faced with variant practices and genres. Such resistances do exist and must be acknowledged in any discussion about forms of research that do not fit easily into traditional or current norms in universities.

An argument in support of the exegetical requirement is that the university is traditionally an institution of thought, philosophy, discourse. But in light of contemporary theory such as the postmodern, this type of suggestion is increasingly difficult to justify. The literary work is itself an engagement with thought, philosophy and discourse*. 

To make a critical exegesis compulsory for a creative writer is to privilege one kind of writing over another. Writing about Possession, novelist A.S. Byatt says: 'I tried to find a

* I do not wish to collapse boundaries between genres of writing. I recognise that different types of writing are, to some degree, bound by different generic conventions and outlines, whilst these can be seen as inevitably under question. My argument is not that all writing is somehow the same and therefore suitable for any and every application. Rather, my point is that it is problematic to privilege one type over another, without considering cases by their individual merits.
narrative shape which would explore the continuities and discontinuities between the forms of nineteenth and twentieth century thought’ (Byatt 1991a, p. 6) [my italics]. Discourse presented within a narrative shape need not be less worthy or reflexive than material presented overtly as theory or criticism. Some may point out that a mode of writing such as a novel may be reflexive and yet set out to prove different things than those proven by a work of theory. Yet the creative work-plus-exegesis model, as a compulsory structure, can be dangerous if it does not allow scope for individual projects to be proven by merit: to be shown to be suitable as HDR theses without necessarily requiring exegetical treatment.

As part of the work on my novel, I have closely studied literary texts, many recommended by my supervisors. I have looked to Michael Ondaatje for inspiration on relationships and memory, to Ann-Marie Macdonald for narrative voice, to Toni Morrison on mothers, daughters, and sisters. Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) is an extensive meditation on history, memory, and literature. Its treatment of Herodotus and Kipling weave into the stories of the characters. The describing of the semi-destroyed books that Hana reads and annotates is as advanced an exploration of literature and reading as any to be found in a theoretical essay or thesis. But whether a novel treats literature, history, society, language, psychology, or utter
nonsense, the principle of it being a complex discourse in a particular form remains the same.

Interpretations
So, from the fluid darkness of creative writing, is it necessary to switch on a glaring light in order to write an exegesis? My experiences with honours and postgraduate writing programs have in some ways represented a rude awakening. After completing a Bachelor of Arts with majors in Professional Writing and Literary Studies, I wished to continue developing my writing. The idea of writing a novel under the supervision of a professional author was tempting. Then I discovered the exegetical requirement.

I look to a dictionary and find no satisfaction. Exegesis: ‘explanation or critical interpretation of a text, especially of the Bible.’ (Collins Concise Dictionary, p. 432) The definition goes on to the word’s origins, from the Greek for to interpret and to guide. But my greatest fear of following my novel with an exegesis is that the theory will guide, interpret, or frame the reading of my novel. An author might be expected to see a creative work as successful only if it included everything she wished to address. The reader may then take up the work and read and interpret as they will. But I can imagine my deflation if I were to turn the last page of a novel that had satisfied me, and
then find following an exegesis written by the author and intended to guide, interpret, frame my reading of her novel. One of the requirements of the PhD thesis is that it be of publishable quality, a theoretical clause of course*. But the creative work coupled with an exegesis has no model that I can think of in published works, other than antiquated texts, and certainly not of the kind where the author herself has written the exegesis†.

In the words of Jeanette Winterson:

> It is a strange time; the writer is expected to be able to explain his or her work as though it were a perplexing machine supplied without an instruction manual. The question 'What is your book about?' has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did. (Winterson 1995a, p. 165)

Winterson continues this questioning throughout her essay, 'A Work of My Own'. She makes points, then slips in a one-sentence paragraph: 'But I have said these things in Sexing the Cherry' (Winterson 1995c, p. 169). 'But I have said these things in Art & Lies' (Winterson 1995c, p. 173). She emphasises that her choice of form is sometimes the narrative, and feels

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* See Kroll (1999) for discussion on the publication clause for higher degree theses in creative writing.
† By the end of my PhD candidature, I came to reconsider this point of view. Published works with material of an exegetical nature included could be said to abound in the forms of introductions, prefaces, forewords, afterwords, references, acknowledgments, dedications, etc., and that does not even begin to approach exegetical types of material to be found published separately to works such as novels, in the forms of interviews and articles and essays and memoirs, etc. For the PhD candidate at a similar beginning point of her or his research process, who may be seeking a model to guide the way inwards to the possibilities, I suggest one such model could be the novel Cassandra (1984) by Christa Wolf, with its comprehensive and insightful explorations of the work as written by Wolf.
bewildered at being asked to express, essentially to repeat, her ideas in other forms.

Other writers may comment that they *enjoy* revisiting novels that they have written, building further layers upon their works. Yet Winterson's point is worth reiterating: that the writer should have a choice about whether or not to revisit in forms other than the original form of writing.

If we recognise that thought appears in numerous guises, including fiction as theory and theory as fiction, then it follows that a mandatory exegesis can be superfluous, and even misleading, as it may falsely indicate a level of authenticity and a relationship to scholarship that is in fact highly contentious. An exegesis following a work of fiction might be read as a further layering of fiction, and if this is the case then it would seem that the purpose of the exegetical requirement is defeated.

Some postgraduate candidates include the compulsory theoretical component in the creative work itself. The acceptance of this practice suggests that only a particular kind of creative work, a kind that overtly addresses literary theory, can validly stand alone as research without exegetical treatment. A work such as Byatt's *Possession* (1990) might have been acceptable as a thesis. It explores the cult of the author, playfully comparing the literary researcher to a shonky
spiritualist, and the literary archivist to someone obsessed with possessing artefacts as though these might transmit talent via osmosis. The novel engages at a complex level with theory and criticism. Another example could be Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* (1981). However, literary writing of many kinds can and does address literary theory and literature in various ways that do not necessarily include the use of obvious themes and devices as do the works just mentioned.

I believe there is room for a voluntary component of theory. It may not be appropriate to follow the creative work with the theoretical component, or to have the two bound together within the same volume, or to call the component an exegesis. Such a component could hopefully be a creative work in its own right, rather than a static reiteration of what has already been said*. The writer could turn to advantage one of the problems with the requirement: the lack of definition or explanation. The definition of the exegesis has never been made clear to me. During my honours year, I asked every academic I came across to explain it to me. The recurring reaction was a turning away, a mumbling, occasionally a frank admission that *nobody really knew*, and to this day I have never been given a clear answer as to the definition, purpose and proposed models

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*This exegesis as a whole illustrates that by the end of my PhD experience, I saw the exegesis as something far livelier than that described here. My observations at this early point of the experience testify to the scarcity of resources and models available at that time, something that largely has been rectified now due to ongoing discussions and publications on the topic of the exegesis.*
for the exegesis. The writer might create her own interpretation: a work that is useful for the writer and for teaching and practicing writing in general.

Directions

I return again to Paul Dawson's paper, which argues that the discipline of Creative Writing developed from within Literary Studies, and disputes 'the assumption that “Creative Writing” is a practice which exists in the public sphere and has somehow been annexed by the academy' [Dawson 1997, p. 72]. These comments are problematised by the existence of programs in Professional Writing, where links to publishing are paramount. Such courses perhaps reflect the increasingly vocational face of universities rather than being entities that have clearly developed from academic disciplines.

Dawson appears to be referring to the creative writing course that is part of, or is based upon, a wider degree in English. In my undergraduate degree, large numbers of mature-age students were enrolled; most of us had applied specifically for courses in Professional Writing. There was an expectation of tuition by professional authors and a primary focus on writing. A major in literary studies was not compulsory, although some argue that it should be, in undergraduate studies, in order to expose students to a wide range of literature. At postgraduate
level, the Professional Writing major appears to be engulfed by Literary Studies, as evidenced by the enforced component of literary theory or criticism. But at this level, a student needs to have the option of reserving every precious word of the thesis for creative writing. The student should be able to specialise, just as a student of history and languages, for example, may choose one area, or combine both, in postgraduate research.

As education becomes more expensive and job and publishing opportunities continue to be scarce, students are making specific demands of what their money is buying. Undertaking a Professional Writing program is no guarantee to publication, but students may approach such a course with different aims from those of a student in a degree of English that encompasses creative writing, and from a student primarily of Literary Studies. Whatever has been the position of creative writing within universities in the past, what matters is the situation now and in the future.

We move into the realm of theorising writing.

The changing realities of writing and the writing life demand continuing discussion, and this may be incorporated into theses by creative writers.

Susan Sontag wrote of Roland Barthes' work: 'Writing registers new forms of dramatic stress, of a self-referring kind,
writing becomes the record of compulsions and resistances to write. (In a further extension of this view, writing itself becomes the writer's subject) (Sontag 1982b, p. xv). Writing about writing itself may be useful for an author. For example, the cult of the author continues to grow, and ideas about the death of the author come under challenge as readings and festivals abound. Recent debates over the moral rights of screenwriters are another example of the growing public voices of authors.

Writers are expected to have public relations skills, to be able to present readings and talks. Readers are interested in the life and methods of the writer. Whether or not we agree with the promotion of the author as commodity, the discussion of these and other writing-related issues is important. Writing courses will need to continue addressing these concerns, and some writers may choose to place such discussions in higher degree research.

The following examples of approaches to writing theory represent starting points or inspirations for writers seeking models for their exegetical higher degree work.

Film-maker and theorist Trinh Minh-ha provides an example of writerly theory in the introductory chapter to Woman, Native, Other (1989), interspersing reflections on
creative writing with theoretical concepts about Third World women.

A writer's journal might be used as a place for conceiving writing theory. I wonder about the idea of a thesis that is part creative text and part writer's notebook. A published example is Beverley Farmer's *A Body of Water: A Year's Notebook* (1990), partly the writer's journal, with completed and developing works appearing throughout. It contains no theoretical material in the current scholarly sense. But a writer's journal could be compatible with the aims of the creative work, and would contribute to writing theory by providing original reflections on writing and the writer's self.

The subjective essay is increasingly popular with creative writers, and could be a suitable model for a variation of the exegesis. Fine examples can be found in *Columbus' Blindness* (ed. Pybus 1994), the volume of winning essays from *Island* magazine's essay competition. Well-known writers continue to publish essays, many of which discuss writing itself. Ironically, Ben Okri, in an essay entitled 'The Joys of Storytelling III', writes: 'The great essays on storytelling are done in stories themselves' (Okri 1997a, p. 123). The story on storytelling is as valid a discourse as the essay or thesis on storytelling, and some writers will ultimately find one form more satisfying than another. And if we consider the history of storytelling, it appears that what we usually think of as creative forms have
been used to analyse cultural production for much longer than so-called scholarly forms.

While reading Robert Dessaix's *Night Letters* (1996), I was entertained by the fictional footnotes supposedly written by an editor and archivist. I was reminded of the World Wide Web, of the use of hot links to connect a net-surfer to different sites according to their interests. This could be a model for someone who wished to write a creative piece and then create footnotes or hot links that led somewhere else, perhaps to other kinds of writing. Interesting reflections can occur within a work that includes so-called scholarly features - footnotes, cross-references, annotations - in fictional forms. Another example is Carmel Bird's novel, *Red Shoes* (1998a), produced in both book and multimedia CD formats. The first-person voice of the main narrative also narrates the footnotes or hot links, resulting in a playing on the notion of footnotes as traditionally being a reliable and truthful feature in writing. When creative writing incorporates such features, hierarchies of authenticity between various kinds of writing are immediately destabilised. However, if such devices were used only to make a creative work suitable for assessment, then the work might resemble Kristeva's eruptions from within.

I agree with Paul Dawson that there is space for critical work that does not necessarily relate to the writer's own creative piece (Dawson 1997, pp. 77-8). Yet to deliberately place a work
that calls itself critical or theoretical alongside a work that calls itself creative can produce provocative dialogues between those works, and this is a point that a creative writer working within a higher degree research model might keep in mind.

Part of my own exegesis involves tracing the genealogies of my novel. I reflect upon the writing of the novel in the context of writing experiences and of other works that have contributed to its development, leading into a wider discussion about the situations of creative writing and writers within academic institutions. While such a treatment may still frame the reading of my creative work to some extent, I am attempting to turn the creative work-plus-exegesis model upon itself and use my position as a writer working within the model to make observations about the model and to suggest possible alternatives.

The concept of the exegesis needs to be reshaped until it is more compatible with the creative component of the thesis, and assessment of whether or not a compulsory exegesis can be enforced justifiably. But with imagination, an optional theoretical component can be used powerfully by a creative writer. In reflection of this, I again quote Jeanette Winterson:

> the most powerful written work often masquerades as autobiography. It offers itself as raw when in fact it is sophisticated. It presents itself as a kind of diary when really it is an oration (Winterson 1995b, p. 105).
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Chapter Two

Skye Journal: Researching a Novel:

Preface

'Skye Journal: Researching a Novel' was written in August of 1998 and was presented at a seminar for staff and postgraduates of the School of Literary and Communication Studies at Deakin University on September 9, 1998. A shortened version of this chapter was published in Write On, the newsletter of the Victorian Writers’ Centre (Perry 1999-2000).

'Skye Journal' continues on from 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis' by focusing on the connections between writers' journals and the writing process. I experiment with the idea of art being a site of research while sites of research may be viewed as art. 'Skye Journal' specifically addresses some of the processes of research used in my writing of Water's Edge. The chapter moves on from the focus on the exegetical component of creative arts higher research that is shown in 'Writing in the Dark', beginning to identify concerns with wider research issues and introducing topics to be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, 'writing/research/writing'. I approach a number of questions in the process of moving from negatives to positives in my view of
higher research for creative artists.

The research and writing period that the chapter refers to came early in the development of *Water's Edge*. The experiences and topics discussed in the chapter pre-empt developments that would emerge in later drafts of the novel. For instance, I describe an experience that I had during a research trip to the Isle of Skye: the discovery of a house that reminded me of a certain house from my own childhood. This experience was later developed into an experience had by the novel's main character, Serena. Also, this character was given a Skye journal of her own, a late development in the novel's life. In earlier drafts, Serena's travel to Skye took place at the end of the narrative. Eventually I decided that this made the novel tail-heavy. In the last drafts, I made Serena's travel happen in the beginning; in fact I placed the travel before the moment of the narrative's uptake. I relied on the use of a journal to facilitate Serena's drawing upon her impressions of Skye.

I see the Skye journal that I kept during my own research-travel in the one instance as a working research document. The Skye journal is a component of an archive, a layer of the existence of *Water's Edge*. The point I am making in this chapter is that as writers we may value the artefacts of our writing processes and recognise that they can be tools of our trade and simultaneously can be artworks within themselves.
This chapter is included since it describes an important link in my processes of research and writing during my PhD candidature. It illustrates examples of writing as research: the physical processes of drafting, revising, carrying out ethnographically informed fieldwork. It also explores one example of a way in which a writing/research tool, in this case a journal, can become an intrinsic part of the final writing product. In addition, I see the chapter as being valuable to other candidates and their supervisors in that it details fieldwork specific to a creative writing project: this may assist others to form methodologies for their own projects.
Skye Journal: Researching a Novel

Journal

I have been to Edinburgh and have driven up through Scotland. Only now that I have arrived on Skye do I feel compelled to begin this journal. I have not entered Marian's mind (or have I?) but I have entered a different realm of the writing of my novel.

In May of 1998 I travelled to the Isle of Skye, an island that is part of the Inner Hebrides off the upper western coast of Scotland. The purpose of the travel was to research sections of my novel. The journal that I kept was bought in Australia especially for the purpose of keeping my impressions of Skye. Later I saw the completed journal as being set out in postcard form. The entries were epigrammatic, a sparse record, a rough of a writing landscape that had yet to be fully realised. While words, phrases and images from the journal do appear in the final versions of the novel, the remains of the journal hover over it: meta-writing.

I ask you to imagine the Skye journal's location in the novel's existence as similar to part of a hyper-textual document
or perhaps an old encyclopaedia with clear film plates overlaying one another. With a click of a mouse or a flick of rustling film, another view of the novel’s artefact is revealed. I see the journal as a view into the novel’s memory rather than into its genealogy. The Skye journal is intrinsically part of the novel’s life. Fractions of my own Skye journal have been worked into the novel from beginning to end, and it pre-empts the keeping of another Skye journal written by the novel’s main character.

Perhaps the first kind of research we think of in relation to a work of art may also be the most problematic within academic settings. I call it witching research: obscure facts and figures chased up by a novelist, for instance*. For Water’s Edge¹, I have researched numerous aspects of nineteenth century Scotland, migration, shipping, Celtic mythology, geographical and legendary material about islands, the gold-rush periods of Victoria, and radio announcing. For some works this research can be enormously extensive and in addition to contributing to literature, the research may contribute to bodies of historical or

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* This same type of research is labelled ‘bowerbird’ research by Tess Brady (2000), and ‘woolsgathering’ by Kevin Brophy (1999a) using a term borrowed from Doris Lessing.

¹ In the original research paper version of this chapter, the novel’s working title, Skin Island, was used. However I have changed this to the final title, Water’s Edge. I include this note to prevent confusion as the late arrival at a final title is discussed in the Conclusion, ‘The Double Life’.
cultural research. But the idiosyncratic nature of such research makes it difficult to assess. A writer necessarily takes a subjective view of the material consulted and manipulates the material at will. Of course, subjectivity and manipulation are common and probably essential to disparate contemporary types of writing other than the literary*.

Another area of research for a novel can be the consulting of cultural sites. Other novels are an obvious example, but the research may take in a number of media, such as film, theatre, paintings, sculptures, perhaps a comic strip or a work of architecture.

Post-structuralist theory suggests that any writing contains all writing ever written, bringing to mind the fantastical image of a writer sitting back and letting it all flow in

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*I recognise that this witching research is similar to the processes of perhaps all kinds of human research. All research projects can be said to begin with an intangible moment, a kind of hunch or fascination. The researcher then ranges about, with the scope of ranging dependent on the project. I do not claim that what I call witching research is unique to creative works, but rather I am exploring some ethnographically informed processes of research relating specifically to creative writing. I extend this point to an analogy with this exegesis as a whole. The journey through the PhD process that is described in this exegesis shows an arc that is not particular to a creative writing PhD: it could be said to reflect many different PhD experiences. Yet, since I am one of the first candidates to complete a creative writing PhD in Australia, my experiences – with specific reference to creative writing – could be useful for future candidates. Likewise, my exploring of witching research that is specific to a creative writing project could be useful to the same audience.
with the hope that the pieces will form themselves into an accidental masterpiece. The reality is that cultural research and awareness brings richness to writing. In the words of Jeanette Winterson: 'A writer uninterested in her lineage is a writer who has no lineage' (Winterson 1995c, p. 172). For Water's Edge, I have found useful Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace (1997) partly a migration story of a young woman moving from Ireland to Canada, for its use of an historical voice, Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient (1992) for connections between landscape and memory, and Krzysztof Kieslowski's film La Double Vie de Veronique (1991) for thematic material and imagery.

The kind of research that I wish to discuss in detail within the bounds of this paper is writing as both a process and a site of research.

Journal

Portree. Already – a full moon over the
harbour. Low and translucent – tissue paper –
above the Cuillin hills. Large seabirds – gulls
– squawking over a slatted wooden box
bobbing in oil-slicked water. Crazy man and
his cobalt and tangerine boat – 'Don't stay too
long – look what’s happened to me – my boat’s a floating asylum’.

For my research trip to the Isle of Skye, the Arts Faculty of Deakin University granted me a small Postgraduate Travel Scholarship. The scholarship application form was flexible in its wording, allowing me to tell the whole truth about the nature and purpose of my research. This faculty-level experience contrasts with suggestions by Stephen Knight that changes made to the Australian Research Council’s (ARC) policies earlier this decade could lead to a response of ‘hostages and cunning’ (1989b, p. 461). Some researchers would be forced to falsify funding applications in order to work on projects that were difficult to define and explain in their early stages.

I believed in the planning stages of my trip that I would be performing tasks mainly relating to my witching research. I needed to acquaint myself intimately with the landscape, atmosphere and people. I would visit museums of island life, seeking knowledge of nineteenth century housing, furniture, clothing, implements, and ways of life.

Other experiences that may happen to a writer while researching are harder to value. The research writes into the writing. The discovery of a certain plant, the view of a plane of light on a rock-face, a dream emerging from a face in a
photograph, a tale told by a local: these crucial moments can change the shape of a piece of writing. They may clinch a storyline, or give a piece meaning that transforms it from one kind of story to another. This can happen in an exotic location or in the writer’s kitchen. But the writer needs to follow where the piece appears to lead. This is not easy to explain to an administrative committee.

When I left for Skye, I had written drafts of around forty thousand words of the novel. I did question at one point whether it was necessary to visit Skye. I thought not. Part of my interest as a writer is in memory, and the ways people re-imagine the past and create their own versions of what they do not know. I, along with my main character, had been imagining aspects of Skye for some time. Could I complete the novel by continuing to imagine the island and not necessarily go there? My own rigour as a writer made me decide to go. I wished to know more than my character. And both my research and my novel benefited from my completing the earlier drafts before I went to Skye: I was able to share with my character the imagining of a place unseen.
Journal

By day Skye is earthy. Even the sea – the hills reflect red tones onto the water. By night Skye is blue. Only blue. All blue.

The journey to Skye brought more than I anticipated. Along with the added dimensions it brought to my novel, I found myself thinking further about writing and research.

My first impressions of Skye inspired awe. The landscape is striking and overwhelming. I knew this from books and photographs, but these did not prepare me for the physical experience. The island is close to the mainland, an easy swim across the narrows in some places. But once on the island, I tended to forget this proximity. The rock-forms characteristic of Skye, epitomised by the Cuillin hills which loomed over me wherever I stood, and the many peninsulas or wings (the Vikings called Skye the winged isle) mean that the villages are remote from one another. Several times, I crossed from one side to another, a distance of about fifty miles, and saw no more than three other vehicles on the long, winding, single-track road.
Journal

I feel at home here. But sad. Similar to how I felt when I visited Tasmania's Port Arthur and saw the faces of the convicts in frames on the stone walls. Skye is permeated with the memory of death and suffering.

The omnipresent harshness of the landscape brought me a realisation about what I had already written. A grisly catalogue appears in the novel: a collective of people in Serena's family and ancestry who have died violent or unnatural deaths. This catalogue essentially belongs to Serena's mother. As I looked at the sheer cliffs and ridges, saw the trees embattled by wind, and went to museums and learned of Skye's part in the bloody highland histories, I saw the aptness of the death catalogue. Serena's mother is closely connected to her ancestry. It made sense for her to keep a list of death-lore close to mind. This is an example of the prescient nature of writing. The writer's mind often puts the clues together long before she becomes conscious of the connections. That hypothetical and hyper-textual document mentioned earlier, the encyclopaedia with clear overlays, gradually becomes visible to her, layer by layer. The research process and the writing - like landscape and its associated memories - exist simultaneously yet the intricacies
of both are not necessarily visible at the same time and in the same place.

Towards the end of the trip, I went to a museum that was actually a traditional black-house or crofter's house that had been set up exactly as it had been in the previous century. I stooped to walk through the front doorway, then stopped with shock. I felt that I had walked into a moment of my own childhood. My great-grandmother had lived in a small house originally built by ancestors from the Scottish highlands. Everything in that house was old, but I had not realised how old. The interior and furnishings of that house were replicated here in the black-house. The furniture, the lamps, the kitchenware, the framed portraits were very similar. There was even an elderly woman rocking in a chair by a smoky fire, just as my great-grandmother had done years ago.

I could now write with confidence about the kind of house that Marian lived in when she migrated to Australia. I felt that I had been to her house, had touched things that might have been hers. I had told myself not to expect too much from Skye as it would have changed greatly in a hundred and fifty years. But when I saw how the landscape and climate discouraged physical change, and when I entered the black-house, I understood that it was possible to re-enter the past.
Journal

I am tracing the island's interior. Glad to set the images into my blood. I feel my way over the land. I hear hammering in the distance – renovation, construction – yet it has a tribal tone. Heartbeat.

Like Serena, I have ancestors who originated from Skye: a branch of my family came from the village of Portree. But I was not looking for traces of my ancestors as I travelled. I felt no particular affinity with Portree. Rather, I was attuned to the traces of my fictional characters, of their origins, of the places that rang with their familial memories.

On the north-east of Skye's Trotternish Peninsula, I found my historical character Marian's home. I knew it was hers at midnight, when the Northern Lights turned everything a glorious, shimmering blue. The line between the sea and the sky was indiscernible. I felt uncomfortably close to both my main characters at that moment. I wanted to shake something off, as though another skin had draped over me.

I felt that I was close to being a fiction contributing to my own work when I stood in that blue light. Yet the entire writing experience could also be seen as a fiction that I, as the writer, am creating. Likewise, with that click of the mouse or flick of
the transparent film, the research can become the fiction and
the fiction can become the research.

*Journal*

*A walking path peters out. A family history*

*peters out.*

I believe that such experiences of writing point to intrinsic
connections between writing that is often separated by labels
and categories: the so-called fictional and factual, the so-called
creative and theoretical. Part of a writer's work is to continually
write into writing, to rigorously experiment with and test writing
itself. An essay by Roland Barthes, entitled 'From work to text'
(1977a) comes to mind. Barthes is writing of the tensions
between a work: a physical, definitive object such as a book on
a shelf, and a text: an entity that cannot be touched or held. He
writes: 'the citations which go to make up a text are
anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*’ (Barthes 1977a,
p.160). I wish to test the significance of the phrase *already read*
for the practical act of a writer writing.

There is a sense in writing that each piece is writing itself
long before the writer catches up: *already written*, then, or
*already writing*. But perhaps the experience of catching up
with one's own story challenges Barthes' theory. Rather than linking into the *already read* for a moment in time, the writer may be producing *new* writing. That is, what the writer believes herself to have found pre-existing in her writing may be an illusion: the writer could have written herself into a new place. I compare this to my novel's main character who attempts to rewrite history but in fact writes the present and future.

I think of an anecdote related by a character in a novel by Beverley Farmer. This character speaks of lyrebirds introduced to Tasmania fifty years earlier. Lyrebirds were not native to Tasmania. A trait of lyrebirds is that they imitate the calls of other birds. But, according to Farmer's character, after numerous generations of lyrebirds have lived in Tasmania, the descendants of those first transported birds continue to mimic the calls of birds found only on the mainland (Farmer 1992, p. 199). The birds' ancestors have passed on the calls of birds they have never heard, in a way that makes me think of the passing on of family and cultural memories. In this story of lyrebirds – we do not know if it is fiction or fact – we can find something of fiction-writing. Aspects of a particular story can be found in the writer's mind, but are too complex and hybrid to be traced or catalogued. Yet in writing, the aspects are reproduced, and have particular meaning for the writer at a given moment. They are added to as the writing progresses. Old and new material converge, continually appearing as
instantaneous sites of new writing, alive in the present tense yet simultaneously impregnated with the past.

Journal

Last night I dreamed of a dust-faced man.
The plains of his face were old but smooth rather than wrinkled. Think of old leather.

Brittle and taut. Dusty.

My early drafts of Water's Edge were written in the first-person voice. Shortly before I left for Skye, I came to a point of writing from where I could not seem to move on. The problem did not affect the historical stream, which was written in a different first-person voice to the remainder of the novel. I kept working on my first-person historical voice, while experimenting with the present-day stream. I wrote a few sequences from a third-person perspective, and found that my moment of so-called writers' block was over. The narrative was vitalised by the new point-of-view that contrasted with the historical voice. Also, the changes immediately solved several other problems in the draft.

Writing itself constitutes a major part of researching a novel, and this is often overlooked in discussions about writing and research. And writing is an intrinsic part of the research.
process in a creative writing PhD: the writing becomes research, at once art and theory.

What I am referring to here is one aspect of the research that a writer undertakes during the processes of her work. Such research involves both the craft and the art of writing. For example, as mentioned above, I had completed drafts of the novel before travelling to Skye, including those drafts that experimented with first person voices. I suggest that this physical process of writing, revising, crossing out, adding in, putting the piece away, taking it out again, playing with the components, redrafting, is a large part of the work of writing; in the case of an HDR candidate, such activities may fill a large amount of the candidate's research time. In addition to the consulting of other resources – to library research and the witching research already mentioned – the physical work of writing itself can be considered part of the writer's research work.

Journal

Today the weather changed. Skye was the misty isle. A thousand ghosts free-falling.
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_**La Double Vie de Veronique (The Double Life of Veronika)**_

(motion picture) 1991, Sideral Productions/Tor Production/Le Studio Canal Plus, Director Krzysztof Kieslowski, Screenplay Krzysztof Kieslowski, Krzysztof Piesiewicz.


Chapter Three

writing/research/writing:

Preface

This chapter, ‘writing/research/writing’, was written in the later months of 1998, the second year of my PhD candidature, and was presented at the AAWP conference of 1998, held at the University of South Australia, Adelaide. The paper was then published in the Journal of Australian Studies (Perry 1999).

The chapter further develops the points made in the two preceding chapters by exploring a wider context for creative arts research. The chapter places the discussion within the larger discourses of higher research in the humanities and of higher research in general. I comment upon recommendations made in the report Research in the Creative Arts, authored by Dennis Strand (1998). I extensively discuss relations between creative artworks and research, advocating the considering of writing itself being valid as higher research.

At that point of my PhD research, drafts of both thesis components were well advanced. I had identified the directions of my exegesis and had discovered that it could be a useful and dynamic piece of writing that was indeed compatible with the type of writing experience I described in the introduction to
Chapter One, 'Writing in the Dark'. I understood that I would use the exegesis not only to record details of my writing processes, but also as a location to develop and experiment with theory about writing and about writing within HDR structures. Thus began a very productive stage of writing. Early, exploratory drafts of both components were finished, and I then began the finetuning. Perhaps I also began the risk-taking. I think of the early drafts of a piece of writing as dangerous, moving out into the territory that is frighteningly devoid of maps or familiar landmarks. Yet for me the most thrilling time of writing is in the latter stages: when a writer is confident enough to take possession of the territory and to etch her marks into its surfaces.
I will begin with a story that may be read as fact or fiction.

An arts faculty of a university recruits a group of writers to teach several different kinds of creative writing on the basis of their professional experience and publication records in those areas. At an induction session, the Head of the School in which they are to work informs them that they will be expected to produce research while employed by the university. This research, the Head continues, would not include creative writing, such as novels, as they would do that in their own time anyway.

Mention the nexus of the creative arts and research to any group of creative arts academics and you will almost certainly meet with someone who has a story to tell, a tale or anecdote about an academic snub, a misconceived comment made by a colleague, a funding application disregarded. This situation may be familiar to many humanities researchers who have similar stories to tell, yet in the case of the creative artists, unfortunately their humanities colleagues are often the ones making the snubs or misconceived comments, a dog-eat-dog scenario that is productive for no-one.

My opening tale brings to mind a fragment from Stephen Knight's article on the under-valuing of certain kinds of humanities research, where he mentions education in the nineteenth century, stating: 'English literature had never been taught before: the young
gentlemen could read that for themselves' (Knight 1989a, p. 783).

Schools of thought do change over time, and Knight is right to point out that it does not benefit any discipline to have a short memory or to be insular and to overlook common elements in the ongoing difficulties being experienced by numerous areas of scholarship.

To explore the links between creative artworks and notions of higher research is to enter hazardous territory. The terrain is nebulous and largely uncharted, but its peculiarities share similarities with those of research across the academic disciplines that do not fit easily into the traditional paradigms of higher research and therefore have met with difficulties in attracting kudos and resources.

It may be generally accepted that a novel or a poem or a symphony or a sculpture can be valued for its research output, for its contribution to scholarship in its relevant discipline and further afield. The work may also exist as other entities simultaneously, just as a treatise in literary theory such as one written by Roland Barthes or Julia Kristeva may be read as academic discourse and at the same time read as a work of art. But such acceptance often appears to be swiftly disregarded in discussions of funding and accreditation within Australia's universities.

In this chapter I discuss approaches to the contentious relations between the creative arts and higher research in this country, which were further complicated in 1997 with more changes being made to the Department of Employment, Education, Training
and Youth Affairs' (DEETYA) [now called the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs or DETYA] Composite Index publication categories. Focusing on creative writing, this chapter identifies creative works as sites of research that are under-valued as contributions to bodies of knowledge. Connections between crises in the creative arts and broader concerns with current research paradigms are explored, and the chapter suggests a challenge for research funding and administrative bodies.

In 1998 a report funded by DEETYA, and authored by Dennis Strand, *Research in the Creative Arts*, suggested that 'The question of what is research in the creative arts is one that has special significance in Australian universities today but little significance elsewhere' (Strand 1998, p. 31). Strand indicates that the question arises mostly in response to local funding crises. This assumption misses the point that definitions of research in the creative arts are linked to wider developments in contemporary research that may indeed be of global interest. I intend to discuss such developments throughout this paper.

I suggest two main ways for creative arts researchers in universities to move forwards:

1. Continue demystifying research activities in the creative arts, identifying ways to educate those from other academic areas and from funding and administrative bodies about the validity and value of our research and about our specific funding requirements;
2. Link in with larger debates, possibly establishing a wider base of support.

**Finding Funding**

In Australia, major problems with funding for research activities couched in artworks themselves rather than critical or interpretative work about the creative arts appear to have arisen following the introduction of the Unified National System, when creative arts courses from institutions such as Colleges of Advanced Education, with strong vocational interests, were amalgamated with university courses that had long-standing traditions in producing research (Strand 1998, p. 69).

For university departments such as English or Literary Studies, this meant existing staff had to share already scant research funding with the incoming staff from other institutions who had been teaching subjects such as Creative or Professional Writing and who were likely to be practicing professionals with recognised achievements in these areas: for example, they were established novelists or poets or playwrights in addition to their academic roles.

In turn, the incoming creative arts academics were expected to produce research, like their university colleagues, in order to prove their productivity, and to gain access to funding and to working

*Statistics show that the introduction of these courses has had little impact on funding being awarded by the major funding bodies for higher research (Strand 1998, p. 68).*
conditions such as reduced teaching hours to allow them to work on their research activities, and to career advancement opportunities.

When poets working within a higher education setting publish volumes of poems, they may consider that within that setting poetry should be counted as valid research output relating to their discipline. But, echoing the policies of major funding bodies, the university may consider the poetry to be instances of professional practice or incidental achievements rather than research activity. The university may direct that an essay about poetry published in a refereed journal is a more valid mode of producing research than a book of poetry. Currently the style or content of the poems is not even considered in such a scenario*.

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*In 2000, following the writing and publication of this chapter, DETYA made some changes to the Research Quantum regulations. Since this chapter is now an historical document, it is beyond the scope of this footnote to extensively discuss the changes, however I direct the reader onwards to an excellent article that does address the changes and their possible consequences: 'Creative work and the Research Quantum', by Andrew Taylor (2000). I include the following portions of the Taylor article to indicate the nature of the DETYA changes:

'a significant change has now been adopted by DETYA, which is that 'Major Written or Recorded Original Creative Works' be included in the Composite Index. These would include novels, published playscripts, books of poetry, as well as substantial works in other artforms. This is a real breakthrough, in that it recognises that the Creative Arts is a genuine domain of research ... (Taylor, 2000).
The Research Quantum is one of the ways annual research output by universities is measured. Points are awarded for eligible research entered in the Composite Index. Individual universities' performances in the Composite Index determine the allocation of the Research Quantum: a percentage of funds paid by DETYA to universities.* When preparing the Research Quantum DETYA uses the following Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition:

Research and experimental development comprises

creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in

A second possible good news item is DETYA's proposal to widen the acceptable categories of research funding to include such sources as the Australia Council (this has been lobbied for energetically for some years), State Arts Ministries, etc. But it is impossible at present to determine the impact of this, as many previously ineligible sources of research funding are also recognised with respect to other disciplines. While the Creative Arts will undoubtedly gain something in dollar terms, they may ultimately still be at the bottom of the heap. As with ECU's research performance, they may be advancing, but everything else may be advancing too, and possibly faster. At this stage, figures are not available to determine what this means. Nonetheless, both DETYA initiatives signal that the Creative Arts are becoming accepted as a research area with validity equal to the Humanities and Social Sciences, as well as other traditional academic disciplines' (Taylor, 2000).

* For an excellent and comprehensive explanation of the workings of the Research Quantum, refer to Strand (1998, pp 74-7).
order to increase the stock of knowledge, including the knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications

(Strand 1998, p. 32). [my italics]

So far most debates coming out of the creative arts sectors have approached such a definition by demonstrating ways in which research in the creative arts fits the definition and by pointing out that the validity of that research should be no more contentious than interpretative or theoretical work being done in areas such as literary or cultural studies. But note the use of the term 'creative work', as a similar term is used with different intent in other DETYA literature. For example, in the guidelines for publication in the Composite Index, the A1 Category, 'Books – Authored – Research' specifically excludes: 'creative works such as novels, depending mainly on the imagination of the author rather than upon a publicly accessible body of agreed fact' (Deakin University 1997, p. 15). This seemingly contradictory use of the terms in the two locations is curious.

The language used in the Composite Index guidelines exclusion also shows disregard of contemporary humanities scholarship. To say that a novel depends largely on an author's imagination is troublesome when read against research on the complexities of authorship and creativity, and ignores discipline-specific discourses being established by creative arts teachers and/or scholars, and implies dated and unstable assumptions that the creative arts cannot be taught or assessed or use bodies of research material. The
mention of a 'publicly accessible body of agreed fact' epitomises a problem with most scientific definitions of research: they assume such a body can be said to exist without question or qualification.

Research in the creative arts, rather than about them, was ineligible for funding by the Australian Research Council (ARC), our largest provider of funding for university research, until late 1993 when the ARC added the word 'solely' to its guidelines, which now read:

The [Australian Research Council] programs do not support those activities that lead solely to the creation or performance of a work of art, including visual art, musical compositions, drama, dance, designs and literary works (Strand 1998, p. 33).

The amendment allows some provision for the creative arts. Yet creative work remains ineligible unless it includes further treatment: a separate critical exegesis, an explanation or analysis. This indicates a hierarchy between modes of presenting information, suggesting that so-called scholarly writing is more in line with research paradigms than literary or other creative forms.

The ARC's change of position is comparable to the use of the creative work-plus-exegesis model in postgraduate research degrees.

The mandatory exegesis seems to serve a purpose of legitimising creative writing, for example, within a scholarly framework, linking the creative component with more traditionally recognised forms of research. However, models for the exegesis are most often non-specific and approaches may be as varied as the creative artworks
themselves, ranging from the reflective essay written on the processes of conceiving and producing the artwork itself, to a work of literary theory, to a bibliographical attachment listing the sources used in the creation of the artwork, and so on.

The origins of the exegetical model may lie partly in the history of some creative writing programs that have developed through English or Literary Studies, fusing the study of theory and criticism with practical components of creative writing. But the model is also connected with the introduction of the Unified National System, involving the meshing of previously disparate groups of academics, as mentioned previously in this paper.

An exegesis would seem most successful for the artist when it is inextricably connected to the creative project. Otherwise a danger exists – a danger already inherent in the exegetical requirement itself – that the artist is offering an interpretation or directive that may diminish the point of creating the artwork. For a novelist, the exegesis may become part of the fiction, defeating the presumed administrative purpose of authentication. The possibilities for subversiveness and/or subjectivity in art – factors that may make it difficult to fit into research paradigms such as those described in the afore-mentioned OECD definition of research – do not necessarily stop at the apparent end of the novel, frame of the canvas, finish of the music.

* An extensive discussion of such a contention can be found in Dawson (1997).
I give two examples of Australian books published in 1998 with final sections that might be considered exegeses. The final section of the first work is entitled ‘Footnote’ and begins:

So you’ve reached this far. They weren’t a particularly nice bunch, nor was it a particularly pretty story. But I’ll tidy things up. I’ll pretty things up, I’ll set the record straight (Goldsmith 1998, p. 210).

The second work ends with a section entitled ‘Coda’ that begins:

The ending of a document draws attention back to an author. Who decides on the fitness of an ending place? Though a name might be attached to the end of a document it is not always clear what this means: does it indicate a claim to ownership, or is it still a part of the document’s textual or fictional existence, does the name stand outside the document or within it, and who requires the name anyway? (Brophy 1998, p. 244)

In the first example, from the novel Under the Knife by Andrea Goldsmith, the voice is that of a minor character from the novel. This character discusses her own treatment in the novel, and refers to Andrea Goldsmith by name. It would be naïve in the extreme to consider the Andrea Goldsmith in this section to be Andrea Goldsmith, real-life author who does indeed mention poodles in all of her novels, just as we are told the Andrea Goldsmith mentioned in the novel does. But the section is called ‘Footnote’, associating it with a feature that until recently we did not associate with fiction. This ‘Footnote’ is a further layering of fiction, yet the title both subverts the
fictiveness of the novel and parodies the illusion of reliability in scholarly features such as footnotes.

When an artwork seems to end and an exegesis begin, we may assume we are reading the work of a more reliable creator who will tell the truth now, or 'set the record straight'. Similar concerns are addressed in my second example, from Kevin Brophy's *Creativity*, when the voice in the 'Coda' asks: 'does the [author's] name stand outside the document or within it, and who requires the name anyway (Brophy 1998, p. 244)?' Both examples express the complexity of authenticity in different kinds of writings. One example is ostensibly a novel ending with a footnote; the other is ostensibly scholarly non-fiction that contains short stories and apparently autobiographical fragments which also address issues of creativity. The endings of both books destabilise the works overall, and demonstrate the difficulties in ascertaining generic boundaries.

Brophy's 'Coda' (Brophy 1998, p. 244) mentions the 'signature', the doodle that comes at the end of the quasi-autobiographical work *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (Barthes 1977d). Each of these words: footnote, coda, signature, might be replaced with the word exegesis. To paraphrase Brophy: who is asking for this exegesis from creative arts researchers, and why is it required? To suggest that such a chimera-like entity as an exegesis can make the difference between an artwork being valid or invalid as research output is close to being absurd, an arbitrary and inadequate measure. The exegesis
can set up a mirroring effect and we all know of the associations between mirrors and trickery, mirrors and sideshow carnivals.

Perhaps the arbitrariness of the exegetical requirement in both the ARC’s amended policy and in university postgraduate requirements arises partly from the difficulties perceived in assessing the research value of artworks, indicating a need for demystification of research activities in the creative arts.

Demystification.

At least some of the opposition to creative arts activities being recognised as scholarly research is a result of a lack of understanding of the work taking place in specific disciplines.

In 1989 Don Aitkin wrote:

> It is time more humanities people took the trouble to learn how universities are funded and managed, if only to get across to their uncomprehending colleagues in other areas what it is that humanities people do, why that is important, and what impact it ought to have on the university’s management of research funds (Aitkin 1989, p. 782).

Strand’s report suggests creative arts research can move forward by developing definitive guidelines for measuring research outputs (Strand 1998, pp. 107-8), and it may be useful for individual disciplines to move ahead with such measures if they have not already done so.
For creative writing, part of the focus may be to explain the contributions to knowledge made by the kinds of creative writing that involve substantial research into matters of social, historical, psychological and cultural significance. But other kinds of writing can be viewed as sites of research, because they write into a body of knowledge that is *writing itself*. The subject of this research is writing. This is a concept that requires further investigation and analysis, and I present it here as a kind of seed. Once again I sense precarious territory, a minefield of questions and problems that will require investigation – although not necessarily de-fusing. At the most basic level of explanation, a body of knowledge concerned with writing itself contains source material for other writers, as validly as other kinds of research bodies provide sources for ongoing work in given disciplines. Novels or poems or plays as doctoral theses in Professional Writing, for example, would require individual assessment of how they made worthy contributions to research in the discipline. For instance, could one thesis show innovation in the use of language or genre or character or voice or background research such as historical material? This is very similar or even identical to the ways some theory-based theses in a discipline such as literary studies, for example, are assessed. Jacques Derrida states:

> Some texts called "literary" "question" (let us not say "critique" or "deconstruct") philosophy in a sharper, or more thematic, or better informed way than others. Sometimes this questioning occurs more effectively via the actual practice of writing, the
staging, the composition, the treatment of language, rhetoric, 
than via speculative arguments as such (Attridge 1992, p. 50).

Evidently the tradition of presenting research material via various 
acceptable modes already exists in fields such as literary studies and philosophy.

It could be argued that bodies of scholarship in the creative arts 
disciplines cannot be 'publicly accessible' or verifiable. But if we 
apply such provisos stringently to other types of research, we may 
find that almost nothing strictly meets the requirements. Also, 
teachers and researchers in the creative arts do work with bodies of 
information; these are used as sources for research, teaching, 
criticism, and assessment purposes just as similar bodies are used in 
disciplines such as literary or cultural studies.

Works overtly addressing writing or literature are not the only 
works writing into writing itself. An editorial in Heat mentioned 
promotional material distributed by Granta that reassured readers 
that: 'No words about words, no writing about writing' were to be 
found in Granta (Cited in Indyck 1998, p. 5). Heat's editor assured 
readers of Heat that 'All the essays in this issue are in some way 
writing about writing' (Indyck 1998, p. 5). But surely every 
contribution to Heat and also to Granta is 'writing about writing', 
including the fiction and poetry. I suggest this because although the 
theses in this issue of Heat do consciously address concerns 
specifically relating to writing, I propose that any text published in a 
journal claiming to be literary addresses issues of writing. Even a
journal such as *Granta* that for marketing purposes claims itself *not* to be literary (Indyck 1998, p. 5) necessarily contains writing about writing simply by containing writing*.

Dennis Strand's report suggests that rather than attempting to 'shoehorn' work in the creative arts into existing paradigms, alternative models should be implemented (1998, p. *xvi*). It recommends that activities in the creative arts that may not be identifiable clearly as research within current models could be given a new category called *research equivalent activity* (Strand 1998, p. 45).

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*In the two prior chapters, I have suggested that the writing process itself in some instances also can be viewed as a process of research. Writing itself is researched: the writer explores elements of craft, style, character, point of view, voice, genre. This is new research for each work, as each work has its peculiarities. At the Melbourne Writers' Festival in 1998, novelist Peter Carey said that every time he begins a new novel, he must learn to write again. An example of how Carey could be seen to be doing this may lie in his latest novel, *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000). This novel is written in a form of naïve prose, and its stylistic variations include the minimal use of punctuation. As Carey has not written a novel in this style before now, his writing of the novel would have required specific research via the processes of writing as part of the work of learning to write this particular novel. I suggest that Carey's observation of his work relates to writing as a process of research, a process of approaching new material in each instance of writing, even if the writer is experienced and even if the writer writes into a well-established form such as the novel. Note, though, that the levels of innovation in writing may vary from writer to writer, genre to genre, and work to work. This is why, to return to the context of creative writing in HDRs, individual cases should be considered on their individual merits as to their value as research projects in addition to whatever other intrinsic values they may have.*
I challenge the suggestion that implementing alternative models is preferable to continuing discussions over the similarities between creative arts research and that of other disciplines.

The report is at pains to point out that the term research equivalent activity should in no way signify a lesser or second-class entity in comparison to research activity (Strand 1998, p. 44).

This is optimistic, as while other humanities researchers are identifying problems with recognition of their work as valid and valuable, it would seem unlikely that work categorised as research equivalent activity would be accepted as truly equivalent to activities perceived to be valid under the current paradigms. Strand’s report mentions that Britain’s National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, the Dearing Report, identified serious concerns with funding crises in the arts and the humanities (Strand 1998, p. 61). Yet elsewhere in Strand’s report we are told that the terms research equivalence and research equivalent activity have been used with success in the United States and the United Kingdom (Strand 1998, p. 44). The reader is given no evidence of this success or of how it may be measured. Rather than simply following the international example, it would be of value for Australian policy makers to be informed of the specific history and uses of the terms. I suggest that time to be taken to debate Strand’s recommendations regarding alternative research activity categories and to assess locally whether or not using a term such as research equivalent activity might possibly, but not certainly, make headway in gaining funding for
creative arts academics. If so, such headway may be at the expense of gaining possible intellectual ground for the value of creative arts research.

To segregate types of research can be dangerous. Firstly the segregation denies the existing and desirable heterogeneity of research whereby many different kinds of scholarship can fruitfully take place and feed into one another rather than forming unstable hierarchies of authenticity. Secondly, where might the segregation begin and end? We could introduce new categories for speculative or interpretative research as opposed to hard-core scientific research. If this were to occur, then we may need to re-assess our definitions of research, to question whether the kinds of research that do appear to fit into the traditional paradigms are in fact 'creative works' (Strand 1998, p. 32). If they are not, then Australian research definitions such as the OECD definition used in some instances by DETYA (Strand 1998, p. 32) may become meaningless.

A Larger Picture

The Strand report's suggestion that current debates are directly related to the Australian funding situation (Strand 1998, p. 31) fails to see a larger picture.

The funding concerns of the creative arts may be part of reassessments of higher research across the spectrum of academic
disciplines. In 1989, following the implementation of new funding structures, Stephen Knight wrote:

the systems and processes of research funding now newly in place tend not to provide funds for innovative, theoretical and inherently critical research in the humanities and tend towards funding in large amounts, research that is mechanical, reified, and intellectually unadventurous (Knight 1989a, p. 783).

Also, Simon During states that works ‘currently most influential on the kind of work I and my colleagues do (some examples at random: Derrida’s Of Grammatology; Foucault’s Discipline and Punish …) would have been unlikely to be funded by the ARC .’ (During 1990, p. 31). Creative arts researchers should not fail to see links between their current difficulties and those of other contemporary researchers.

Shifts in the nature of research find a related example in the Commonwealth Government’s Report on the Inquiry into the indigenous stolen children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997), which used controversial methodologies of research and styles of presentation. Ronald Wilson says of the personal material in the report: ‘They are words which were spoken from the heart to the heart’ (Wilson 1998, p. xii). Some have criticised the report ‘as lacking in credibility’ (Wilson 1998, p. xiii). Also provoking controversy is Wilson’s comment that the report’s objective ‘clearly is not retribution, but understanding and healing’ (Wilson 1998, p. xiv), which invites further discussion on what might constitute valid outcomes of research.
The use of alternative styles of writing in the report demonstrate an unusual approach to increasing a document's effectiveness and in recording and communicating material that might otherwise have been difficult to locate and present. Wilson's report destabilises so-called objectivity of research; this is intrinsic in its structure and approach. A subsequent book edited by Carmel Bird (1998b, p. xiii), re-collecting stories from the report and presenting responses to it, comes with an 'Erratum Slip' tucked inside, a kind of postmodern bookplate or marker. Part of the slip reads: 'The nature of the Inquiry process and of the information sought and provided meant that evidence and submissions could not be tested as thoroughly as would occur in a courtroom. This applies to all the evidence' (Random House 1998). We are reminded that writing which cannot be proven authentic by certain standards is not yet fully accepted as valid research material.

But at least part of the effectiveness of the report on the stolen children has been as a result of its format. We might read this as being a fragment of evidence of a changing face of research. This kind of research recognises contribution to knowledge from the humanities and indirectly from the creative arts. It also inadvertently addresses concerns of these disciplines such as questioning the validity of objective research. A problem with my using the report as such an example is that much or all of the personal writing included in the report was presumably done, at least in part, with the intention of its being published in the report. This raises a concern that personal or
creative writing may only approach acceptability as research matter if it is framed in some way, such as being part of a report including other, more traditionally scholarly research materials, or by being accompanied by an exegesis. Further advances need to be made before creative work that is presented without such scaffolding may be accepted as research output equal to other currently accepted research output within institutions of higher research and within the wider community.

Don Aitkin (1989, p. 782) writes that the humanities should make known their specific requirements for research funding, but went on to state that this: 'will not be done by bringing out the rhetoric that each discipline has developed to put forward to the world outside and to comfort those inside'. This comment denies the richness of interdisciplinary discourses. To suggest that funding bodies are not interested in these discourses – and some of the discourses may be the outcomes of the very research they are or are not funding – is bizarre. Perhaps it should be pointed out that official literature and commentary from research funding bodies should not be seen as existing in an intellectual vacuum or as not being answerable to current scholarship from right across the disciplines at some point.

We might see the ongoing crisis in creative arts research funding as a moment of warning for researchers of many kinds.
Right now, it is the creative arts that are being hauled over the coals for not fitting into paradigms of scholarly research, in part due to newfound but recognisable involvements in higher research environments. But research in other disciplines is also encountering difficulties with the current paradigms. The creative arts situation may be pre-empting a time for major changes to the face of research both in Australia and internationally. Research funding bodies and university administrations may be forced to move with the times and become more flexible and imaginative in their definitions of research.

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Conclusion

The Double Life:

Preface

The concluding chapter was presented as a research paper at the 2000 Conference of the Association of Australian Writing Programs, held at Griffith University’s Gold Coast Campus in June of 2000. That paper has been published in Text (Perry 2000).

The chapter incorporates material quoted from my novel, Water's Edge; I have used some of this material to transgress generic boundaries and to form metaphors that link the novel and this chapter. To some extent, I have used such ficto-critical modes in the other chapters, most particularly in Chapter 2. In this final chapter, the ficto-critical mode is used more extensively; I have inserted the excerpts from the novel, using those insertions in a ficto-critical manner as the metaphors of the novel text give depth and perspective to the critical material of the chapter. While some may read my use of the novel’s text in this chapter as being a problematic instance of utilising rhetorical passages within an apparently critical framework, I see the existence of ficto-critical genres as justifying such transgression. As has been explored extensively
in this exegesis, while many different genres exist in writing, each with basic rules and boundaries, these may be transgressed. Perhaps there is no more appropriate place to carry out such transgression and to fuse rhetoric and critical argument than in a document that explores the fusing of novel and exegesis in an HDR thesis in the discipline of creative writing.

The chapter sums up my experiences of reading for my PhD thesis. It is written as the last document for the thesis and is thus reflective of the entire process. 'The Double Life' is more personal than the preceding chapters of the exegesis as I wished to stress the possibilities of identifying research directions that are significant to individual writers. I make my final assessments of my experience and whereas the previous chapters have focussed on recommendations for policy-making relating to the creative work-plus-exegesis model, this final chapter offers advice to HDR writers and their supervisors.

The piece draws partly upon Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1993), using language such as 'punctum' and 'wound'. In the discussion-time following my presentation of the paper at the AAWP Conference, a delegate commented that my use of that language was ironic, considering that this work treating punctures and wounds appeared to represent a kind of healing for me. I acknowledge that on completion of my work for this thesis I have undergone a kind of healing in regards to my views
on the model that I worked within. My opinions on the model are much more positive than at the outset of my candidature, a fact documented throughout this exegesis. However, the wound is not smoothly healed but is ridged and thorny and prone to eruption, as battle scars tend to be.

Also, as mentioned in the introduction to this exegesis, I see my final chapter as attesting to a culmination of the success of my PhD experience. The development of my writing style and confidence is clearly evident when the first chapter, 'Writing in the dark: Exorcising the exegesis', is compared to this concluding chapter.
The Double Life

On the bird-shaped island, a legendary woman once taught the arts of war.

Serena, whose family past resonated in the rough tongues of the island, would come to believe that nobody needed to be taught to kill.

I have opened with a doppelganger, for those first sentences are also the first sentences of Water's Edge, the novel that I have just finished writing. Water's Edge already has at least a double life, as I intend to submit it to commercial publishers following its academic assessment. The double life of this piece of writing has always existed: I have written the novel and the thesis simultaneously, inseparably.

Discussions at the annual AAWP conferences and in Text remind us that research in the creative arts is under a tumult of interrogation and growth. In part, the tumult involves anxiety over what we do as writers who are also researchers, and this has resulted in much talk about possibilities of identification and nomenclature relating to our research*. I do not suggest that we should be prescriptive or restrictive in our

* See Strand (1998); Brady (2000); Sallis (1999); Dawson (1999) for discussions regarding various aspects of identification and nomenclature of creative arts higher research activities.
discussions of what we do. Rather, we can openly discuss our activities and take inspiration from one another. If we do not succeed or do not wish to succeed in producing specific names and models, then we at least have the privilege of knowing what other writers and researchers do. We can be privy to the ideas and methods of our colleagues as they write within the current higher research structures, stirring up a humming, buzzing noise of names and definitions and points of interests that surrounds and penetrates our work and working environments.

Eva Sallis (1999) writes:

Seeking authenticity and authority for imaginative work is destructive and leads to writers lying about their names and antecedents and generates an even more authenticity conscious readership. Taken to a conclusion this trend is the death of fiction: we would only have life experiences, based on true stories and the illusion that people knew what they were talking about. Discomfort with lack of authenticity and lack of authority could easily dominate a readership which searches too rigidly for the right to write.

While some may question the logic of or indeed disagree with Sallis' argument, its context must be kept in mind. Sallis’ paper was presented at the 1999 AAWP conference and was subsequently published in Text. It can be read as being part of ongoing debates about creative writing and higher research. In that context Sallis’ comments are pertinent. Her point about
the dangers of forcing writers – or of writers who wish to obtain HDRs or research funding forcing themselves – to constantly justify the research value of their creative works needs to be kept in mind as we develop writing programs in higher research. Otherwise, a very sterile and cautious type of writing could end up being the only type that we are brave enough to produce within such environments. But as writers who are also professional academics, or vice versa, we do need to continue to seek authority for our activities, for the purposes of procuring funding and employment conditions, for example. But the fight for the right to write need not infringe on the nature of the writing being done.

Likewise, Kevin Brophy (1999b) writes:

I am not so comfortable with the arguments for creative work being recognised as research. Seems more like arguments for creative work being recognised as health products endorsed by the State. I want room for mean, unhealthy, ambitious, unsettling art too!

The discourses of higher research can also be ‘mean, unhealthy, ambitious, unsettling’. The processes of identifying and naming, of writing towards the subject of research in the creative arts need not be sterile or rigid or conservative, and in fact, in the context of the writing that already exists on the topic, it is the opposite of those descriptions.
Models for writing programs in higher research need not be tightened or clarified, but rather elaborated upon: scribbled and doodled on, cut and pasted, coloured in, erased and rewritten again and again, until each of us has an image in mind of our own version, our own customised marked-up manuscript. With such an artefact in mind, I make my final analysis of my experiences of writing within the creative work-plus-exegesis model.

My interest in doubles and doubling was inherent in the writing of Water's Edge. One of the novel's kernels was the idea of two sisters who had lived apart, oblivious of one another's existence, until the moment in this narrative when they meet as women in their twenties. The themes and range of my exegesis revealed themselves more slowly, surreptitiously.

If students and supervisors find themselves initially bamboozled with beginning an exegesis, then I suggest that they read the exegeses of others and talk to candidates who are further advanced in the processes. At the least, this can reveal the richness of the range of material being produced in recent times, and show that an exegesis can be many things and certainly need not be less creative than the other component of the thesis.
She skimmed through her scribbled notes, then paused at the last entry, the legend.

*Scatha* (or Scath or Scathach), pronounced sky-a, by some, was a dark goddess, Mother Death one of her aspects. Another of her names, Scotia, was used to name Scotland itself. Some say Skye was named for Scatha and that the isle was her mythical realm. On the island, Scatha taught the arts of war to the famous warriors of Celtic legends.

*Scatha*. Serena whispered the name.

When we write novels, we range and rove about, finding the directions the novel will take us, researching sometimes eclectically, sometimes in quite an organised fashion. How do we research the exegesis? Obviously the process differs from writer to writer. The novel and exegesis form a whole for the purpose of the thesis, and some writers have reported ways of researching both pieces at once, drawing from the same bodies of research to produce different kinds of writing.

Eva Sallis, for example, writes of how she produced her novel *Hiam* and her non-fiction work, *Sheherazade*, from the one body of research, stating:

*Hiam* and *Sheherazade* grew side by side. To look at them now perhaps you could not tell. They are utterly
different. *Hiam* is lyrical storytelling, set in Australia. *Sheherazade* is socio-literary criticism. Writing them side by side kept each free of the material and the style which belonged to the other (Sallis 1999).

Tess Brady (2000) writes of a related yet different experience:

I was writing a novel and I was writing a PhD. The academic became the creative; the creative became the academic. My desk was covered with the trappings of the academy, with filing cards, photocopies, Manila folders marked 'bibliography', 'Vinland references', 'maps, other' and so on. My desk was also covered with the trappings of the novelist ... But I could not maintain the division as one slid into the other and the academic and the creative processes blurred.

In comparison to the experiences of Sallis and Brady, I think that the double life of my thesis had a somewhat ragged birth. I fought the development of my exegesis for some time. I wanted to write fiction and was uninterested in writing a second body of material with a non-fiction structure that treated similar themes, for example, to my novel. I believed – and still believe to some extent – that to write fiction as one hundred percent of a thesis in the discipline of Professional Writing is acceptable. Yet with that fight came an immersion in the myriad discourses of creativity and writing theory and creative arts research, and I was intoxicated by those, caught up in the excitement of developing research that is difficult and
sometimes dirty and never dull. That is when my exegesis came to life.

In the early days of researching my thesis, I read *Camera Lucida*, by Roland Barthes (1993). I was browsing works of literary and cultural theory, seeking a thread to lead me into critical work that interested me. The lyrical title of Barthes' book drew me in. *Camera Lucida* is in one instance a theoretical work on photographs, but is often referred to as part of Barthes' autobiography, grouped together with *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977d) and *A Lover's Discourse* (1977c). These three were the last books Barthes wrote before his accidental death in 1980. *Camera Lucida* was the final.

My reading of *Camera Lucida* is that it addresses far more than photographs. It is a meditation on the death of Barthes' mother and his ensuing grief. That singular expression of a death is what wounds me in this book, as Barthes writes about the certain something in a particular photograph that wounds a particular spectator (Barthes 1993, p. 27).

Barthes (1993, p. 63) writes of how he sifted through photographs of his late mother, planning to write a book about her. So *Camera Lucida* too is a work with at least a double life. For it is a book that emerges from the efforts to write another
book, yet in itself it is a book about Barthes' mother: perhaps a book that was never to be written?

As Barthes reads references on Photography he is frustrated that they fail to include the photographs he loves (Barthes 1993, p. 7). This sense of the singular and personal is picked up again and again throughout the work and culminates in a statement about how he grieves not for a generic figure of the Mother but for his own mother (Barthes 1993, p. 75). For me, that segment is the moment when Camera Lucida becomes a conscious part of my research, of my work. This is the moment when my reading shows me that I know what to look for when I research a piece of writing, even if I cannot identify it until a certain significant moment. Or, in the language of Water's Edge, I know how to kill.

Scatha taught to kill: Mother Death of the bird-shaped island. Serena knew how to kill. The right moment was all it took for the knowledge to reveal itself, like a sword drawn from a sheath that she found had been strapped to her waist all of the time.

Barthes' thoughts on grief remind me of my own family tragedy, the drowning of my father and my brother. Following the tragedy, I tried to read personal help books about grief, but I
discarded them all, unfinished. I had no desire to read of the psychological stages of grief or even about the grieving experiences of other individuals. The book that I sought was about a butcher and his son who drowned in an irrigation channel.

Barthes (1993, p. 7) writes:

What did I care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite? Each time I would read something about Photography, I would think of some photograph I loved, and this made me furious. Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body: but an importunate voice (the voice of knowledge, of scientia) then adjured me, in a severe tone: 'Get back to Photography. What you are seeing here and what makes you suffer belongs to the category 'Amateur Photographs', dealt with by a team of sociologists; nothing but the trace of a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family, etc.' Yet I persisted; another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture. So I went on, not daring to reduce the world's countless photographs, any more than to extend several of mine to Photography: in
short, I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, 'scientifically' alone and disarmed.

Is it a sense of disarmament that we writers feel when we set upon the mandatory exegesis: an awareness of the pressing in of troupes of university requirements and rules? In *Camera Lucida*, I found the weapons that I needed to proceed, or rather, like my character, Serena, I found the weapon that was always sheathed at my side, and knew that I never was disarmed. If this sounds aggressive or negative, I think of it rather in the sense of good, clean battle: sport, perhaps, much as we participate in when we write whatever we choose in defiance of fear or dread.

Barthès discusses what he calls the *studium* and the *punctum* of photographs. The *studium* is that in a photograph which is enjoyable in a generic sense: the cultural or historical points of interest in a photograph, for instance (Barthes 1993, p. 26). Of the *punctum* Barthes (1993, p. 27) writes: 'A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).

Of course *Camera Lucida* is not a photograph. Yet I find a *punctum* in its pages: a moment when I am pricked and bruised by the singular sense of grief, the desire to own one's grief, that Barthes expresses. At that instant, the book transforms into a singular experience of my own, becoming not the book Barthes
has written but a book about my father the butcher and his son.

The emotion driving the writing of Water’s Edge was murderous anger. I kept in mind the legend of Scatha who taught warriors to kill. Taught people to kill. Taught to kill. In fact she taught the arts of war, the use of weaponry, for example. Yet it was the killing that stayed like a barb in my mind as I wrote. Who needs to be taught to kill? Surely we all know how. And does whatever we want to write: whatever has the power to prick, bruise, maim a particular writer; already exist and is waiting to be recognised? In my case, the knowledge of where my research was leading me was tapped by the recognition of a moment in Camera Lucida, a punctum found in its pages.

Since 1993 I have found myself writing on one topic and when this topic is submerged in any piece, I know that still I write around its edges. The deaths of my father and brother, who drowned on a January day in 1993, have engulfed my writing. In that year, what I now call the water’s edge writing began.

The first story of that writing, ‘Night Swimming’ (Perry 1993-4) was eked out, a fragment at a time, in the weeks following the drownings. The story was about my brother. At that time I could not think of the double tragedy. My mind
seemed to protect me by letting me focus only on the death of my father or my brother at any one time. I grieved for them separately, but the sense of doubling would trouble me later.

I named the story after a REM song. Night swimming was a metaphor for my grief. One line of the lyrics chills me. Referring to the moon, the line goes ‘and what if there were two, side by side in orbit’ (REM 1992). I think of two deaths, two drownings, two bodies in the water at night, two people I loved side by side in a cemetery.

I wonder if the day when the two of them drowned marked the beginning of my interest in doubles and doubling.

As I began writing my novel, I found two characters developing, the adult sisters who were meeting for the first time. I looked to Krzysztof Kieslowski’s film, *La Double Vie de Veronique* (1991), about two women who look identical and have the same name but have never met and live in separate countries. With my exegesis in mind, I extended my research to doppelgangers in literature, finding that most of the material related to psychoanalytic theory and German romantic literature." But I found myself unmoved by such reading. Like Barthes’ thinking of the photographs that wounded him, I kept returning to that one work, *Veronique*, and by connection to other films by Kieslowski that were not about doppelgangers

* See: Herdman (1990); Hoffman (1969); McCallum (1996); Miller (1987); Pizer (1998); Rank (1989); Rogers (1970); Schwarz (1997); Tymms (1949); Webber (1996).
but that wounded me in other ways. I returned even more impatiently to the writing of my own novel.

Just as Barthes did not wish to research photographs in terms of family rite or history, I did not want to research doppelgangers in terms of psychology or in terms of German romantic literature. I found nothing to wound me in that research, nothing that discomforted me.

The second part of *Camera Lucida* directly addresses the photographs Barthes has of his mother. He writes: ‘And no more than I would reduce my family to the Family would I reduce my mother to the Mother’ (Barthes 1993, p. 74). He speaks of reading Freud and other theorists, and considers how easily their theories could be applied to his situation. He concludes: ‘Thus I could understand my generality, but having understood it, invincibly I escaped from it. In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother.’ (Barthes 1993, p. 75). Barthes continues: ‘For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a quality (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable’ (Barthes 1993, p. 75). I see Barthes’ discussion as being applicable to the research methodology and output of the creative artist within an HDR. The researcher looks for something akin to a *punctum* in the material being read. She or he seeks that which is personally significant, that which bites, has teeth: *wounds*. Researchers
need to have the confidence to research whatever it is that wounds.

In the first year of my PhD candidature, I wrote the research paper, 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis', that was to become the first chapter of this exegesis. I continued to write papers on research in the creative arts. I knew that these would form my exegesis, yet still I lacked framing. I lacked naming. Also, although the progress of my novel was constant, the work lacked a title. The exegesis had never had a title. All the while, I often thought or spoke about my *water's edge* writing, of how every story, review, article, paper, chapter that I wrote had the submerged image of a double drowning lurking within. In the final month of working on the thesis, I wrote the words *water's edge* in my writing journal, and there saw the title that my novel must have. Immediately afterwards the title of the exegesis was obvious: *The Water's Edge Writing*. At this time, I understood that the shape of the exegesis had existed for some time, perhaps as long as the history of my novel. In the novel, I wrote of sisters living parallel lives, and in the exegesis, I found myself writing of components of a thesis living parallel lives. I wrote of doubles, and I wrote of the instinct to kill in both works.
Emerging from my experience and my research, I have a suggestion for those writers and their supervisors who encounter difficulties in wading through the fluid qualities of the HDR requirements. I suggest that they move on with *writing*, using the methods and approaches that work for them whenever they take up their pens. I advise them to trust their instincts: to know that the research material with the power to stop them, as individual writers, in their tracks, to *wound*, is likely to be the material that can guide the writers through the thesis phase of their works.

I re-present the opening passage of 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis':

> When required to couple a creative piece with a critical exegesis, a postgraduate researcher may be tempted to subvert the notion of the exegesis, to rupture it by slipping in subjective writings. *Sometimes I write in the dark, by moon- or street-light.* This reminds me of writing myself into a new work, into darkness. I think - *is it* - of Julia Kristeva's 1983 essay, 'Stabat Mater', which attempts to subvert scholarly writing with a personal text written around, into and through the theoretical material *necessary for me*. An exegesis may appear to frame or direct the reading of the creative piece, *to switch on the overhead light*. The student may feel trapped in a space between the impulse to create, *when I come*, and the institution.

This chapter considers the misgivings surrounding the
exegetical requirement, seeking positive approaches to
writing my exegesis?

Finally, I open up my writing in the dark to let in the writing of
my exegesis: or is it to let out the writing?

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