A Sibling Romance:
The Sound of Romance Reimagined

by

Valerie Jeremijenko
M.F.A., B.A. (Hons.)

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Previous Publications


Abstract

This thesis explores the interplay between lived perceptual and sensual experience and the visual representation of it in the romantic novel and asks what happens to and within a creative artefact if the hierarchy of the senses is reimagined. As a practice-led research endeavour it consists of a novel and an exegesis, both of which have been deeply influenced by sound studies scholars such as Veit Erlmann, Steven Conner and Jonathon Stern, sensual revolution thinkers including Michael Bull and David Howes, and theoreticians such as Lisa Blackman and Nigel Thrift, from the fields of body studies, embodiment and affect theory. A major premise of the project is that the senses are not biological facts associated with an individualised body but rather, or at least largely, cultural and shared productions. Developing this notion through the romantic presentation of a story about two deeply entwined sisters, one of whom has extraordinary hearing abilities, has allowed for an exploration of the relationship between sense activity, representation and expression, and an inquiry into the ways in which our aesthetic forms produce and express sense experience while also resulting from the cultural limitations woven through them.

The novel *A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality* begins this exploration by creatively scrutinising what it means for the listening-oriented sibling to be deeply immersed in sound. It does this in three sections: the first
being from a child’s perspective and focused on the sounds of the body and the sensual expressions that link a family trans-generationally; the second evolving through an exploration of the body-environment encounters represented by the sisters’ journey through the Australian outback; and the third, told from the sensual environment of Qatar, being informed by the reorientation of the senses inherent in the character’s yoga practice and by a reflective consideration of sensual reconstructions, remembrances and oral storytelling forms. The sensual concerns encapsulated in the novel are further developed by the exegesis’s mapping of the predominantly visual orientation of our literary forms and discussion of the successes and failures of the novel’s attempts to subvert it. Titled The acoustic body: Towards a reconfiguration of the senses in the romantic novel, the exegesis suggests that a focus on sound and its associated attributes of listening, voice and orality can serve as a method of nuancing our established literary forms, expanding our notions of subjectivity to address the notion of trans-subjective sensual experiences, and of amplifying the oral links of romantic literature.

Taken together, the novel and the exegesis address the typical lack of sensual self-awareness in the process of developing and responding to literary works. By positing sound as the central determining factor in the construction of the work, the novel provides an example of an inversion in the creative process which consciously attaches form to sensual experience rather than sensual experience to form, and thereby offers to practitioners a method of reverse-engineering literary genres. This mode of approach, which is drawn from a methodological experiment in reverse-engineering cross-art-form practices, is demonstrated to be widely applicable to other creative processes and invites further experimentation. Similarly, the reflections in the exegesis that examine the implications of this re-engineering of process and its resulting reconfiguration of the senses provide a new approach to literary and other...
types of criticism—the value being to suggest new ways “to come to our senses” creatively, emotionally and intellectually.
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A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality
Dedications

To Eliah, Sonora and Jamba
A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality
The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

W. B. Yeats
Prologue

Doha, Qatar, 2007

It was shortly after I began my first yoga studio that somebody told me I was ‘not very yogic’.

It was a junior teacher, an expat wife who had just completed a teacher-training course, and she wanted a different shift. When I said ‘Sorry, no,’ she stamped her foot and said, ‘Well, that’s not very yogic.’

I looked at her, surprised. I was balancing on a tightrope that could easily become a noose. I was selling a fitness program that was deeply Hindu in a fundamentally Muslim environment, and was a single mother risking my children’s futures to do so, and then I was told I was not very yogic. I really just felt like laughing.

I didn’t. I must have tried to smooth it over, to work it out, but all the while I know I was thinking, Not very yogic. Not very yogic, as if you need to tell me. As if I didn’t already know how very non-yogic I am.

So later I decided to write it all down, to express to myself and yes, maybe to you, my very unyogic nature.

Here are the ones I started with:

I smoke. Every so often when I am stressed out, I will dig up my secret stash of stale cigarettes, find a corner in the dark somewhere, then suck that puppy down.

I am addicted to coffee and attached to the red wine that I am consuming almost nightly now.
I am a terrible vegetarian, even when I am trying. My food group of choice is chocolate.

I have hit my daughter. The oldest, not the youngest.

I hit my first husband, too. I struck him hard but he struck me harder. That only happened once.

My practice of brähmacharya, sexual restraint, has had some very low points. I am not proud of this though I could write pages of justifications.

Drugs? There have been some.

And there is more. My fear and greed and avarice, my worldly attachments, my deep-seated envy of my sister and the other secrets I am hedging on here.

In fact, with all of that, I question if there are any ways that I am yogic at all.

The only way I can think of right now is that I listen to the sound of my breath and seek a quieter mind. Maybe, also it is in how I believe. I believe, for example, that if I practise a little every day and that if I write everything here that needs to be written then the day will come when I will be able to sit down sweetly and find a point of singing silence somewhere inside me. And even if there is violence in what I write, even if some of the truths I say will break the basic rule of ahimsa, I believe they will speak for a stronger more substantive non-violence that eventually will free you and that should make it alright, right?

I guess what I am hoping is that writing like this becomes an act of yoga as well as one of spell-breaking and that in a way by showing myself up as not very yogic I will be yogic in the long run. I am peeling the rotten onion but I am doing it for you. So listen up, draw close.

We’ll begin at the beginning.
Mackay, Queensland, Australia, 1966

I was four months old the night my sister was conceived, and already I was serious and silent, a clairaudient child. I never smiled or laughed. I didn’t coo or kick or giggle. Instead I listened. I listened to the bodies that I lived with. I listened to machinery grind cane. I listened to sugar bats soar and cane toads croak. I listened to dreams and desire, to aspirations and intent. I listened to the country, to the swell of waves washing through the reef, to the softly rotting rainforest and beyond that to the perpetual invitation to breathlessness, the long slow exhalation of the distant desert.

My mother, who was blind to my auditory concentration, feared that I was slow. In our failed interactions, my retarded responses and blank stares, she pictured a deaf mute or autistic child. But I wasn’t deaf and far from being autistic; I had been embittered by the loneliness of the womb. It had been too big for me, too bleak and solitary, more like a watery tomb, an enforced unnatural isolation. I had felt my mother’s sickness, her surprised disorientation, then her loathing of my presence. I knew I meant an end to her, not a beginning or a life. So I had spent the whole nine months of my gestation struggling to hear beyond her ceaseless heartbeat, struggling to hear an end to isolation. What I heard was my parents’ exclusive love in a vast, unpopulated land. What I heard was their promise to each other, to never let me, a mere child, intrude upon their love.

On the night my sister was conceived, I was lying on the bed beside my mother, a four-month-old, staring intently at her mouth. I heard humidity
seeping into our weatherboards. I heard heat lounging on our tin roof, sweltering in our decaying stilts. I heard the promise of a storm, and then I heard my father.

He looked and smelled exactly like any other young doctor returning exhausted to his family – only his family was my mother's quiet gaze. His short-sleeved shirt was stained with yellowed moons from hospital rounds in uncooled wards. His wispy curls and deep vibrating belly laugh were defeated by the long and sweltering day. But when he saw my mother with her sheltering lapis eyes looking up at him from an unmade bed, he sighed so completely that I almost forgave him his obsessive love for her.

My mother's excitement at his return was flamboyant and uninhibited. She jumped up, her robe falling open to expose a milk-stained bra and naked body. She flaunted her everyday lies in front of him. Said I had rolled myself over when I had only turned away from her begging smile. Said I had squealed with pleasure when I had only exhaled too noisily. Said I had looked deep into her eyes as if to say 'thank you Mother, thank you', when actually I had been transfixed by the image of solitary children in them.

My father smiled at this invented daughter and picked me up. He rolled his tongue, vibrated his lips, then tired of my hollow stare and handed me back.

‘She's tired,’ Mother said, ‘but if you'd seen her earlier. If you had just seen her…’ Her fabrications faltered and she looked down at me. ‘Mikhail,’ she sighed, ‘we've done a wonderful thing. We've got a beautiful daughter here.’

‘But we were only practising.’ He kissed her ear, he moved me aside. ‘This time we'll get it right. This time we'll make it perfect.’
On the edge of the bed, I didn't flinch. I knew already I was a teetering C major scale, an exercise that had ended badly. I also knew from past experience that my mother's cries, when at their apex, were equal to a major composition, a Bach or Vivaldi at least.

So I lay there, a silent, partial child, listening to soft, sensual laughter, listening to jokes about voyeuristic babies and pornographic memories, listening to my parents pulsate with desire. Above us the beating fan cut their murmured dialogue into disembodied chords, which mingled with the lazy undertones of heat, floated on waves of sinking humidity, harmonised with the distant urban drone. Their speech stopped and the room collapsed into a cacophony of overwhelming sounds heard only by me. I could hear them touch then, hear the careful caress of a stubbled cheek, hear fingers circle soft tissue, linger on curved flesh. I could hear the brush of falling cotton, the abrasion of moist lips, the quivering of Mother's secretions. Their bodies were permeated by sound and in the absence of speech, I could hear it all. Rushing blood, racing pulse, swelling breath. Sound which mounted and fell away, invisible but there. Sound which echoed against the din of our hot, heavy weatherboard, creating a duet of body parts that I endured alone.

Outside, there were other sounds. The screech of a black cockatoo. Rolling thunder moving closer. The sound of water falling, the sound suspended high and then falling from the air.

Inside, Mother groaned. I heard the depths my father plunged to.

Outside, a flushing toilet, a yelling man, a slamming door.

Inside, long, then short, then long again. An abrasive rhythm on a grating bed.

Outside, wind lashing trees, sheets flailing clotheslines.
Inside, the dissonance of grinding skin, of arms and legs pushing against muscles wound like string.

Overwhelmed, I opened my eyes. I tried to eradicate sound with vision but the shadows only emphasised the volume of my mother’s cries. I turned away, tried to find a space between the noises to measure time with, but the darkness only amplified the reverberations in the room.

Attacked by so much noise, I heard an involuntary gurgle in my throat. I started twisting, fidgeting, thrusting. My movements went unnoticed. I kicked, grunted, pulled at my ears, scratched at my cheek. Still nothing, no response. So, in desperation, I took an enormous breath. I prepared to defend myself by howling at the world, by giving it its own back, but at that very moment, the rain swept in and assailed our galvanised roof with all its audible frequencies.

It was intensely pure and white, that noise, deep and safe enough to drown in. It was regular yet arrhythmic, loud yet peaceful. I closed my eyes and entered it, entered the sound of water beating on tin, tumbling in gutters, cascading down glass. Head flung back, I listened to it submerge all other sounds, listened to it flood the room, wash the silence into a clear, pure undertow. It washed so deep I barely remembered to breathe.

But then, as the rain eased off and my parents grew quiet, I heard something else, something entirely different. It was below the frequency of the audible but I heard it as precisely as the distant waves. It was buried in secret chambers but was as clear as a mountain sunrise. I squirmed. Mother, disengaging herself with a sigh, turned her already flowing breasts towards me and pulled me close. I latched on, unyieldingly, and belly to belly – skin to skin – I felt the vibrations of her body, heard the hollows of her womb. But it wasn’t enough. I had to get closer. So I struggled, kicked, wormed. I tried to pierce her skin, open her with my fist, rupture her echoing womb. But it was
hopeless. My activity only stirred my parents up. They got excited, set to cooing and laughing at me, set to telling each other how wonderful I was. So I calmed myself and waited. Waited until they slept, waited until all was very, very still.

Then, in the scoured silence of the night, I heard it again. Heard the frantic march, the swimming parade, the Pied Piper calling. I followed with my ears. I followed the path of a hundred million sperm beating rhythmically on the cervix. I followed them swimming through the vast open cavities of the uterus, followed them choosing between left and right. I kept nursing, kept tracking the noises of my mother’s body. I pursued them into dark, narrow passageways, swam with them against the forceful downward tide, raced with them on the final frenzied stretch. And as I followed deeper and deeper into familiar resonant chambers, as I heard the egg rolling like a mysterious celestial body, as I heard contact, breakthrough, the genetic message spilling, I realised that this was the noise of life before light, the call of creation – the voice of conception. Transfixed, I nursed through the night. I nursed my mother dry. I nursed until I heard the very first splitting of the cell. It sounded like the rush of an opening door.
Doha, 2002

Let me begin again. Let me begin from this place of sandstorms and stories that I now call my home.

I fell into it by accident and the shock of our arrival stays with me to this day. The door of the plane opened to a wall of heat and humidity so shimmering thick that for a moment we didn’t breathe. I held my daughters’ hands tightly, descending down the stairs and onto the steaming tarmac. It was five years ago but I see it now, my littlest one’s hair bouncing up in curls, my oldest’s falling flat.

We have two suitcases between us – everything else has been abandoned – but I am an expat worker so a house with crystal chandeliers in every bedroom is provided. I buy Ariana, my eldest, the one that feels the loss the most, the first of our Maltese puppies. For Cadance I find a nanny that she doesn’t like at all. I work, making daily mistakes, worrying about each in the fear that I will lose this chance and the opportunity it means for us. It takes me months to remember my phone number, to remember how to weave my way back home through faceless changing construction sites.

We settle into a daily life of Western veneer. I wake at dawn and practise yoga on an upstairs porch overlooking a brown flat land. I search hard to find the items we need to maintain our modern life – a pumpkin for Halloween, a turkey for my American children. Soy milk, tofu, the items of our other abandoned life and the diet that used to define us, are impossible to find.

A child in Ariana’s class hears that there is no father in our home and cries for us. Ariana shakes as she tells me this. Broken families are not the norm in this land of dust and brown and my children feel even more displaced.
But on Tuesdays, every Tuesday, we go downtown to the souqs. The sea of men in dish-dash part as I walk through the narrow alleys in jeans and a button-up shirt with my two blonde daughters. The occasional woman peers at us through the slits of her niqab, then turns away. It feels like we part the Red Sea wherever we go and this makes me feel very, very powerful but it also feels like we are a contamination just to look at, which makes me feel very alone.

We buy shoes and scarves and frankincense for the house, and then we walk through the spice section and weigh out the curries and chillies we have invented a need for. It is the colour more than the taste that interests me. Finally we go to Perfume Alley and I visit the perfume man, who kindly pours me sweet tea with mint while the children run up and down the alley trying every perfume they can. They return, redolent with scents, some of which are almost familiar, a memory just beyond reach, but for the most part are exotic and new. I ask my perfume friend about the distillation process and he explains about alcohol-free perfumes. I ask him about other Arabic customs and ways, about jinn and superstitions, and incidentally, one day, I ask him about spells.

‘Ah yes,’ he says. ‘Al nashrah. If you are bound by a spell, there are just two ways to undo it, by casting another – which is the work of Shayateen – or by prayers and seeking refuge in Allah.’

I do not argue with him as I absorb this information with my tea but I know there is a third way – and that of course is to tell it – to tell the story of the spell as truly and fully as possible and hopefully, through the telling, to explain and find forgiveness. It is what I will do here if I can find the courage to be honest – confess and seek redemption.

The call to prayers begins just then, emanating from the dozen mosques that encircle us, reverberating as it weaves through narrow airless alleys. Every radio and distant mosque takes up its own version. They sing in a fragmented unison, sound moving through the different distances and dreams – a vibration that encircles.
'Come to pray.'

'Come to pray,' it calls.

'Prayers are better than sleep.'

My perfume man excuses himself to wash but I barely notice. The sound is penetrating me, each wave of energy containing its own potent message. As I sit finishing my tea Cadance climbs on top of me and I feel the vibration enter her as well. Wishing that it wouldn’t I take advantage of the clearing of the alleys and hurry my children back to the car, just pushing them along. But on my way back home that evening, I remember the feel of that vibration, and the way my focus on it overtook all my other senses, and I wonder if I am here for a reason. It is a world of calls to pray and calls to action here, a soundscape in a flat and barren territory and perhaps I need to be here to unweave the web and undo the damage. Perhaps it is the only place I can.
Mackay, 1966

Our pregnancy went well. My sister was celebrated from the moment her presence was confirmed and I was careful to let both mother and child sleep. Mother read, exercised and watched her weight. She honoured her belly, sunning it on the beach, massaging it with oils and caressing it as it grew. Pregnant, she had joy and energy enough to nourish me and my sister both, and she loved this capacity of hers. I could hear that in her rhythmical heartbeat as she sang to us, hear it as her body swelled with blood and pride.

Yet, alone inside my mother, my sister needed no help and little encouragement to create herself in her own image. First she embedded herself stubbornly in the uterus. Then she invented a spine like a xylophone and a nervous system as delicate as the rainforests all around us. Later I heard her stumpy arms and legs thrash against the boundary of the uterus. Later still, I heard her heart, her ceaseless comforting core, begin its count towards cessation. By four months in vitro, she breathed her watery atmosphere with ease, turned eagerly to patterns of light, backed away from sound.

Occasionally I would be distracted from my task of listening to her growth by a sound beyond the boundaries of our creaking weatherboard house – a flock of lorikeets perhaps, a colour-maddened rage of sound, or a storm of tree frogs croaking at the rain – but when I listened too long to the formless sea of vibrations outside, I felt lost, even to myself. So I would cry – a fretful, uneasy child – until my mother allowed me to press my ear against
her breast again and to hear only the whispered, private conversation within her. I extended my dependency. I refused to crawl or walk, so I could use my mother's skin as slate and her breast as message-bearing conduit. With these tools, I told my sister I would always, always be there. But I was never sure she listened, let alone understood.

At times, when I nestled against my mother's inflating belly, I could feel my sister move towards my weight. The skin that encased her would undulate, would yield like sand beaten by waves, and her warmth would radiate towards me. When I felt that, I'd smile up at my mother and stick my fingers in her mouth. I'd think, the baby knows me now. But then, there were other times when she would kick against my belly and elbow me in the chest. She'd squirm away from me or kick into our mother's lower back until Mother, struggling against my inexplicable cries and the baby's ruthless movements, would have to put me down. And again I'd lie alone, listening as the house dissolved into the sound of waves, or I'd sleep fretfully until the early mornings when we woke together at dawn and my hope would be rekindled. My sister would be curled within my mother, I would be arched about her on the outside, but waking, we'd turn to face each other. And as she'd reach out, I'd see the outline of her hand pressed against my mother's skin. Matching mine to hers, we'd almost seem to touch.

Then I was almost one and my parents got excited. They planned a party to celebrate my birthday and their wonderful life and future and spent hours writing invitations and calling friends and family. They baked cakes, wrapped gifts, rearranged furniture to create more space and then, on the day before my party, Mother got down on her hands and knees and scrubbed the floors till they shone like blades of old silver. As she scrubbed she talked, telling me stories of her aunties, and all the while I ignored her until I heard what sounded like a water balloon drop and my attention came hurtling
back. I knew that something had changed and something else was about to happen.

Moments later, the phone rang. My mother rose from the floor, moved over to the table and rested her hand on a teetering stack of books she had yet to put away. She picked up the phone and said hello. My grandmother asked for my father.

‘Ah, he isn't here right now,’ my mother answered carefully. ‘He's gone out shopping. He's buying gifts for your granddaughter's birthday.’

‘What? That child is one already?’

‘Yes,’ my mother said. ‘Your granddaughter is one tomorrow.’

‘One? How is that possible? How can a June marriage have a November one year old?’

‘It happens like that sometimes,’ my mother answered rigidly. ‘In both war and peace it happens.’ But then she slammed down the phone and my father, who arrived back just at that instant, had to duck as she swung it at him, ripping it out of the wall.

The night before my birthday was a hot, still night that tolled with the stifled noises from the mill and the constant drone of a moth beating against the veranda light. My father slept on the couch that night and without him in bed beside me, I could hear my sister clearer than ever before. And it wasn't motion that I heard that night. It wasn't her liquid movement or rhythmic heart, which by then had merged with my own fixed body sounds and had become like my breath and blood. What I listened to instead was a softening, a release of bone and marrow.

Then the morning came and the dawn light rustled in the cotton drapes. My sister thrashed in agitation. Just before my father came to wake us, I heard a gripping, flexing, sweeping muscle rend my mother's body. I
caught my breath and listened. Groaning, Mother woke from sleep and clutched her binding stomach, then relaxed back into dreaminess as the muscle returned to normal. ‘One,’ I counted to myself and smiled. Right after that, my father came into the room. He pulled back the curtains to wake us with peals of light. Then, throwing a gush of brightly coloured boxes on the bed, he sang ‘Happy Birthday’ in his clear and innocent tenor.

I giggled mutely and listened as the baby rolled like an eyeball and then edged towards a narrow darkness. My mother moaned again. She looked at my father, then looked away and turned to speak to me. ‘Happy birthday, my darling. Did my baby sleep well?’

I flung myself at her belly.

‘Look at who's excited,’ she laughed. ‘Do you know what birthday means?’

That was the day I learned about the regulation of time. That was the day I realised that sound in itself is nothing outside the interval it fills. I learned this by listening for the surging sounds of my mother's body as my parents prepared for my birthday. Learned by listening to meat and muscle, nerve and marrow, twisting through interval and onset. I paid attention and counted. Time, measured by the contractions of my mother's body, passed.

Then before I knew it, and before Mother had realised she was in the early stages of labour, it was lunchtime and people were arriving. Doctors and nurses from my father's work. Neighbours and grocers from down the road.

‘Say hello to Dr. Belligen.’ My mother's voice, more breath than volume.

‘Say hello to Benny. My, how big he looks today.’ My father's jolly song.
‘Say hello to…’

‘Say hello…’

I didn't say a thing.

The yard and veranda filled. Adults with young children resting on their hips or clinging to their legs stood in clusters beneath the trees and talked about the season. Others sat on metal chairs and their butts squeaked with every move they made. The barbecue sizzled. Plates, knives, forks and glasses clinked. Children screamed as they rolled down the hill. I heard the gate swinging, the door squeaking, the stilts of our old house groan. The day was a banquet of sound, but all I listened for was the wringing of my mother's body.

My mother was a sound sculpture that day, a Venus de Milo of noise, and contemptuous of all who couldn't hear, who didn't realise and didn't care, I was constantly aware of her. Her emanations came intermittently at first. The muscles surrounding the child would tighten, then like rolling thunder moving closer, they'd mount in a merciless crescendo until the pent-up river ripped at its barricades and pain gushed over my mother's abdomen and ground like the mills all around us. Suspended at its heights, I'd hear my mother's rushing blood, racing pulse, swelling breath. I'd hear the child sink deeper into darkness and then, just before the retreat began, I'd hear the momentary, timeless space between the sounds.

The women fussed about her, of course.

‘You should sit. You can't be on your feet like that.’

At her occasional gasps, her occasional lapses of temper, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Braxton Hicks, I think. They're bad this time. Much worse.’
‘But of course, it’s your second after all. But not to worry. She’ll come out like bread from an oven. Just you wait and see.’

Precocious and impatient, I kept on counting. Twenty-eight…thirty-two. The space between the sounds was growing shorter.

Forty…forty-four. Each contraction took longer in its rise and fall.

Then people started leaving. My parents waved goodbye with their arms around each other and turned away in separate silence.

Fifty…fifty-six. My father noticed my mother pant. He extended his hand and asked, ‘Honor?’

My mother turned away.

The sun crackled as it sank over blazing plains and, out in the backyard, a mess of paper plates flapped and fluttered against the fence. My father pulled out his violin and, with long, slow strokes, he played to himself in the bedroom. Outside, the moon rose to the beat of my mother's step as she paced on the veranda.

At nine o’clock, count sixty, he brewed some coffee. He showered and then dressed for work. With cup in hand, he picked me up and gently asked, ‘Do one-year-olds stay up all night?’

I rubbed my eyes, pulled my ears, pressed against his body. He moved towards my cot, but Mother interceded.

‘She'll sleep when she's ready. Let her be.’ She took me from his arms and put me on the floor.

‘Honor,’ my father sighed. ‘Honor,’ he sighed again. ‘I really don't want to argue. Not on our daughter's birthday.’

‘Who's arguing?’ she answered with a flippant toss of her head.

‘Well, we are, obviously.’
‘But no, we're not,’ she said. ‘We're not arguing because there's nothing for us to argue about. Your mother will insult me every day and you will let her do it.’

My father reached to touch her. ‘Honor, my love, my darling. You have to understand.’

‘Don't touch me.’ She sidestepped.

They stood. My mother glared at him in defiance; my father looked at her with concern. They stood and the silence between them stretched and lengthened until he sighed again.

‘I have to go,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘You have to go.’

He turned and walked towards the door. He paused, waited, and then turned again.

Count sixty-one, the beat of her contractions. It swelled like the rising tide.

‘You have to go, so go!’ she groaned.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Just go!’

A pause and then my father, ever obtuse to his family’s needs, left. A slump, a point of ease, and then the pains surged up again. Mother, battling, rushed towards the door. ‘Mikhail,’ she shouted to the empty night. The engine revved in reply. ‘Mikhail,’ she shouted again. The car took off. ‘What have I done?’ she wailed, then whispered, then sobbed as she bent down over her belly. ‘Mikhail,’ she said once more and collapsed onto the floor.

I crawled to her then and, bending, attending, I listened as her hips turned to rubber. Relaxed and happy, I smiled into her eyes and she stared
back and soaked me up, but saw nothing, sensed nothing, until the pains had ebbed again.

But at count sixty-three, she saw she was alone and screamed. She saw the closed and bolted door, the dark and gaping window. She saw me bending over to stare between her knees and she whistled when the contraction ended. ‘I've really done it this time, babe. I've really screwed up this time.’ She rolled herself over, pushed herself up, and, pulling me up, she took my hand. We walked towards the bathroom. Slowly, with each step a feat of boldness, we moved down the darkened hall. But halfway there, she quailed. Her fear collapsed her knees and she fell against the wall crying, ‘Mother, Mother, help me.’

Count sixty-five. Then sixty-six. We resumed our walk. I guided her pace and slowed her down. Seventy and she was chanting, repeating over and over, ‘It's okay, it's okay. I'll call Mikhail. He'll come when he knows. He'll come.’

Count seventy-one at the broken phone. I held her shaking leg. ‘Jesus bloody Christ,’ she said and looked towards the door.

Seventy-two, the pains were back to back, crowding like a drum roll.

Seventy-seven surged over her like molten rock and I thought that I was losing her as she battled to breathe through the pain. But then, a brutal eruption and the waters came gushing down. Beneath her I was drenched – baptised by the waters of my sister’s sac into what would be my lifelong faith.

Panting, my mother recovered. Puffing, she noticed me. ‘Oh, my darling, my baby, you're soaked,’ she said. ‘How did you get so wet?’ She pulled my dress over my head, took down my frilly knickers. She tore off my nappy and threw it away, then cried out yet again. ‘No,’ she yelled, ‘not yet, not yet. I can't push yet, not yet, not yet.’ She started breathing, ‘Hee...hee...
ho, hee...hee... ho,’ then, turning, grabbed the table leg. ‘Mother, Mikhail, forgive me,’ she moaned and then let out four guttural grunts. I saw my sister's head emerge. Another grunt and I saw her shoulders. Another and she gasped for air and cried like a wild wind. My mother bent and held her and with one push more, she slid out, fully born.

My sister started to look for me immediately. With eyes the colour of a deep turquoise sea, she squinted against the light and searched the room until she finally found me, squatting beside our mother's shoulder. She stared – stared until she was sure it was me, then she smiled directly at me. She knew that I was there for her and her alone forever and for always.

My mother put her to her breast and laughing beckoned me to come. Naked beside my bloody sister, I took my mother’s other breast in my mouth. But her milk tasted different – thin, like gruel. With my sister’s colostrum in my mouth I knew I was starting over and this time as my sister’s twin.
Doha, 2007

There is little left of magic in my life. Well, that is not entirely true. When I come home from the office, feeling like burying myself in the sofa, my two daughters – Ariana with her incredible determination, Cadance so carefree and easy – are magic incarnate. In twenty minutes or less, they breathe life back into my body and we are laughing, playing, happy. That is magic certainly. Well, isn't it? And my office? It is in a far-off land. When I step outside to warm up from the air conditioning, I hear that ever-resonant call to prayer or sometimes see a woman in black, silhouetted against construction. And there is a romance in the wind that blows relentlessly through the desert. A romance even in the chaotic construction. The country is being birthed from its oil-rich sands and I give thanks for our delivery to its promise.

Still, these are just moments of gratitude and awe, rare moments, beyond the struggle and exhaustion, and if I look too closely or turn around too fast, I see how deeply I am ostracised from the community around me. The morning hallways are filled with talk of parties I am not invited to, the lunch tables are always full. Seven thousand miles away from home and I am an outcast, an infidel for Arabs and expats alike. I am not sure why. I look for the answer in the mirror, in the way I dress and hold myself, in my long straight hair, worn occasionally in braids, in the Harry Potter roundness of my glasses. I hold my hands up, trying to find the answer in my palms, but my fingers open and comprehension slips through them.

Maybe my shame is visible. Maybe all of those things that I do not want to tell permeate the pores of my skin. To be clear: I do not want to reveal them. Every time I sit down to write, I think of the evil eyes in the corridors and know that they would only be a fraction of the snorting laughs I'd have to deal with if people knew what I
dread to reveal. I always think of not writing. But then I think of you and the hope that comes with the magic of a truly told story and I start again, understanding that the process requires me to go as deep as possible — then deeper again; and deeper still.

Of course, most of it seems impossible to believe sometimes, and often even I do not. I stride through the mundane, willing myself to forget until those moments come, when my children run on the sand flats, their arms outstretched to a flock of flamingos flying low and heavy with colour above them, or the gulf, the changeable sea, hits the turquoise colour of your eyes and I am living again in the rare, magical times. It is as they say: Time is stored in the body, forgotten behind the knees. Scratch me and fragments of it re-emerge.
**Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, 1967**

When my grandmother called, we moved back to Brisbane. My mother said afterwards that the call came in the middle of the night and that was it – the end to her great escape. And she was right; the call did come in the middle of the night. I heard it in my father's dreams, more like a siren's lure than a call, and we both woke to it, him sweating from the visions that accompanied it, me curious about its undertones. The moment he woke, I crawled over to him and, seeing me awake and restless, he picked me up and took me to the window. The sugarcane was burning again and as he watched the fires, I heard the memories that he didn't dare touch, pounding in his chest.

‘I have to go back, Michaela,’ he said. ‘You understand, don't you?’

I laid my head on his shoulder. My grandmother’s dream-call echoed still.

‘Yes,’ I didn’t say.

It wasn't long after that that our house was packed and we found ourselves sitting on the porch of Galina's house in Brisbane.

My grandmother stared triumphantly at my mother, then mopped a hanky over her forehead, neck and chest.

‘So I meet my grandchildren at last,’ she said.

My father replied in Ukrainian, took Rayah from my mother's arms and handed her to my grandmother. My grandmother bounced her carelessly and nodded over to me.
'Does that one talk yet?' she asked.

'No, Baba, not yet,' my mother replied. ‘She's just a little over one.’

'Yes, well, no matter. Mikhail, he started late as well. But once he started... He speaks six languages, you know. It's a shame you can't appreciate how perfectly he speaks them. He has the ear, my son.’

My mother stood up straighter. ‘She doesn't speak, but she understands. I think she looks like you.’

'Hmph,' my grandmother snorted, and singing ‘lu-lu-lululu’ crushed Rayah to her body.

We stayed with Galina that summer and it was as hot and still as any I would know. In the evenings, the skies would flicker with heat lightning but there was never a roll of thunder. In the mornings, the trees in the park would sway and fill with birds but there was never a breath of air to carry any breeze or sound. All we heard, day in, day out, was the cluck of Galina's chickens out the back and, in the evenings, my father's violin. That was the way of my grandmother Galina – she was the master of calls and of secrets, of the untold tale that permeated all others. Her mass moving slowly but constantly around her world seemed to absorb and override every sound before it was even issued. Smell was the only thing that escaped her: cabbage, sweat and a bitter soap.

Meanwhile my parents went in search of their lives. They had a vision of a practice they would build together and a house for a mess of children as perfect as their second. Each morning they would leave me with Galina and take Rayah with them in search of it. Abandoned, I would hiccup and cry and Galina would set me in her garden and turn my tears into the moist black soil. She'd pull a capsicum or tomato from its vine and break it with her teeth for me to chew on, saying, 'Bah, of course you cry. This is nothing. Like
cardboard. You should have seen our garden in the Ukraine. Here the food tastes poor.’

Or she would take me to help with her chickens, as the cluck of them seemed to calm me. They were free-range chickens, her chickens. They had the run of the whole backyard, which was a narrow terrace cut into a hillside and held in place by a retaining wall. There was a mango tree on that narrow terrace. It shaded the chickens from the sun and dropped its rotten fruit and leaves, so what with mangoes splattered on the ground and the remnants of the cabbage feed and the humidity of the Brisbane summers, the earth of the terrace was spongy. Like Galina, the ground was a soft external mass that both absorbed and secreted rot.

The first morning Galina dragged me up to the chicken run, she stood me on the terrace wall and didn't say a thing. Holding my breath against the smell, I sniffed slightly as I watched her scatter the kitchen waste and search for eggs. The rooster crowed at her till she spat at it but all the chickens flocked to her side.

Another time, as I was standing on the terrace ledge, Galina walked across the yard, her gumboots squelching slightly. She stood beside the intersection of the wire and the coop and mumbled to her chickens, ‘They leave me with this crying child, saying it is his. But how do I even know that? Why would I believe it?’

She counted the chickens within before she unlatched the gate.

Once, after a whole day with my grandmother, it was dark and my parents had still not returned. I cried constantly until Galina took me out to the backyard to listen to the soft rustling sounds of the chickens sleeping in their coop. The sound of feathers rubbing on feathers began to calm me and I listened intrigued as she asked them where their eggs were. She nodded then swept the beam of her torch across the wall and caught the glow of an egg
hidden behind the tree. Mumbling, her words sinking into the ground like weight, Galina climbed through the roots of the tree. Holding the trunk she reached for the egg, but as she pulled herself up, she slipped and the egg she held was smashed.

I stepped off the edge of the wall to help and felt the ground beneath me give like corpulent flesh. Galina shooed me back and addressed me in Ukrainian.

‘My head is hurting from all your tears,’ she said as she wiped the egg on her dress. ‘Have they forgotten you, you think? Is this why you cry so much?’

Another time, late at night, Galina brought my gumboots. She let me hold her torch as she put them on my feet. Then she guided my hand as we swept the yard with light. The chickens woke to the light and the rooster crowed half-heartedly. There were no eggs that night, so we switched off the torch and sat in darkness.

‘First my son, then my peace and quiet. Now my chickens do not lay.’

Slowly I began to understand her language.

Another night she let me hold the light alone. Turning it into the palm of my hand, I watched my flesh turn red.

Galina turned to her chickens.

‘They are always late. You are always forgotten. What if I had forgotten my first-born child?’

I turned the light into the chicken coop and listened as they ruffled in response.
One day, standing beside the coop, I felt my weight starting to sink through the flesh of ground. It was like sinking into a layer of secrets. As I lifted my foot, the land lifted with it and Galina started to speak.

‘Your mother, now barely she talks to me, always she sees me as a competition. But when they were what? dating? always she was so compassionate, so caring. ‘Ai, Ai, Ai,’ she says almost every time I see her, ‘it must have been terrible, the things that happened to you.’ But always, always asking. Never letting it be. Always asking me to tell her this and tell her that. ‘What happened to your husband? What happened to your daughter, the little one that got left behind?’

‘They died,’ I told her. ‘Died.’
But still she asked, ‘Your mother? Your father?’

‘They died,’ I told her. ‘Died.’

‘Your sister? Brother?’

‘Died,’ I said. And yet still she asked.

‘What happened to Mikhail? What happened to you?’

‘We didn’t die, is all.’ But then she wanted to know why not. I had no peace from it. None.’

Just then she saw an egg in the mango tree roots and sent me for it with an absent-minded nudge. I squished across the yard, sinking deeper with each step, then climbed through the roots of the tree to get it. Holding it very gingerly, I took it back to Galina.

She nodded and continued.

‘She said she went to libraries to read but nothing was there about us. All of them here say that. It is not in their minds, our history. So let it be. If it was nothing, it was nothing.’
The next day the egg we found was in the coop. Galina opened the gate and sent me in to get it. The chickens were inside still. Galina kicked at the rooster through the wire when he tried to peck my hand. Terrified, I retrieved the egg. It was still warm as I handed it to Galina through the wire and then stood beside the gate.

Holding the egg, Galina looked down at the house, as if into a dream or memory.

‘It was a miracle, yes, that Mikhail stayed alive, but a man-made one is all.’

The rooster crowed. I rattled the gate of the cage. The chickens clucked in their corner.

‘There are no miracles, only deals. And you, you may as well know this.’ She turned, squatted at the gate and unlatched it, but didn't open it yet. Looking at me carefully, she said, ‘Sometimes you sacrifice a child to gain one. Like that story in the Bible, sometimes it’s what they ask. But it doesn't have to be your own. If you're smart, it’s not your own.’ She smiled at me.

She almost laughed as the rooster clawed the ground again but then she spat at it and let me out. Shivering beside the gate, I heard my parents’ car. Galina mumbled, but even as she spoke and shook her head, even as she ruffled like her chickens, I could hear her secrets settle deeper into the distant ground of her memories, hear her starved sisters clawing at the coffins – the children she abandoned, crying. I knew she would never expose them, that her silence would only get heavier and that I would never dig that deep again.
Doha, 2007

We went driving without light when Ariana and Cadance were still small. It was something I had to do, go back to an arbitrary starting point and try to piece it all together.

I took them to the sand flats out past the Ritz, pulled off the road, down a small dune, then with the high beam seeking for previous tyre marks, I drove out onto the beaten sand, as close to the water as I dared.

We parked and started to walk. On the beach, the girls got nervous. The distant hotel changed colour as the lights at its base moved through their spectrum, but apart from that, there was only the beach and water and expanses of dark, starless sky – a featureless, continuous line. Cadance hid her head in my hip and tripped me as I walked. Ariana, who had reached the age of not touching me in public, gripped me as I pulled them towards the water to wade.

‘Mum, I can’t see. It’s too dark.’

‘Your eyes will adjust in a minute. Come on,’ I reassured them, ‘Let’s feel the water at least.’

I let them hold me tightly as I took them to the water. I do not ever, even for a moment, take their presence with me for granted, yet I really wanted to walk.

The water was bathtub warm as we began to wade, and only ankle deep for almost half a mile, but we kept walking, kicking at the phosphorescence that glistened at our feet. The girls alternated between whining, trying to hold me back, and marvelling at the patterns of light in the dark water.

‘It’s so shallow,’ I said, ‘we could walk all the way to Iran.’
'Yeah, right,' Ariana said, still nervous without her vision. The sound of the water around our ankles did not soothe her. If anything, the amplification alarmed her.

Eventually I responded to their dismay and we turned back, watching the light against the distant hotel change colours as we walked back towards the sand. For a while we were lost, unable to find the car in all that flatness. I laughed nervously as I tried to force my eyes to adjust.

Eventually we heard voices – ‘Yalla, yalla.’ Another family was on the beach. They started to play their drums. The girls were comforted and emboldened by their human presence even though there was no visual sign of them. They relaxed, hearing the far-off squeal of another child in the dark, and finally we found the car. I pulled out a blanket and we sat and ate the cold McDonald’s I’d brought with us for dinner. After that, they asked me for a story.

The stories I told them did not include this one. Instead I ran down the list of relatives, writing in sand the names of the people that they, like you, will never meet. Galina, Kathleen, the aunts, Bridge and Gen and Franny. I sketched a branch of the family tree on the beach and mimicked the laughs and accents of my grandparents’ generation. We laughed as we erased the names to begin another story from yet another branch of our wild family. It made me very happy to see them destroy those patterns.

Then my littlest wrote our names. She was familiar with her own name and her sister’s but that was, I think, the first time she had written mine. I spelled it for her slowly: K-A-Y-L-A, the diminutive for Michaela, the one that had sounded less foreign.

Eventually I became aware of the tide and the silence from the other family, and I put the kids back in the car. I kissed them as I checked their safety belts – I was always very careful. I rolled the windows up to keep the sand out and as I pulled slowly down the beach, Ariana grabbed my phone and began to play a game.
Cadance gasped, then screamed in horror, when I turned out the lights. It was only for a moment.

‘Again, again, again!’ she shouted.

‘She's finally gone insane,’ Ariana said. Then she bit her lip as I cast them into darkness again. I sped down the beach in darkness until I lost my nerve and the sand turned soft. Then I turned on the lights to pull us over the dividing dune and onto the road again.

Back on the beach, our names were still there but I knew the tide had turned on them. Kayla, Ariana and my baby Cadance. It was the other names, the ones we erased ourselves, that worried me and worry me still. The patterns in their names seem too set for even the shimmering gulf.
Brisbane, 1967

The first time I met my grandmother Kathleen was like every other time after. We were on the way to the beach when mother said, ‘We'll just stop for a minute. Just a moment, That’s OK, isn’t it, Mikhail?’

My father sighed and pulled the car off the highway, stopping suddenly in front of the junkyard. He beeped the horn, once long and loud, twice staccato, then once again, longer, louder. I stood up on Galina’s lap and pressed against the window to try to hear beyond the chain-link fence and through the hundred-metre maze of gutted cars to the broken window above an old garage. There, two figures draped in grey moved slowly as they heard our horn.

Mother handed Rayah to our father, and then swung her long legs and high heels out into the mud. From the back seat, I waited and listened to the dozen starved dogs that barked at the end of their leashes, waited and watched while Mum, stony-faced, threaded her fingers through the chain-link fence. The shrill flat note of cicadas engulfed her and the passing traffic droned. Slowly a shapeless figure started to weave between the glinting steel and encroaching scrub.

Mother waved and smiled too broadly.

‘Cooee, mother,’ she called. Her voice carried to our other grandmother, who lifted her stooped head slightly in response, then continued to move through the rusted cars until at last, arriving at the fence, she grinned and put her face against the wire to be kissed.
‘Hello, Mother,’ my mother said, a little too loudly, with too much emphasis.

‘Hello, Honor,’ her mother replied.

I watched from the window of our car. The sound of cicadas shimmered with the heat. My father stood and stretched. He threw Rayah in the air, then strolled around the car to help Galina lift her bulk from the deep bucket seats. Left inside the car, I listened to the movement of the eucalyptus beside the fence and the symphony of other sounds – cicadas, traffic and Baba’s restless movements.

‘I brought my daughters,’ my mother said as she looked uneasily back at the car. ‘I have two daughters now, you know, and soon there will be a third child, too, I think.’

Kathleen grinned and nodded.

Mother moved in closer to the fence, spoke louder through the wire. ‘I brought my babies, Mother. I have two babies now.’

‘Two babies, how wonderful!’ Her voice crackled like dry leaves in fire. ‘Two babies,’ she sang over her shoulder. ‘Did you hear that, Cappy?’ she said to no one I could see. ‘Two babies, our little girl has.’

‘Mikhail!’ my mother called loudly back to the car. ‘Come here and say hello. Kayla, darling, come.’ She swung her arm, gesturing loudly in her false enthusiasm. ‘Come meet your other grandmother. Come and meet Kathleen.’

She looked back at her mother on the other side of the fence and pointed to a folding chair. ‘Open the gate, Mother. Let’s sit down and visit for a bit.’

Kathleen cried, ‘Yes, yes, of course. Two babies, Cappy. She has two babies now.’
She brought out a jangling set of keys, sorted slowly through them and then clumsily unlocked the padlocked gate. Mother retrieved the two rusted chairs from behind a gutted car and guided her mother beyond the gate. She opened the chairs beneath the whispering eucalyptus and they sat facing out to the highway. As they sat and I scrambled out of the car, I noticed the curtain on the old garage fall and heard a slow, limping footstep moving down the stairs.

‘How are you, old girl?’ my father asked, slapping her on the back. Kathleen smiled and took his hand, shaking it up and down.

‘You're a good boy, a good boy,’ she said.

‘Are you keeping well?’ he asked, bending towards her ear.

‘You are a good boy,’ she said again. ‘The Captain always says what a good boy you are. The Captain always says you will get his violins.’

‘Yes,’ my father said. ‘Yes, yes, yes.’ He looked up at the eucalyptus, measuring its height and breadth. The cicadas continued their dry, unchanging note. A truck's gears ground, grating as it passed us on the highway.

Mother took Rayah from my father and handed her to Kathleen. Rayah looked to my mother for reassurance, then quizzically back at the woman who held her. She wrinkled her nose, squirmed a little and panted. ‘This is Rayah,’ my mother said and, beckoning to me again as I hid behind Galina's skirt, ‘and over there is Kayla, short for Michaela, that is.’

‘Oh my,’ Kathleen said as she looked down at Rayah's wide-set eyes and tapering chin. ‘Oh my, she looks like you. She looks like you did as a baby, Honor.’
My mother shook her head. ‘I wouldn't wish that on anyone. I think she looks like you.’ Bending closer to her mother, my mother said, ‘I think she's going to be beautiful, a renowned beauty, just like you.’

My grandmother smiled and shook her head. ‘Two babies.’ she said again. ‘Two babies just like me.’

The flat, shapeless note of cicadas continued; the roar of traffic persisted. I pressed against Galina’s skirts. The conversation faltered and Rayah started to fuss. Kathleen, sensing a departure, searched frantically for some subject, some object she could give us, something that would make us stay. Her eyes rolled over the sharp-edged cars, the crack that ran up the garage, the shimmering blue-green scrub encroaching on the highway, the dogs pulling at their leashes. Nothing. Then remembering, brightening, she said, ‘You know the Captain has many, many diamonds for these two baby girls. Many diamonds and many violins.’

‘Yes,’ my mother said, ‘I know.’

‘He has land all the way down to the beach and — —’

‘It doesn't matter, Mother.’

‘The girls will get the diamonds, your husband the violins and you, Honor, will get — —’

‘Hush, Mother, please.’

Just then the dogs began to bark, pulling on their leashes. My mother stood and walked towards the fence, threaded her fingers through the wire and scanned the grey expanse for what had disturbed them. Inside the garage, I heard her father’s limping footsteps move towards the door. It stopped, hesitating a moment too long as Rayah cried, and my father, taking her from Kathleen, called my mother's name.
‘Honor, my love, it’s time to go.’

‘Yes,’ my mother said. ‘Let’s go.’ Turning back to her mother, she slipped a twenty into the hand she squeezed. Then she said goodbye.

Later, red-eyed in the car, that time and every time after, Mother would ask, ‘Did you see her teeth?’

My grandmother Galina, always there, would snort.
Doha, 2007

I took them to the beach another time, a little later but still at a stage when we felt we were starting over. That time I took them to Al Wakra. The tide was high by the time we got there. It was a Friday, my day off work, and I had promised to set out early but my yoga practice ran late that day and then with this and that and the friends we waited for who didn’t come and then my own resistance as I really didn’t know that beach and we really didn’t think of it as our beach like we did the Ritz beach of the drums at night and the low-flying flamingos…

So, like I said, the tide was high and the day well advanced and we couldn’t pull out onto the sand flats the way that we had planned to, so instead I parked the car in the overcrowded car park, avoiding the public beach near a port filled with dilapidated dhows and the crowds of women and seven-year-olds swimming in full shalla. We started to walk out towards a deserted spit – me, two dogs, and my two shockingly lovely girls.

Before tapering into the shallows of the incoming tide, the path took us down the retaining seawall and then past a few stray mangrove shrubs and workers from the subcontinent sunning themselves on their only day off. We waded to the first sandbar, crossed it, then waded to the next one. The sandbars stretched out to sea, a patchwork of white and turquoise set off by expansive blue light, but we stayed where we were, within sight of the port behind us and across the channel from the SUVs that had found their way onto the beach. We settled in, finding a mangrove to shade our water and hang our sarongs on. Cadance, refusing sunscreen, hat and T-shirt, ran with ever-lengthening legs and bucket to the water but Ariana hung back with her dogs.
‘Come on, darling. The dogs are OK. We could take them off their leashes now.’

‘No, Mum, they’ll run. We’ll never catch them if they do. What if they get lost?’

I quelled my irritation. Her heightened anxiety levels were my fault, her fear of losing her dogs related to all her other mother-imposed losses. I accepted this, but still I was about to argue with her, to encourage her, to try to help her with the idea of letting go, when I noticed some other workers on the sandbar beyond us, a group of maybe four or five. Out of respect for their customs, I let her keep the dogs restrained.

‘OK, OK,’ I smiled and pulled her against my side. ‘Let’s just relax.’ I held the dogs while she took off her T-shirt and adjusted her bikini. Then I handed the dogs back to her and we walked together to where Cadance was trying to catch hermit crabs. We sat in water barely three inches deep, heat and light soaking into us, and I let go of breath after breath as I watched my daughters expand into the sunshine.

Cadance alternated between checking beneath every shell for life and herding her hermit crabs back into their castle. Ariana, her breast buds just beginning to strain beneath her top, rolled stomach down in the water and chatted reassuringly to her dogs. Wet sand drained through her open fingers.

I closed my eyes and tipped my face back into the white warmth and listened to the lapping of water against my thighs, to a car racing beyond a sand dune, muted but still present, to a scuttling through sand – a crab escaping Cadance – to the comforting sounds of my daughters’ soft movements and voices… white light like soft half-darkness, almost making it possible for me to reclaim what I’d lost.

But then there was a shift, a change in the atmosphere, and I opened my eyes and turned.

‘Mum,’ Ariana warned. The dogs had started barking. The group of workers from the other sandbar had arrived on the edge of ours and were watching us intently. Another group was walking towards us from the beach.
‘Mum,’ Ariana said again.

‘Hush, darling, it’s fine. We can share the beach.’ Cadance had wandered a little too far and I gently called her back. An ibis was standing nearby, eyeing her bucket of crabs.

I walked to her and pulled her back easily as she chatted about her finds. I kept my movements slow and even as I noticed that the second group of workers had stopped on the path that led back to the beach.

Ariana was sitting up by then. ‘They are all staring at us, Mum.’

‘Don’t worry about it, darling. But put on your T-shirt, OK?’

Another two workers were walking through the deeper channel, approaching faster than the others, and as I turned, shading my eyes, I saw yet another small group of three or four walking towards us from another sandbank.

I dressed, then squatted to pat the dogs and slowly surveyed the scene. I counted five different groups moving in towards us, a total of maybe twenty-five.

‘What do they want?’ Ariana asked. I didn’t tell her, ‘You.’ I didn’t for a moment let myself imagine that in this country my two prepubescent girls were already ripe for the picking.

‘It’s their only day off,’ I said instead. ‘They are just at the beach to relax.’

‘Yeah, right,’ she said with a snort. I wondered just where her trust had gone.

The dogs were barking madly by then and pulling at their leashes. The men were crowding almost every edge of our sandbar.

‘Cadance, darling. It’s time to go.’

‘But Mum, you promised. Look at this crab’s claw.’

‘They’re all staring at us, freak.’

Cadance looked up from her bucket of crabs, around us at what had become an almost complete circle of men, and then back at me in confusion.
‘It’s OK, darling. They are just lonely for their families, but it is really time to go, OK?’

As we finished packing and Cadance dressed, I whispered to the girls that we were just going to walk with our heads held high but with no eye contact. They nodded, their matching hazel eyes examining mine for reassurance. ‘Look at each other if you need to,’ I said, ‘but not at them. They won’t like it.’

We walked straight along the path, saying nothing, but the dogs yapped madly and pulled at their leashes. The men stayed back from them. In silence they opened their ranks for us just moments before we reached them, then crowded the path as we continued to walk. We waded through the channel to the next sandbar where more men had gathered to watch our progress. Then finally we threaded through the mangroves, back up the retaining wall and into the car park where a group of women in abiyas sat around a small fire pit at the back of their car. The women watched us as I fished around for my car keys. Looking back briefly, I noticed that on the sandbar we must have been seen by all, so when one of them spat in the sand beside us, I was not surprised. My movements were still slow and steady as I pushed the girls and dogs and bags of clothes into the car, but there was a tremor in my hand that started to get worse as I put the key into the ignition and pulled the car away.

Driving away, I saw them all watching us still, but I tried to tell myself that there was never any threat, never any danger. Still, I knew that I was lying to myself, knew that if I didn’t undo what I had done, hazel eyes as well as turquoise ones would also be torn apart.
Brisbane, 1969–70

By the time of Martin’s birth, we were living next door to my Great-Aunty Gen in what Mum called her stucco palace. It was one in a line of pink and yellow houses hidden from the roar of Hamilton Road by a row of hedges carved like ducks. Across the road, in a shopping centre, was my father’s private practice where Mother worked with him. So most mornings, if my mother wasn't distracted, if my father wasn't on an unexpected call, if my parents weren't racing into the bedroom to make us little brothers and sisters, they'd walk Rayah and me to Aunty Gen's and then take Martin across the road with them to work.

But we didn't mind. We loved going to Aunty Gen's. We loved playing in her fall-away backyard and chasing her cats through the unkempt patches of elephant ears. We loved watching the haze of her cigarette smoke form low floating shapes as we listened to her laugh. But mostly we loved her house. Her front room alone was a wild adventure. There were huge armchairs cramped against each other and overflowing with stuff. There was an array of dusty sideboards filled with chipped teacups and yellowed photos and, in the centre of the room, two dining-room tables, one on top of the other.

The rest of the house was a treasure trove of the stuff that her memories were made of. Along the walls in every room were piles of magazines and papers stacked unsteadily. Boxes spilled out of the bathtub and obliterated windows. The scurry of mice filled the rafters. When we napped between the tables, I'd fall asleep watching the halfway light floating
through dust. Then I’d dream to the hum of the house as it groaned and shifted beneath its weight of stuff and memories.

But it was Rayah who especially loved it there. She loved Aunty Gen’s haphazard way of calling to us every now and then from in front of the TV. Rayah would appear in front of her all dressed up in moth-eaten silk and worn-out, high-heeled, silver pointy shoes, and Aunty Gen would laugh, saying, ‘You’re quite the clothes horse, girlie.’ And when she told us stories, Rayah would sit beside me at her feet and while I listened to Aunty Gen’s struggling breath become a rasping sound, her sound become words, her words language, her language the lilt and sway of her stories, Rayah would sit transfixed by our aunt’s bent and twisted toenails. She’d reach for them sometimes, daring herself to touch them, would pause quivering just above their gnarled, tattered surface, but then withdraw contemplatively. Repulsed yet fascinated, she’d look at them for hours.

And the stories that Aunty Gen told were like her gruesome toenails – old and inappropriate, better kept as secrets. Mostly they started with furniture.

‘That there’s from Ireland,’ Aunty Gen would say as she nodded over to a lead-paned sideboard hidden behind the tables. ‘It belonged to my mother, Eileen.’ She’d pause to light a cigarette, scratch one foot with another, and draw deeply on her smoke.

‘In Ireland, as girls,’ she’d say, ‘we had this huge old house filled with spit-and-polish furniture. It was lovely there, so lovely,’ and her snort would become a cough. ‘Mind you, I never did appreciate how lovely it was. I spent my time polishing furniture, not rolling on the ground like you two rascals.’ She’d throw back her head and laugh.

Her laughter, heavy with fumes, would carouse dangerously through the furniture and then sink into the rustling papers.
Later, breathing beneath the silvery blue spread of jacarandas, Rayah would fold her hands on her belly and heave her shoulders awkwardly as she mimicked the seal-like bark of Aunty Gen’s laugh.

‘Ah har, ah har, ah har,’ she’d imitate, and then break into a cough.

‘Ah ha, ah ha, ah ha,’ I’d copy.

When we went back inside, Aunty Gen would go on with the only stories she knew.

‘My mother was Protestant, of course, but she came from the south and spoke with a brogue. That made it difficult for her. You can’t imagine here how a little thing like accent… It was she who wanted to leave, not Father. He always was a unionist and loyal to the cause.’

Out the back again and free from the spell that Aunty Gen cast, Rayah screamed and giggled as she chased the cats about. She sang tuneless melodies among the banana leaves and babbled to the dolls she habitually decapitated. Her voice was already beautiful, filled with clear ringing vowels and neatly clipped consonants. I tried to copy, but the noises I made got confused on my tongue. I’d noticed already how people didn’t listen.

‘And this one here is from Coronation Drive.’ Aunty Gen would stand to pat the table balanced on top. ‘You know that big house on the river? Your mother’s shown you, surely. Well, it’s where we lived when we got to this place. It’s where your grandmother sent your mother and her brother when…’ She drew back her hand from a memory and dust fell to the ground. ‘Dinner was served when they brought him in. Jimmy was six when he drowned.’

Next door, our father worried. He complained about the state of Aunty Gen’s house and the way she went on about things we couldn’t understand. Mother dismissed him, saying, ‘What else does she have but stuff? Stuff and
stories and no one but our little girls. Anyway, who’s to say they don't understand?’

I understood. If not the words, then the intent at least. Aunty Gen with her rambling hoard of stories was teaching us the use of language. She was teaching us that it was something to sit down with, to bridge gaps with. Something to account for people and things and memories with. She was teaching us that language was the furniture of memory and memory itself the skin of dust that coats it.

‘There were five of us,’ she said as the days turned to weeks, then months, then years, while Mother challenged convention by making a nursery of the surgery. ‘Bridget and Ramona, Kathleen and Franny, and me, of course. I came after Ramona, before Kathleen. Franny was three when we emigrated.’

In the backyard, Rayah held out her fingers to a tree and said, ‘I'm three, tree.’

‘Pre, twee,’ I copied as I signalled that I was, too.

Rayah stamped her foot. ‘No you're not, you dummy. You're four and almost five but you always want to be like me.’

‘We arrived during the Depression,’ Aunty Gen said as she stirred her tea in her English Rose cup, ‘and converted the Coronation Drive house into boarding rooms. It was my job to run the place and help with Franny, while the others worked outside in secretarial positions. I cooked and cleaned, washed and ironed. I dealt with the shell-shocked veterans that we always had our share of.’

While in the backyard, in a cubbyhouse we built of yellowed damask and deep-green leaves, Rayah served tea to a headless doll. In a tea-party
voice she said, ‘Dolly, polly, golly solly.’ She lifted a leaf that shimmered with the rain of a recent shower and offered it to me. ‘Do da, la ga,’ she said.

I laughed and took it with my best fairy-queen manners. ‘Doe plo go ga geeee — —’

She shook her head impatiently. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Like this.’ Repeating her original gesture, she thanked herself in her make-believe talk.

I turned from the leaf, saying nothing.

Claire was born. White-haired, heart-faced, sweet-natured, but with ears like the wee ones that Aunty Gen feared. And Aunty Gen went on with her stories through every turn of season.

‘Well, it was a hard way to live, as you can imagine. Especially for our father who'd always believed in that pot of gold. And after all he'd had as an engineer in Ireland, he couldn't get a job and was supported by his daughters. You know, he walked every day on the path by the river for hours. He'd get dressed in a suit with a button-down collar, put a paper under his arm and be gone for six or seven hours at a time. Just walking,’ she said. ‘Just walking,’ she whispered. ‘People we knew would see him miles and miles away with the paper never opened.’ She sighed and shooed a buzzing fly. ‘A houseful of women, I suppose.’

Surrounded by his daughters in the house next door, my father jigged Martin on his lap and opened a paper package.

‘Oh, Honor, by the way,’ he said as he tried to take control. ‘I picked up this sample for you.’

My mother looked over at the pack of twenty-eight neatly ordered pills and said, ‘Great.’ Then, putting Claire to her breast, she winked at us and said, ‘Now, you go first.’
My father blustered. ‘Come now, Honor. You know it doesn't work like that.’

‘It doesn’t,’ she pouted innocently. ‘Too bad. I guess that means more babies.’ She smiled at us and the next day laughed with Aunty Gen.

‘Your mother wants to make up for the lot of us,’ is what Aunty Gen told us later. ‘She wants to make up for the whole bloody lot, but there were five of us and there’s only one of her.’

We pushed our way into her bedroom. We wove between the boxes and listened from our hidey-holes.

‘You see, of all of us, only Kathleen married. The war, you know, and she being the most beautiful, I suppose. Mind you, none of us was shabby. We all were clothes horses like Rayah there and we all took pride in dressing well.’

In Aunty Gen’s bedroom, the clothes leaked out of the wardrobes and hung on the straining door handles. They mounted her crowded bed and buried her numerous pillows. Rayah laughed as she tried on various outfits.

‘She was always our father's favourite. The pretty ones always are. He'd walk her into town and back, so it really hurt him the way it happened. She just arrived one day, looking like a princess, with a husband on her arm. Said she had taken the day off work and…’

Rayah found some beads and wire and twisted them together.

‘I can make a princess crown, can you?’

No answer.

‘Michaela, how come you won't talk to me no more?’ Rayah bent the crown and put it on my head.
And then, one day on a warm winter afternoon, Aunty Gen let down her hair. We sat behind her on the armrests of her chair and watched it as it fell like water tumbling off a cliff, watched as it covered her back and curled on the chair behind her. Her hair was long and white and rippling. In the warm dry air, strands of it flew everywhere. Rayah picked it up and watched it run through her hands like silver. She picked it up again and buried her face in its whiteness. She picked it up again and tried to hide beneath it but she must have pulled it hard because Aunty Gen turned to slap her. ‘Ouch! You little monkey.’ Rayah only giggled while the electricity crackled.

Then Aunty Gen reached over for a silver-handled brush and handed it back to me. ‘If you're gentle,’ she said, ‘you can brush it.’

I took the brush. It was a heavy horsehair brush with cupids on the back, and as I soothed it over her hair, it seemed that the pull of hair on hair and the mix of silver and white was focusing all the glisten of winter right there in that very room. And by the time Aunty Gen started to murmur, in a voice the colour of pearl, the sunlight was incredibly bright and the silver had started to shimmer.

‘We used to brush each other's hair like this,’ she murmured above the pull of the brush. ‘From when we were very little, Kathleen and I would sit talking like this and, with this very same brush, we'd brush each other's hair for hours and hours on end.’ She closed her eyes, rolled her head to the side. Rayah panted softly as she watched my long, smooth strokes.

‘In Ireland, as girls,’ Aunty Gen went on, ‘we shared a big four-poster bed and it had those white muslin curtains that danced in every breeze. And your grandmother's hair was oh-so-blonde and the bed was oh-so-soft, and it seemed like the moon was always full and filling the room with light.’

A breeze ran through the house and lifted ashes and dust. Aunty Gen pushed back the hair from her face and turned to smile at us. ‘Can you
imagine that, my girls? All whiteness and softness and brightness. I always used to think of it as like sitting in a cloud.’

We giggled at each other and moved in closer to her. We were caught in her web of hair and it tickled our noses, got stuck to our lips, and flicked up in our eyes.

‘But when we got here,’ Aunty Gen resumed, ‘there were no more clouds or softness. There were only those smelly boarders and the work we had to do. And day and night it was cook them food and wash their pants. And day after day it was lewd suggestions every time I cleaned their rooms.’ She shrugged and shook her head to herself, then bent to remove her slippers. ‘Well, I worked in high heels, of course, and I never did let myself go. I was even a lively dancer as I went around with the broom. But, oh, did my feet hurt by the end of the day, my corns and my ingrown toenails. And it was all I could do to climb the steps to Kathleen's attic room.’

She stopped and looked over her shoulder at us to see if we were listening. Rayah snapped her eyes off Aunty Gen’s toes and focused them on her hair.

‘But I did,’ she said. ‘I did. Aching feet and all, I climbed the steps to the top of the house to brush and braid her hair. It was the only thing I enjoyed back then, brushing her hair while she talked. She got out, you see. She was my outside world and she had such a way of telling. Maybe it was just some ducks she saw on the river or a band in town at lunch, but she told it with a curl of her finger and a tilt of her pretty head. She told it as something wonderful, as something worth the sharing.’

The brush had stopped. It had still in my hand and Aunty Gen patted my knee. ‘Go on,’ she said, ‘or it'll all fall out.’
So I lifted the brush to the top of her head and pulled it down to the ends. The knots resisted then released and I lifted the brush to the top again.

Aunty Gen went on with her story.

‘Well, it was while I was brushing her hair one night that she told me about the Captain. She told me how this man, this “older, worldly man”, had come into her office and just stood in front of her desk saying, “My, my, what a sight. What a beautiful sight.” She told me he had insisted on lunch though nobody had heard of lunch in those days and then she told me everything he said.

‘Well, you can imagine I held my tongue and kept on brushing and brushing. I didn't say a single thing, just listened to what he'd told her. A pilot, a violinist, an aeronautical engineer as well. He claimed to have built every aircraft Sir Charles Kingsford Smith flew and now owned race cars round the country. Well, that was just the half of it and any fool but Kathleen would have known it all for lies. Still, I held my peace and I brushed her hair and watched her wriggle and giggle. She wriggled as much as Rayah here and it drove me near as crazy.’

Rayah sat on her hands and tried to be still. Aunty Gen looked off through the tables and sighed.

‘I guess I could have stopped it but I wanted a family romance. Apart from our young Franny Kathleen was our last, best chance. So I didn't tell a soul about what was going on and on the day she went off to marry him, I made a little bouquet. I bound it together with strands of our hair and a green velvet ribbon we'd brought from Ireland, but later, when I told Bridget, she was absolutely horrified. And no it wasn't the runaway marriage, nor the expensive lunches. It was that ribbon, that old green ribbon from Ireland. ‘Oh Gen, you didn't,’ she said. ‘You didn't use green, did you, Gen?’”
I tugged at a knot and Aunty Gen flinched.

‘Well, that’s old Bridge, for you, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘Protestant to the core. I swear she’ll blame the apocalypse on green when it comes, and me in the meantime for everything else.’ She threw back her head and laughed. Rayah squirmed again.

‘Righto,’ Aunty Gen said, patting her thigh, ‘hand this child the brush.’

Rayah took it eagerly from my hand and, with her tongue between her teeth, she soothed it through the hair. Aunty Gen hung her head and closed her eyes. ‘Mmm,’ she said. ‘That's nice. You have your grandmother's touch, you know.’

I watched as Rayah held her breath. I watched as the beads of sweat that gathered on her forehead glistened like diamonds in white-winter light. I watched until the room began to crowd with waiting voices and stored noises seeped from furniture. Then I could only listen. Listen to the river lapping at its uncleared banks and washing through the mangroves. Listen to a tram rattling down the pulled-up tracks of Coronation Drive while Franny practised arpeggios. And as I listened, I heard the untold, the barely mentioned, the only alluded to or omitted. I heard memory become audible and the sound of sound remembering itself. And as the density of silence in the room rose to a clamouring crescendo, Aunty Gen started to talk again and her voice was resonant, so resonant.

‘Later,’ she said. ‘When Kathleen came home to us as a married woman, when it became something we’d got used to, I’d go up to her room after Jimmy and your mother were in bed, and I’d brush her hair, so gently. I’d brush around the bruises while she held ice to her eye or nursed her twisted arm and I never mentioned, not even once, the way her hair was falling out. Instead I’d talk to her about this and that and wait until she cried
and then I'd keep on brushing, keep on brushing. Poor Kathleen. I'd keep brushing, trying to recreate for her that faraway, cloudlike mist of childhood.

‘He was a rotten drunk but she always went back. In those days, that was just the way it was.’

Aunty Gen pushed the brush away and stood up and walked to the door. Afternoon sunlight caught at her hair and lit up her dress.

Rayah crawled between the two tables and rested her head on a stack of papers.

The layers of sound overlapped and leap-frogged through each other.

‘Yes,’ Aunty Gen continued. ‘She always went back. But after Jimmy drowned, she didn't always take your mother. “I’m not fit,” she said, time and again. “I’m not fit to look after a child.” So it was Honor’s hair I brushed at night, long and straight and auburn. Orphan Honor I’d call her, as I brushed her hair and told her about Kathleen when she was little. And she seemed to enjoy it. She seemed to relax and feel a little more at home. But anyway, it was back and forth with her for a very long time. Your mother divided her time between us and them and the boarding school she was always running away from. But then, when she was twelve or so, they took knives to each other, Kathleen and your mother, that is. Well, let me tell you, it caused a riot. Your mother was always a spitfire and Kathleen just couldn’t handle it. She turned up here all ashen and hysterical, saying over and over, “I’m not fit. I’m not fit.” She said she’d killed her little boy, and now she’d do it to her daughter, too. She said we had to save her, had to save her baby from her. So we decided that Honor would live with Bridget, our oldest and most independent, and the rest of us would help. The thing is, Kathleen decided to cut herself off but she never told us at the time.’
Aunty Gen stopped and turned to us. The sun had dipped lower and her hair was burning like a beacon now but her face was distorted by backlight and could have been any face at all.

Rayah lay bored on the table, watching her foot as she swayed it, while on the arm of the chair I curled into myself. It was chilly. Mother was late. I'd had enough and I wanted to go. But I was rooted where I was by the uproar in the furniture. It wasn't ghosts. It wasn't the dead. It was only the store of emotion. The furniture was ablaze with feeling and I could hear it burning all around me.

‘The day Kathleen said goodbye to Honor and left us all for good,’ Aunty Gen’s voice was raspy with the echoes now, ‘was a day just like today. Clear, cool, and winter bright.’

A voice, dry like the ancient wood of the furniture, picked up and elaborated on her words.

_It was clear, cool and winter bright, and the windows were open to the fresh crisp air._

‘We were packing up Coronation Drive and moving into houses of our own. My parents were dead, the boarders were gone. There were boxes and papers everywhere.’

_The last of the life we had shared was in boxes and stacks of paper._

‘And the house was filled with the sounds of high-heeled shoes as Bridget and Franny searched the empty rooms...’

_And in those empty rooms I searched I heard the sound of the river lapping, heard the sound of it drinking our memory and drowning it like it drowned my son._

The sun sank. It was abruptly night but Gen stayed where she was and continued with her story.
'Your mother was hiding in the kitchen and Kathleen was looking for her everywhere. She was frantic, calling “Honor, Honor, where are you, child?”'

…and my voice seemed to rise from my knees, weak from the courage I didn’t have, and I wondered if I could do it. If I could leave my daughter for good.

‘From where I stood in the door of the kitchen, I caught a glimpse of Honor hiding behind some boxes. Her hair was in braids and she was wearing a too-short dress. Her knees were grazed as usual and her face was pressed against a box. She watched her mother look for her, and, not finding her, lean on the table in anguish. I saw Honor edge deeper into the crevice between the wall and the boxes and then heard her as she shouted, “I’m not going to let you find me.”

‘Kathleen startled but didn’t turn. “I only wanted to say good-bye.”

“Good-bye,”’ your mother said.

“Can I hug you before I go?” she asked.

“No,” your mother said.’

‘No,’ my daughter said again when I pleaded and told her I had to go, that the tram was coming soon. So I said, knowing she didn’t believe me, ‘I love you, baby. I love you very much.’ I said that, even though I knew she measured my love by desertion, and not by the sacrifice I was making.’

“No,” your mother said. And then she said nothing at all. She just stood there wanting to hear more but waiting to hear nothing. Kathleen opened and closed her fists, opened and closed her mouth. There were tears at the corners of her eyes and she shivered and hugged her shoulders as she searched for something to say. But your mother stayed behind her box and Kathleen stayed by the table.
‘Then it was time for the tram and Kathleen had to go. She touched the boxes as she passed and said again, “I love you…”’

And then I was running blindly and stumbling onto the tram. I found a seat at the back and collapsed against the window, but I couldn’t stop the shaking. When I got home, the Captain beat me but it still didn’t stop the shaking. I had to hear him crying for his lost children first. I had to make him dinner. It was only when I took the leftovers outside to the dog and saw the moon rise full and orange over the dusty scrub that the shaking actually stopped. I felt triumphant then, in spite of it all.

‘And after she left, we didn't see her again until your mother's wedding and by that time, well, by that time Kathleen had been beaten stupid. At the wedding, she went on about diamonds and violins for her grandkids and — —’

‘Aunty Gen,’ Rayah said before she finished her sentence.

‘Yes, Rayah, my darling,’ Aunty Gen replied softly.

‘My father says you talk too much.’

‘Does he?’ Aunty Gen asked. ‘Does he, indeed?’

Just then my hugely pregnant mother emerged from behind the hedge with Martin and Claire on her hips, and her hair piled messily on top of her head. She sang out, ‘Cooee, darlings.’ Entering the crowded room and infecting it with life, she made a beeline to the table where Rayah sat nonchalantly chewing on her hair, managing to laughingly take her also into her arms.

Curled in my corner on the oversized chair, I felt an echo of Jimmy take shape in the shadows, and we watched each other watching them, life and love where we were not.
Kovalam Beach, India, 2002–06

That was the earth we were sowed in, and I see the stories of my family in the little things my children do. Like the times I would take them to Kovalam for Christmas before I finally had the courage to finally take them home. They tell me they miss India now. They say, ‘When are we going back? Christmas please, it’s the only place that feels like home.’ And I see the whole scene, frozen in time. I see the view from the slightly rancid-smelling hotel that we often used to stay at. A valley – coconut groves planted into the rice paddies, little pathways meandering through and up and over the trenches.

And I remember the rest of it, shaking them awake at 4:30, five a.m.

‘Come on, darlings,’ I hear myself say again. ‘All you have to do is lock the door. Then you can sleep till I get back.’

And they would groan and mumble and one of them would wake enough to take me to the door and pull the padlock shut after me. I’d shine my torch through the window bars, lighting them back to bed, checking once more. ‘I love you both,’ I’d whisper, and then I would turn and head down the stairs, and more stairs, and then, with a nod to the watchman who knew to keep an eye on them, I’d head outside and go down yet more stairs.

Moving between ramshackle buildings, following the line of light at my feet, I’d try not to show any nervousness as I walked past the pack of sleeping dogs who might or might not lift their heads as I passed. I’d be off the hill by then, turning left past Green Valley, the hotel we’d stayed in a time before. I’d take a left again at the Ayurvedic Clinic. Moving from memory in the quiet darkness, I would snake along
the dirt paths and past the closed shops. The smell of the uncovered drain would place me in the centre of town. It would always stop me in my steps for a moment, that foul stench, but then I would continue.

The last part of the walk was always the most disconcerting. There'd be no shops, stairs, or dogs, just a few chickens slowly starting to rouse, the quietest quietness before the dawn. But then in the distance, the soft light of the Peacock hotel – people waiting, expecting us – and lights, other yogis arriving silently in groups or alone. Up five flights of stairs next to the roof, a few flickering lights casting shadows on the bodies already in movement, the sound of breath. A nod from my teacher and I would lay out my mat. To the accompaniment of waking birds, dawning light, and a room of breath, I would begin my practice, and practise until it was done. Then I would return stabilised, satisfied, able to carry on, to where my little girls waited in their hilltop hotel, brushing each other’s hair, experimenting with Indian sarongs, laughing and looking like just a picture of us, my sister and I, or of Kathleen and Gen in an earlier time.
Brisbane, 1972

There were moments when it was exactly as I wished. Rayah and I, unnatural twins as close as could be imagined. There is a photograph documenting how very close we were. We have our hair cut very short as our mother now had six children and could not deal with tears and braids, but we are in matching clothes that she had stayed up all night to make: tartan skirts with braces over polo-necked shirts. In the photo, our faces are very serious. Mine, with a sprinkling of freckles on the bridge, looks directly at the camera. Rayah looks towards me, her cheeks still baby fat.

The photograph is one of several that document that day. It was spring, if I remember right, though to be honest my memory is dictated by these images. The photographer was a Ukrainian patient of my father's – short, pot-bellied, with thinning hair, his breath and lounge-room studio thick with cigarette smoke.

The first photos are group shots. In one my mother sits in the middle of us all with her chin lifted and turned to the left to reveal the profile of which she is so proud: a strong straight nose, her jaw a clean line. Baby Simon is pulling at her shirt, wanting to be fed, a need for gratification that has always haunted him. Alex, our toddler, is picking his nose. The four older ones – I, Rayah, Martin and Claire are grouped together behind them, a group so tight with rivalries that we wouldn’t cohere.

In another group shot, my mother looks straight at the camera. Simon is feeding in this one and Alex has also climbed up on her knee to caress her other breast. In spite of the exhaustion that slips into her smile, she defies the camera and flaunts their need for her. Claire and Martin and I are also turned to her, but Rayah has turned away, pouting, looking very bored. Another studio shot shows just the kids – three girls, three boys – a can of laughing,
unposed worms. Mother's hand is caught in retreat from propping up the baby.

Yet another picture is of just the girls. Rayah and I stand behind Claire whose tartan is only in her bows. She lifts her gaze towards us but is not an unnatural twin and will never be a part of us. In the photo of the boys, they tumble over set-up toys. Years later, when I found these photos with my daughters, I let them speak for themselves. My girls were impressed by my mother's boots – high, white and embroidered – and the elaborate hairdo. They laughed when Cadance said they were black and white because it was the old-fashioned days. ‘You're cute,’ they say of me, and kindly do not comment on the obvious fact that Rayah was much cuter than I was. But there are ghosts behind each picture that did not speak to them: my mother's growing despair at my father's absence, my sister's distrust of the glare behind the camera, my continued lack of speech. All that is silenced, frozen by the image, and my daughters do not see it.

The next set of photos is taken outside. There is a series of natural shots in a playground: Martin in a safari suit with his foot on a ball; Mother, by herself, one leg bent, her lifted profile again. Her skirt is very short and her legs are very good. She doesn't look like a pregnant mother of six. In the next series of shots, Galina and my father appear. Grandmother holds first the baby, then the toddler. Father stands behind her. They are formal shots. My grandmother wears a hat and my father stands with his hand on her shoulder. None of the older children are in those shots. None include my mother.

Rayah and I are by ourselves in the next series. We have been drawn away or retreated to the swings. On the other side of the park, my parents were yelling at each other, but the photo only seems to records that Rayah and I are swinging, higher and higher and higher. The photos catch us with
the wind in our hair and lifting our skirts to show our frilly pants. Then the camera zooms in, the skill of the photographer revealed by the detail of our underwear. In another, I stand like my mother, leg bent, head back. I have pulled my skirt up a little to show more leg. ‘Higher,’ he’d said, ‘Just a little higher.’

‘Jeez,’ my kids said when they saw it. ‘What were you doing, Mum?’

In the next few photos, Rayah stands arms crossed, scowling, while I am going up the monkey bars, but she isn’t in the others – the ones of me swinging upside down with my whole belly exposed, of me with my hand behind my head and leaning forward to pout, of me looking over my shoulder, my skirt lifted this time to show a little of my bum. There was a whole series just like that; he’d had lots of ideas for poses and I had been, as always, silent and cooperative.

And what else wasn't in the photos, the images of that day? My mother coming over with Rayah and finding me beside a clump of trees which the photographer had thought would be nice and private. My mother taking my hand. ‘Enough of photos,’ she’d said, dragging me away, while my father, in the distance, had guided my grandmother into the car. And what else? The return of the scattered children to the bench where my mother sat in tears, her rage at always being second to my grandmother another element marking my family's descent into disarray.

But still the image of Rayah and me remains and depicts exactly what I have always wanted: us, unnatural twins, with identical short-cut hair, together – me looking after her like a big sister should. The rest of it just white noise.
Doha

There are times that are always present to me. Times when present and past merge. My children are small, Rayah and I are small, even my mother and my Great-Aunty Gen and her sisters are small. It is all like a roundabout song, the same catchy melody of the chorus returning over and over.

Like the time when my children are playing in a dusty playground in a dusty compound on a dusty day.

Another mother is there, a stay-at-home expat mum, who comes from that magical place of elephant ears and jacarandas that I still call home. I am so delighted, so far from home, to meet someone so close, until she asks the question that always gets asked when we meet someone else from home.

‘What school did you go to?’

I react as I always do to this question. What does it matter? I think. I have lived in four countries and earned three degrees and you ask me about my kindergarten. So I try to deflect the question, knowing that she is actually asking about my status and is trying to determine how much to invest in our relationship – even here, as my neighbour, in this dusty playground. So what, I think, if our school was of the right class – what would it matter if she knew that the babies were always arriving, our uniforms always dirty, our toilet door never closed?

But I knew that it did matter – that it mattered very much – but for other reasons than the ones that she was asking about.

And so I confess that it was the school of the bottle-green uniforms and I tell her that every day, on the way to school, my father would point out the bottle tree, which was brown instead of green. ‘It’s going to burst one day,’ he would say, every single day, first to the six of us, then to the eight, whom he would drive to the school that he couldn't afford but that mother insisted we attend. And though he was often tired, then more and more often grumpy, he was always jovial when he spoke about trees – especially that tree, the bottle tree.
My neighbour knew that uniform, and even the bottle tree and the jacarandas, and we compared notes while our children played. Still, she couldn't know the rest, the parts that only return to me now like snatches of an old song – a word here and there – a melody that I could hum if someone else was leading. She couldn't know that, even though I was older and in the year above, that it was Rayah who was the triumphant one. A natural to everything, beyond strata, class or any other limitation, it was Rayah who was in control of all the playground games, a magnet flocked about by all. And how I, who longed to be a princess in one of the games that Rayah concocted, was taken every day at lunch to the corner of the playground, where everyone could see, and made to practise forming words.

At night, with the children still coming, more beds were crowded into both the girls’ room and the boys’ room, and Mother would sit at the door between them, reading while nursing the youngest child. ‘Mum,’ the little ones would yell when her words started slurring and her head would drop. And she would wake again and read until our father came home from his night rounds and, fearing his ever-growing anger and exhaustion, we’d all pretended to sleep till the sleep became reality.

Snatches of a song, a refrain. At night the bed-wetters, the bad-dreamers, the lonely and the scared would wake and slip into my parents’ room, filling the bed with reaching bodies and twisted limbs. When I could, when there was room, I would slip my hands prayer like between my father’s thighs and let the warmth radiate down me.

But back at school, there was no such warmth. The social isolation of learning language so late only increased with the stilted accent I developed and instead of listening, like I’d always done, I started trying to filter out some of what I heard. With a certain tilt of my head I found I could make the words that were crescendoing all about me, words like ‘freak’ and ‘weirdo’, pass through me like the distant whisper of a haunted wind. And when Rayah was a part of the conversation, saying ‘Yeah, she never talks at home either,’ I found that if I held my breath and squeezed closed my eyes I could make myself stone deaf.
Yet down the road from our house was a garden, Mr Camble’s garden, and it was an acre full of flowers, bed upon bed and row upon row of flowers. After school, while my brothers and sisters rode bikes and kicked ball in the cul-de-sac in front of our house, I would slip away to the garden and hush all my imaginary friends and we would play our favourite game, the ‘how still can you be?’ game. Sitting there absolutely and totally still, I would luxuriate in hearing the usually inaudible world amplify. The pulse in my wrist would begin to thunder, the lazy bees would helicopter in my ear. Lying close to the ground, I would listen to the earthworms overturn dirt on their slow and careful journeys, or to a spider walk on its thread of silver. The quieter we got, the more there was to hear, and of course I was the princess in this world and the noises around me my symphony of tribute.

And then when my language finally did come, I used it to tell my little brothers and sisters of what they could hear if they’d just try to listen. I would make them sit and practise stillness, if only for a fraction of a second, and we would reach for the secrets in the fleeting silences. When exhaustion finally overcame her with yet another baby, and Mother stopped her bedtime reading, the children – my little brothers and sisters, whom I would eventually abandon and fail in every way – would crowd around me at night to hear these secrets in story form.

So what does it matter of class and the colour of our uniform? Back in Doha in the dusty playground, we compare notes about the teachers that stayed for generations, and hum together the parts of our school anthem that we can still remember.
Brisbane, 1974

Music always mattered to me, the tuneless hums and songless melodies, the tones and chordal progressions. The music of my father’s violin drifting through the subtropical evening and my mother’s halting piano during our family sing-alongs. The cathedral choir at the Anglican church where my brothers sang for school fees and the music of the Ukrainian church with its dirge like chants. The music mattered, all of it, but not how people thought.

There were music lessons, of course. Every Saturday afternoon for years, Mother would round up as many of us as she could catch, wipe our noses, and send us to Great-Aunty Bridge’s small cottage where we would squeeze, two to a doiled Irish armchair, eat stale shortbread, and copy theory books until it was our turn to sit at the piano and show her how little we’d practised from the week before.

But Aunty Bridge, with her long silver hair braided over her head, was patient. ‘Cup your hands like you’re holding a bird. Here is middle C.’

And Aunty Bridge was wry. ‘Don’t, for heaven’s sake, put on the light in the toilet. What do you need to see in there?’

And Aunty Bridge, with her back two rooms filled to the ceiling with music scores and her MBE on the wall, was determined that one of us, just one, would continue the family tradition. It turned out to be Martin, the one with the musical ear, but for a long time she thought it would be me. I was her disappointment.
‘My sister,’ she would tell me as I stumbled through ‘Fur Elise’, ‘could play a concerto by ear at the age of five.’

I’d nod and smile. The traffic from the main road outside was the accompaniment to our conversation.

‘She had stickability, Franny did. Like me.’ She turned the page as I fingered out a chord. It crackled in a beam of light.

‘Pay attention, Michaela. Listen.’

I sighed.

She put her hand on mine. ‘You have to have stickability. You have to have something your own. Do you hear?’

‘Yes, Aunty Bridge, I hear.’

‘Nothing matters if you have a career. Not beautiful sisters or faithless men. But you have to have stickability.’

‘Yes, Aunty Bridge. Okay.’

‘Okay? What is that? A horse’s hay?’

I placed my hands on the keys, squinted at the chord. She moved my fingers to place them right.

‘You want to end up pregnant all the time like your mother?’

‘No, Aunty Bridge, I don’t.’

‘Good. Then start again.’ So I would try, and make it a little further before I missed a note again and she would turn to look out the window, her hand to her heart as she shook her head.

‘What do you listen to child, that you just can’t hear?’

And I could never tell her exactly that the music mattered, but not so much as the source of it – the sounds that crowded beneath it.
Doha

When my children were a little older, they had this game they liked to play.

‘I am the favour ed daughter.’

‘No, I am.’ They would push each other and roll on the bed laughing hysterically and crying.

Or at the table.

‘See, Mother is giving this to me first as I am the favour ed daughter.’

‘No, no. Mother is giving that to you as she is sorry that you are not and is overcompensating with food.’ They would tackle each other’s plates, turning each meal into a competition.

It was fun, and I think they know that neither of them is favour ed, that each, like my inhalation and exhalation, are essential to my being – but still I worry. Did I do it right? Was spacing them four years apart, not back-to-back like we all were, the thing to do? The motivation at the time was my yoga practice. I had to regain my poses first, then build on them a little before I stopped for the second child. But that was just on the surface, what I said to their father. The truer reason was the deep-set fear that if they came too close together, there would be a repetition: that one would be prettier, happier, smarter, and the other, so close in age, would feel that every day.

That is the story I lived, still live, and I know how it feels to be the unfavour ed child, the mythical ugly sister, the one who may tell the stories but about whom the stories will never be told. As an adult now, I rationalise. A family selects within itself for the survival of its genes. They may love all their children, denying no-one anything, yet there is that instinctual, unconscious drive to invest more in the ones
who will do best. It is biology really, not favouring, and who blames anyone for this? Still there is that ugly sister's rage.

I live far, far away from everyone now, but that rage still lives in me and at times has cost me almost everything. I try very hard to control it. My daily yoga practice stems from it, but still something small can trigger it, something as insignificant as a dirty dish, and then the rage will become a swell of fury that takes over my whole body – one that nobody, least of all myself, can control. If I have awareness when it begins to happen, I will leave my phone downstairs and lock myself away; will count, sit, meditate, scribble onto a page; but mostly it will be sleep that finally quells it.

And then there are the headaches that accompany such feelings. Not the migraines that I have heard people speak about, but rage aches, starting in the back of the neck and gripping me, shaking me into a deep, deep discomfort: not pain as such, but a ‘why-me?’ gripping that won't let go and makes it hard to breathe. It is when that grip has hold of me that any trigger will set me off. And really I am not exaggerating when I say that it feels like my blood runs black, that I am being drip-fed bile.

Is it diagnosable, like perhaps my baby sister's rages, or is it just the blame game we were raised with in our family? Is it because I have lost something essential to myself or is it just part of the genetic gene pool? I do not know, but rage and anger and violence became commonplace in our family, and at about the age of twelve, my father stopped calling me his peacemaker.

I remember once – though I hate to.
Brisbane, 1977

My mother looked at herself in the mirror and tried to smooth her unkempt hair.

‘Don't go,’ I said.

She bit her lip. ‘I have to, darling. You know that.’

‘Really, Mum, can't you just say no?’

‘I have to go. It will all be fine.’

‘But, Mum, I have a maths test tomorrow and — —’

‘Your father wants me there. I chose an Eastern European man so I have to do what he says.’

‘But, Gracey. She was sick last night.’

‘I know, but she’s okay now, I think. I'll feed her before I go and she should sleep, I think.’

‘But my test. And I told you I need glasses. I don't get anything in class and I can't see and — —’

‘Rayah will help if she cries.’

‘She won't. You know she won't. And Grace is not okay. She's flushed and wheezing still.’

My mother sighed, turned to the bed where my baby sister lay, and lifted her to her breast. She fixed her gaze on me. ‘You know what will happen if I don't go.’
'But, Mum.'

'You are twelve now, my oldest. I need you to help.'

'But, Mum.'

'He could have anyone. At every event, your grandmother lines up eligible Ukrainian women.'

'Please, Mum. He loves you. He loves us all.'

'Here, help with this earring. Do I look okay for a mother of nine?'

She left and I lay beside my feverish sister and sang to her a little, wishing her to stay asleep. In our bedroom, Rayah turned up her music and drew. Lilly began to cry.

'Hush,' I said to Grace, kissing her on the forehead.

Slowly I edged myself off the tousled bed and, stepping over piles of clothes, went to the other room.

Lilly put her arms out to me. I picked her up and put her on my hip. She was a stocky toddler, already half my size, but we knew each other's bodies and she laid her head on my shoulder.

'Rayah, you have got to switch off the music. You've already woken Lil.'

She shrugged, turned her music down and focused again on her drawing. The music stopped and the house slipped into the sound of sleep.

I took Lilly back to my parents' room, pushed away some stuff and laid her beside Grace. I had almost read her back to sleep when the phone began to ring. Lilly jerked awake.

'They were asleep,' I answered. 'You just woke them both.'

'Grace's fever?'
'The same, I think.'

'And Rayah and Martin?'

'I don't know.'

'Okay, Okay. We won't be long.' I returned to the bed and curled beside the babies, singing softly as I willed myself to stay awake. The sound of sleep pervaded the house again, occasionally a cried-out word, a moan, a flushing toilet. The clock ticked – late, later, latest. Lilly's tight brown curls softened with the dampness of Grace's restless fever but they slept, they all slept, and I slid off the bed of books and clothes to walk through the darkened house. In the room I shared with Rayah and Claire and the two baby girls, I collected my maths books from my bed. The reading light next to Rayah's pillow was on, hanging dangerously low to her pillow. Rayah was asleep, a comic book resting on her chest. I shook her gently. 'Rayah, the light,' I said. 'You could cause a fire that way.'

She mumbled and turned. I switched off the light. Then I stayed on her bed, swinging my legs and sighing.

I shook her again. 'Talk to me, Rayah. Wake up.'

'What do you want?' she moaned.

'Why me? Why do they always do this? I have a maths test tomorrow.'

'But maths is easy. Don't worry.'

'It isn't easy for me.'

'Why are you bothering me, Kayla? It's only a test. Don't worry.'

'But I can't see the board and — —'

'Forget the test. Sleep. Besides you can tell stories. The little ones love your stories. I love your stories.' She rolled over, dismissing me.
'I need someone to talk to, Rayah,' I said, shaking her. 'I'm scared and lonely and Grace is sick and…'

But Rayah had tossed her arm over her face and when I tried to shake her again, she didn't even mumble.

I went back to my parents’ bed with my books and, keeping one leg pressed against Grace, hoping that the human contact would keep her calm, I tried to study for my test.

A strange kind of pressure started to build in my neck when the numbers refused to focus. I read over and over the first sum, but even as I read it, I couldn't see it. Even as I held the book, I couldn't feel it. I rubbed my eyes hard and tried to pull myself out of my stupor. My head dropped. I pulled myself awake. I rubbed my neck and rolled my head but over and over the page became a meaningless blur.

At just after twelve, Grace's fever peaked and she woke from overheated dreams. Her whimper became a cry when she saw I wasn't her mother. I picked her up and, rocking her, singing, I took her to the bathroom.

I closed the door behind us so that Lilly wouldn't wake and I set her on the sink. I ran the water to wash her face. The sound of the running water calmed us both. I took her hand and held it in the stream of water and we watched, mesmerised, as it ran through her fingers and then down the drain.

The moment stretched. Absorbed by the sound and coolness of the water, we lost touch with our bodies, became both less and more than our physical needs. But then there was a shift outside; a child moaned or rolled and I focused on the bathroom and the sick, restless baby who was my sister. I turned off the water and for a moment we sat watching it spiral down the drain.
Then Grace began to cry again. I switched the water on again and washed her face again, but this time neither the sound nor the coolness soothed her.

Next I tried walking, walking up and down the corridor between the bedrooms, singing and patting her back. She kept on crying, frantically squirming in my arms and crawling up my body, crying and crying on my shoulder. I apologised. Over and over I said, ‘I'm sorry, Gracey, sorry.’ Once or twice she hiccupped into silence for a moment and I took a breath, but then she stubbornly woke herself again and cried all the harder.

‘How can you be sick and screaming so much?’ I asked her.

Walking up and down the hall. Leaning against the wall.

‘Gracey, please. I'm tired.’

The clock. It was later and later and later.

‘How could they do this?’ I cried. ‘Why would they do this? They really don't care. They just don’t care!’

In my parents’ room, Lilly began to cry as well. From the boys’ room, I heard another child begin to whimper.

‘Stop,’ I said to Gracey. ‘Please stop.’

Lilly’s cries became more insistent.

‘Please stop. Please, you have to listen. I can't take it. Really I can’t.’

She cried and kicked even louder.

‘Please,’ I begged. ‘Please.’

Suddenly, I realised I was shaking her. I was holding her up and shaking her and I would have thrown her against the wall, but for a moment she was silent.
I stopped. I held her up above me and looked at her. She stared back at me, surprise froze her features for a moment more, then fury overtook her and she screamed. She wailed and kicked and thrashed and I knew that, if she could have, she would have attacked me. Pressing her against me I started to walk again – saying nothing, hearing nothing, just walking. If she kept on crying, if Lilly wept in the other room, I didn’t know – I didn’t hear. I just walked, back and forth, back and forth, until I couldn’t anymore. Then I lay down on the floor, with her beside me, and slept.

My parents must have returned eventually as the next morning I woke up to find myself in bed. My father took me to school, laughing at the bottle tree as we drove by and later that morning, I failed my maths test – and every one after. But it didn’t matter, what mattered was that every time someone mentioned Gracey’s uncontrollable rages, her possible borderline schizophrenia, I remember the baby I shook so hard and wonder if I am responsible.
It started almost as soon as we arrived. There was a man who said he loved me. He was a yogi with a soft Virginian drawl and a gentle telephone voice and having his support had helped me do what I needed to do. He had helped me to leave my children’s father, to walk away with only two suitcases between us. But by leaving I had left him too. Somehow he didn't get that.

And he would call from time to time, and then more often as he tried to keep a hold on me. From seven thousand miles away, he would try to commit me to a long-distance relationship and a return date, and I was so alone after my children went to bed that I would talk to him for hours and perhaps let myself believe in an alternative reality that would let me go back.

Still, after a while, the girls caught on. They would force themselves to stay awake, crawl into my bed in tears, yell out for me if I was downstairs on the phone.

Trying to protect them, trying to do no more damage, I would take his calls only later and later, but they would wake to every noise, have panic fits and nightmares.

He tried so hard, my yogi with the southern charm, and I love him for it still, but after a while I couldn’t do it. There had already been so much damage done. We were all so far from home.

Then, sometime later, there was another. He was entirely inappropriate – old, fat, married – but he had an almost feminine charm and again I was so lonely. So I tried in a half-hearted secretive manner, but the girls in their hyper-vigilance got wind of it and would again panic at the sound of any phone call and cry mercilessly if
I tried to go out. It went on far too long, me trying to reason with Ariana and reassure Cadance, till eventually he said he couldn't deal with it anymore. It was a blessing, really. Still, it broke me at the time.

And there was one more time – with a colleague – but it didn't last for very long at all. It was just Ariana that time. Every time my phone went off, she'd jump. She'd grab my phone and read my text messages, spy on me around corners. One night I came home late and all the way up the steps were childish drawings of her slit wrists, of arms slashed and bleeding.

I yelled, screamed, threatened. I argued. ‘But your father has girlfriends, lots of them!’ I catastrophized. ‘Am I supposed to die this way, a servant alone in a foreign country?’

But nothing moved her. She stood her ground and brought Cadance with her.

And so I told him that I couldn't. He said, ‘That doesn't seem to worry you too much.’ I spread my hands and fingers wide. Choice, control, hope, slipped through them. What else could I do if I was to do no more damage? For this he took revenge on me at work and in the compound, mercilessly making my miserable life more miserable.

So that was that. I gave up. I wanted to do no more damage yet damage was all I did. And I kept coming back to this, the story of a spell I had to tell to free you and, by extension, me.
Sugarloaf, Queensland, Australia, 1978

Our family life crescendoed. The life and energy of all my brothers and sisters pulsed day and night, binding us together in a mounting wave, a sweeping tsunami of chaos. As a way to contain us, to give our wildness its place to run and scream and fight, our parents got a holiday property out at Sugarloaf, a rugged pine-tree forest close to Stanthorpe. It was low and undulating country, filled with wineries and stone-fruit orchards, with granite outcrops and ancient balancing boulders. The sun was savage in the summers but at nights the temperatures plummeted with sudden frosts and heavy dews. It was the place I would learn to cook on an open fire while my brothers and sisters rode motorbikes and horses. We’d shoot, go spotlighting kangaroos at night, swim in freezing quarries and later, when the school fees all became too much and my father, under the pressure, started making terrible mistakes at work, we’d harvest beans, or whatever else was in season, to make our contribution.

But before that, before the shambles of caravans and sheds that the locals were always vandalising, and the fall of my father and his medical career, we went just for family holidays.

I remember the first time. We stayed in a four-man nylon tent with the freezing condensation dripping on us every time we brushed its surface. My mother tells the story of our first weekend there as another of her funny incidents.
‘I sang all night,’ she’d say. ‘Sang as loud as I could, “Rain Drops Keep Falling on My Head”, while outside wild boars and howling dingoes sniffed and snorted and waited for a child to snatch.’

‘Shut up, woman,’ would be my father’s reply. ‘It wasn’t like that. Why do you always make a drama?’

‘You wouldn’t even build up the fire. You left us and slept on the roof of the car.’

‘Too right,’ he’d say. ‘Away from your nagging and the screaming kids.’

‘We could have all been eaten alive.’

‘They would have spat you out for bitterness.’

And my parents would laugh sardonically at each other, simultaneously snorting with anger and taking pleasure in the backhanders, while the little ones looked on in confusion.

But my memory of that first weekend is different. Buried as I was beneath the pile of children and smothering blankets in pitch-dark, freezing cold, and thinking not of the rancour of my parents but of our undifferentiated breathing body, I knew with the certainty of a thirteen-year-old that if something happened to any of us, it would be the end of all of us. Our mother sang as she fed Grace – a comforting slurp, release and murmur in the darkness – while I listened intently to the wet, cold tears and shivering bodies of my other brothers and sisters. Their sleep sounds rose and fell in unison with the swelling sounds outside, unfamiliar noises of beetles hitting against the tent, owls and other night birds calling. Every now and then a dream erupted into a random call, and the rustles in the blankets would be matched by the soft, moist movements of the grass outside. My mother would reach out a hand to touch a head or smooth a cheek and pause in her
song, holding her breath to peer into the darkness; but then the children and imagined predators would quiet again. Eventually, even Mother’s tuneless song lapsed into uneven snores of exhaustion. I listened to my heartbeat then and the way it synced with the pulse of living blood moving through our babies, with the frogs singing, and with the calling, crying owls, and then back to the sound of uneasiness in my ears – a bodily sensation rather than a noise. Outside, haunting hootings and sudden screechings. Inside, Rayah’s restless movements and grunting frustration.

‘Rayah?’ I tried to reach her in the pitch-black darkness.

‘It stinks in here,’ she said.

‘Oh. Maybe one of the babies.’


She elbowed Alex beside her hard. A slap of flesh, a cry.

‘Did you poo in your pants again, you idiot?’

He, voice uncertain and embarrassed: ‘No, no I didn’t.’

‘Get out. Get out. You stink.’

‘But I didn’t. I didn’t. I don’t do that anymore.’

‘Someone stinks. It’s revolting in here.’

‘Stop it, Rayah. You’ll wake everyone up.’

‘Aah,’ she yelled. ‘I can’t breathe. I can’t move!’ She kicked and pushed at Claire. ‘You’re taking all my space, you big-eared freak.’

Mother, suddenly awake and spitting mad. ‘Rayah, I’ll whack you good if you hurt another child!’

‘You can’t even see me. How can you whack me?’

‘Honestly, child. I don’t need to see you to pull off your ears.’
‘Pull off your ears,’ she mimicked and laughed.

‘Rayah, stop it, please. You’re making them all cry.’

‘I don’t care. Someone farted in my face.’

‘For goodness sake. Would you stop the fuss?’

‘No, no. Give me room. Let me breathe.’ She pushed and shove the crying children.

‘Bloody hell. Come here, Martin. Get closer, Claire.’

Eventually the tent was rearranged, and we were limbs of a single body again, pressing tight against each other so as not to touch the walls of the tent, except for Rayah who stretched luxuriously on the other side under the warmest of all the blankets. And as we settled slowly back towards our crowded sleep, my mother said to Rayah with a sigh, ‘You know the punishment for being a difficult daughter?’

Rayah rolled into the darkness. ‘As if I even care.’

‘A more difficult daughter, child. And just you wait, girl, you’ve got it coming.’

Beside the fire the next morning, I sat silently absorbing the cacophony of the birds. Magpies, cockatoos, kookaburras laughing hysterically at my family, those calls I knew; but the rest of it – the clicking, chirping, carolling, the single notes that would rise and then fall away, the undertone base notes of the swell – all remained unnamed, undifferentiated, a force rather than a chorus. Meanwhile, beside me, the sniffling children coughed and cuddled into my smiling mother, while Father, shirt off to the cold dawn, walked around the fire, gesticulating, accompanying the birds with a full-bellied song.
‘Who needs coffee?’ he laughed, but then he turned to me to show me how to kick the embers of the fire over the damper and how to swing the billycan around. Dutifully I made him and Mother tea and then slit bananas and stuffed them with chocolate before heating them on the fire. The little ones waited anxiously until hot bread, mushy chocolate bananas and the warmth of the rising sun were delivered.

Then there was the packing up for the long ride home with the swelling sounds of the bush in my skin and the first of the flies in my eyes. I folded and organized the blankets and bags in the back of the station wagon. Then I made up the thermos with sweet, hot tea and the bucket like Esky with sweet Ribena. Everyone else had scattered, so I worked alone, pausing to listen to their silhouetted sounds: the three middle boys, huddled together, digging into some hole in the ground with scrapping, pushing inquisitiveness; Rayah climbing a tree, her voice clear and taunting as Martin and Claire tried to keep up; Mother with Grace on her hip and Lilly by her leg, walking the property and nodding at my father – ‘Yes dear, yes, yes, yes.’ In the gully below, the remainder of a fog was rising from the creek but the sky was shocking stainless blue already and the soundscape pure in its singular swell. The sounds of my family cut a bold relief against it.

Then, while driving, Mother read aloud the last chapters of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and cried over the lost girls in the bush while we all yelled over each other about what really could have happened.

My brothers insisted, ‘UFOs got them.’

‘No, bushrangers.’

‘No, dingoes. Ripped from limb to limb,’ they laughed.

My father was reasonable and measured. ‘Heatstroke for sure, then the cold at night. Once the sun went down, they didn’t have a chance.’
And Rayah: ‘I reckon they just kept going. They didn’t want to be found. They’re out there still. Hiding and happy.’

‘Yep,’ said Martin. ‘That’s what I’d do.’

‘Me too.’ Little Claire.

After a bathroom break or three, my father sang again – Ukrainian songs, folk songs, old songs from their courting days – and my mother reached out to rub the back of his neck. Claire and Martin harmonised. Rayah stared out the window. In the back, Alex, Simon and Patrick started kicking at each other but before the cacophony of yelling family voices really started, we pulled up for the promised picnic break at Thunderbolt’s Hideout, the site of the famous bushranger’s last stand.

Rayah and Martin were out in a flash, running down the path, while Claire, a little slower on her feet, was clambering as fast as she could after them.

‘Stop, Rayah, Martin, come back,’ my mother called.

Rayah laughed and skipped as she grabbed Claire’s hand and yelled back the bushranger’s famous last words: ‘You’ll never catch me. I’ll die first.’ And they were gone, lost to sight immediately in the wan winter light of the dappled bush.

‘Mikhail,’ my mother groaned. ‘We’ll lose a child in a heart-beat here.’

The little boys started to run.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ my mother yelled. ‘Mikhail, help.’

My parents grabbed them by their ears and necks, standing away from their thrashing and kicking and their angry protestations – ‘It’s not fair! Let me go!’ – before following the others down the path. I gathered up Lilly and Grace and tried to hurry after them, listening to Mother as she disappeared
into the bush, calling all the time – ‘Cooee, Martin, Rayah, Claire, cooee, Martin, Rayah, Claire.’ It was a run-on word, a plea, with only an occasional distant laugh as an answer, until there was none, just the swelling sound of the bush engulfing my family’s presence. I stumbled over the rocky path, Grace heavy on my hip and Lilly begging to be carried. My footfalls and the little one’s cries bounced off the towering boulders that emerged from grey-green scrub, then faded back again. I called, ‘Cooee. Mum, Dad. Wait for us.’ My voice rebounded and then fell flat. No answer.

‘Mummy, Daddy,’ little Lilly cried.

‘Sh,’ I said. ‘We’ll find them. Let’s stop here and listen.’ But pausing to listen, to really listen, I heard all those other sounds – the magpies, cockatoos and kookaburras all laughing hysterically at my family, and the stranger ones, the noises I couldn’t differentiate and didn’t know – the clicking, buzzing, calling, the shrill, high, piercing notes. They surrounded us and seemed to get closer while the deep, ominous undertone bore down on us like a dangerous current.

‘Hush, please hush,’ I said to the sniffling babies or to the bush, I’m not sure which. I stood, covering my ears for a moment, taking a breath, regrouping. Then, as I turned back to the babies to pick them up, to walk again, suddenly, so suddenly it pounded the breath out of me, a piercing scream ripped through the space around us.

Everything stopped, went silent, froze. Claire. A moment of suspension, and then the pandemonium. My mother, nearby but out of sight, screaming fanatically back. My father’s panicked calls. A flock of cockatoos taking off in terror. A deluge of noise and movement through the skies and scrub and treetops, but still the screams went on. Claire’s voice, shrieking, purely terrified, piercing all other sounds, echoing back and forth between the towering boulders.
I picked up the kids and ran. I found the boys only two twists in the path away but Mum and Dad were gone. I handed Grace to Alex and pulled Patrick and Simon close. The screams continued, seeming to fold in space, coming from everywhere at once. Mum and Dad’s voice threaded through it, calling, calling. Suddenly the screaming stopped, there was a silent suspended moment, then my parents’ calls, tumbling over each other again, even more frantic than before. Then their calls stopped as well. I stood with the five smallest kids, looking up at the motionless clouds, turning, waiting, hoping. Without the desperate cries the bush began to sing again, its rise and fall of sound, its ebb and flow of movement, its shadow plays of light and flickering views, resuming its normal patterns, but this only made the waiting harder and the silence of my sister more surreal. We stood, a huddled group, a circle facing out, waiting, waiting…

‘Cooee, children.’ My father’s voice.

‘Cooee.’ Martin’s.

‘Is everything okay?’ I called.

Moments later, we caught glimpses of them, all of them, laughing and pushing each other on the track, another moment and they were walking around the corner. Had they always been so close?

The boys ran to them, all asking at once, ‘What happened?’

‘I got scared,’ said ten-year-old Claire with a shrug.

‘Scared?’ The boys were obviously disappointed.

‘Scared? Hysterical more like it,’ said Rayah. ‘It was just a little cave.’

‘It was dark. There was this huge hole.’

Rayah rolled her eyes. ‘Such a baby.’
'I could see him.' Claire was defiant. ‘With his horse and the girls from Hanging Rock and…’

Everyone turned away. ‘We want to see. We want to see. Let’s go.’

‘No.’ My parents, laughing but ashen around the edges still, were firm. They dragged us back to the car, herding us in a group, ignoring all the moans and complaints and all the taunts at Claire for being such a ‘scaredy cat’ and ‘ruining it for us all’. Halfway back, under cover of the swell of sound, Claire grabbed my hand and whispered, ‘He was there, Kayla, really. And Rayah. She saw him too. She saw him and kept pushing me to him.’ My skin prickled, but more at the idea of Rayah pushing Claire than at the thought of the ghost of a bushranger.

Anyway, my mother tells about this weekend as just another of her funny stories, even the last part: the long drive home in an overcrowded car with an overheating engine, the crescendo of fights as Rayah insisted on her space, the cries of the shivering children as we climbed the range with all the windows open because Rayah said it stank, her teasing of Claire and the welts on Claire’s neck that appeared in response to Rayah’s increasing savagery. All of this Mother laughs off in her stories, secretly proud of her Rayah for having so much spirit. But in the back, pressed against a door, I watched each child cringe or cry when her insults turned on them. Alex’s smell, Simon’s oversized nose, Patrick’s lisp and bedwetting. Rayah was unrelenting in her attacks. When Lilly whimpered and drooled in her sleep, an elbow shot out. ‘Stop slobbering snot on me, Lilly.’

‘Rayah. Stop – she’s just a baby.’

‘A leaky package, more like.’

Or at Simon staring into the darkness. ‘Stop your bloody staring. You look like a halfwit retard.’
‘I’m n-n-not, n-not looking.’

‘N-n-not. Right, Pinocchio. I’d believe you if your nose would stop growing.’

‘Rayah. Must you? He’s only seven.’

Or Patrick desperately needing the bathroom and Rayah pressing against his bladder. ‘You need a pith? Can’t wait to pith?’

‘Rayah. Leave him, please.’

‘Rayah, leave him. Rayah, stop, Rayah, no. As if I’d listen to a fat slob like you.’

‘Shut up Rayah.’ I tried to defend myself from her latest favourite taunt. ‘Just because you have no boobs.’

‘You’ve got boulders, not boobs.’

I shrank behind the little ones I hugged, hiding my emerging breasts.

‘Don’t you listen to her, Kayla.’ My mother tried to be helpful. ‘You’ll have an hourglass figure just like me and nurse a dozen kids.’

‘A fat slob cow then.’ Rayah said. ‘Next time I’ll remember the cow bit.’

But anyway we limped the car home, first through dusk and then into darkness, under constant attack. With each new insult, each damaging, lifelong scar she inflicted, we started to form an alliance against her. But it was Patrick, the littlest of our boys, who lashed back first that time. When she yanked his blanket and then pulled his hair, he shouted, ‘I’m sick of you, sick of you! I’m going to get you this time.’ And suddenly he was on her and all the boys were on her too, hitting, shouting, spitting.

‘We’re sick of you, sick of you. Shut up.’
The car was immediately in uproar. Mother was yelling as she clambered halfway over the front seat to try to pull them off. Grace, pressed between the seat and Mother’s body, howled. The boys grunted and then wailed as Rayah, the older, stronger one, kicked them off. Then they dived straight back in to scratch at her and pull and claw. I grabbed Lilly and Claire and pressed them behind me, trying to smother their sobs as Mother pulled at whatever clothes she could reach.

‘Boys. Boys. Stop it.’

‘Come on, get me, try,’ Rayah laughed

‘You’re such a bitch! Such a bitch!’ they yelled as they hit at Mother’s grip and jumped back into the fray.

‘Mikhail, for Christ sake, help!’ my mother yelled. ‘They learnt this language from you.’

‘How can I help? I’m driving.’

In the close confines of the dark car, the noise of them clawing, scratching, pulling, the reverberation of it against the shaking windows of the car, the sobbing of the girls behind me, the anger of my parents… it all accelerated. Disconnected body parts hit whatever they could reach.

‘For Christ sake, children.’

‘Shut up or I’ll make you!’ my father yelled into the rear-vision mirror.

But still the fighting went on. The sound of the clawing, spitting, biting – the flesh on flesh, the pure savagery of it – surrounded me, penetrated me. The noise pounded in my head.

‘Make them stop, Dad. Please make them stop!’ I cried.
‘You’ll kill us all!’ he yelled over the chaos. No one responded until suddenly he was braking and the car was screeching and swerving off the road and we were rolling all over each other, screaming.

‘No!’ my mother yelled.

The car swung to a stop over grinding rocks. My father was out, pulling open the door, spilling Lilly and Claire and me onto the gravel. He grabbed the esky.

‘Shut up or I’ll bloody make you.’

‘No, no, Mikhail! Please.’ Too late. A sudden splash – gallons of Ribena everywhere. Saturated with sweet red cordial, the dripping children stopped their fighting.

A pause.

‘Honestly, Mikhail. Now look what you’ve done.’

‘Shut up, woman!’

‘The blankets.’

I quickly pulled shivering Lilly and Grace away from the car, away from my father. He looked at us in the darkness, panted, turned, and then walked off.

Another pause. His footsteps, measured, disappeared into night sounds. I heard the panting cries of the children: ‘You made him do that.’

‘No, I didn’t. You did.’

An owl, a screeching… But I barely heard it. Finally, there was just the panting quietness of my family in the darkness. My mother was out of the car, pulling out wet blankets, shivering in the cold.
When my father finally came back, when we finally tried to find dry-enough spare clothes to wear, and even when we were all back in the car and the crying and the whimpering had quieted into silent tears and shivers, still I felt the noise in my bones, shaking me, shaking me harder than the cold. I could find no way to quiet it.

And as we took off, quiet, subdued, and sobbing, Patrick said, ‘We’ll get you, Rayah. Just you wait.’

So you see, even then, even as kids, I wasn’t the only one who harboured ideas of revenge and punishment.
Doha

I remember these things in the bath, late at night with the water running scalding hot and the steam a clouded mist of receding memories. I’d thought it was the heat before, the touch of it seeping into the cavities of my body and evoking the forgotten store of memories, but now I know it is the whiteness of the sound of water that gives me access to these pasts.

When I sit there in the bath, and the tap is on high and the water a continuous solid falling, all other sounds are silenced. There is an unspeakable safety in that. I can switch the water off and sink below its surface, listening to the amplified sound of my breath and the hollow dripping as the tap resets itself, and know that in an instant I can turn the sound back on again and forget where my train of thought has taken me. So I allow myself the luxury of remembering in the safety of the bath.

I go first to where the loving was easy: Ariana as an infant, needing white noise to calm herself almost as badly as I did. When her bouts of colic were bad, we would hover in the moist shower room together, I collapsing with exhaustion in the corner and she sweetly oblivious in my arms, absorbing the heat and noise with eyes closed and breath shallow. In that room with the steady stream of the sound of water filling me, I would forget my worry and let my lonely ‘where is he?’ questionings settle.

Or Cadance, my dancing child, preferring the white noise of the dryer, the hum and shake of it, the movement in the sound. When she cried, she would grip my finger tightly and I would put her in her seat on top of the dryer and sing softly to her over the mechanical purr, until her grip softened and she slept.
Then I would sink to the floor, arm up still so we wouldn’t lose contact, and lean my head against the glass of the dryer and feel its white noise softly vibrating in the hollows of my cheeks as I watched the empty drum rotate, around and around and around, the hypnotic hum banishing all my bitter thoughts of their father spending his life on whoever bought him drinks.

Those white-noise memories, punctuated by whispers, murmurs, and the soft pant of breath, are the good ones, the moments of relaxed remembrances. Slipping under the water of the bath, knowing that the tap is there, to drown all the others out, I allow myself to reach deeper.

I remember the rainy nights when Rayah and I were fourteen and fifteen and finally had our own bedrooms. Under the water, I hear your mother’s young voice, ‘Why do you always close the door on me?’ And when I did open it to her again, I remember all the things we did and didn’t say. It was a moment in time when we were like a permeable membrane, a delicate tissue, a web of fascia binding each other’s bone and muscle.

With a sigh that the water picks up and transforms into an underwater groan, I remember.
Brisbane, 1980

The first bedroom I called my own was a glassed-in porch at the back of the house, beside the laundry. The bed just fitted between the glass and the wall in one corner and my desk; a small wardrobe leaned crookedly in the other. Benjamin had been born by then so we were the complete set, five boys and five girls, and I had been offered my room in exchange for doing the laundry. Rayah got hers, a conversion of my father’s home consulting room, for some peace.

That was one of those things I accepted, and besides it was such a haven, my room. Outside the sliding glass door to the garden, a tangle of elephant ears would catch my reflection, but elusively, gently distorting it and keeping it fleetingly mysterious in such a way I could reimagine and reinvent the gifts that had been withheld from me, while through the door to the house, the clothes-strewn floor of the laundry and the constant hum of the washer and dryer muffled the chaos of the family above and the music from Rayah’s room just across the racks-of-hand-me-downs.

It also hid my solitary shame as I watched her visiting friends and heard the extension of the phone she had claimed – ringing, always ringing. At fourteen and fifteen, she had passed from loveliness to beauty while I had been given bottle-thick glasses with Woolworth frames and, as my mother called it, ‘child-bearing hips’. Still, I had my hum-and-rattle room.

At the end of each day, as we drifted home from school, my mother’s voice would echo – ‘changed, get changed’ – and amid the yells and shouts of
all my kid brothers and sisters, bottle-green uniforms and navy sports clothes would come flying down the stairs. Item by item, I would pick them up and sort them before putting them in the washer. A few clicking sounds, a pouring of the soap suds, then the water would begin to spray and the hum of the engine to purr.

First load in I would retreat and lean against the vibrating glass of my room, feeling the soft amplification of the hum of the laundry moving through my body and my room until it encased me, easing the jitters of performing at school and the dramatic drive home.

My room became my humming cell of peace and privacy and in it I began to hoard my books and secrets and solitary time. When the first load finished I would transfer it to the dryer, adding the next to the washer and the spinning cycle of the knocking, overloaded dryer would clamber over the spray and hiss of the washer, completing my sense of peace.

My family thought I studied between the changing of the laundry but instead, once the white noise of the laundry had done its work, I read – novels mostly, but poems worked too. I liked them for the voices that I heard escaping from their pages. I liked them for their stories and the ever-present intensities. But when I was bored with books I would sit on the floor and squeeze my pimples, with the spray of water, the hum of rolling sneakers, the repetitive back and forth and churn of the washer deadening the chatter of my mind and whatever drama echoed from upstairs.

But maybe, in my increasing secrecy and privacy, there was something valuable, or maybe it was the change in the weather, the gradual build-up of heat and humidity, that made my room look more appealing. Whatever the reason, Rayah wanted in.

The first night she came to my door, she was slightly flushed with the heat and a fine line of sweat was beading her lip.
'What are you doing, Kayla?'

'Reading.'

'What are you reading?'

'Stuff.'

'Jeez. How do you stand it? Just sitting there doing nothing when it is so, so hot?'

She leaned against my doorframe, gazing out the window, a Botticelli-blonde with moist kiss-curls escaping her schoolgirl ponytail.

'Can you close the door as you leave?' I hated how unattractive I felt in her presence.

But then, another early evening, Rayah was again standing in my doorway.

'Jesus, it's hot in there. Doesn't that dryer drive you crazy?'

I tucked my diary away from her. 'It's not so bad.'

Upstairs something crashed, followed by a shouted, 'Jesus bloody Christ!'

'It blocks out all the other sounds,' I said.

She opened the sliding glass to the twilit garden and leaned against the brick. Within moments, a swarm of mosquitoes headed for the bulb, pitting their intense whining buzz against the low hypnotic hum of the dryer next door.

'Really, Rayah, must you?' I got up and closed the door as she slapped at the two or three mosquitoes that had settled on her face and arms. Blood marked her arm as she left.
I was unforgiving and belligerent, but either the heat was maddening her or the rejection was challenging her – she kept on coming back.

On yet another night:

‘What are you doing, Kayla?’

‘Stuff.’

She hovered at the door, the sagging laundry behind her framing her willowy form.

‘Don’t you have a call to make or a child to torture?’

‘No, not really. Not at this very moment.’ She rolled her forehead against the cooling brick and then leaned it on the glass as she peered listlessly out the window.

‘You could always pick a fight with Mum.’

‘I could if I had the energy. But it’s peaceful in here. I like it.’

She wandered in and sat at my desk in front of my little fan. She lifted her hair and hummed into its breeze. We both listened to the way it cut her voice.

Bored with that, she turned her back to the fan, to look at where I sat on the bed, watching and waiting for her next move.

‘So why are you always reading?’ she asked.

‘Why are you always making the little ones cry?’

‘Something to do.’ She shrugged.

‘Same,’ I answered, and reached for the book I was reading, the one the librarian had given me with the whispered challenge, ‘It’s Italo Calvino’s latest’. But Rayah grabbed it before me, redirected the fan to the bed, and jumped on the bed beside me.
Opening to the first page, she started to read aloud. ‘You are about to begin reading…’

She stopped and looked up at me. ‘Ridiculous way to start a book. “You are about to begin reading.”’

‘Then give it back. I’m way past that. And besides, it’s the book that everyone is talking about right now.’

‘Oh is it?’ she sneered. ‘At least it’s not a romance.’

Sitting straighter, she continued: ”Relax, concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door.”

She stopped to laugh. ”Close the door”, hey. Were you quoting them or is he quoting you?”

‘Keep reading, Rayah, or not,’ I answered.

‘Okay, okay.’ She cleared her throat.

”Best to close the door. The TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away. ‘No, I don’t want to watch TV.’ Raise your voice – they won’t hear you otherwise. ‘I’m reading. I don’t want to be disturbed.’”

With regular disparaging comments, she continued to read the prologue of If on a winter’s night a traveller, and I lay back listening to her voice. Even then there was no hesitation, only confidence. She made no effort to be poetic, to read as we’d been taught in all our speech and drama classes, but just to read the words as the words appeared, and it worked perfectly for that book. Still, lying there that night, I listened to sound, not meaning, voice, not words, until eventually she tapered off and started reading to herself. She was still there in the morning when I woke up, the book opened to the end.

And so it began. Each night that early summer as the family started to fall into sleep and my parents’ moans or shouts began to echo through the
house, Rayah would come to my room and we would close the door to the chaos of the rest of them and, sinking into my over soft bed, we’d light some candles and look out beyond our flickering reflection into the darkness of the garden. Then we’d read together from the books I’d gathered.

And when the rains started, the wild tropical thunderstorms, the damp seeped up through the concrete of my floor and out of the bricks, and rivulets of moisture would find their way under the glass sliding door. It was a sinking ark at times, but in spite of all the water flooding in we would only pull away from the glass, and lift the sheets and blankets so they wouldn’t trail on the floor, and keep on reading to each other. That summer, though, it rained so hard sometimes that we couldn’t even hear the movement of words in our heads, so instead we would watch the tree frogs, hundreds of them, clambering through the elephant ears and up the windows, catching and repelling, their suctioned feet a soft undertone to their sudden, sometimes shrill songs.

And so it was that, in that resonant room of chorusing tree frogs and patches of cushiony moss, with the white noise of the endless loads of laundry muffling my parents’ arguments about money and his mother, Rayah and I invented death and drama and love. Along with the poets and writers we read, we created lives and futures that were full of trauma and dying and the brilliance of mentally unstable, suicidal young. We lived what we could of these dreams. We listened to David Bowie, being oh so hip in our with-it interpretations of his songs, and we talked about Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. Rayah, enraptured by Emily Dickinson, began her lifelong habit of wearing white. I emulated Sophie from Sophie’s choice by making whisky and water my drink of choice and drinking it as often as I could. When Hotel New Hampshire came out, Rayah’s favourite line to me was ‘Keep passing the open windows’, while my invitation to her was to travel
aimlessly through Africa like the characters in James Mitchener’s *The drifters*. Everything we read and said at that time mattered; it would all come back in different forms, only I didn’t know it at the time or I would have chosen different books.

Our newfound closeness as sisters lasted only for the season. Your mother was beautiful and my books weren’t going to hold her long. By the time the rains had passed and it started to cool, there would be gangly boys standing at my door in the middle of the night. If Rayah wasn’t already with me, I’d jump up and hide my glasses before sliding open the door. And, sometimes, just now and then, I’d let myself hope that perhaps a friend… But even when there were friends, they were never interested in me so I would stand aside as Rayah slipped out, sometimes stealing Dad’s car and sometimes just slipping into theirs.

My books wouldn’t comfort me then. I’d sit waiting for her return, to maybe hear her stories about driving around through Ascot or watching the dawn from the water tower. While waiting, my restlessness and loneliness would overtake me and I would walk the neighbourhood, the complete darkness accentuating my soft footfall, the movement of the branches above me, the wind in the flight of the flying foxes. And as it got colder, I would wait in her room, curling on the floor in front of the medicine cabinet that my father was still keeping there, fixating on all the jumbled bottles, the brightly coloured pills and the key he had left in the lock. Nights on end, I stared at those pills, alone and curled in the corner, the washing already done, the dryer uncannily silent. The night I finally took some, I didn’t even turn on the light to see what I was taking; I just grabbed the nearest bottle and threw a handful down. I had no idea why, no consciousness really of what I’d done, just this sense of hopelessness that didn’t go away even as I waited and kept
on waiting. Nothing happened, only sleep. When Rayah finally made it home and found me curled on the floor in her room, she shook me.

‘What are you doing, Kayla?’
‘Is it morning already, Rayah?’
‘You won’t tell Mum and Dad, will you?’ she pleaded.

Shaking my head, I went to the bathroom and vomited, not knowing to this day what I had taken.

Then, another time of waiting in Rayah’s room deep into the night, a razor in the back of the cabinet glinted. I couldn’t even touch it. But the invitation was there. I got up and went to my room searching for something. I didn’t know what. Finally I found a brooch, one of Aunty Gen’s. It was shaped like a Cinderella coach and, knowing already that there would be no Cinderella story for me, I started to scrape at my wrist with it. I stood and went to the laundry sink with grand ambitions of copious blood and scraped and scratched and tried to prick, all the way up my arm. I was totally fixated on what I was doing and didn’t hear Rayah slip in from the garden.

‘What are you doing, Kayla?’ she asked from the darkness behind my shoulder.

I had no shame. It was just matter of fact. ‘I’m seeing what it feels like.’

‘What does it feel like?’
‘Nothing much. I can’t even get a scrap of blood.’

‘Try harder.’
‘I can’t. I’m hopeless.’
‘Here let me help.’
‘No, no. You’ll hurt.’
But she’d grabbed the brooch and jabbed the pin deeply into my wrist and, with the blood pouring out, wiped it against her dirty white top and jabbed herself as well.

‘What are you doing? Ow.’

She pressed her bleeding wrist against mine over the sink and smiled.

‘Blood sisters forever,’ she said.

‘But we are already sisters, sisters and twins but for a year.’

‘That was an accident. This is by choice.’

We stood in the darkened, silent laundry with bleeding wrists pressed together a moment longer. Without daring to look at her or speak the words out loud, I whispered, ‘I promise to always stand by you’. Then I turned on the tap and we watched our blood flow away.

‘Done,’ Rayah said with a laugh, before turning to go to her bedroom.

And then it was November and hot again and our birthdays – my sixteenth and her fifteenth – arrived. It was a Saturday. Waking, excited, thinking presents and parties, I went upstairs to our barely liveable living room where the little ones tumbled all over me, happily singing. Then they snuggled in close as we watched the morning cartoons. My parents, gone already on various errands, had left a relative peace. Claire had made her favourite breakfast, Milo pancakes. Lilly and Grace had a card for me. And our trio of little boys, all sweaty from riding their bikes, had punched me affectionately while running by. Outside, the birds were a clamorous mess of noise, and the light was strong and hot, and the movement of the breeze in the trees was just enough to make freedom feel possible. I decided I was happy to be sixteen with the promise of a cake, at least, in the evening. Who wouldn’t be happy? I thought.
But when Rayah emerged sometime later, that changed. Her sleeping late was nothing new, of course, nor were her morning attacks and her denigration of our family life; but to see her despondent, her breath too shallow to hurl even a passing insult, left us ungrounded. We’d been waiting all morning for her to come up, knowing that we couldn’t start with proper celebrations with only part of the twinned set present; so when one of the kids yelled ‘She’s coming, she’s coming’ we gathered, eagerness etched on the children’s faces, at the top of the stairs. Claire held her cold Milo pancakes, Lilly and Grace their cards; the boys were ready to jump and then drag her on a bike ride, and before the crown of her head – the halo of beauty and charm that she wore for us all even when she was at her worst – was visible on the first part of the stairs, we were singing: first, the happy birthday song; then, the Ukrainian song of long life and prosperity, which we always sang on birthdays. And we would have gone on, would have continued the whole litany for her, the ‘Why was She Born so Beautiful’, the ‘For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow,’ the clapping of the years, would have sung our pride for our outstanding Rayah, the one we knew was our best and brightest and most beautiful. But she wasn’t even smiling, let alone singing along and bouncing a baby. Our voices tapered off.

‘Have you finished?’ she said, when we finally stopped. ‘Can we forget about it now?’

We looked at each other in silence and stood to the side as she walked up the rest of the stairs. Brushing past us, she grabbed a carrot from the refrigerator, and then turned back to where we all stood.

Lilly bravely moved forward. ‘Look what I made for you, Rayah.’

‘Leave me alone. I don’t want it.’

‘But I made it. There’s a picture of us together.’
'I said I don’t want it, Lilly. I don’t want this birthday at all.’

‘How could you not want a birthday?’ Martin asked.

‘I just don’t,’ she said, and with that she pushed back past us and down the stairs. We looked at each other and shrugged, not speaking of disappointment.

The day wore on. Her door stayed closed. Mother swooped in on occasion to gather a child or two and take them to an activity, while I stayed busy, looking after the ones she left at home. Still, something had drained from the day, and the noises of the suburbs and the overbright light and the sweltering moist heat started to feel discordant. Nothing seemed to match. The birdsong didn’t belong to the constant hum of traffic; my mother dashing in and out – tooting her horn and yelling as she pushed us to more and more activity – didn’t match the heated invitation to retreat; and the kids playing, pushing and shoving didn’t match the flatness of my mood. And without that match, that movement of the one sound into the other, odd noises became unnaturally foregrounded. A fly, a cry, a bird landing heavily – it all just added an element of awfulness that made me crave silence and sleep.

Still, I kept on doing what I had to do, and checked on Rayah throughout the day, either alone or with one of the kids. I’d hear her inside, a still, listless breath, and a bare movement reacting to my knock, but nothing more. So I would walk away, reassuring whichever child was with me and wondering where she got such power. How was it that a word or look from her could matter so much? How did it set the tone? And as the day began to slip away and the sports clothes piled up, I went downstairs to put in a load of laundry, and standing there, hearing first the stream of water, then the comfort of the white noise pulling all other sounds back into place, I tried to figure it out – her power to focus our lens. All I knew was that it was my birthday too, that we were going to celebrate, and that in spite of all her
taunts and teasing, Martin was brilliant, Claire so sweetly giving, and the
others filled with bubbling-about-to-burst being. Even I, I thought, had
something though I wasn’t sure what. So I knocked on her door and went in
uninvited to find her lying listlessly on her bed, one knee falling over the
crooked peak of the other, *The Hotel New Hampshire* on the bed beside her.

‘It’s time to get ready,’ I said. ‘Our dinner is soon.’

She didn’t turn or acknowledge me.

Picking up laundry, I tried again.

‘Rayah, really. Come on. We’re going to Sizzlers. The aunties are
coming.’

She snorted. ‘The one at the shopping centre, I suppose?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ignoring her scorn. ‘Dad’s getting Grandma. He’ll be back
soon.’

‘Fabulous,’ she said, looking blankly at me. ‘I’ll wear black with a
diamond tiara.’ She pulled up her sheet and turned away.

‘Rayah, really. Come on.’

‘Don’t “come on” me, Kayla. I hate this life.’

‘You’re being dramatic.’

‘What’s wrong with dramatic?’

I sat on the end of her bed, trying to figure out the right approach, but
sitting there looking around in the early evening light, I realised how
different her room and perspective was from mine, with its sliding glass and
its always-damp floor. Her barred window was almost level to the garden
outside where our father kept his orchards. These odourless trophies draped
like menacing puppets against her window and the lean-to greenhouse was
filled with mosquitoes that drilled against her screen. Through the door into
the laundry, all the hanging clothes filtered light almost to the point of oppression, with the only opening coming from my room at the end of the tunnel of clothes. And from here, the washing machine, my white-noise comfort, seemed only to bang and bark against the brick. I sighed, at a loss for what to say. It was Rayah who broke the silence.

‘Don’t you see, Kayla? Don’t you see that birthdays are a part of the trap? With each celebration we say “yes, we accept”, “yes, we comply”. And don’t you see how this one yes leads to all the other yeses. We say yes to a birthday and then yes to being a nurse or a teacher and yes to marrying a doctor or an engineer and — —’

She’s been rehearsing all day, I thought, before cutting into her monologue. ‘Well, I’ve been thinking about speech therapy myself. If my maths improves, that is.’

‘That’s not the point. You don’t get the point.’

Maybe I just didn’t want to.

‘And with all these stupid books you give me.’ She pointed to Hotel New Hampshire beside her. ‘You either walk past the windows or not. It’s the only real choice you have.’

‘Your window doesn’t count, Rayah.’

‘Kayla, I’m trying to talk to you.’

Just then Claire came to the door, a brightness on her open face. She wanted so much to be a part of us, her delicate longing palpable, but her timing always terrible.

‘Rayah, Kayla, which one should I wear?’ She held up two dresses, both yellow, which was Mother’s chosen colour for her.

‘The yellow one,’ said Rayah.
‘Yes, but which one? This one with the collar hides my ears, don’t you think.’

‘Hides your ears? You brain-dead fuckwit. How does a dress hide your ears?’

Immediately I saw the nervous welts start to flame on her neck, and I stood to go towards her. Rayah’s mood had changed. It was time to get out before it got too bad.

‘Well, I mean,’ she stuttered.

‘Bugger off. You and your ears and dress and pestering. As if I even cared.’

‘I just — ’

‘Get out. Both of you, out!’

‘Rayah, really, come on.’

‘Get out, get out! I want you out!’

Claire had started to cry. ‘I only wanted — ’

‘Sh, Claire. Rayah, be nice.’

But by then she was punching her bed and screaming, ‘Out, out, get out!’ And that made Claire weep harder and my own breath start to get tighter. ‘Rayah, Claire — ’

‘If you say another word…’ she yelled, picking up her book and hurling it, missing us only just and shattering the door of the medicine cabinet. Coloured pill bottles flew everywhere.

I backed Claire out and closed the door, taking refuge in the garden, and held her till her nervous welts went down and the bite of the insults faded. But by then my father was home and anxious to get our birthday
celebrations going. He’d gone downstairs to rustle Rayah up. Instead he discovered the broken medicine cabinet and no Rayah anywhere.

From upstairs, sitting beside our impatient grandmother, we heard our parents voicing their not-so-whispered accusations.

‘I told you to get rid of it, that it wasn’t safe to keep it here.’

‘Where else was I going to keep it? She took my office. I need an office.’

‘Is there anything missing?’ my mother asked.

‘How can I tell in this mess?’

‘Tut, tut, tut.’ My grandmother shook her head beside us.

Then everything went into hyper speed. Our parents were back upstairs and grilling us: ‘Where is she? Did she say anything? Did someone pick her up?’

We called her friends’ families and our family friends. No one had seen or heard a thing.

My mother was in a panic.

‘Calm down, woman. She’s gone for a walk or something.’

‘Rayah, walking. Not bloody likely. She’s either run away or — —’ She grabbed my arm. ‘Kayla, Kayla, what was she like these past nights? What was going on?’

‘She was fine, Mum, fine.’ She hadn’t really been home.

‘Did she ever talk about killing herself?’

‘Really, woman. You’re catastrophizing.’

‘Am I, Mikhail. Am I? Want to know how many times I tried at that age?’
‘Jesus bloody Christ,’ he said.

Turning back to me, my mother asked, ‘Did she Kayla? Did she?’

‘Well, um.’ I hesitated before answering. ‘She said she didn’t want to be a teacher.’

‘That’s it,’ my father responded, snorting. ‘We’re going into red alert for that.’

My mother ignored him. ‘Where would she go, Kayla? What would she do?’

Her panic was contagious. ‘I don’t know Mum, really I don’t.’

‘Think, has she ever said anything else?’

‘We had this thing about open windows.’

‘Open windows!’ my mother wailed.

My father swore. ‘I’ve had it with all this drama,’ he said, and beckoning to his mother to follow him, he stormed out the door. ‘You deal with your goddamn daughters!’ he shouted. And that was it; he was gone with his mother in his own car, and my mother was herding us all to the minibus.

‘Forget him,’ she said. ‘Leave him. We have to find Rayah before it’s too late.’

In the minibus, I sat in the front with Benny crying in my arms and Grace pushing away from my anxious grip. The rest of the kids whined and worried in the back. We drove through the darkening neighbourhood, tooting our family rhythm – once long and slow, twice fast, then once again, longer and slower. We checked all the usual places: the park down the road, the quarry where the boys rode their bikes, the shop where we bought our ice creams. She couldn’t have gone much farther.
The darkness was complete by then, but in the close confines of the crowded bus, the heat had only increased. The kids in the back kept changing their places. ‘Rayah,’ they cried into the whipping wind on either side of the bus. ‘Rayah,’ they cried over and over. Their voices scratched and tore, but still my mother kept driving and tooting and telling them to shout. Down into Clayfield, past the school, slowly past the river.

At a red light, the calling stopped and the complaining immediately began. ‘Can’t we just go home?’

‘I need water.’

‘She’ll come home when she’s ready.’

My mother ignored them and, on the move again, began beep-be-be-beeping as she peered into foliage and behind every tree.

‘I’m hungry,’ the little ones cried.

‘It’s hot.’

‘It’s time for How the West Was Won.’

‘I’m hot.’

‘It’s my favourite!’

My mother groaned before turning to me again.

‘Kayla, really, you have to think. You must remember something.’

‘How would I know, Mum, really? She never told me anything about what she did at nights.’

‘She told you about the water tower,’ Claire said, draping herself over the seat.

‘The water tower?’ my mother questioned.
‘She likes to go there to watch the dawn,’ Claire said. ‘She told you that once, remember?’

I looked at her blankly. Had she sat at my door wanting to come in or just hoping to hear what we said?

‘The water tower, Kayla?’

The memory of Rayah’s story came flooding back like the swarm of mosquitoes that had followed her into my room that dawn. ‘The one at Ascot, Mum.’

‘Oh God,’ my mother choked on her fear. ‘Oh no,’ she said, and pulling a U-turn, plunging through the traffic, she started speeding down the road, up the winding streets, past the luxurious houses, all the way to the highest point on our side of town.

When we arrived, the city lay like a woman in black, covered in diamonds and rubies, but all we saw was the height of the tower and all we heard was our own running feet as we dashed towards its base. She was up there, of course, at the top of the tower, leaning over the railing, her loose white smock and long blonde hair flying madly in the wind. We all started shouting, ‘Rayah, come down. Rayah, we’re here.’ But the wind picked up our voices and pulled them away. She didn’t respond. She was very far up.

Within moments, my mother was on the first step. A moment later she was lost in the darkness as the ladder spiralled around the tower. I kept the children close beside me and we listened, our breaths shallow and tight, as she climbed, still calling, always calling. The mantra of Rayah’s name was punctuated only by mother’s occasional melodic ‘cooees’ but soon even that was lost. Then it was only the wind and the sound of small scrub animals, and the muffled snufflings of the little ones. I closed my eyes to listen, feeling the small sounds that surrounded me transform into an incantation – a
whispered window into another place that we could all pass by if we chose. When I opened my eyes again, I saw my silhouetted sister leaning into the force of the wind, her arms spread wide to the expansive space, and behind her my mother crawling slowly to where she stood. A word, perhaps, was exchanged up there, a ‘please don’t, Rayah, we love you’ that I might or might not have heard, and then Rayah was turning around to fight her off as my mother grabbed first her smock, then her leg, then folded her into her arms.

And that was it. She was saved, and eventually, after the many hours I spent waiting with the hungry, cranky kids, Mother and Rayah would come down to us, and the children who were still awake would hug her and wish her happy birthday, and she would thank them for making her world worth living in and cry and kiss them and her beauty would only be accentuated by the windswept mess of her hair and the backdrop of the stars and city lights.

And of course, in the midst of all that drama my birthday would be forgotten. And it would be something similar the next year and the next, until our birthday became only hers and the preparations we made were focused more on suicide-prevention strategies than cakes. There would be only once that I would try to commemorate my birthday. It would be by myself far away from them all and I would try to bring an element of magic to it. But I should have known it could only go wrong, that for us our births only forecast our deaths – the inevitable tragedy of life.
Doha, 2012

So with so many trips to India you would think that I’d be good, right? A developed and developing yoga practice with beautiful asanas, a steady mind, a deep and even breath. But no, I struggle. My breath gets uneven and jagged. I protect myself against imagined injuries. Between the babies and travels and studies and pitiful attempts at a career, my practice has slipped back and forth a thousand times in spite of all the times I have dragged my kids to India.

But still I have a romance with yoga and remember places I have practised like others remember lovers. Rooftops in Rajasthan, pujas echoing over the white city and its silent body of water; beside a white-water river in the United States, blue herons standing guard close by; an old church hall in Brisbane, wind whistling through the floorboards. And here, of course, in the dusty desert of Doha, timing my chants to the calls to prayer.

But now that I am older, the practice has changed and my lack of achievement doesn’t bother me so much. Sometimes when I go out onto the balcony just after the morning prayer, I am happy, instead, to sit and just listen. I listen to the desert, to the footfall of men returning from the mosque, to the city waking up to traffic or, failing that, to my own breath. This is the one real gift of the practice for me, something soothing to listen to, something regular and dependable. Even in the days when I thought the practice would make me beautiful, it was really the sound of my own breath that kept me coming back.

And by focusing on listening, I imagine I can start to hear like I used to, like my distant memories of hearing. I imagine also that it was always a sense of comfort that I derived from all the things I heard, and never one of torture. And so I breathe,
and watch the flow of the outside becoming inside, and my inside becoming the outside world. I breathe and chant. I am made of breath. I breathe. I am surrounded by the breathing world, a soft and living sound.
If it had only been the chaos, the crying babies, yelling kids and the fighting of my exhausted parents. Or even just the underlying torrent: the TV, radios, and alarm clocks blaring from every room; the horns and traffic of the morning’s rush; the laundry and the clanging dryer. If it had just been that, the unending crescendo of our family life and the oppressive sounds of a suburban summer… but it became something more, much more.

I think it began to get worse with the tea.

I was home from school with a fever one day shortly after our first suicidal birthday when, midmorning, I was woken by the scraping of the wrought-iron chairs on the tiled veranda above me. Perhaps the fever had made me more sensitive, but I swear that sound on the roof above me was worse than fingernails on a blackboard, more like a sharp nail screeching as it scraped my spine. I curled deeper into my pillows to escape the pain of it, nausea swelling in my belly, and tried to breathe more quietly. Then I heard it again: a dragging chair and a walrus laugh and a clanging set of keys. Mother was having tea with Fiona Mortimer, her best friend at the time.

Fiona was both a legend and a warning in our house. She had seven children, the oldest being Lucy, who was just a little bit younger than I was, and a husband, the seemingly meek Anglican minister at the church down the street who was always committing her to the local insane asylum for this or that. Mother talked about Fiona’s institutionalisation a lot.
‘If I don’t shut up, your father will commit me, just like Fiona Mortimer.’

‘If I don’t get dinner on the table by six, it’ll be electric-shock treatment for me, just like Fiona Mortimer.’

‘If I don’t get home for sex tonight, who knows what drugs they will pump me with in the place they send Fiona to.’

But Fiona wasn’t committed that day, or drugged. She was on the veranda above my bed, braying like a sea cow and scraping her chair and adjusting her thighs noisily on our sticky plastic seats. And between that and the whistling kettle, and the dogs complaining about our noisy guest, and my own aching head and difficulty with breathing, there was nothing to do but to go upstairs.

‘Darling,’ my mother called when she saw me in the kitchen. Her voice, distorted by the compression in my head, seemed louder than it should have. ‘Check that the kids are still napping then grab those shortbreads and join us,’ she yelled.

Slowly, aware of every movement of my overheated skin, I did what I was asked.

They were talking about sex, of course. They always did.

‘He was on his seventh orgasm that night,’ Fiona lisped as she leaned forward to whisper to my mother, ‘when, thankfully, one of the little ones knocked.’

She threw her considerable body back, her chair clanging against the railing, and they both laughed conspiratorially. Mother poured the tea. She had her Royal Doulton out, the Old Country Roses set, along with her silver spoons. She loved the tone of her fine bone china. The patterns she thought were ‘glorious’.
'I have it down to a sixty-seven-second margin.’ My mother winked at me. ‘Kids in the bath. Sixty-seven seconds before brain damage. Husband is happy and so am I.’

I joined them at the table. The fever flamed through my body and I squinted against the light as I opened and arranged the shortbread on a plate.

My mother clinked her silver sugar tongs against the sugar bowl. She paused to let it ring and then dropped a cube in Fiona’s cup before tumbling two into hers.

They competed for irreverence.

‘Imagine his concept of contraception when I refused to go on the pill,’ they laughed. ‘Imagine his inability…’

I poured the milk for them, fixating on the jingling of the silver spoons. Again it was all too loud and I began to feel cold within my burning skin. Every sound scratched on the back of my neck, sending goose bumps down my arms.

‘Did you ever orgasm while breastfeeding?’ my mother asked with a ladylike nibble of shortbread. The biscuit broke and fell down her front. She slapped at her ample breasts, pulling money and car keys and crumbs from her bra.

Fiona answered excitedly, ‘Yes, yes. All the time. Made me crazy for wanting more babies.’

‘You know I nurse at least two while I’m driving. If I have to be in the car all day — —’

Fiona sputtered, choking on her tea. I handed her a serviette and she mopped her mouth while saying, ‘Not too loud or they’ll have you away for sure, my dear.’
Crumbs dusted and face clean, Fiona topped up their teas again. The pouring, clinking and plop of the sugar cubes eclipsed their chat and laughter. The spoons and whispers circled.

‘What about you, dear one?’ Fiona leaned towards me.

‘She’s a virgin, darling. I watch her like a hawk.’

‘But the hand is under the sheet, for sure.’

‘Mother, please.’ I turned to her, begging. The fever had turned to mortification. ‘Can’t you make her stop?’

Fiona’s mouth was full of masticated shortbread. ‘We’re all women here, my love. We know these things. We know.’

I stared out into the garden, my revulsion almost complete. ‘I have no interest in sex. I hear her every night and it makes me want to puke.’

They laughed, almost falling off their scraping chairs. Their moist, maternal buttocks snagged on their seats and the plastic squeaked between their thighs.

‘That’ll change. It’ll change.’

And suddenly they were both lecturing me, telling me it was important to wriggle and moan and pretend until you’re not pretending, and then they were suggesting that I practise with a pillow and that, when the time was right, it would be the most wonderful thing after a night of bliss to know you’ve conceived a child.

‘Wonderful for you,’ I said, looking at the hand-me-down T-shirt that Lucy might inherit. ‘But what about me and Lucy?’

‘Oh tut, you love the little ones. You know you do.’
‘Besides,’ my mother added, slurping on her tea, ‘it’s better than having a period. Between the babies and the nursing it’s been fifteen years since I’ve seen blood. What about you, my dear?’

I felt like gagging, not at their performance, nor even at their talk of sex and secretions, but at the sound of them eating and drinking. They laughed and talked and nibbled and chewed and hiccupped on their stories, and I was torn between wanting to shove the shortbreads in their face and begging them to just stop putting anything in their mouths.

I looked at the palms I had crossed in my lap and tried to listen beyond the sounds surrounding me, but my efforts only made me more aware of the rhythm of their breathing. Fiona filled her ample chest and then let all her breath out in an unwashed rush. Mother gasped and sighed. ‘For every child, a tooth,’ they’d said, and I could smell the rot of the seventeen children they’d borne between them by that time hovering over the table.

‘Just two more,’ my mother said as she passed the diminishing plate of shortbread. ‘Children, I mean. Not shortbread.’ She winked when she saw the horror on my face. ‘Cheaper by the dozen, right?’

‘You’d better hurry. Time is short.’ They discussed the possibility of their future children as I drew a hand across my flaming forehead. I thought of the torment at school.

Of my classmates mocking, ‘Don’t you lot have a TV?’

‘What is it with you new Australians?’

There was also the concern of our well-meaning teachers, commenting, ‘Another one? It can’t be true, now can it?’

And the drudgery of another child! I thought of Lucy, like me, a baby always on her hip, a sullen and serious face.
Mother, noticing my flush, leant forward to touch my arm, which I rapidly pulled away. ‘Sick still, darling?’ Her voice was full of concern until her breath caught, then hesitated. A moment later she sneezed, spraying shortbread and tea all over my thigh.

‘Seriously, mother, really!’ I jumped up from my chair.

‘Sorry, darling,’ she laughed. ‘I think you’re contagious. One like you and I want a dozen more.’

‘Mother, no. Disgusting.’ I grabbed a serviette and, wiping myself, battled with the anger, despair and humiliation that was making me want to scream.

She shrugged and sighed. ‘Have another shortbread, dear.’ But I couldn’t stand the look of it, couldn’t take another moment of them talking and laughing with their mouths full, couldn’t bear to hear another round of sighs and gasps and laboured breaths. I was furious at her for thinking of yet another child and at Fiona for encouraging it, but mostly it was the way she ate and drank and breathed. I just couldn’t stand the sound of her.

I took the shortbread and threw it on the table in the midst of her Royal Doulton. A futile, useless exercise; nothing, not even the biscuit, broke. I stormed off to nurse my fever.

So you see, something had changed, something in me. The small sounds, the soft and whispered ones that had been a comfort before, now seemed to have a secret hold on me. And no, it wasn’t just the breathing of the house at night, nor the mice scurrying like buffalo under the laundry sink and the cockroaches’ screeching scramble in the kitchen. It wasn’t even the slapping sounds of sex that would come from my parents’ room late at night. It was all of it together, clawing constantly on my skin, or gripping behind my neck.
And yet it was something more as well. Something in the way sound moved in and out of nightmare focus, something in the difference between listening and hearing. It was a build-up, I think, to what came next, the natural follow-up of what had come before.

I remember it most from the day my father didn’t hit me. Angry at me as he always was, he came at me, grunting as he hurled himself up and after me, but I ran, first down the hall and through the kitchen, then out into the living room on the other side. It was more the sound of his laboured breath than his anger that kept me moving forward. Sliding past chairs, I ducked round a corner, falling over the doll Lilly had been playing with before she ran and hid.

His breath on my neck sounded from his throat, rasping and impersonal, beyond any reasonable volume.

He reached me and grabbed my shirt.

‘What did I tell you?’ he shouted as he balled my shirt in his fist. ‘What did I say?’ The cloth of my shirt tore with a violent rending of its tissues as I ripped it from his hold and screamed, ‘Daddy, no! Please no.’

Somehow my mother’s shrill voice penetrated the sound barrier. ‘For Christ sake, Mikhail, there are better ways to do this.’ Ben was crying behind her leg. I heard her voice and his whimpering cries as if through the solid barricade.

‘Stay out of this, woman,’ he yelled. ‘Stay out of it or I’ll make you.’

I bolted for the steps and, racing down them two at a time, I hit my hip on the railing.

‘Outside, get outside!’ My mother’s screams behind me were distorted as if by water. I held my hip and hopped, then twisted, squirmed and ducked as my father reached for me again. I made it to the laundry, ripped at the
clothes that hung from the ceiling. I kicked through clothes all over the floor. Then I saw the sliding glass door of my room open. Grace stood framed in it, backlit and blonde, blocking the way to the garden. For an instant, I stared into her messy curls and innocence, wondering why she wasn’t hiding, why she wasn’t running. Then I turned from her and ran into the music room and into a wall of books.

Everything slowed down. Everything went silent. My father came in after me. He reached me in the corner, grabbed my arm and jerked it. A vein pulsated in his forehead. The pulse behind it matched the drumming in my head. ‘Ignore me, will you? Pretend you can’t hear.’

He tried to pull me from the corner. I grabbed a shelf and held it. He yanked at me again. Books tumbled down around me, rumbling like an earthquake, as I scrambled for a hold.

‘Fat-arsed, stupid… I’ll teach you how to listen.’

He jerked at me again and my hand slipped from its hold. I clawed at the carpet as he dragged me across the room. ‘Stupid, deaf and insolent.’ I reached for a chair leg. ‘Lazy sack of lard.’ He twisted my arm. I twisted back, caught. There was nothing I could do but stand there and take it, so I gave up and looked into his wide, rigid jaw and slightly bloodshot eyes, looked and thought, it’s okay, it’s only fear. But then I saw the glint of his wedding ring as he raised his hand and fisted it and then, as if within a slow-motion replay, I heard the rush of air as his fist came down towards me. All my courage fled. I collapsed at his feet crying, ‘God in heaven, please. He's going to hit me. He's going to hit me. Please, please don't hit me, Daddy.’

The silence was complete again. My world went totally still. My father didn't hit me. I waited, trembling on my knees, but still he didn't strike. The tension in his grip released. I pulled my arm away and scrambled into the corner, cradling it against my hip. I listened to the stillness envelop every
movement and held my breath, trying not to break whatever magic had made him stop. But then I sensed a gesture, a motion of the air. I looked up and saw my father's naked, baffled grief, just before he turned and walked away.

The noises came back slowly, in erratic, disconnected pieces. I heard a child upstairs scampering as it ran from one hiding place to another. I heard Benny's tired cries slowly peter out.

Then a flash, a change, and I heard my mother's harried shouts. ‘Where is she?’ she cried in the gentle breeze outside. ‘Where is she, Mikhail, where is she?’

My father didn't answer. Next I heard his step in the greenhouse just outside the window. Next the grinding of the tap. Another fluctuation, a hiccup in time, and the sound of water falling on leaves, on mulch, on glass. Water brimming in his hands and clapping as it hit his face. Water and the intermittent sound of my mother calling out my name. Huddled in my corner, I listened as those sounds transformed to nightmare, listened as the water running through my father's hair started running through my name. Then the kids began to call it too, their voices fading in and out as they moved around the house, the two syllables of my name becoming like a mantra – a set of sounds with meaning lost from so much repetition, a set of sounds that easily transformed. I sat and let them search for me, hearing it over and over, hearing the transformation. Kayla, Kayla, Coward Kayla. My name would retain that private meaning, to me at least, forever after.

And then when I thought life couldn’t get any worse, it did.

It was 1982, my final year of school, and I was waitressing in the evenings at a coffee shop in the city. I had this plan to save, to first move out of home and be on my own in peace and quiet, and then to drift around the world like the characters in *The Drifters*. It was a simple dream, nothing special, but one I clung to. So I waitressed. Late-night shopping on Friday
nights was the busiest of my shifts. It was also the night for the schoolies to socialise and every now and then Rayah, who I barely saw at home those days, would sweep in, looking gorgeous in another new top or dress, cover me with kisses, then sit in my section of the restaurant with an ever-growing group of friends. They’d order endless cappuccinos, grilled cheese sandwiches and lemon meringue pies, and I would watch from behind the counter or while running around with orders, proud of the beauty and vibrancy that made her the centre of every group, but also on the lookout for signs of a tell-tale fissure. It is what my parents had asked of me, what she had asked herself.

‘I almost did it, can you imagine? If you hadn’t remembered the tower,’ she would sometimes remind me.

So I watched her and tried to listen in over the clatter of the coffee shop, and mostly it was fine, just her and a bunch of privileged private-school kids being rowdy in the corner. Still, the manager would check on every ticket whenever she was there, and that, along with the maddening noise of the restaurant, would start the tightening behind my eyes. When they left, Rayah blowing kisses and singing, ‘I love you, sis,’ my throat would tighten and this whooshing sound would start to blow through my body as I held the unpaid bill, the one she’d promised wouldn’t happen again.

And sometimes she would come back just as I was closing up or rushing for the last bus home.

‘Come out with me, Rayah. Let’s have some fun,’ she’d say. And I would protest, saying, ‘No. I’m trying to save. You’ll just spend all my money.’ And she’d say something like ‘Come on, Kayla, don’t be like that. I promise I’ll pay you back. Besides, there’s someone who wants to meet you.’

And I would know how it would always work out. Yet still I wanted to believe, not only in the dream that someone would want to meet me, but
that she would be solid as a sister – my sister. So I would go along with her in
my grubby uniform, unwashed hair and glasses, and stand beside her,
buying drinks. I would try to smile and flirt. I would try to interact – but as I
fended off the disdain and gave her money for more rounds of drinks, my
internal sounds would start again. They would fill not just my head but every
cavity of my body, consuming my attention, making conversation impossible.
When my money was gone, even the little I’d tried to keep aside for a taxi,
she’d say, ‘Call Mum or Dad to come and get you. I’m going home with
Cathy,’ and rather than risk the scene, rather than be the one in reach of
Mother’s late-night anger and despair, I would walk the two hours home,
grateful only that the maddening sound, the wind-roaring tinnitus, would
ease as I walked through suburban deadness.

But then that noise within me started whenever she was home as well.
When I awoke to find her asleep on the bed beside me, it was always a mix of
joy and terror. She loved me; I knew this. She needed me; I knew this too. I
was the stability in the whirlwind of her life and the calm point in the tumult
of her emotions, but it was always difficult when she was home – the
weapons she bandied about, her torturing of Claire, the fights with Mum and
Dad, her goading of Martin and merciless teasing of all the others. From the
first instant of seeing her curled on my bed in her rumpled, shoplifted
clothes, every sound of my body – my heart, my pulse, my muscular clicks –
would combine with that wailing-wind sound to make clear thought
impossible.

And then it got to the point that the sounds never stopped. I lived in
an uproar of noise from morning to nightfall, with all other sounds (the once-
small sounds of my environment, the voices of the little ones, the distant ones
of the suburbs) a cruel accompaniment. I was beside myself by then. I’d sit
alone in my room, a pillow over my head or my hands plugging my ears,
hoping and praying and begging and crying, but nothing would bring relief. The particular sound I heard changed occasionally, sometimes ringing, hissing and screeching, at other times roaring, buzzing and clicking. Sometimes it accelerated; very occasionally it decreased to a maddening pulsation; but it was always there, intertwining and mingling with the base sound of a torrential wind. Later, much later, I thought there was something I should have learnt from the sounds within my body, something metaphysical, but at the time I was totally captive to the noise, and I thought that I’d go mad. Perhaps I did, a little – the only thing I knew for certain, the only thing I believed, was that Rayah was responsible, that she was the one that was making my life hell.

And then one early morning when I’d only just managed to fall into a tumultuous windswept sleep, she was beside my bed, waking me, asking me for money.

‘I don’t have any.’

‘Come on, Kayla. You must have something. I need it for a taxi.’

Broken already from lack of sleep and fearful of a gradual crescendo, I reached for my hiding spot and the hope of peace.

‘No. Not there,’ Rayah said. ‘I’ve used that money already.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I had to use it the other night.’

I thought I didn’t hear her right. The pressure was starting to mount again. ‘What did you say, Rayah? What?’

‘Long story, Kayla, but look, I’ll pay you back. I needed the money but I’ll pay you back.’

‘What?’ I turned to her to see her speak.
She shrugged. ‘Kayla, really, the taxi is waiting.’

Amid my disbelief, realisation was dawning. She’d taken my money, my only way out.

‘How?’ I asked. She looked at me, confused. ‘How will you pay me back? You’ve stolen every cent you haven’t borrowed. How will you pay me back?’

‘Really, Kayla. What’s the big deal?’

‘I want my money, Rayah. I’m sick. I’m sick of here and sick of you and I have to get out.’

‘So go. You can leave anytime. Just leave.’

‘I’m not like you, Rayah. I don’t steal and manipulate. I need my money to leave.’

‘You’re not like me because you are such a coward, and such a bitch. I’m your sister asking you for help.’

I turned away and buried myself in the blanket. The noises were in full force again. It felt like a physical pain was trying to explode inside my body and there was nothing I could do to stop disintegration. I curled deeper into my misery, vaguely aware that Rayah had left the room, vaguely aware that she’d come back. Sobbing now, I hid beneath my blanket.

‘There,’ she started throwing coins at my head under the blanket. The sound of them was thunderous. ‘There,’ she said again. ‘Sit at home on your fat, ugly arse and count your precious savings.’

‘Please, Rayah, don’t shout,’ I whispered.

She smashed something against the brick wall – Claire’s piggy bank, I realised later – then threw more jangling coins against the wall and at my pillow.
‘Rayah, please. I’m sick.’

She bent over me. ‘Do you have a headache?’ she screamed.

‘Rayah, leave me alone, I beg you.’

She jumped on my bed and shook me. ‘Leave you alone? Is the fat slob sick?’ She screamed it for fun. ‘Are you asking your sister for help?’ Her voice got louder when she felt me cringe. ‘You want the sister, the one you’d abandon to save your precious money, to be nice and leave you alone?’

I could think of no way to defend myself, no way to resist. She had already invaded my head and my body, and now she was yelling and belittling me as well. My only response was silence. I curled deeper into the uproar in my head, and tried to hear her voice as just another meaningless signifier of pain. And she kept going, jumping and yelling and shaking the bed, trying to pull down the covers and calling me fat slob, lazy lard and other names, until suddenly, either bored or tired, she left, and with her absence I was buried in yet another avalanche of sound. But within me, when I thought that all was hopeless, I found a point of resistance. I knew there must be a way and I promised myself to do all in my power not to be tortured by those internal sounds and my sister again.

I graduated soon after that, barely made it into an arts degree. I found a flat, lost weight and, not believing love would ever come my way, became indiscriminately sexually active. I barely spoke to Rayah for the three lonely years of my study and didn’t care when I heard that Dad had found the money to buy her a car for the birthday they didn’t celebrate for me. Still, slowly, slowly, the winds subsided. It was a ghost called Tilly who helped with that.
Doha

I tell these family stories to my girls, sanitised of course.

How they love to tease me.

Like when Ariana in the car one day, straight-faced and looking worried, said, ‘You haven’t given me a sex talk, Mummy. You need to give me a sex talk.’

I was squinting into the density of the traffic and thinking of a meeting.

‘Come on, darling, don’t you do sex ed. at school?’

‘But Mum, this is a Muslim country. It’s worthless what they teach. You know they told me to stop riding horses, ’cause that will break my hymen.’

‘Oh,’ I replied, checking the rear-vision mirror. ‘Okay, then. Pass my phone. I’ll make you an appointment with our counsellor. Or would you prefer a gynaecologist?’

‘No, Mummy. I want you to tell me all about it. Like, will I have to wiggle or something?’

And after that second of hesitation, when I realised she was teasing me, I pushed her with a laugh and we giggled.

Still, some of the exchanges are more difficult. Another time I remember was when we were shopping – it was Cadance that time and it was just her and me, as Ariana was travelling. We were in the dressing room of her favourite store fighting over the price of a top and how many things she was wanting to buy.

Frustrated, I asked, ‘Do you think my parents took me shopping, ever, even once?’
She groaned.

‘No, wait. There was that one time. My father bought me a cream silk shirt but then my parents argued because it hadn’t been on special so my father took it outside and burned it.’

She rolled her eyes.

‘And the allowance you so freely spend. Do you think my father ever…?’

She turned to me and scowled. ‘At least you had a father, Mother. It’s been years since I even heard from mine.’

It’s that knife wound that doesn’t heal.

She dressed quickly and left the stall. And yes, I remember that their life as spoiled, third-culture kids with lovely bedrooms, multiple passports and flights around the world does not undo the fact that essentially we are homeless drifters with nowhere else to go.

And that at least I had a father.

But I do remember the romance of meeting theirs and remind myself to tell them of it again. It was as sweet as anything you’d ever read. Me, a young teacher adventuring to work in a foreign country and standing befuddled at a Japanese train station. He, a tall bilingual American who was able to make me laugh. After just our second date we threw the I Ching together and when I got the symbol called the marrying maiden he asked me to be his wife. I accepted without even reading the prophecy and we lived our love, Scott and I, for two lovely years in Japan. After our late-night teaching shifts, we walked the backstreets of Kyoto together, listening to the scratching sounds of straw brooms sweeping cobbled entrances and wind charms rustling under blossoming cherry trees. And when, frightened by the forceful nature of our love, I ran away to India for my first adventure into yoga, he came and found me and studied with me there for a while, becoming a fine practitioner himself with his long lean bones and monophonic concentration. And then he took me to America, where we were going to live our dream.
So yes, I remember I have a father, and as I struggle to forgive the difficulties I had while living with him, I wonder what challenges my girls will face when they try to forgive the father they didn’t live with. Like you with your mother, they will one day have to ask him – how did you ever let us go.

Sighing, hearing still the echoes of the way we had to leave him, I gather up all the clothes she wanted, buy everything, and give them to her where she waits on a seat outside the store.
Brisbane, 1983

I was haunted when I moved out of home but it wasn’t always as you would think. Once it was just a love affair, an unrequited passion that lasted, at most, two weeks, but woke me with a shiver in my skin for years. For a long time my children were a kind of haunting, a set of living, breathing ghosts of the dreams I had had with their father. And you, of course, you haunt me. Even now I turn and unwittingly remember the spell I cast and my breath is caught in my throat.

Still, the first of my uncanny hauntings was of the ordinary type. It was in the historic Queenslander, the stationmaster’s house, where I lived with my flatmate Jessica as a university student. The house was perched on a hill overlooking the city, the river, the main arterial roads, and three sets of train lines. Upstairs was a busy, stylish architect’s office, but it was downstairs in the built-in flat that I found my peace and quiet. Day in and day out, trains and traffic rumbled. Horns blared and tyres screeched, but it was an even and consistent noise and I understood its source. It soothed me and kept me company during my long hours of study, until eventually I didn’t hear it anymore. Instead I would be inhabited by the constant steps on the wooden floors above my head. The high heels and loafers of the architects and their staff roved restlessly above me, echoing from early morning until deep into the night – and beyond that, even into the midnight hours when all their cars were gone, the step would continue its march. That midnight step was shuffling and muted but never stopped. Up and down the corridors,
back and forth on the wide veranda, it was moving, always moving. My flatmate never heard it, so I knew it was there just for me, maybe as a kind of sound therapy or refocusing, maybe as a lesson in another way of listening.

But it was an uneventful haunting. I named the constant step Tilly, after a doll I had once loved, and believed she was a woman waiting and keeping time just like me. Occasionally I would hear her come down the steps and stand in the kitchen doorway; occasionally, she’d seem to want my attention and stamp around a little, but mostly she kept her distance and I got used to her. She became a comfort, a steady step that matched my heartbeat and settled it. With Tilly and the trains and traffic, the gusting wind within me settled. I had something safe to listen to, the sound of a memory that couldn’t touch me, and an invitation to another of my senses.
Doha

I’ve spent a long time thinking about the nature of haunting and echoes and of all the things I have and haven’t heard. I think about it still during the time I have carved out to do my morning practice. But even now all I have are questions, like what is it I hear anyway? Is it an object, event or duration? And are those other sounds extensions of an original event or a separate thing entirely? And what of my internal sounds? Are they like echoes, reverberations of another time and space, or just figments like the ghosts I think I hear? And what of what I write? Do you hear it as you read just as I hear it as I write, or is it just a visual representation of all my reflected and remembered sounds?

So many questions and so few answers. My inability to understand is affecting the quality of my practice so I wouldn’t wonder if you were to doubt the things I’m saying. I doubt them too. Sometimes I think I am just a fun-house mirror distorting the travelling waves as I run faster to escape them. But whether I trust my perceptions of them or not, they live within me still, to such a point that I struggle knowing if I experience them in the future, past or present.
Brisbane, 1985

I am almost twenty on the day of my first dramatic leaving. My arts degree is finished and Jessica and I are selling our stuff. It is a Saturday, the day I am remembering, and the young architects are upstairs working overtime. The one with the red tousle of hair, the one I have a crush on, comes out now and again for a smoke on the upstairs porch. We have everything set up for our garage sale on a table in the driveway and on the porch downstairs: pots and pans, random knives and forks that we had picked up at various op shops—old books and tablecloths and sheets. It is a hot, sticky December day and all sales will be put towards our travels. Jessica will go to Sydney before joining her boyfriend in Japan, and I will go to Cairns. From there I will go to Alice Springs. I had always wanted to go to Alice.

My mother arrives uninvited, beeping her horn, one long, two short, one longer as our family has always done. I laugh, happy and excited to see my brothers and sisters, and I run over to greet them as they pull into the driveway and all pile out of the bus. Stuff spills out of the bus as the door slides open and I bend to pick it up as the three middle boys tumble out and disappear around a corner. Claire, long-legged and blonde, is crying because I am leaving. Little Lil and curly-haired Grace jump around me. Baby Ben, now seven, clings to our mother. A birthmark on his face is still prominent.

Mother gets out of the car crying. I am the first of her children to leave her. I take her in for a cup of tea. She decides instead on instant coffee with hot water out of the tap, and as she stands to drink her coffee, she begins her
standard script: money problems, school fees, a husband who landed her with ten kids then never helps. I just nod and smile. The little girls cluster around me while I nod for Mother.

I know the conversation will never veer to me. I know she will never ask me where I am about to go or what I am about to do. At best, she will ask if I have seen my sister and my answer will be no.

On the way out, my mother stops at our table of pots and pans.

She picks up a ladle and turns it over. ‘I gave you this,’ she says.

‘Um, no,’ I say, confused. ‘I don’t think so. I got most of this at the Salvation Army.’

‘Yes, I did. And I gave you that one too. And that, and that.’

‘Mum. Mum. Those are all Jessica’s. You didn’t give me anything.’

‘Of course I did. These I gave you for your birthday.’

‘Mum, you didn’t give me anything. Remember, my birthdays were always for Rayah.’

‘Don’t be ungrateful and ridiculous. This is my tablecloth, too.’

‘Mum. Please. I am leaving tomorrow Mum.’

‘Look at this. My picture frame.’

‘No, Mum, really.’

‘I work all my life to give you stuff and this is how you repay me!’

‘Mum, please.’ I am begging. She grabs stuff indiscriminately from the tables, filling her arms as she continues to yell. Jessica moves in to grab what she can of hers, and then turns to me, mouthing ‘stop her’, before she retreats back into our flat. The architects upstairs gaze down from the balcony before moving away from our line of vision. The little girls retreat into the kitchen,
the scattered boys peek around a corner and quickly withdraw again. Only Benny and I remain at the table by my mother, him crying and pulling her skirts, me pleading and arguing.

What comes next is totally unexpected. She is still yelling, ‘You steal my stuff, take my things, refuse to help, leave…’ Then without warning, she turns and wallops Benny. And stuff flies everywhere.

‘Mum!’ I scream.

‘I can’t hurt you but I can hurt him.’ She wallops him again. I run in to try to save him, but she pushes me away and thumps him again.

‘You take my things, sell them, treat me and your family as if we didn’t matter.’

‘Stop, Mum, stop!’

‘Come closer and I’ll hit him again.’ The girls are by my side now. The boys have come back, too. We are circling her, all looking for ways to move in on them. Benny clings to her even as he looks for a way to run.

‘You think you are the only one to hurt people. I know how to hurt you too.’

‘Okay, Mommy, okay. Here, have your stuff. Claire, get a box. Really, you can have it all. Just please, please don’t hurt Benny.’

‘I worked for that – it is all I have. I have slaved all my life for you ungrateful kids and you just think you can throw everything out.’

‘Yes, Mum. Yes. Here, have it. Have it all. Here, this was a present I was keeping… Claire, quickly with that box.’ And so with Claire helping me to pack and Lilly making her a cup of tea and Grace and the boys drawing Benny gently away, we are able to sit my mother down, able to bring her slowly to the point of tears, to the point where she is beckoning to her
beloved baby Benny again, and crying because I am leaving. By the time I put the boxes in the car, I know the children will be safe for the evening. But I know it isn’t for long, that there will be many other triggers. Still, I know it is the end for me, that the next day I will get on the train, abandoning the children to their fate. I know I will put on earphones and music as the train pulls away, and that I will watch myself watching my own departure, as I leave my childhood behind.

Something different began that day, the day of Mother and Benny, but nothing really ended; it hasn’t ended still. Once my mother and siblings had gone, once the garage sale had been packed up and my friends had made their discreet and shuffling exit, once the architects had closed up for the day and the movement upstairs had been reduced to that one single set of footsteps walking back and forth, back and forth, on the long and open veranda, once all of that… then I was alone.

It wasn’t how I had imagined my last night in Brisbane would be, but I just kept on moving, finishing my packing, making endless cups of tea. Every now and again I tried to call the share-house that Rayah had moved into recently. I let the phone ring on and on, or when the answering machine picked up, I left long rambling messages reminding her that I was leaving, asking her to watch out for the little ones, pleading with her to make sure they were okay. The phone in the kitchen was beside the window and the stairs that led to Tilly’s veranda and sometimes I imagined that she was listening, that her step was slowing down to catch the floating embers of my voice, that maybe she was hearing what I felt as I tried one last time to say goodbye to Rayah. Maybe I was right – later that night, she came in again.

It was no big thing, really. As the light dimmed outside, I sat in the low light of the kitchen with a cold cup of tea, looking out onto the river,
waiting and hoping for the phone to ring, and maybe as the shadowed dimness turned into a haunted darkness I started to slip into sleep, or if not sleep, then away from alertness, awareness, me-ness. It wasn’t a step that brought me back but a change in pressure, a shift. She came down the stairs, through the kitchen door, and into the room. Nothing had changed but the atmosphere. Still, I knew she was there. If the chair being pulled away from the table made any sound, the blood in my ears disguised it, but there she sat, her restlessness gone, as still as the dead of night.

We sat together. Again, it must have been a long time. The darkness thickened. The lights in our city glowed. The trains rumbled back and forth. The phone didn’t ring. I must have fallen in and out of sleep, in and out of awareness; and as before, I awoke to a shift in the atmosphere before I heard any sound, a knocking at the door this time, a ‘Cooee, darling.’

It was my mother. ‘Kayla, darling, wake up. I’ve come to say goodbye.’ I didn’t answer, couldn’t. Benny’s eyes were still upon me and the embarrassment of my shuffling friends. I heard her trying the back door and the side window, then the front door again. She called my name again and again, peered in the window by the phone, rattling the security bars. ‘Kayla, darling, wake up.’

I shrank into my chair, trying not to breathe, and stayed as still as possible. She called and called. ‘Come on, darling, I know you’re there. You must be there. Please open.’ I shrank deeper into my corner, not knowing what I was doing, only feeling my rock-cold anger freeze my movements. As I listened she sank onto the stairs, dropped her head against the sill. Her calls and pleas petered out into deep, strained breathing, then guttural sobs, then exhausted breaths again. She sat there crying and I sat motionless and cold in my corner. And again maybe I fell in and out of sleep, or we both fell in and out of sleep, or maybe it was all a dream, but at one point when I woke, my
mother and her grief were gone and the window was a clear view to the sparkling river again and my sleep was lighter, clearer. But then there was another shift, another movement in the pressure, and I was awake and Tilly was beside me, her hand reaching out to touch my shoulder, telling me it was time to go.

And so I left. It was dawn and my lipstick was very red and my bag was very small. I got on the train heading north and, with headphones on, I listened to music as the city and then the country unfolded in front of me. I sought the flattest music I could, and watched myself watching the scenery as more and more distance separated me from my family. Every now and again a memory would become audible: Aunty Gen’s smoky laugh mixing with the sound of my own childish cries; or the sound of my little brothers and sisters scattering like cockroaches, or prowling catlike around each other, ready to pounce and victimise. And I would turn the music a little louder. I kept turning the music louder or changing it to something so familiar that it was just a drone that didn’t register, and then I would stare into nothingness until my vision became a blur.

I travelled up the coast of Queensland like that, every thought, every memory contained or forbidden. Except for one I couldn’t quite control. One kept coming back. During my whole long night of vigil, Rayah hadn’t called.

Finally I was far enough north. At Innisvale, I got off the train and hitched over corrugated roads to Mission Beach to look for work. In spite of the flat mood that had overtaken me on the train, I found a job waitressing on Dunk Island. It didn’t start for two weeks so I travelled again, this time up and away from the expensive tourist sites into the hinterlands and to a cheap caravan park not far from the rainforest. I had a novel, a diary, a basic caravan to live and cook in, and just enough money for rice and fruit. Beside
the little park, there was only the rainforest and the streams and waterways and waterfalls.

The first day that I walked the twenty minutes to the rainforest and waterfalls, I struggled. I turned my Walkman up and down, thinking still to control my memory by penetrating it with music. I walked through the countryside as though it was a picture to walk past – two-dimensional and flat with only a slight heat-induced shimmer in the distance – and I listened to my music with an almost impossible concentration. When I got to the start of the rainforest path, I was hot and thirsty and irritated from the effort, so I took off my earphones for a moment, and without any warning, without any preparation or foresight, I was bombarded with the overwhelming roar of cicadas. It came from everywhere, surrounding and enclosing me, and I turned and turned, looking for the source of it, scanning the towering trees and the surrounding shrubs but seeing nothing – only experiencing it in an inescapable way: the torrent, the wave, the constant steady song.

I walked into the sound of it like I was walking into a cave. Keeping to the path, I looked around, always hoping to catch a glimpse of something that would verify what I heard, but I saw nothing – just felt the sound vibrating in my body. I was almost upon the water before I heard it above the roar of cicadas – a bubbling stream at my feet, a cascading waterfall beyond, the rushing of water over rocks connecting them. I took off my shoes and felt the cold green water wash between my toes. I took off my clothes and sat, lying against the current, as if in a bath, as the water pushed past my shoulders. I sank beneath it, exhaled into its distorting echo chamber. When I came back to the surface, all I could hear was water – water in my ears, water streaming through my hair, water fighting against the rock, water swimming with a rush in one direction and trickling off in others. The roar of cicadas was a distant accompaniment.
I spent the day exploring the creek, found the still rock pools, the trickling gullies, the rock slides, the cascades, the tumbled ancient waterfall.

I went there the next day and the next.

I walked each day into the wonder-world of water through the cave of cicadas, and then explored the different parts of the creek, before I settled down to while my hours away with the water washing over me and the sound of it flooding me.

 Mostly I was alone and my solitude started to settle in and swell my tongue. It became hard to talk and my voice started to sound foreign, even to myself, so I hid when I heard others coming. They never stayed long, and if they did, I would move to another part of the creek.

I let day after day pass like that.

The heat built. Sitting by a pool of cool green water, my muscles melted and my skin soaked up the moss-dripping humidity. I shrivelled, became prune like, and yet I felt like I was expanding. At nights I started to dream of the sound of water – of the sound of it, not the substance of it, washing through me. I dreamt that the gurgling, bubbling chatter of it penetrated my skin and entered my organs and that, like a pair of hands, it pressed and massaged my insides, chatting in a foreign language that I sometimes thought I caught the etymology of. I woke with a start each day to the call of the waterfalls, would dress with the memory of water caressing my skin. The landscape pulsated as it walked me to my destination; the cicadas encircled me and accompanied me to the edge of the water, the stream reached out to embrace me. I submerged myself each day into a hypnotic stupor and allowed my senses to experience themselves experiencing.

On the last day, when I was lying on a rock in the middle of a waterfall pool, listening to a water-spray rainbow, feeling empty, but content and in
control, I felt that same silent shift in the atmosphere and realised that someone else was there. I turned to see a man with a shaggy blond beard and long hair seated on a rock nearby. An old hippy with a very soft tread.

I started to tie my top.

‘You don’t have to do that on my account,’ he said. ‘I come here every day. I’m not here to bother you.’

I finished adjusting my top and lay down again, trying to decide what to do. Every day? I thought.

‘My house is over there. Built it myself. Mud brick.’

I looked towards where he pointed and saw nothing but rainforest.

I nodded. Every day? I thought again, confused. Why hadn’t I heard him then?

‘Bloody hell,’ he said. ‘Hear that. They are at it again!’

I turned and looked at him.

‘Huh?’ I tried.

‘Listen. They have been having the same bloody conversation for weeks now.’

Sitting up to listen, I became aware of the low-level soundscape beyond the sound of the rushing water. In my abandonment to the sounds and sensations of the water, I hadn’t bothered to register it.

‘What?’ I asked. ‘The birds?’

‘Listen.’

‘I really only hear the water.’

‘You’ve got to listen past that. Hear them?’
I became aware of one set of birds above all the other babbling sounds of birdcalls. I started to say something.

‘Sh,’ he said. The birds chatted on. ‘Yep. Same conversation all week.’

‘What are they talking about?’

‘What do you think they’re talking about? Before it was all about sex. Now it is all about who is feeding the babies – and they are noisy little buggers too. Sh. Sh. Listen. From that direction. Over there. Can you hear them too?’

I tried to listen in his direction, but the water was still filling my head.

‘You eavesdrop on all the birds’ conversations?’ I asked.

‘What else am I supposed to do out here?’ he grumbled. ‘Ain’t much to see. All the bloody same, isn’t it?’

I looked around – three metres of visibility all around me. Green in its endless variety, in its endless victory.

‘Shh,’ he said again. ‘Hear that?’

Now that I was hearing, I wasn’t sure what to listen to.

‘No, no. Not the galah. They never shut up either. That one. The storm bird.’

I was suddenly listening on a whole different level. Concentrating, turning the volume up and down on the different sounds around me, trying to keep up with him, unsure of how to distinguish everything that had now become audible. Listening hard, I heard what I thought were insects, the probable scuttling of beetles on the shore, or the delicate skimming of dragonflies on the water. But I also heard the whishing give of branches as the birds landed and lifted off, random kookaburras, a flock of passing parakeets, and still the overwhelming white noise of the water and cicadas.
He had totally drawn me in. I swam over to his rock and listened with him, tried to stay with him as he isolated one birdcall after another.

After an hour or so, I fell back on the rock, exhausted. ‘Jeez,’ I asked, ‘how did you learn all of this?’

‘You don’t learn – you just listen.’

‘No, really?’

‘You just listen. Make a life of it.’ He looked at me before he went on. ‘But it’s worth it. You know there are other things, beyond this – beyond all this endless chatter of birds and insects and trees and water. Other things you can hear – if you want.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Just some stuff I learnt in India.’

‘Jeez. Okay, surprise me.’

He laughed. ‘Okay, okay. But it’s true. I was ten years there before I came here. Spent time with the Sadhus of Varanasi. Sat around with them. Smoked ganja, bhang and stuff.’

‘Right, sounds productive.’

‘Yeah, but they taught me. Once they had me stare at the sun for a whole day straight, without blinking, and that was after a night of not sleeping. I went delirious. I spun out. I lost my sight and all my other senses. My skin was burnt to a crisp – only hearing was left.’

‘What did you hear?’

‘Can’t explain it really – but the hearing became tactile sensation. Another time I’m just walking down the street, just walking, and then I hear this gong and everything stops – freezes, just like that – and I go into that space again. The cows were bloody moving but nothing else. I was frozen
mid-step, worried I was about to fall on my face, and then the gong became a spinning-top sound and — — ‘

I laughed. ‘So God is a spinning top.’

‘No. It was the cow beside me, seriously.’

I laughed.

He told me another then another of his mystical experiences and they were all incredibly funny, and they cracked me up until the sun started to go down and the noises around us changed and it was almost time to leave.

‘It’s all about listening, there,’ he said, finally, with a shake of his head as he, like me, started to register the change in the light we sat in. ‘India, I mean. Sitting at some sadhu’s feet and hearing what they say.’

‘Well I’ll go some day – once I get the money.’

‘It is really too late.’ He shrugged. ‘Besides, if you know what you’re listening for, you can hear it all here.’

‘Of course. Right. Well I plan to travel Australia first. But then I am going and I might never come back.’

‘It gets lonely.’

‘I am lonely already.’

But it wasn’t loneliness really, the solitude. It was becoming who I was, who I accepted I would probably be from then on. The aloneness in the hinterlands had started to shake me loose, but when I moved onto Dunk Island and started my job, in the wettest wet season ever, the aloneness started to allow me to hope. Perhaps it was the butterflies too – the beautiful blue monarchs that floated around me as big as dinner plates until the afternoon rains set in. Whatever it was, on Dunk I started to feel a certain sense of power.
In the mornings, I would walk to my shift surrounded by a crown of butterflies. In the afternoon, I would don the hotel-issued yellow raincoat and look for them as I swished back to the room I shared with a roommate I never saw. My room had only a screen for a window and the rainforest outside would cluster close when I came home to gather my breath. I would stand beside it, breathing in its exhalation and listening to all it shared, while I waited for the floating flash of blue amid the green. It always came. The butterflies would come and gather by my window, resting against the sill, watching over me as I read between my shifts.

Back at work, waitressing, I would try to placate the grumpy tourists who had come for the cheap rates, forgetting to check the weather. After work, or on days off, I would run up the mountain with the butterflies circling my head. Pushing me ever higher and deeper into the rainforest, they were the ones that showed me the camp. It was in a clearing, secreted against a cliff on the western side of the mountain, and had obviously been used for growing and smoking dope. Nevertheless, it had a clear view out to the mirror-flat sea as well as a few decaying comforts. I knew that I was safe up there, so I would stay for hours at a time when I could, just practising a different way of listening. I would tune in first to the lowest-level sounds, the softest fall of a leaf or feather, the quietest movements of the ground life, then throw my hearing as far as I could, out to the soft lap of the sea, perhaps, and the pull of it against the coral beach, or to the tourists by the beach on the other side of the island, or the staff cooking in their quarters below. Then I would bring my attention back to the symphony of rainforest life again – to the flutelike quality of the birds. There was a magical domelike quality to the enclosure, which made me feel protected, and as the days or early evenings drew to a close, I would listen in one direction and then another, waiting to feel the shift in temperature that always came before the downpour, waiting to hear the sound of rain sweeping in, first over the ocean, then onto the coral
beaches, before hitting the rainforest canopy. When it arrived, I would run back, whooping in the torrential stream – saturated, dirty, alone and happy. If the others thought me a little odd, I didn’t mind.

But it was the wettest wet season ever and the rains kept coming, filling up the days and making movement ever harder. It became more difficult to get up to my symphonic camp. So instead, alone in my room, I watched my shoes start to grow mould and my few silver necklaces tarnish, and through the window I listened to the downpour. The more it rained, the happier I was. I started to invent new names for the sound of it: soft-rain-on-dirt sound, driving-rain-on-pavement sound, rain-falling-from-leaves-onto-other-leaves sound. Each sound had its own name and as it rained on and on, I invented more and more.

Then they announced that a cyclone was on its way and I was even happier.

‘Make a life of it,’ he’d said. ‘Just listen.’ I wondered what a cyclone sounded like. A mild panic and an urgent sense of focus overtook the island. Evacuation was not an option, so while the maintenance team spent the day tying things down, boarding up windows, and securing equipment, the waitresses ran after the children who were banished from the beach, packed away the cutlery and served drinks to the tourists, who teetered between rage and excitement.

In the late afternoon, we were all ordered to gather in the main hall for a meal off paper plates and to wait out the storm. But the weather was perfectly still. The warmth was dry, almost static. It was calm, but not ominously silent. When I quietly slipped away, I thought that I had time. I told myself it would only take a minute, that I was really just checking on the butterflies. But it was there – that whisper of a dare that had fleetingly crossed my mind. What does a cyclone sound like?
On the rainforest path, everything was different. Silent tremors of energy vibrated through the trees as they withdrew themselves deep within their roots. The ground life stood still. Not a bird or insect called. There wasn’t a single sound of movement. I should have listened, but I kept on going through the mass of trepidation in the trees, trying to quiet my own breath and to step so I didn’t feel so obvious. Every movement echoed, thundered in the silence. At one point I stopped, pulled up by a distant, vaguely familiar sound that I couldn’t immediately place. Until I did: it was waves. The pull and lift and crash of water. My breath tightened as I remembered our mirror-flat sea and I looked around, trying to place myself again. ‘Where was I? Why? Go back.’ After a moment of hesitation, I kept on going into the darkening, silent rainforest, my footfall more and more unnatural sounding. When I made it to the camp, I looked out towards the mainland and saw a lone windsurfer, a red and white sail flashing on the tumultuous sea. Someone was on the beach, apparently blowing a whistle to call him in, but I couldn’t hear it above the crash of the ocean. There was no one else about. In the camp around me, everything was still. I sat on the hammock, trying to still my heart to listen. In the silence, I wondered about the butterflies again. Where do they go in a storm? I started to look for them, under leaves and in hollow logs. I crouched down to peer into a rotted-out tree base, thinking perhaps I saw one, but it suddenly got dark – that shadow-across-your-soul kind of dark. I turned towards the sky to see a hand like cloud of ugly green reaching out to pluck me from the cliff. It was only then that I realised what I’d done.

The wind picked up immediately. It screamed in from the sea and leapt on the forest. I ran towards the path but it was gone. The trees and undergrowth lashed wildly under the attack, making the only way out impossible to reach. The rains blew in on the wind’s strong back, knife-cutting strong. I covered my face, cowering beneath my elbow, as I tried to
retreat to the protection of the cliff. In the clearing, the wind struck and slapped at me, pushed me over mindlessly. On the ground I crawled, slithered as quickly as I could to the cliff, than curled impossibly tight against it. Around me, the trees cried and wept and pleaded as first their leaves, then their branches, then their roots gave way. It was completely dark and impossibly loud. Wild wind, clamouring rain, the bone-crunching snap and slap of trees breaking and falling all around me. I jumped as, in the darkness, I felt a tree brushing past me before falling and splintering against the cliff above me. With no hesitation, moving only with my hands, I found the base of its broken trunk and pressed between it and the rock, hiding beneath its mass.

The ferocity of the storm increased. Even beneath my tree, the rain tore at my skin and the wind pulled at the ground I curled on. I kept clawing into the earth and pushing deeper against the tree’s very bark, begging for protection. I stayed there, hour after bone-shaking-cold hour, in total darkness that I was too terrified to open my eyes to. Hour after hour. The only sound the whole time my breath sobbing and screaming out now and then, my teeth shaking or grinding if I tried to stop them, my blood pounding against the pain of the muscular grip in my neck. I needed these sounds – they reminded me I was alive – and I clung to them as I listened to the doomed terror of the trees and the ever-wilder gusts of wind, and the rain-pounding attack on the cliff. It was too loud to think about anything but that immediate present, that exact location, my constant prayer for survival. Let me survive, let me hear sound. Please, please don’t hurt me.

Then hours and hours later, the eye passed over and it was still – a surprise stillness that hovered lightly and caressed the injured rainforest gently. Under its touch, I could hear a low-level weeping. Water settled into the ground and streamed over the cliff above me. The waves, gentler now,
caressed the ripped-up beach. Broken tree after broken tree finished its fall in the forest. But it was quiet enough to think. Should I risk running back through the dark and broken forest, or stay where I was, stay and wait for the rest of it? I opened my eyes to the absolute darkness and waited, hoping they would adjust. But they didn’t. Only a few grieving, ominous shapes penetrated my blindness. I curled deeper into my crevice beneath the tree and listened to the haunting sounds of the water-rushing forest. I knew I was helpless and that I had no choice. All I could do was wait, wait and hope and beg that my tree would hold for the second part of the storm. Incredibly, I must have slept for a while.

When the storm returned and woke me, less ferocious but just as wild, I pressed my face into the cliff wall, my back against the tree, and prayed as the noise rampaged around me – yelling, shouting, destroying still, but with most of its might worn out.

The next morning the storm was over and light returned to the sky. Testing, first the light and then the ground, I slowly emerged from my crevice and began to push my way through the broken, wind-burnt forest. I was lost many times, exhausted beyond movement many times, but I kept on going.

Eventually I emerged into the wreck of the staff quarters just up the hill from the main hall where everybody was still sheltering, and I fell in the middle of the road. I stayed there, smelling the sap that spilled onto the street and feeling the warm sun penetrating, prickling against my skin. I was still there, half asleep, when they found me. They hadn’t missed me but they rescued me anyway – half-walking, half-carrying me back to the hall.

At the main hall, the other staff and tourists lined up, waiting to make their calls on the single line out. I sank onto a pile of blankets and stared off into the distance, listening to them make their plans. Some were staying; some were going. Some were not going to let a cyclone destroy their island.
Some were too grief-stricken at the damage. Dirty and exhausted, I lined up too, and as I waited to make my call, I sorted through my options. I could do whatever I wanted. I could go find my guru in the waterfalls, or stay on the island and help with the clean-up, or just simply move on, go somewhere else. I had enough saved for a few weeks at least. Nothing was going to hurt me.

And then it was my turn for the phone.

‘Mum,’ I started bravely. ‘Mummy,’ I whispered into the phone.

‘Oh, darling, darling, I’ve been so worried.’

‘It’s okay, Mum, I’m fine. Don’t worry.’

‘Seriously, darling. I am at my wits’ end.’

‘Relax, Mum. It’s done. It’s fine. We are all okay.’

‘But she is on her way. You didn’t know? You haven’t heard?’

‘Um – no, Mum. There was a cyclone up here. Category 3. Did you know? We were cut off. We are being evacuated now.’

‘She’s coming.’

‘What?’

‘She’s coming. She broke up with that boyfriend Eddie and is on her way. She was in such a state. I’m so very worried.’

‘Mum, slow down. You’re not making sense.’

‘Rayah. She’s coming up to join you.’

‘What? I don’t understand.’

‘She needs you. I need you to help her. We will get her back to uni later but we have to get her stable first.’
'What? But Mum, no, this doesn’t make sense. I don’t have a job. I just spent a night in the cyclone.’

‘You’ll sort something out. I know you will. Just look after her, will you? She’ll be there by tomorrow. Innisvale Station.’

‘But Mum——’

‘Bloody hell. For Christ’s sake, boys! They’re screaming bloody murder here. Got to go.’

I put down the phone, and not comprehending, not understanding, just stared at it. Someone, worried about delayed shock from the cyclone, moved me away and sat me down with a blanket and tea. I looked down at my fingers, twisting them. Everything gained was so much to lose. A scream of protest started to bubble up. I tried to calm it down, to drink my tea and find my centre – that centre that had survived, that centre where I believed I could exist – but my hands shook too violently and my tea went everywhere. A medic came over and I heard him whisper, ‘She was left in the staff quarters, all alone. Have you seen it up there?’ I started to cry, sobbing. You don’t have to go, I told myself. You can disappear back into the rainforest and be gone. I tried again. If you meet her, you will wither. You, everything you, will be stamped on, eradicated. But what could I do? I couldn’t listen to that voice, couldn’t abandon my sister, and so I told the medic that it would be OK, that my sister was coming to get me and look after me and that if I could only sleep a little… Immediately, I sank into a deep and soundless sleep.

And that was it. I stopped the trying-to-make-a-life-of-it-listening act. I met my sister at the train station the next day, and in her dirty white dress, and with her knotted blonde hair, she came running and screaming up the platform. She jumped all over me, her long-lost-bestest-sister-ever, and why had it been so long? And what on earth had been going on? And Eddie! What a drag! Glad to be rid of him. And in spite of all of her careless desertions,
and all my dashed hopes and never-agains, I let her cast her spell on me once more. I began to believe that this time, with just the two of us, it could be as it always should have been.

And so we began our journey together, first to the centre and then to other places, that I wish I’d never seen. It was on that journey that your story began. So listen up. This part is for you.
Doha

Now that my oldest is almost an adolescent, I get it. Well, some of it. That is the privilege of parenting, to look back and forgive our own parents for their mistakes. Still, I wonder if all those mistakes I’ve made will be as indelible on my daughter as my mother’s were on me and if forgiveness is an option.

Like the day when Ariana was almost fourteen and decided to clean her bathroom. She was proud and happy of the work she’d done – the shining mirror, the clean and ordered shelves. But I despaired as I looked at all the three-quarters-full containers she had carelessly thrown out.

I picked one up from the bin. ‘I gave you that. It’s barely touched.’

‘Oh damn,’ she said, ‘I didn’t mean to throw that out.’

‘But this one?’ I asked, pulling out another almost-full shampoo. ‘I worked for that, you know.’

I went through her rubbish pile, looking for what could be saved, aghast at the waste and carelessness. A moisturiser that didn’t feel right, sunscreen she refused to wear.

‘This is environmental terrorism,’ I spluttered. ‘How can you do this? How can you waste like this?’ I was shaking.

She was filled with impossible defences. ‘I got fifteen perfumes for my birthday. You didn’t give me that one.’

‘But this — —’

‘Mum, Mum.’
Turning over the bin to search for other evidence of her waste, I realised I was suddenly hysterical.

‘Mum, Mum. You are being irrational. Can you please calm down, Mum, please.’

And for a moment I actually heard my own voice in her as she pleaded with me to be reasonable. It was like an overlay or edge, a depth to the perception. And then I heard my mother’s voice in the voice I used to respond, ‘I gave you this and that.’ But then, from out of the distance, I heard the echoing sound of Benny’s cries and helplessness and remember how that sound would drive me away, so I stopped and breathed, reminded myself that non- hoarding and non-grasping is a principle of the sutras, then turned back to where Ariana sat crying on the floor.

‘I was only trying to help,’ she said. ‘I wanted you to be happy.’

I sat beside her, pulling her head to my shoulder and putting the half-filled bottle of shampoo back into the rubbish. ‘Sorry, my darling. Sorry.’

So, like I said, I get it now. It was written in my grandfather’s junkyard, in Aunty Gen’s piled-up furniture, in Bridge’s boxes of music, and in the way my mother collected children like others collected cats. Our DNA was haunting me too, all the stronger for the times I tried to fight it. The only real tool I had to combat it was my daily practice of observing myself. My only hope of undoing it: this story as an act of yoga.
Next, we are hitching outside Camooweal. We are, we were, we will be. It stands as the eternal moment – the present unfolding in our past. The sun is sinking over the long flat plains, turning everything a wildfire orange, and I am braiding her hair as she twines it. Dark is approaching when the next car rushes past. The men inside lean out to wave and hoot as they keep on driving by, but when they see Rayah’s knotted blonde hair, they change their minds and screech to a stop. Backing up fast over the gravelly edges of the road, they send dust flying into our eyes. We cover them and, coughing, bend to get our stuff. Rayah slings our water bottle over her arm and moves towards the car. As I stand, the dust begins to settle.

It is then that I see the emus. There are two of them and they are running fast across the sunset, as if eluding some encroaching danger that is just beyond my perception. Their long spindly legs and loose shaggy plumage are seared onto the sky, and their black silhouetted shadows reach out to us like elongated phantoms. I grab Rayah’s arm and we pause to watch them as they race across the mulga, brigalow and spinifex grass. They don’t let up their pace, just keep on running, and for one distorted moment I hear them, the beat of their step, the movement of their feathers, but I turn away from the sound as one of the men shouts out impatiently and we have to get into the car.

It is suddenly dark. The halfway light lasted only long enough to throw our bags in the boot and by the time we are in the car – Rayah in the
front with the driver who introduces himself as Kevin, and me in the back with Steve – their faces are already shadows.

‘So where you headin’?’ they ask.

‘To the comet,’ says Rayah.

‘Jesus bloody Christ,’ the one beside me snorts.

‘Alice,’ I add quickly. ‘The best place to see it is Alice.’

‘Yeah, well, don’t know about getting you to that comet, we’ll need extra petrol for that, but we can get you to the Three Ways by tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Maybe!’ says Steve. ‘If this beast doesn’t overheat.’

The car takes off. It gets darker still as we drive. A lighted sign tells us we are crossing from Queensland into the Territory and the guys tell us they are abattoir workers, off to work in Katherine. We hear details about their slaughterhouse rounds and about the advantages of seasonal work. Rayah is bored. She keeps on peering into the darkness. She bends and whispers in the driver’s ear, He cannot refuse her challenge and, in the next instant, he switches off the headlights and we are cast into absolute night and are hurtling, hurtling on a blind race against fear, into the very centre of darkness.

It is only seconds till his nerves fail. The lights come on, blinding a kangaroo, which our driver swerves and misses. Then all returns to normal. The headlights pierce the spacious darkness. The road is unerringly straight and empty.

Rayah screams, ‘Again, again! Again, again!’ She winds down the window and sits on the edge and her hair streams behind her as her free arm flies and beats against the wind.
The lights go out. The car is filled with rushing wind and breath-snatching terror. In the darkness, I am pulled against the man beside me, who gasps hard as he holds me, but all I am aware of is my surging blood and hammering heart and the absolute lack of light. My screams are carried away by the velocity of wind.

The lights come on again. Rayah crawls back into the car then turns to me. ‘Come on, Kayla, try it.’

‘No,’ I shake my head, panting, as I move out of Steve’s hold, which might just have been fear. ‘No,’ I say again. ‘I couldn't, just couldn't, do that.’

‘Oh, come on, Michaela. Don’t be a baby. I want to see you live at last. To do something. To go a little wild.’

I shake my head again, looking down. There are different forms of tearing wind fresh in me still. Rayah turns away.

She rides on the ledge of the window, arching her back, and letting her head fall back as she screams, ‘Yee haw!’ Her voice echoes in the darkness. From where I sit behind the driver she looks like she is winging over the desert, a pure blonde figure etched on the void, untouchable and sublime.

‘Again, again, again,’ she cries. She hooks her foot to the seat and lets both arms glide through the night.

In the darkness inside, Steve reaches for my arm again. I press against the door but he moves closer. The lights are back on and he is still pressing close. This is not just fear. I look at Rayah, flying beyond anybody's reach. Then I wind down the window, and holding tight, I sit up on the ledge.

‘Jesus,’ the driver says, ‘the other one's out as well.’

Rayah sees and cheers. She screams again, ‘Turn out the lights! Turn out the lights!’
The lights go out and I sit in absolute silence as we charge through the inky night. Above me, the stars look like pinpricks in a domed ceiling that reaches from one horizon to the other. I stand and yell over the top of the car to Rayah. I know I am dashing into a dangerous mystical territory, yet I feel clear and unobstructed, suddenly younger, suddenly immortal. I sit on the ledge of the hurtling car rushing towards the centre, and I balance Rayah on the other side.

When the lights are on again, I slide into the car.

Rayah jumps in too, saying, ‘God, it’s amazing. There’s nothing out there, just space and stars. It's incredible, just incredible.’

She doesn’t wait for me to answer. As if hypnotised, she crawls back on the window and rides there, quietly now. She rides for a long, long time, and before she comes back in, I fall asleep against the door. Asleep, I dream of racing and running and falling. I dream of a mystical orb revolving and turning, exploding, congealing. I dream of water, clear and pure, carried in a bucket.

When I wake, it is almost dawn and we are parked by the side of the road. Everyone is asleep. Getting out quietly to pee, I am shocked by the coolness of morning and the vastness of space around me. There is nothing, just miles and miles of shadowed scrub against a dark and rust-red earth. The road, a black scratch, stretches straight and long and lonesome in both directions.

Then in the distance, I hear a metallic, rolling ‘creee, creee’. It mounts to a wailing collection of screeches as it moves closer and closer. Then just as the others start to stir, I see a flock of red-tailed black cockatoos in buoyant flight. They fly low over the desert, circle the car, then settle in a burnt-out tree, not very far away.
I run back to the car and drag Rayah from her sleep. ‘Come on, come on, wake up.’

She emerges, and we stand together, watching them beckon to the dawn. They fan their tails, make round their helmet like crests. The colours are black and red against the black and red sky, and the black and red land. The black road is littered with red Coke cans.

That moment – that one. It was, it is, it will be a moment that unfolds for me – for always.
There are other moments that unfold like that, moments that live as a constant through time. They feed into the patterns that hold us and the names in the sand that I try to erase and they rise up over and over. Like my runaway marriage. When I went to America as the Marrying Maiden I should’ve read the prophecy and remembered where I came from, not got carried away by the title, as it states it very clearly. A young girl of lowly station who longs too much is taken into the family, not as wife but as concubine. And it was true. In spite of our sudden love, in spite of all the yoga and what I did to try to save us he was wedded to his addictions, not me. Only I didn’t know that at the time. Nor did I know we’d end up living in the desert.

‘The desert,’ I said when he told me he’d been accepted into a graduate program in Arizona. ‘Does it have to be the desert?’ I should have insisted we go somewhere else and not to where I knew I’d be haunted. Still, we believed in a dream at that stage of our life and, like I said, I was a just a Marrying Maiden then – such a person follows.

Some good came out it, of course. I studied as well. I remember looking through the catalogue of the local state university and flicking past a program for a masters in creative writing. Writing, I’d thought at the time. I wanted to be a writer once and that was in the desert too, but then I moved quickly past it to qualify in education – just as my parents had always planned. And there were yoga teachers in the area too so I was able to grow in my practice and eventually begin to teach. And, of course there were the children, daughters of the desert just like you, Ariana, my song and Cadance, my dance and final chord. For them I wouldn’t change a thing.
But the patterns always haunted me. As I watched their father move from optimism to despair and then later into unemployment and disabling addictions I thought of the broken families and lost children that had scattered my families’ generations – of my mother and her mother, of my father’s sister written out of Galina’s memory. And of course I thought of you and the spell that I had set. I swore that in spite of all those unfolding moments, I wouldn’t lose my children even if it meant losing everything else. And so I came here, to this dusty desert in this lonely town and daily I watch over them – two sisters, creating a world, a language and a binding – a binding I hope is stronger than the one that failed your mother and myself, and for which you paid the price.
Threeways Roadhouse, Northern Territory, Australia, 1986

Next, in the way of dreams and memories, we were hitching by the road again, this time by the exit of the Threeways truck stop with the woman within it watching. The boys, like the sense of time, were long gone and the road stretched lazily through the undulating, dusty desert while behind us flies buzzed relentlessly around the remnants of our outback meal. Hours, or just unbroken minutes, had passed without any cars. We waited, grit in our palms and teeth, the smell of our yesterday selves mingling with the hot dust. Rayah sketched, collected rocks and feathers from the desert, and formed a sculpture from them as she drifted in and out of our mumbled conversation. I lay over my map, circling the places I wanted to visit: Alice, Uluru, Kakadu. I liked the sounds of these names and rolled them on my tongue as I tried to interest Rayah in my plans. ‘Timor, Rayah. Why don’t we go to Timor?’

‘OK, Kayla, whatever you want.’

‘Or Arnhem Land. There must be a way.’

She didn’t answer, just continued to sketch.

‘Come on, Rayah. Tell me. Where do you want to go?’

‘Nowhere,’ she said. ‘Well, everywhere. Can’t we just follow the song lines like the Aborigines?’

‘We’d need to know the songs.’

‘Maybe we could hear them and follow them that way.’

‘Maybe,’ I said. ‘But I am not hearing them, Rayah. Are you?’
She shrugged and went back to her sketching. I folded my map and stood, mesmerised by the heat waves and the long pull of the road. Hours more passed. Rayah turned from her pile of rocks and feathers to cartwheeling through the desert, to hand standing on the empty road, to making elaborate designs in the dirt along the roadside. Her dirty white overalls and matted hair were set off by the slow descent of the sun and the occasional stark birdcall, echoless in the boundless landscape, accentuating her laughter.

Eventually, the door of the truck stop slammed and the woman from inside it beckoned. ‘Go on then. Fill up your water bottles again and get out of the sun for a bit.’

Relieved, we sat in the shade and ate the oldish apples she had given us along with a lecture on hitching. I counted my money while Rayah started to practise the panpipes she had bought just before we left the coast. The late afternoon spread in front of us, punctuated only once or twice by the shadow of a cloud.

‘Let’s talk,’ I said at last.

‘Sure,’ she laughed. ‘About what?’

‘About what we’re going to do,’ I replied, looking up and down the empty road.

‘OK,’ she said, but picked up her pipes to play again. She played but didn’t talk.

‘Shall we try again?’ I finally asked. ‘We could make a plan? A “just in case”.’

‘OK,’ she said again.
‘Damn, Rayah. You’re teasing me. Don’t tease me. I’m feeling weird. I don’t like this. What if we don’t get a ride?’

‘We could stay here. They probably have a caravan or something out the back.’

‘But I’m almost out of money.’

‘Let’s keep waiting, then, and see what happens.’

One more time, we tried hitching a ride, back on the cracking clay plains with the flies buzzing incessantly and trying to bore into our eyes. I slapped at my face and jumped away from them, almost crying as I begged them to let me be. Rayah buried herself under a T-shirt and lost herself in her pan pipes, a soft raspy sound that spiralled off into the desert like the occasional dust devil on the horizon. The flies didn’t bother her at all. Nor did the gradual dimming of light.

‘See the stars,’ she said. ‘It’s like you can watch them turn on out here.’

I looked towards the semi-dark skyline instead, desperately hoping for a car. The light left suddenly and with it the flies, but replacing their maddening, penetrating buzz was an equally unsettling silence. The solitary sounds of the wakening night desert, a long lone cicada song and then the sudden rustle of an unnamed marsupial, only made everything else seem hushed. I felt the edge of panic mounting in my breath. Slowly, reluctantly, I turned my attention to it, listened to the rise and fall and catch of my fear, and by listening tried to calm it down. But then in the calmness of my breath I heard it again, the sound of space, the ripple of it expanding through the unknown darkness, and underneath that, a mesmerising tapestry of textured sounds, and a quietness deeper than its cloak of silence. Hypnotised, I listened, feeling drawn, almost beckoned, until a slight vibration shimmied through the land and a beam of light appeared on the horizon. A road train
gusted towards us with incredible speed and we jumped up to watch it, an
overwhelming tunnel of light and wind and movement and noise that almost
blew us off our feet as it hurtled past, and then, with its roar vibrating
through our bodies, left us.

We stood, watching it recede until the darkness swallowed it
completely, and then we stood a little longer. The desert insects took up their
subtle song again. The muted undertone expanded as if it had just been
waiting. A breath of coolness touched my gritty sunburn. I shivered.

‘Why didn’t it stop?’ I whimpered.

Rayah looked at me, confused. ‘He must have filled up at Tennant
Creek.’

‘But why? Why would anybody stop at Tennant Creek?’

‘Relax, Kayla. He was heading towards Darwin.’

Silence. It was getting darker. I took a breath and shook away the
unease.

‘Weird, that’s all. But there’s no point waiting here anymore.’

We went and sat inside the truck shop, violating the ‘no hitchhikers’
sign and spending more of my ever-dwindling fund. We played stupid pass-
the-time games with ripped-up napkins and added sugar satchel after sugar
satchel to our cold, bitter coffee. The lady behind the counter rolled her eyes
as she ignored us. ‘If they were my daughters,’ I thought I heard her mumble.

Then finally a truck came down the road from Darwin and pulled up
by the tanks. A shortish man emerged from the belly of the cab. He noticed us
staring at him through the window of the truck shop but ignored us as he
slowly did the rounds of his truck, kicking tyres, checking connections,
fuelling his tank. His exhaustion was palpable, even from where we watched.
He leaned heavily against the truck, his head falling now and again as he waited for his tank to fill up, and when he came into the shop we could smell a tired scent of coffee, cigarettes, and day-old clothes clinging to him.

He nodded as he ordered his food. ‘Guess you girls are looking for a ride.’

‘Yes.’ It was Rayah. ‘We’re trying to get to Alice.’

He snorted. ‘What are you? Eighteen?’

‘Nineteen,’ she replied.

‘Yeah, well you can have a ride if you can keep me awake. Supposed to have this load in Adelaide day after tomorrow and I’m bloody stuffed already.’

A little later, we were high up in the cab of his truck, shouting over the engine and the music and the crackle of the radio and far removed from the eeriness of the desert. As we pulled away from the truck stop and onto the road, Rayah hooted and laughed and jumped in her seat. We were inside the tunnel this time – the desert below us barely visible, just a space we hurtled through. We tried to fill the space with talk. Our trucker’s name was Ray. He had two kids to different women, a daughter ‘your age I reckon’ and a twelve-year-old boy.

And then we filled the space with song, Rayah head-banging and leg-kicking along to Midnight Oil and Cold Chisel, then turning to me to croon along with Brian Ferry: ‘Come on, come on. Let’s stick together.’

The windows to the side of the cab reflected Ray’s smile at Rayah’s ongoing performance and, encouraged, she continued to alternate between trying to woo me, her unwilling sister, into a smile, and teasing me with her favourite soft-shoe rendition of ‘Me and My Shadow’.
Ray laughed at that. He really laughed. ‘Shadow,’ he said. ‘Now that ain’t fair.’ But then he laughed again. He laughed and laughed until the tears were streaming down his face and he kept on laughing until we realised he was crying hard.

‘Jesus,’ Rayah said, sidling over to put her arm around his shoulder. ‘It’s okay. It’s okay. Don’t cry.’ But he only moaned and hid his head.

‘The road,’ Rayah said and grabbed for the wheel. It pulled to the left dragging her with it till, sobbing still, he grabbed it back.

Sitting back, she squeezed my hand as we sat quietly waiting.

Eventually, his breathing evened out and he turned to us, apologising.

‘Don’t know what happened… More strung out than I thought… Never happened before.’

We nodded, simultaneously saying, ‘It’s okay’ and ‘Are you all right now?’

He shrugged. ‘You just reminded me of my daughter,’ he said, looking over at Rayah. ‘I almost thought you were her when you were sitting back in that truck stop.’

He sighed then and, reaching behind his seat, pulled out photos. We stared at a little girl with curls sitting on the lap of a young man and helping him to steer his truck. Another photo showed a fine-boned woman with a six-year-old hiding behind her leg. The woman stayed unnamed. The little girl was Amy.

‘So where are they? What happened?’ Rayah asked.

‘Don’t know.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t know?’
‘I just don’t know. They were gone one day and I never heard from them again.’

‘But didn’t you look for them? Didn’t you try to find them?’

‘No. Never looked for either of them.’

‘Why? Why wouldn’t you look?’ Rayah asked.

‘Don’t know,’ he shrugged. ‘I should’ve looked. But I didn’t. Just let them go.’

‘But why?’ Rayah asked again.

He stared ahead at the road in answer as we drove on in silence. I peered into the inky night beyond the headlights, only just perceiving the wave of the grasses before us and the occasional red-eyed dart of an animal into the darkness. Finally, Rayah pulled out her pipes again and, accompanied by the crackle of the lonely radio, started with her waspy, wispy sounds. But at some point even she must have slept – when I woke to the weight of the tonnage behind us resisting the long grind of the brakes, she was flung across me, her panpipes held loosely in her hand.

‘Where are we?’ I asked, as I started to shake her awake.

‘Barrow Creek.’

‘Oh. I thought we were going to Alice.’

‘Too tired. Too wrung out. Just got to sleep.’

‘Oh.’ I peered out into the blackness and shook Rayah again. The stars seemed brighter, the skies infinitely larger.

‘Look. I’m getting a room tonight. You can join me if you like. Sleep on the floor, whatever.’

Gratefully we agreed.
There was no town at the Barrow Creek roadhouse, only the road stretching in either direction and the dirt pull-off to the pub. Ray signalled us to wait on the veranda and went inside. Through the door, I saw him talking to the publican and ordering a pot with a whisky chaser, then another. Rayah swayed against me, exhausted, hardly awake. I pulled her to a bench. Across the road, a donkey brayed and a windmill creaked. Those silhouetted sounds again, standing out stark against the soft rustle of the wind in the grass. I peered inside the door, watched him order another round with two more chasers. I was too tired to care about anything around me, but listening or not, the night noises of the desert and the muted jukebox and the glasses clinking and the soft pant of Rayah’s exhaustion – all moved in and out of focus, almost as if I were a radio being tuned to a different frequency. I sat passively, letting the various sounds move into and out of my consciousness, until finally I saw him pick up the key and head towards us.

‘You coming?’ he mumbled as he walked past.

Inside the room, we grabbed pillows from the bed and sleeping bags from our packs, and fell into sleep on the cool lino floor.

His breath, her breath, my own breath – the sound of an air conditioner.

In the way of dreams and memories, it was the timeless middle of the night when a dream or memory or voice started to pull me from my sleep. Rayah as ice beside me. Rayah as a ghost above me. Rayah as a cry behind me. She whimpered and I pushed the sound away and tried to sleep but again I heard that whimper, this time accompanied by the smell of fear and a hot ragged snatch of breath. Her voice was inside my head. Dream or memory or neither. I woke suddenly, knowing it was neither, and immediately flung myself away. Ray was a shadow in the darkness pinning Rayah down.
'What are you doing?'

He rolled towards me. ‘Huh?’

‘No, no. What are you doing? Leave her alone.’

He stopped, confused. Was he awake or asleep or neither? I couldn’t see his face but heard hesitancy in his breath.

‘Shit.’ He registered Rayah’s fear beneath him and rolled onto his back, his arm still across her heavily. ‘What’s happening here?’ he asked.

‘You tell me,’ I said, quickly surveying the room, instincts alive, night vision sharp.

‘I just wanted to hold her.’

‘Let her go.’

‘Really, I wasn’t going to hurt her. She just reminded me of Amy and I just wanted to hold my baby girl.’

‘Look, it’s not okay,’ I said. ‘Please let her go. Just let her go and we’ll go, okay?’

He pushed himself off her and slouched to the bed. Rayah crawled behind me.

‘Yeah, yeah, whatever.’ He fell on his bed. ‘But you don’t have to leave. I just wanted to hold her. I wasn’t going to hurt her.’

‘Okay, Okay. We know. But we’ll leave, okay? Better if we leave.’

Maybe he was just strung out, maybe we could have stayed, but I wasn’t going to risk it. Grabbing our stuff, we made it to the door. A moment more to grab our shoes. Then we were out. My last sight of him: a shadow in the darkness, body collapsed, his shame and exhaustion palpable.
But then we were outside under a shockingly star-flooded sky and what had been vast before was even vaster here. And beautiful too, as beautiful as anything I could have imagined, a silver hue fresh with the spill-off smell of bore water, electric with the settling heat, and grandly silent under the faint song of insects. It was alive with sound but riddled too with a hushed and holy quality. Catching our breaths, we crossed the highway as if walking across the aisle of a cathedral and knelt behind the far side of the water tank as if in a sanctuary. I almost would have prayed to the shimmer in the landscape but the donkey brayed again, the windmill creaked and Rayah, coming back to herself, started to laugh hysterically.

Rolling in the sparkling sands, she mimicked, ”’What are you doing?” Your little voice. You should have heard it. “What are you doing?”’

’Stop it, Rayah.’

’’’What are you doing? What are you doing?’’’

’Shut up, Rayah.’

’Meaner than Aunty Bridge, you were.’

’Leave it alone, would you? Poor guy was a mess.’

’Poor guy. Bloody fuckwit. Makes my skin crawl.’

’Forget it, Rayah. Check out the skies. Look.’ I pulled her up to search the skies with me. ‘We might see Halley’s from here.’ She stood, but grabbed me suddenly back.

’Sh,’ she said. ‘Listen.’

I turned to her, fearing the worst, almost feeling a step and push, but she shushed me again and turned to the sound.

It was a bird. A pied butcher bird, I think, singing in the cool of the night. I sat with a sigh beside her and we listened to its song unfurl, first a
fluted musical tone, then a short melodic phrase, and then a haunting whistle that echoed slightly off the range behind us, all as languid, slow and unhurried as you could wish. And from the indistinct hills, its lifetime mate responded, but with so much space between each note that we listened to the landscape between them as much as to the wafting melody.

In the way of dreams and memories, it is moment after moment I remember, and this is another of the moments: Rayah and I, sitting in space and stars and a sacred humming silence, listening to the nocturnal love song of butcher birds, our skin and bodies meaningless in the totality of that experience, our separate selves absorbed into the fluted notes of the starlit land.
Sometimes when I teach my yoga class, we finish with the Sea of Oms. It is a very simple exercise. Before moving into our final relaxation, we jump our feet between our hands and come to standing. We pause, letting our breathing soften towards normal, our sweat cool on our bodies, and our nervous systems ease towards homeostasis. Then when the feeling is right, each student at her own moment begins to chant. It is a simple chant, a word, but with a beginning, a middle and an end, an open forward ‘O,’ a deeper lighter ‘u’ and a soothing completing ‘m’. We take it up, the primeval Om, the mother of sound and language, and at our own pace and in our own tone, we repeat it over and over and over.

And that’s it. That’s all. We just chant this word and slowly, without any orchestration, we harmonise, and as the richness of the sound increases, rolling through the room like a swell of waves, a slight vibration begins to fill our bodies. The vibration is subtle, but for me, every once in a while, it is like that very subtlety dissolves my skin and I feel my aura expanding, sometimes to be just a little larger than myself, at others to touch and mingle with the edges of my students. Memories come and go at the fringes of these moments. I let them go. The cherished memory of a child’s touch, the slant of a lover’s eyes that for a moment seemed to love me – just little bits of memorised me-ness arise and pass away.

But other times, perhaps it is when there is that special type of static in the air, or when it is especially quiet before the call to prayers, it seems as if the vibration of that sound is digging within me and trying to drag things out that, to my ever-abiding shame, I won’t let emerge. When that happens, I cut the chanting off and take
the class too rapidly to savasana. If my shame is to one day be revealed, I don’t want it to happen in class.

But still, it is a nice way to end a class, a nice experience of closure for what has happened in the physical realm. And even when it scares me, the chanting also reassures me that I will hear things in a different way. Perhaps it is a little like the problem of walking on water. Was it a miracle or a learned skill – or was the learning in itself the miracle?
Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia, 1986

We went feral for a while at Barrow Creek. Suddenly getting to Alice wasn’t so important. Hiding out the next day, we watched Ray’s truck pull away. Then we ‘borrowed’ a tarp from a passer-by’s ute, bought some nuts and bread and water, and hitched back up to the Devils Marbles national park. We stayed there for a while, sleeping by day and watching and listening by night. It was like a gestation, our time there. We hid from the heat in the tumbled cocoon of rocks, drifting in and out of awareness as we listened to the wind through the hollows of the rock and to Rayah’s propped-up pan pipes. Once it was night, we climbed to the top of a granite rock and sat, back to back, in the open air of that orb of a horizon under that stunning spread of stars and whispered about everything and nothing. There were many birds we heard out there, dingos too, but it was the midnight song of the pied butcher bird we waited for. It was our song and connected us somehow, made us feel more sisterly and alive. By the time lack of money and food (coupled with too much solitude for Rayah) drove us to Alice a few days later, it felt like the starlight was luminous in our skin and as if we were the unnatural twins we were always meant to have been. I was the stream, she was the flow. We finished each other’s sentences, drew from each other’s ideas. Our differences were just complements, her white clothes and blonde messy wildness the match to my black T-shirts, glasses and quietness.

But the flow of us contained other people, too, and they were important – each in their own way.
The first of them was Simon. He took us in on our first day in Alice. We walked by him sitting shirtless on the porch of a partly renovated house and asked for directions to the hostel. He invited us up, gave us a tour, and before we knew it we had a place to stay. I was to cook, Rayah – by the way he consciously avoided looking at her – just to be.

Simon was white almost to the point of absolute albino, and to begin with it was as hard for me to look at him as it was for him to look at Rayah, but he was kind and seemed safe and we settled in for a while. He worked on the house and, while we were finding our feet, gave us money. I would shop and cook and, in the evening heat, we would sit in the shell of the house with its concrete floors, exposed beams and single light, and talk. He always avoided Rayah’s gaze. She was aware of this but didn’t care. We were busy looking for work and she was meeting people everywhere, on the street, in coffee shops, in the dried-up riverbed under trees and there were always people she had to see. And then when we got our jobs at the casino, she as a cocktail waitress, me behind the bar, she was even busier. I saw her at work at least and, if our shifts ended at the same time, we would dance wildly to Annie Lennox and Aretha Franklin, but mostly I was on closing shift and she would go into the desert with others to watch for Halley’s until the early morning. When she came home, starlight-stained in the late dawn, she would sit on the end of my sleeping bag. If I was awake enough, I would brush the red dirt of the desert from her hair and she would talk about the shooting stars and the tiny streak of the comet’s tail on the horizon and we would whisper and hide from Simon, who walked through the house like a ghost.

Still, we saw less and less of her at the house, and Simon started to fade, not wanting me to cook, not wanting me to talk; so before my shifts at the casino nightclub, I would just sit with my book on the porch, listening to the quiet song of the magpie larks and honeyeaters and the wave of the wind.
in the gums. It would have been fine. I didn’t mind being dismissed and waiting in that quiet shell of a house, except for the pain in Simon’s eyes as he listlessly continued the construction. There was nothing I could do to ease his suffering, nothing I could say that wouldn’t be a betrayal, an ‘I told you so’ when I didn’t. And then the day came that I woke in the midday heat to a moan and found Simon sitting on the floor of the living room, hair and skin almost blinding white in the washed-out light of Alice. He was scraping at his chest with a nail.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, confused and alarmed.

‘Trying to cut her out of my skin.’

‘But that doesn’t make sense. You barely know her.’

He kept carving away at the hairs above his heart, scraping into his skin. Was he writing on himself? Were those other scars?

‘Don’t be insane,’ I said, grabbing his wrist, but pausing as I fixated on the scarred skin that ran up and down his arm. ‘You’re freaking me out, Simon. Why would you do this?’ He looked up at me in pain, removed my hand and started carving at himself again. The blood streamed down his mottled skin in the white light. Red on white, the tangle of clotted hairs almost a text, a curse. I shook myself away.

‘That nail is not going to work,’ I said, as I stood and backed away. ‘You should get a knife if you’re serious.’

I packed our bags and met Rayah at work. Without sharing any details, perhaps even lying a little, I told her we were moving. She was fine with it. ‘He’s a little odd, don’t you think?’ she said. ‘Why do you think he never wore a shirt?’

We speculated for a while. Then we started our shifts. I thought that would be the end of it, but nothing ever ends; something always remains, and
that night, as I served my bloody marys and strawberry daiquiris, I was haunted by the glimpse of scarred skin, and the spill of red down his white chest. And I don’t know why, but Snow White’s mother came to mind, the way she too had fixated on the spill of red on white and evoked a child, the much-sought-after daughter, a child of grace and somnolent beauty born from an image of harm.

But we needed a place to stay again and by that time a Sydneysider tennis coach with a sports car had started coming around, so we begged him for a couch for a night. The couch became a room and ‘a night’ became a couple of weeks, but I was the invisible older sister this time. Rayah and he went out for lunches. He dropped her off at work and picked her up in the early morning after her work was done. There was never room in the car for me. Once though, on a night off, they did invite me to join them in the desert, and one of his friends kissed the nape of my neck as we looked up at the stars. I thought I might have a romance. I longed for a romance, if only to know that someone could see me, but the next time the coach’s friend came round, he turned away from my smiling welcome.

I found us yet another place. This one was a room in an apartment downtown, right above the arcade. The lease-holder was a South African engineer and I thought it might be different there as he was older and more refined. I imagined sitting down and being part of a conversation, but he had a restless, roving energy that was almost a match to Rayah’s. Leg shaking, eyes darting, he drummed on the table with a spoon while he waited for the kettle. I couldn’t get more than a grunt from him and Rayah wouldn’t even try. Instead she’d pick up another spoon and match his restless rhythm, drumming softly on the table beside him. A smile would pass between them and then one of them would accelerate the rhythm, moving it from soft and subtle to harder and faster, and then accelerate it more, standing up to put
more volume into it, before seizing other household instruments and attacking other surfaces – beating on pots and pans and windows and doors. At that point, I would grab my tea and duck away as inevitably one of them would jump on the table and stamp out the rhythm on the ceiling, while the other would beat it on the wall with the two copper pots and they would both shout and toss their heads to accompany the rhythm until they had drummed themselves into wild laughter, or until the neighbours above and beside us were yelling to ‘shut the fuck up already’ and then they would fall on the floor, panting. When their breaths eased I’d watch as he reached out and tucked a curl behind her ear.

And so it went. Everywhere we went, man after man was mesmerised by Rayah. I took on extra shifts to keep myself busy, bought myself an old bomb of a car so it didn’t matter that I never had a ride, found a flat that we didn’t have to share, yet still I struggled with that ugly-sister-cum-caretaker reality. The flat was lovely, though, with just the two of us. It opened onto the McDonnell Ranges on one side and looked out onto the open desert on the other. And the ranges were red, always red, but a changeable red, a living bleeding red from dawn to dusk and then by night a rusted red, which reacted to starlight and the moon with shimmering shadows and a deep, solemn silence. And out there, between the desert and the town, we had our moments of twin-ness again. There is a photo of us, after our shifts, both of us still in our black-and-whites from work, walking back to the apartment in the stark light of dawn, the sky already shockingly blue, the mountains burnt and oxidised. Rayah is holding her skirt up and her long, slender legs are exposed. Her curls escape her bun. I am walking with a slow sway, the movement of my hips frozen in haptic time. There is a static electricity captured in that photo, as if the age-old time of the ranges, the most eroded and patient in the world, and the fleeting movement-time of my sister had
created a dynamic moment of potential that I, with my slow step, was witness to.

We were happy there, or so I thought, although when Rayah let her various admirers fall away, she became quieter and more reflexive. She started waiting for my shift to end. Still, as soon as we got home, we would run up those bleeding hills together and dance at the top of them, or just sit and look out to the desert until the heat set in. She sketched again and often I would wake up to the mid-afternoon heat and see her scrambling up and down our backyard mountain, her constant dirty-white figure making a long streak against the bloodshot dirt. And then, as the season started to draw to its end, as the crowds that came for Halley’s left, we got off work earlier and would make our way up the hills by starlight to try to catch the last fleeting remnants of its tail on the far-off horizon. We would sit talking as we waited for the dawn, me trying to make plans on what to do next, she strangely hesitant and sad.

So I wasn’t really surprised when it happened. There was a sense of evocation, after all, in the way that Rayah stood on the hills at sunset, and a magical potential in all those dawns when we were caught between starlight and sunrise. Later I joked that it was because I let her out alone, but really I had nothing to do with it. It was the colours and rhythms of the place, the white on red, the red on white, the starlight and silence, and yes, a lovesickness for your father that she finally let slip.

I had woken up late after a busy nightshift the afternoon she finally told me. When I noticed Rayah wasn’t there, I looked out onto the range, scanning the normal places we sat, and when I finally saw her, in a small saddle at the top, I noticed she was naked. I made nothing of it really and continued to prepare a meal. She came down as the sun set, dressed again.
We sat down together to the food, some small talk until finally said, ‘Something happened out there today.’

‘Really? What?’ A niggling premonition made me respond nonchalantly.

‘Well, I felt something. I took off my clothes and lay there and — —’

‘And what?’ I reached for the salt.

‘And I felt it here.’ She stood and held her stomach. ‘And,’ she paused before letting her news out with a rush, ‘and, I decided to have a baby.’

I looked at her and she watched me, waiting for my reaction. A slow burn of anxiety started in my belly. I was supposed to get her back to uni.

‘That’s lovely, Rayah. Of course you should have a baby. Thirty-two is a good age, don’t you think. Mum was twenty-five.’

‘No, Kayla. You don’t understand. I want to have a baby now.’

‘Why? Are you pregnant? We can get an abortion. I have money saved.’

‘Kayla, I’m a virgin. That is not what I am saying.’

‘Rayah, how can you be a virgin? You were engaged, in love.’

‘I just wasn’t ready, but now I am.’

‘So you’re ready for sex. Good. Enjoy. Just don’t have a baby yet.’

‘I felt it on the mountain, Kayla. They’re so immortal, so worn and rusted by age and we’re so fleeting.’

‘Rayah, you can produce after uni. You don’t need a sermon on the mount for that.’

‘No, Kayla, I can’t. I am more like Mum than you. She always said that sex is for babies.’
‘Yes, and look at her. Really, we can get you the pill. You can sleep with whoever you want.’

‘No. I want a baby and I want his baby.’

I felt slammed against the wall.

‘His? Whose?’ Suddenly I realised. ‘Eddie’s baby, Rayah. Is this about your ex?’

‘No, not just that. But if I am having someone’s baby, I want his and only his.’

‘But you left him. It’s over. You haven’t mentioned him once.’

‘It was messy.’

‘If it was messy then, it will be even messier now.’

‘Kayla, listen,’ she sat me down and held my hands, ‘I’m going to call him. I’m going to tell him I want his baby. That’s all.’

‘Rayah.’

‘I’ve missed him. I have missed him every moment. The harder I run, the more people I meet.’

‘But you said nothing.’

‘I want a baby. I want his baby. That is all I know.’

‘But you could have any of them.’

‘I want none of them.’

‘But a baby. You’re only nineteen.’

‘My age is not going to stop me.’

‘I am not saying that. But you’re not even twenty. You don’t have your degree, a job, a place to live.’ I trailed off.
I could have argued with her more, though sometimes I wonder if I argued at all. I go over and over this conversation in my ‘do no more damage’ states. But whatever I did or didn’t say, I am sure I didn’t encourage her, unless perhaps subliminally. Still, I knew my sister. She had decided and there was no arguing. And so on our way to work, she called your father from a pay phone to tell him she wanted his baby. A week later, he had dropped out of his law degree and arrived. So believe me when I tell you this. You were wanted. They both wanted you as much as they wanted each other.

And the first night that he was there, I sat on the steps outside our flat and watched the moon rise on the McDonnell ranges. For me you were always the child of starlight, white on rusted red dirt, the seed of immortal landscape and wild movement. That image of glistening white on red was not meant to be one of harm.
Of the next part of our trip I remember wind again, the sound and the touch
of it constantly caressing my cheek and ear. We were in motion. The comet
had passed by anticlimactically and the unnatural summer high season for
Alice had ended. We started to head to Darwin but first we travelled. We
travelled like the wind over the desert, pausing and twirling around
ourselves like whirlies, backtracking when we felt like it, stopping for
days at a time, when we could, at gorges and swimming holes. The wind was
everywhere, the feel of it constant as it pulled at my matted hair and coated
me in grit and sand and the smell and seeds of spinifex grass. But it was the
sound of it that haunted me; the whisper and the weeping of it at night in the
gorges, the cry of it as it whipped over open plains, the sigh of it as it eddied
under trees. It was always there and always reaching out to say something,
but I could never really catch it, never pin it to any meaning. And it got to the
point that, as we travelled – Rayah and Eddie and I, windows down in my
rattling little car on the long horizon less roads – that the rush of wind
overwhelmed all other sounds and I heard nothing else, not even when Eddie
yelled over to Rayah, not even my own internal dialogue (unless the wind
was the voice in my head by then).

Meanwhile, Rayah and Eddie just got wilder and wilder. Maybe I
made that happen by being there as a caretaker, maybe it happened between
them, maybe both. I just know that, as I drove – Rayah sitting out the window
half the time, and Eddie practising his guitar in the back – that they both
seemed happy, yet also desperate to stay at the centre of the other’s attention, and that their antics got crazier and crazier all the time. At Uluru, at the top the winds were high, strong enough to fall into and be supported, but not so strong that a human would float like a feather in its embrace. Still, Rayah and Eddie stood at the highest, steepest point, falling deeper and deeper into the wind, daring each other to go a little further before pulling back to balance on the very edge. I turned away from their play, from my memory of the tower and my terrible premonitions, and facing into the wind I asked it to whip away my fears.

And at one of the gorges, the water ice cold and of indeterminate depth, the two of them climbed up a wall of red rock and then let go and fell. Each time they climbed higher and fell deeper and each time I listened for the splash and waited for the explosion and laughs of emergence. I had to do it too, of course, but it wasn’t for the thrill of it. When I did mechanically follow their lead and fall back, plummeting into the icy water, it felt like a powerful magnetic core was drawing me down and that its deep, strong voice was asking me to stay, to relax and to question the point of breathing. For an instant a part of me listened. Floating in the dark depths, releasing all my breath to its power I hesitated and felt the density of the cool, dark waters, before the other part of me demanded that I shoot up to the surface. With a gasp I emerged and swam rapidly to the shore to feel the wind caress my face with a welcome-home smile.

Another time we’d camped for the night in the desert, just near the Olgas. It was already night when we stopped, and with a few sticks I had packed in the boot of the car I made us a small fire, creating a circle of comfort and closeness before lying down on the tarp to look up at the sky. Eddie played his guitar, running through the same few unfinished songs. He was telling Rayah again how big he was going to make it, how music was
definitely a better place for him than law, and this time, instead of telling him
to learn some new chords first, Rayah just leant against him in silence and
nodded. There was a stillness between them, and the night noises of the
desert, along with the occasional spits from the fire, swallowed Eddie’s
music, making it rustle like the wind in dry grass. And I think with the way
that his music dissipated and our own breaths seemed part of the passing
breeze that we almost felt at home, part of the moment of that location. Then
an orange ball of light screamed through the sky directly above us. It was so
close, so blinding and so obviously about to make impact, that we ducked
and then, once it had passed, jumped up and ran to the edge of our circle of
light, yelling, ‘Did you see that? Did you see that? Oh my god, did you see
that? Amazing!’

The moment seemed seared onto our bodies, the light still streaking
across our eyes, the shudder and sound of impact still vibrating and echoing
in our bones. It only took moments before Rayah was running,

‘Let’s find it,’ she called. Eddie was after her instantly.

‘No, Rayah. Come back. It’s too far, too dark.’

‘We’ll be back,’ she called. ‘Find us if we get lost.’

‘Or write about us,’ Eddie laughed. And they were gone, yelling to
each other and stumbling as they ran, but very soon swallowed by the sounds
of the desert, the rustle and slither of it, leaving me alone, blinded from the
meteorite and the darkness, and breathless from the sudden abandonment.

Immediately the desert felt different, as if something had woken it up
or as if it had been waiting for an age or two for a moment alone with me, but
then it said nothing, sank only into a deeper, more fundamental silence. The
animals, on the other hand, had become almost frantic. A dingo pack howled,
sounding closer than I wanted. Small marsupials scampered away, escaping
from the ruffled night flight of disturbed birds. Sitting all alone in the desert, I felt like the prey they were seeking. My meagre fire flickered blue and then died down into only faintly glowing coals and I was suddenly cold, an untouched memory or a deja vu chilling me. Where I had almost felt at home before, I now felt alien.

I sat waiting. I wondered if I should wait in the car, but I could only imagine the teasing I would endure if Rayah and Eddie found me asleep there, so I grabbed the last few pieces of wood I had collected and stayed by the fire. I debated whether to build it up for them to see or to save the wood for later. I added one piece, thinking that if I heard any call, I could always turn on the car lights. I stayed hyperaware, hyper vigilant, every sense alive and straining for a sound of them returning. Hours passed. I played worst-case scenario in my head, thinking through all the various possibilities and planning how I could solve them. I felt confident that even if they were lost, I could find a way to find them or at least get help. But then the breeze that had held back for so long picked up, skimming around my struggling fire, through my hair, and carrying with it the sounds of the dingos snuffling nearby.

A different sort of monologue began running through my head. Slowly to begin with, but then with more confidence and clarity, the voice that accompanied the wind began to make sense. It said, ‘Don’t trust them. They don’t want you. You are only useful at the moment.’

I tried to shake it away like a thought, but you can’t do that with a breeze.

It said it again.

‘Hush.’ I spoke back softly. It went quiet for a moment but then again, this time as a caress whispered on my face, ‘Don’t trust them. They don’t want you. She will desert you again.’
‘Stop it, please.’ I tried hopelessly to brush the wind from my face. ‘You think I don’t know that? They’re probably just over the rise making babies and glad to be rid of me for a bit.’

‘Don’t trust——’

‘Would you stop it already? I get the point.’ I sighed in exasperation and curled up, foetal on the tarp. The breeze swirled around my feet and torso, leaving my face alone but trailing its fingers of meaning up and down my back. I shivered with an almost perverse pleasure under its touch. Its meaning spun off to a whole string of thoughts: They are just using me, will dump me soon. I am always just a functionary. Still, I refused to talk to the breeze anymore about it. It felt like hours more passed, but then as the breeze spoke with a pre-dawn coolness in its voice and the birds started to slowly sing themselves awake, I heard it, the desert – the silent unmoving mass of earth that nonetheless breathed beneath me, demanding my attention. It said nothing, but in saying nothing seemed to say, ‘Listen harder, go deeper, stay focused.’

I sat up, squirming. This was not fear, not disjunction. It was on the one hand an overwhelming sense of communication while on the other a deep physical discomfort. Whatever it was, I couldn’t ignore it. I stood, trying to walk away from both the breeze and the desert, but the breeze played around me with the same repetitive speech and the desert felt like quicksand with its grand silence and impossible demands. Finally I couldn’t bear it anymore. Just as the first light started spilling over the horizon, I got in the car and started honking the horn. Beep-beep-beep. I honked like my family always did, over and over and over. I stopped and jumped on the bonnet shouting, ‘Cooee, cooee.’ I listened, but only for human voices, nothing else but human voices. I started shouting or beeping the horn again, leaning on it heavily and calling until my voice was hoarse. Finally I heard them, distant,
very faint, but a human ‘cooee’ for sure. I kept on shouting and beeping the horn, bringing them back in, and then as the light picked up and I could see them and they could see me, I stopped and packed up our camp as quickly as I could and when they were finally back I pushed them into the car and drove – and kept on driving, stopping only once for petrol at Alice, once at Barrow Creek, and then just after dusk at Tennant Creek, where I thought I would be far enough away.
Doha

In yoga there is a practice called pratyahara. I practise it more often now that my physical practice is disintegrating. I sit and, lifting my elbows to the side, I put my thumbs in my ears, my index fingers along the line of my eyelids, and the other fingers – three, four, five – against the midpoint of my nose, beside the opening of each nostril and on the outside corner of my mouth. And then I sit and breathe. That’s all. Sit and breathe, hearing the amplification of breath within my skull and watching the pressure on my eyelids form patterns and lights and visual depths. Sit and breathe, gasping now and again, and feeling my shoulders and arms protest. Sit and keep breathing until my body starts to throw off questioning protest and my mind goes through its normal questioning of my motives: This is crazy. Why are you bothering? The kids need their socks ironed. Sit and breathe and struggle with the sitting and breathing until it is done, the ten or twenty minutes I have assigned to it, and then collapse on the floor.

It is a symbolic practice, of course, a withdrawal of the senses from the outside world, and we call it the hinge, the crossroad, the bridge. Like Tennant Creek, it marks a point on a map or journey, a place where exterior and interior start to merge. That is where the real work on the self begins. The hope is that all the external practices of yoga – the core strengthening, the even, non-reactive breathing – have helped to soothe the demons before we enter the labyrinth. The challenge is to keep on moving forward.
The Top End, Northern Territory, Australia, 1986

Tennant Creek is a simple enough collection of plosive consonants and closed vowels but even now, saying the name is difficult. It sticks in my throat and gags me like a poisoned slither of sound that no amount of retching can remove from my system and memory. The smell of shame is in those words and I should have felt it the first time, the tenacity of Tennant Creek, but I thought we were only passing through and I was desperate to forget the pull of the desert, so I didn’t. Should’ve but didn’t. What more can I say?

But before Tennant Creek, you will remember I was driving. Your parents were asleep in the back and to begin it was a mix of fear and rage that kept me going, but then it was the quietness of them sleeping and the unfolding of the desert in the heat and the hypnotic pull of the black thread of road. Fourteen hours straight of wind-rushing sound and hazed horizons and lonely, hopeless thoughts, but I wanted away, far away, so I drove. I was tired and ready to sleep by the time we got to Tennant Creek and set up camp on a side road just outside town, but Eddie and Rayah were just waking up and Eddie wanted to practise: the same three chords, the same five songs! I couldn’t sit comfortably on the surface of the land, so I suggested the pub for a drink.

‘I’m practising,’ Eddie said.

‘Rayah, then? Just you and me?’

She looked at him and shrugged.
‘You’re not going to meet anyone, you know,’ said Eddie.

‘You saying that people don’t want to meet me?’

‘No. I’m saying you’re a freak show that jumps at every sound.’

To my surprise, Rayah came to my defence. ‘Eddie, stop it. Don’t listen to him, Kayla.’

We walked the wide road into town past the shambles of an Aboriginal camp and the pack of dogs that roamed it. Some women watched as we went by, silent and unforgiving. Closer into town, I tried taking off my glasses and putting them in my pocket, but almost immediately I tripped and the dim world of the twilight sky got dimmer, so I put them on again. I tried not to hear anything. I was spooked already and the watching eyes that followed from the Aboriginal camp had only made it worse.

Outside the pub was a row of panel vans; inside a bunch of miners on their pay-day celebration. As we walked in the door, they all went silent. We sat at the bar, the only women in the place. We were surrounded instantly by offers of drinks. And so we drank and chatted and heard about a goldmine fifty miles west called Warrego where most of them were living, and then we danced to jukebox music. They were a youngish lot, long hair and blackheads, nondescript, wearing dirty clothes, and I was trying to drink all my disturbing thoughts away, the hard-to-be-me, third-wheeler, caretaker, ugly-sister stuff, so maybe I forgot myself a little as I grabbed one with a blondish mop of hair and danced provocatively against his hips. But I didn’t forget myself as much as Rayah. She flirted and drank and danced with them all and as it got hotter, and the men pressed in closer, she joked and teased, and when she began to dance again, braless under her dampening T-shirt, and lifted her arms to twirl, there was hardly a breath in the room. I was sober enough to understand that tension and pulled away from my partner to

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take her back to camp. She was drunk enough to sing out, ‘Bye, we got to walk back to our camp’ as I dragged her out of the pub.

The walk home in the moonless dark, past the despairing yells of the camp and the wild howling of the dogs, sobered us up enough to realise that we’d maybe made a mistake letting the drunken miners know that we were camped and as I stoked the fire and put on the billy, I mentioned to Eddie that there might be trouble. No sooner had I said it than two panel vans pulled up beside our camp and the guy I’d been dancing with and four of the others got out.

They walked towards us casually. We didn’t stand, just nodded. They hadn’t expected Eddie, nor Rayah sitting so close to him, and they stood in front of our fire, arms crossed, kicking dirt, not knowing how to start filling their expectations. Then, nudged by the others, my guy said, ‘Thought we’d come out and party more. Want to party or not?’

‘Not now,’ I answered carefully. ‘I’ve had it for the night.’

‘Then you,’ another of them, smaller with a wiry neck, stepped forward and turned to Rayah. ‘You seemed to want to party at the pub. You seemed all pent up and ready at the pub.’

‘I was dancing,’ Rayah said. ‘That’s all.’

‘Prick-teasing, more like,’ he mumbled.

‘Dancing,’ she said again looking at him squarely.

They stood in front of where we sat. Their faces, a mix of shadows and refracted light, anger and anticipation; their mass, a unified form. We watched them as they stood, watched them as the shivering energy passed back and forth between them. The fire spat. I squatted to turn a piece of wood, and turning it considered the length and flame and solidity of it. The blond one caught my eye and with my hand still on the burning wood an
understanding passed between us. No one was going to hurt Rayah, no one, unless it was me.

‘Come on, mates,’ he said, pushing his group back into their single selves. ‘Ain’t nothing happening here.’

‘He’s right,’ Eddie said, standing and moving towards them. ‘Appreciate the call and all but we’re calling it a night here.’

And that was it. They were gone, pushed away by my guy and by Eddie, with just that smaller wiry one throwing a ‘we’re not finished here’ backward glance.

The moment they had pulled away, we were packing and Eddie was attacking me. ‘Idiot. Fool. You wanted attention! Did you get enough? Did you meet the man of your dreams?’ But I wasn’t listening, just kicking out the fire and stamping on my burning stick, and ten minutes later we also pulled away.

Safe, with Tennant Creek behind us, we continued to travel towards Darwin and started to take our time again. Still tentative from my experience in the desert, I tried to move more lightly on the land, never sure whether it would swallow me whole or reject me outright. I placed each foot more gingerly, thinking perhaps that I could avoid the unknown song lines. I sang to myself, or hummed, as a way to fill the space around me, until Eddie teased me about my voice and then I stayed quiet and focused instead on fantasies and dreams. I let the voices in my head wander, lost in my own world as behind me or beside me or around me Eddie and Rayah teased and taunted and pushed each other into their uneasy futures. I never fully understood their love. From where I rode it seemed like a never-ending game.
And so we travelled, criss-crossing around the Top End, seeing Katherine Gorge of the towering cliffs, Mataranka Springs of the endless frog song, Mary River of the floating bird life. The days were of wide skies and baked sounds. The drives, dusty, dirty and hot. At night I cooked on the fire but let Eddie and Rayah take over the tarp while I slept in the car. For the most part, the breeze had stayed an incomprehensible murmur and the land a silent spread of grey green, punctuated by towering anthills. But still I preferred to give them their space. In the wide spread of land, with not much of an agenda, they were very much in love, but seemed okay to have me there. I’d saved in Alice Springs after all and they needed food and petrol. For myself, I had nothing and no one else, so I drove and cooked and organized and tried to believe that they would pay me back in one way or another.

But still there was some stuff going on that I could never really understand. Like the time with the bird’s wing just before we got to Darwin. A strange incident, really. Disarming. We were in Kakadu setting up our camp and Rayah and Eddie had gone in different directions to find firewood while I was pulling out our gear. When Rayah returned, instead of holding wood, she held, reverentially, a wing. I repressed the shiver of revulsion that went through me and examined it with her carefully. It was huge, an eagle’s wing perhaps. Each feather and spread of ligaments was perfect, and except for the savage way it had been ripped from the body, it was totally intact. She spread it on the tarp, the black feathers inky against the plastic blue, and I asked, almost as I would of a child with a treasure, ‘What could have happened, do you think?’

‘Hard to say,’ she answered. ‘Ripped off, but how so perfectly?’

‘You think it’s a wedge tail eagle? Couldn’t be anything else.’

‘Wedge tail eagle, hey? Did Dad teach you that at Sugarloaf?’

‘He taught me nothing except how to make his tea.’
I squatted to caress its feathers with her but the question hung unanswered between us. How had the wing come away so cleanly? How had the predator become the victim?

Then Eddie came back with the firewood and saw it.

‘Jesus,’ he threw down the wood. ‘What the fuck! Get that thing off our tarp. We’re sleeping there, you know.’

‘Look at it, Eddie,’ she replied, unruffled by his reaction to it. ‘The colour is so sleek.’

‘No fuckin’ way. It smells. It’ll bring in ants. Or even worse, a croc.’

He picked it up and threw it. She jumped up and pushed him hard, sending him stumbling backwards. Then she walked away to where the wing had fallen in the grey tumble of scrub near the creek and sat beside it, crying softly as she stroked its silky texture. Eddie approached her once but she stood and pushed him away again, violently protecting it. He returned, pulled out his guitar, and sat by the fire half-heartedly practising while he watched her in the dimming light. Underneath the sunset soundscape of birds and cicadas and darting grass dwellers, I heard her whispered prayer for it.

The night wore on and I took her a cup of tea.

‘Here,’ I said, ‘just like Papa taught me.’

She took it and blew away its steam. ‘I hate him,’ she said. ‘Hate him.’

‘You want his baby.’

‘A baby, his baby as in DNA, not his baby as in person.’

‘Okay,’ I responded carefully. ‘You’ll sort that out, I’m sure. But Rayah, come away now. We can bring it to the fire and sear its edges, or maybe we can salt it.’
She caressed it as I spoke. ‘It was once so free,’ she said.

But then Eddie came over and tried again to reason with her.

‘Come back, Rayah. Really. You are being ridiculous sitting here.’

‘What’s ridiculous about seeing beauty, Eddie? What’s ridiculous in that?’

I walked away from their argument and set myself up in the car to read by torchlight. I slept. It was hours later when he came to me.

‘It’s dangerous out there.’ He shook me awake. ‘Get her to come back in.’

‘I can’t get her to do anything,’ I replied.

‘Kayla, please. You’re the only one she listens to. The only person in the world who can get her to do anything.’

‘Eddie, really. You have no idea.’ I rolled over and slept fitfully again, wondering what this wing from a bird of prey could mean to her, to them, to us, but again I had no answer. When I woke the next morning to the clamour of bush life, I rose to look out the window and saw them standing together by the water’s edge. They held the wing together. She pressed its feathers to her cheek, holding it there for a moment, and then together they threw it as far as they could into the creek. It floated only momentarily before something snatched it down.

There was more, much more to the time I spent travelling with my sister. But so much of it now is just freeze frames, disconnected moments seared into a story without a narrative. It unfolds in the future and within us, it haunts us in the starlit nights we share in different worlds. It unfolds in this very moment in you, as well as in Arianna and Cadance. But too much telling would be hoarding, a family habit I am trying to break, so I leave you with
this image: your mother in dirty white overalls and matted hair, climbing onto the top of the tallest termite hill and calling to the sky, ‘I’m pregnant, pregnant. I’m going to have a baby.’ Your aunt and father are on either side; we restrain ourselves from begging her to come down but are ready to catch her when she falls.
Doha

Memory, they say in yoga, is just a modification of the mind stuff, something we must work to detoxify and cleanse, just like the cells of our body. When purified, we are told, it is a useful tool and serves our intelligence as a leg serves the body. But when it’s mired by distortions and misinterpretations, when stolen associations of other memories cloud our senses and accentuate our propensity to hallucinate, then we are victims of our memory’s belligerence and the stories we tell will be full of holes.

I wonder about this as I sit here remembering with my anything-but-pure conscience. Of course I seek to tell you the truth, to take you on the journey with us so that in some small way you can understand and forgive, and there are techniques I know to help with this endeavour. I could sit in meditation and watch the rise and fall of my fleeting thoughts. I could leave aside my judgements and just observe and write what comes to pass. But that would be about me letting go, forgiving myself, and it is yours and your mother’s forgiveness I seek. So I am offering it to you as I remember it, mired, toxic even with all my judgements and shame.

But then again – given that I do not seek to argue with the sages – but what if, just sometimes, memory serves us better when it isn’t clear at all?
Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia, 1986

In Darwin I get a job, the best job I can hope for. I am excited, beside myself. In this job I am going to transform myself, I am going to be someone else. In this job, as camp cook on a safari outfit, I am actually the attractive hostess and will entertain at meals. All the bush skills that I ever learnt cooking for a family of ten every time we went to Sugarloaf, along with my papa’s bush tea recipe, have helped me after all. I have a cute khaki uniform, very short shorts, and I am even given a gun. It’s a Winchester lever action and is really only for just for show as I don’t even know how to load it, but with a gun I can’t use in hand it is easy to act the dumb brunette.

This is what I do in my job: in town I help to greet and orient the guests. We pick them up from the airport in our bush outfits, then check them into a hotel and wine and dine them and show them some sights. Then I pack for our three-to-five-day trip into the bush and, once out there, I set up the camp and cook and clean. Our guests are Americans, rich ones, and they are here to hunt for water buffalo. These are introduced animals that are destroying the environment and we are part of the eradication program, so I feel OK about it even though I am trying to be a vegetarian. In the bush we have guides, Crocodile Dundee types or displaced white Africans, and it is usually just the three of us: a guide, a tourist and me. I trail behind as we track a worthy trophy. When there’s a kill, I stand back while the horns are chopped from the head. Then I help skin the animal. I am often the one carrying the blood-soaked horns back through the bush and swamps, hoping
that the smell of them doesn’t attract a croc. There are other cooks, of course, but for a while the boss man seems to like me and I get a lot of work.

This is Darwin for me. I pass in and out of town, visiting Eddie and Rayah, who are on the dole looking for a job they can take together. We are in a shared house again, but it is better than in Alice. I am paying the rent, of course, but it’s okay as I have an exciting job and am not just the third wheel or a caretaker.

But then there is that trip that changes things, that makes me question the dimension of echoes and the age of the pre-monsoon winds – the trip that draws me deeper into the mysteries of sound-soaked spells and magic and hallucinations. The trip that sets me up for the spell I set on you.

It starts in the normal way. We are in a helicopter, flying. It is dry season and we soar over the ochre grasses of Kakadu, sending kangaroos and emus scattering until we hit the escarpment face, which we dart up before flying low over the plateau and the dramatic fall-away cuts. This is historic territory, Arnhem Land. Each rugged escarpment drops into valleys and gorges filled with rivers, lily-covered billabongs and bird-teeming swamps, and we are darting back and forth, circling flood plains on the floor of them, peering into tall monsoon forest, skimming rainforests and plummeting into chasms before pulling back up in front of another towering scarp. Jack, my flamboyant tourist, Frank, my sullen guide, and the pilot are all leaning halfway out the open doors looking for signs of buffalo. I have earphones on to protect my ears, but it is still impossibly loud and I can’t hear a word they say.

The land below us teems but we keep going deeper and deeper into this uncharted terrain of sandstone cliffs and secreted basins. Eventually we see a valley that has signs of abundant buffalo, find a clearing and land. The chopper’s blades do not stop and we run low beneath them and unpack in
the deafening noise. Before he leaves, the pilot looks around him and then to
the skies and jokes, ‘Well, I’m pretty sure I might find you.’ We hold our hats
and watch him rise into the skies, hoping that he does, and then, still holding
our hats, turn around and around, dizzy from the height of the towering cliffs
that close us in on every side. The chorus of bush life that was silenced by the
chopper comes back full force. It seems as loud as the chopper was and I
wonder if my ears are just adjusting or if the sound of life untouched could
really be so fierce. Every noise, including our own, ricochets off the cliffs,
echoing threefold, creating a canyon of intense and varied noise as deep as
the one in which we stand, and it is almost as if we are encased within the
heart of an ancient, timeless clamour. As we start to set up, I notice an
aboriginal painting – a lizard, at least three metres long, painted at one of the
highest points of the cliff. It seems to be looking down and watching us.

‘Look.’ I point it out. ‘Cool.’ The light is fading so I cook under the
umbrella of calling birds while Frank and Jack do a quick reconnaissance
walk. When they return, we eat. The night sets in rapidly and the night-time
noises are as dense as the day’s. In the morning, I can’t sleep past the pre-
dawn awakening as the bird life is so crazy loud. Ominously loud almost,
bearing-down-on-us loud. I feel like saying ‘shut up, already’ and slamming
closed a window. Then I remember how lucky I am to be there.

After breakfast we begin our hunt. There are tracks everywhere, but
they take us nowhere and we find nothing. At a small creek, I bend to rinse
my face and my pocket camera falls in the water and is ruined. At lunch Jack
realises that the battery in his is suddenly flat. We continue through the
afternoon, sometimes following animal tracks through the dense scrub and
undergrowth, sometimes waiting on the edge of swampy flood plains. But
there is nothing, not even a kangaroo. Towards the end of the day we start
heading back, and as we near our camp at the base of the escarpment walls I
notice another painting. This one is of a kangaroo beside two abstracted human figures. It is on an overhang and somewhat hidden, but the figures are large and the colours are bright. We go up to take a closer look and notice another and then another painting. Clambering along the base of the cliffs, we find more and more, and then, standing back, we realise there is rock art in every nook and cranny nearly all the way up the face of the scarp. There are more kangaroos, a six-foot long crocodile, painted white with an ochre outline, barramundis with geometric patterns on their backs, and what looks like some type of silhouetted spirit figure. Under another overhang, I find what might be a battle scene, as there are many sticklike figures clustered together and beside them two guns – old-fashioned lever-action ones like mine. Then I come across a picture that confuses me. I look at it, trying to work it out, but it’s abstract and vague in outline and doesn’t really resemble any animal I know of.

‘Frank,’ I say. ‘Come here. What is it, do you think?’ He comes over to look, then stands back and looks again. ‘Hum,’ he says.

‘Hum what? Looks like a big cat or something, right?’

He takes another look, seems to shake away a thought, then gestures to me to follow him to where Jack, now bored, is waiting round an outcropping in the rock.

I follow him but I’m still confused. Big cat, here? I think. Then I wonder if it is some other kind of species, something that is now extinct, and if so, then how old are some of the paintings that surround us? And with that it occurs to me, with paintings so old and so numerous all over this valley, should we even be here? Or are we trespassers, unwanted, unforgiven? Fear passes through me and it is at that precise moment that I feel the back of my neck tighten and I become aware of how quiet the valley suddenly is. A strange sort of stillness has entered it, a holy hush. I turn around to check if
anything is watching, then turn to Frank and Jack, who are both also standing
still, listening, even though there is nothing. Slowly we back against each
other and I hear Frank shift his rifle and unlatch the safety, and we stand
watching, absorbing the silence. The moment stretches, stretches into a
suspension of time that I hardly dare breathe in, but then a cloud passes over
the sun, an indistinct shadow moves on the opposite escarpment and a
kookaburra laughs, breaking the silence with its hilarity.

We return to camp within the subdued but present soundscape and as
I ready the food, Frank tests the radio. The crackling modernity of it comforts
me but still, alone in my tent that night, I lie awake, terrified of the call of the
barking owl.

The next morning is devoid of birdcalls and I sleep until Frank comes
shaking on my pole. I have to scurry to make the coffee and some damper in
the coals. We rush to get out of the camp, and there is, in the disquiet of the
morning, an unspoken agreement that we should find the kill that day.

We start to hunt and find fresh tracks of a lone buffalo. It seems to be
following a well-worn path out of the valley and we trail it until we get to a
tidal creek. We can see the tracks of where the animal emerged on the other
side and the creek doesn’t look so deep or wide, but Frank backs us up and
points.

‘Look,’ he says. A smoothed-out groove of mud. ‘It’s a crocodile slide,
big one too by the looks of it. Sixteen foot, I’d say.’

We say nothing as we stand looking at the slide and the tracks of the
buffalo on the other side. Behind us the valley is empty of animals. Behind us
there is fear even in the bird life.
‘Right,’ Frank says. ‘This is how we do it.’ He prepares my gun, making sure it is loaded and cocked and reminds me how to shoot. Jack is already prepped.

‘I go first. Any movement, you shoot.’

We aim into the murky water and are ready to react as he walks through the thigh-high creek. When he reaches the other side we take a moment, letting our guns fall to our sides, and search the scrub along the creek. Nothing moves while we calculate if the risk is now higher or lower. He calls to me.

‘Now you, Kayla. OK?’

They stand, guns ready on either side of the water as I hold my own up high and enter. My head, my body, my eyes are pounding with the sound of my heart. I hear it in my skin and tissues. It fills every cavity of my brain. The water is deeper on me than on Frank, and the mud below my feet pulls, wanting to hold me fast, but I struggle through, the blinding drum of fear pressing me steadily forward; even when I am through, even when Jack is through, even when we are miles away from the creek, it pounds into me still – huge pulses of the sound of my blood silently racking my body.

The crocodile creek left behind, we track the buffalo for many hours but lose all trace of it eventually and find no other animals that day. They all seem to have moved as far away as possible. We are the only animals left in that valley of art and silence. We walk back a different way and pause at the cliffs again. The picture of that strange animal transfixes me. It’s a mix of kangaroo, cat and dog, and I stand staring at it trying to comprehend it. Stripes or patterns run down its long tail, but the way the colours fade in and out of the rock makes it impossible to guess how long ago it was painted. As the sun begins to set, that unearthly quietness grows, as does the uneasiness of being watched. We are being watched, I am sure of it now. It is like a touch,
a hunger, seeking out our backs. It has driven all the other animals from the valley and its stare is now on us alone.

During dinner that night, I ask Frank about the picture again.

‘There’s something you’re not saying,’ I say.

He looks into the darkness carefully and I notice his gun is close.

‘No really, Frank. What is it? Every other animal on those walls is real.’

He looks at me then over to Jack then out into the darkness again. I try to speak but he shushes me and listens to the valley. Only insects, a few frogs and a barking owl. I sit on the edge of my camp chair.

Finally he turns back to us.

‘Thylacine, perhaps,’ he says.


‘Tasmanian tiger. Extinct. But that would be my guess.’

‘What the hell,’ says Jack and pours himself a whisky. ‘Are we talking art or the shit that’s out there clearing off my buffalo?’

Frank shrugs. ‘Maybe both,’ he says.

Jack lets out a whistle. ‘How extinct are we talking exactly?’

‘Very,’ Frank replies. ‘A thousand years at least.’ He pauses, looks back into the darkness, then back at us again. ‘But there are reports of sightings. Savage and unexplained kills.’

The night gets quieter. The walls of the valley feel ancient and alive. It feels like we are being listened to as well as watched.

In my tent that night, in the absolute darkness, I listen with every pore of my body to the quietness that surrounds us. I try to just observe it, to place the
sounds that occasionally disturb it, but not to call forth anything. I hear a faint whisper of breeze. It rustles my tent, picks up a little to flap at Frank’s, then leaves, satisfied with our dusting. The soft ker-plunk just now is nothing but an ember falling in the fire. The barking owl is calling for its mate. It’s lonely in this silence. My skin moving against the sheet distracts me, so I stay as still as possible and try to control my body’s fear. My blood is pounding against my ears again, but when I breathe without depth or volume it seems to settle a little. I am working hard at not anticipating anything as I am thinking that I might evoke it. My conversations with the wind have taught me that, at least. If you do not listen, it will not speak. Still, in spite of my efforts, I am not surprised when I hear a movement on the outskirts of our camp. I know exactly what it is: a slapping tail, a tail with stripes or patterns fading in and out, a tail from an animal that is a thousand years dead.

Now that I have heard it, there is nothing I can do but listen as it moves around the campsite. It seems to be near the fire now. The slapping of the tail against the dirt is clear. I wonder if it’s real. It must be real. We just got it wrong and it’s not extinct. Maybe it’s an animal from a zoo. I wonder how far the nearest zoo is. I wonder if it might have escaped en route. That slap again, over by the radio. Then again we shouldn’t be here; we obviously shouldn’t be here; we have violated some sanctity and what better way to call up something from the dead? The soft slap and movement is beside my tent now, and I hear it move slowly around the perimeter. I know there must be footsteps but I don’t hear any padding, just the shifting of space and the tail. It moves towards the back of my tent and pauses. I hear the tent rustle and veer towards me and then a soft pant as the circling animal presses its nose to the nylon, smelling the fear behind it. It’s a wallaby, I tell myself, or a kangaroo. A thylacine! What nonsense! It pauses. I shouldn’t have thought its name. I didn’t call it, just accidentally disturbed it. I am asleep and this is just a nightmare. I am reaching for every explanation, every hope, desperate with
my awareness. But then it slaps its tail against my tent and moves off slowly
to where I can’t hear it anymore.

The dawn is silent again when I wake and roll over to peer out a
corner of my tent. Frank is up already, squatting over something in the
ground. He sees me, nods, stands and kicks at the dirt. But he can’t kick away
the print on the ground in front of my tent, the ghost of a print, or the print of
a ghost, one with five toes instead of the normal four.

Over breakfast, we decide. There are no animals in the valley now and
we are here to hunt, not seek out ghosts. We call the chopper in and move to
a flood plain much closer to Kakadu, where Jack gets himself a very fine
trophy, buffalo horns a metre long. Still, in spite of this success we are
haunted by that hunting beast, and it makes me more attuned to the
possibility of silent beasts.
The work started to dry up after that last trip into Arnhem Land. The heat and humidity built and the string of tourists dwindled. Back in town, Rayah, Eddie and I would try to find refuge from the pre-monsoonal sauna on the balcony of our shared apartment. We’d wait there in the afternoons, watching the rolling thunderheads of towering cumulus clouds sweep in to darken the skies. We’d watch, lethargic to the point of stupor, and almost beg the clouds to storm and give us some relief. And when it did storm, it was such a show, so much rolling thunder and pouring rain, so much darkness punctuated by wild flashes of light. I would usually retreat behind the glass once the rains really started, but Rayah would take that as her cue to jump over the balcony, hold onto the rail, swing in the wind, and drink from the skies. With the ongoing thunder and the deafening rain, I wouldn’t be able to hear Eddie’s pleas to her to come back in.

But heat or not, I had to get working. With almost a year of travelling and job-hopping, I wasn’t any closer to either my original plan of an overseas trip or any idea of what my future could be. Rayah and Eddie were waiting on word of a job too. They’d been talking to some people about something out near Victoria River as jack-and-jillaroos and they thought it would come together soon.

‘Jillaroo, Rayah?’ I’d asked when I heard. ‘But you’re pregnant.’

‘So,’ she shrugged. ‘It’s early yet and it will just be for a while.’

‘Eddie?’ I turned to him.
‘Hey, don’t look at me. Besides, she’s the one with the bush skills, not me. I’m just along to look pretty.’

They were excited and happy and anxious for it all to happen, but I guess they were worried about me too. I’d been clingy since I got back. I hadn’t mentioned the thylacine – what was there to tell? – but like my fear of the desert, it inhabited me and I tried to avoid silences and shadows. I think they may also have felt guilty about how much they’d enjoyed their time without me. They were closer now than before, and my presence was more intrusive. Eddie often lay with his head on Rayah’s non-existent bulge and she would stroke his long, unruly hair and smile at him as if I wasn’t there. They wanted rid of me, it was clear, but still, they loved me in their way and when I finally pulled myself together and got down to the employment centre, they came with me to support me.

We scoured the boards together. Waitress, bartender, bartender, waitress.

‘Do I have to?’ I groaned. They were all the same just in different locations. ‘There must be something else.’

We kept looking on the various boards for something with a spark, but there was nothing I had experience in, nothing I was interested in.

‘Okay,’ Eddie called from in front of another board. ‘How about this one?’

We joined him to look at it together.

*Writer’s Assistant.*

*Successful published writer needs assistant for new project. Accommodation provided.*

I stood in front of it, letting it sink in. Everything suddenly made perfect sense. It was precisely what I wanted.
I turned to them for approval. ‘This could be great, right?’ I almost whispered with excitement.

‘Absolutely,’ Rayah said, ‘all the reading you used to do and your arts degree. You’d be perfect for that job.’

I took the card down from the board, staring at it silently.

‘Have you ever thought of writing, Kayla? This could be like an apprenticeship.’

I realised that I’d thought of it almost every day for as long as I could remember without naming what it was. I looked at her and shrugged, downplaying the sense of destiny that I suddenly believed in.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘It could.’

‘It’s totally perfect,’ Eddie laughed, a mix of relief and joy on his face. ‘You can be the writer and we’ll be the beautiful couple you write about.’

‘Sure,’ I replied with a smile. ‘In my very first book, I promise.’

I took Rayah to the counter with me and squeezed her hand tightly as I casually asked the clerk for more information on the job. She pulled up a file on her computer.

‘Sure,’ she said, then read. ‘Writer’s Assistant. Located in Warrego, outside Tennant Creek.’

My breath froze. I wondered if I’d heard her right.

Carefully, with a measured voice, I said, ‘Warrego, hey? Near Tennant Creek. Is that the only location listed?’

‘Only location listed?’ The woman looked up at me quizzically.

‘Well, are there any other details?’

‘No, not really. Just the number. Says to call to set up an interview.’
She printed out the file and handed it to me. I took it and looked at what was written. No name, just a number and those words, ‘Located in Warrego near Tennant Creek.’

I couldn’t believe it. It felt like some weird trick. I stood staring at it, unable to understand how a dream just discovered could be so quickly poisoned.

‘What do I do?’ I asked of Rayah. She said nothing. Neither of us could look at each other. Yet we both knew I would risk almost anything now for the dream I had just declared.

My interview was in Tennant Creek. I’d woken before dawn to start the drive down the long straight road towards Alice. When I set off, the Top End was moist and lush from an evening storm and the sunrise a mass of colours, but as I travelled down that flat ribbon of a road, pulled towards the centre again, the land got drier and sparser, the trees more stunted, the colour more reminiscent of blood. I kept the window open to the rushing landscape and for the whole trip heard nothing but the onslaught of the wind. Two cars overtook me, three passed the other way. There were several trucks, but that was it. I was alone in every direction for almost all of the trip.

I stayed in a hotel on the other side of town from where we’d camped the first time that we’d stopped there and met my contact at the coffee shop the next day.

His name was Doug, an old guy in miner’s clothes. Tall with a grey beard, lean and bony fingers. Still, there was something about him that reminded me of my guru in the rainforest and I wondered if he had either the wisdom or humour of the man I had almost loved back there.

I ordered a tea. He ordered a Coke.
‘So you want to be a writer?’ he asked me outright.

I answered, ‘Yes,’ declaring it out loud.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Because that is what I’m looking for. Someone who wants to learn.’

A pause, a nervous sip of tea. In the light of day, it seemed normal here. Wide, gum-lined streets, flat houses set back from the road.

I asked about the job.

‘The normal stuff, really. I have a bunch of tapes I need transcribed, notes that I have to organise.’

‘Sounds doable.’ I nodded.

‘But see, apart from that I’m really looking for somewhat of a co-writer. There are sections, sections that need to be in a woman’s voice, sections that I’m struggling with.’

It seemed both an invitation and a threat.

‘I need someone who can hear the voices I am trying to catch and record.’ He said this bending forward, as if inviting me into a mystery.

I leaned back from his sugary breath. ‘I think that I can do that,’ I replied.

Another pause.

‘Is that your car?’ he asked. ‘You’ll need a car out here.’

‘Yes,’ I answered. It wasn’t much, but it was mine. ‘You provide accommodation?’

‘Yes.’

‘Work hours?’

‘Flexible and constant,’ he said with a grin.
‘And the work? Can you tell me about the work?’

‘Hum,’ he said. ‘It’s philosophical in nature.’

Interview over, terms discussed, I told him I would let him know, and the next morning I started on the long drive home again. He seemed normal enough, safe I thought. Maybe Tennant Creek would be fine, maybe all my dread of the desert and the men we’d met at the pub was just a passing thing. And besides, it’s not like I’d be just a secretary. I’d have a voice as well, and maybe even start on something of my own work when I wasn’t working for him. Still, for all my rationalisations there was something – a dread that ate away at me the whole drive back. I didn’t have to do it after all. I could just go on the dole until the season changed, maybe go home and get a job there until I had enough money to travel again. I couldn’t decide. I would have to talk to Rayah.

But when I finally got back after the long and dusty ride, she wasn’t there. Our flat-mate said their jobs had come together and they’d been told to come immediately before they were cut off by the rains.

‘They said they’d call and leave a message here,’ our flatmate said, ‘once they knew where they’d be.’
Warrego, Northern Territory, Australia, 1986

It is abandoned now, a ghost town, but on the night I arrived in Warrego, with the sunset burning purple, grey and dusty orange, it felt like a ghost town already. A sullen cluster of weatherboard houses spread over three or four dusty streets – random patches of grass and the peeling white of paperbark. If there was more to the town, a sports club or community, I never discovered it. As far as I got from the house was the clothesline in the backyard where I would watch those wild sunsets again and again and again.

It wasn’t supposed to be like that, of course. Going back to the desert hadn’t been part of my longed-for plan of travel and adventure, but perhaps I was a ghost myself by the time I’d driven to Warrego. Perhaps all those hauntings whispering in my marrow and the sudden abandonment of Rayah had left me more lost than I’d allowed myself to know. Perhaps. But then again, it could just have been the desert. Maybe it wasn’t done with me yet and had sent out a call to fetch me back. Maybe as I was preparing to set a spell, I was already unknowingly under one.

Whatever it was, I let it unfold. I knocked at the door of the house I had scribbled the address for, knocked and didn’t act surprised when Doug answered wearing a long black robe and a pentagram.

‘Welcome,’ he said as he ushered me in. ‘Welcome to my temple.’

I entered, loss and trepidation raging within me, entered and left behind my uncharted other futures. Yet once inside, the dream that had brought me there, the hope to be a writer, suddenly awoke again. It was the
books, the stacks and stacks of books, that did it. They were piled on the table in the centre of the room, heaped against its legs, falling in masses beneath it. The place was alive with them and they whispered a thousand secrets as they crawled in boxes down the lino corridor and over the kitchen counters. I dropped my bag and walked to them immediately. Picking up first an I Ching and then something by Aleister Crowley, I turned them in my hands, felt their weight and texture, then drew them to my chest as I gazed at all the others.

Behind me, Doug apologised. ‘Bit of a mess, I know.’ The books still in my hands, I turned to where he stood. He was a long and narrow man, taller then I remembered. His robe and grey beard were both on the edge of shabby and his hands pulsed veins as he moved away some other books and beckoned me to sit. I joined him on the tattered sofas in front of the softly mumbling television. Remembering where I was – in an unknown man’s house, in the middle of the desert – I sat on the edge of the chair.

‘Are you looking for a prophecy?’ he asked as he nodded towards the I Ching.

‘Oh,’ I laughed, relaxing, as I looked at the books now on my lap. ‘I guess that maybe I am, but, um, I don’t know how to use it.’

He handed me some coins and cleared a space on the coffee table and walked me through the process. I threw the coins six times, counted the heads and tails and built the hexagram for Youthful Folly. ‘The young fool seeks a teacher,’ I read, then laughed again as I looked at Doug across the coins. He smiled and waited as I continued reading quietly to myself.

The prophecy felt like a destiny being handed to me on a platter. It asked that I be modest, that I respectfully accept the offerings of the teacher, that the teacher wait until the timing was right before he begins instruction. Pausing, I looked back at the books. Had they been waiting like this cast of
the coins? Had the desert called me for this reason? For a moment the shock and loss that had inhabited me since Rayah had left so suddenly was just a distant memory.

I closed the book and turned to him. Wanting to let it all begin, we began to discuss the work.

It seemed easy enough, what he required of me. He worked the night shift, from eleven until seven, and slept for most of the day. Every night while at work, he’d record his ideas, which I would then transcribe. Once that was done, I was to organize and compile his notes, and help to inventory the books. In the early evenings, we’d work together and when the time was right there’d be other work. With that established he showed me around, then excused himself to get ready for work.

He returned a little later, transformed by his overalls and hard hat. He gently asked if I would be okay, to which I answered with a shrug, of course, then bowing regally, he left.

But alone again, in the half-light of the room and the silence of his retreating car, I wasn’t at all okay. The relief and confidence I’d felt in his presence fled the moment he walked out the door, and the grief came flooding back. I looked around the fibro house trying to remember why I was there, and what I had done to make Rayah leave so suddenly. I searched for the answers in the I Ching again, reading and rereading the passage that a youth must seek out a teacher, opening to random pages to seek other fragments of wisdom, until beneath my feet I felt a tremor in the floor. I put down the book to listen as a distant rumbling rose and fell away and a vibration shook the couch. The mine, I said to myself. Perhaps it extends below me. The thought was vaguely disturbing.

Closing the book, I walked around looking for a phone, thinking I’d call Darwin and leave a message for Rayah. When I didn’t find one I clung
instead to the hope I’d found in the books and the promise of the prophecy. A distant noise from the mine again. A quiver in the floor. It reminded me of that subterranean call I’d heard in another desert. I shook away the memory and, taking the I Chin and my bags with me, I went to the room Doug had pointed out.

It was quiet there in that simple room. No books – just a bed, a wardrobe and a broken air conditioner. The window faced the backyard and beyond that the darkened desert. I opened it for air and instead of the mine heard the soft familiar pant of the landscape, the languid call of a night bird, and the breeze as it rustled the grasses. Exhausted, I slept, but at some point deep in the night I woke to the sound of that bird again – a fluted musical tone, a short melodic phrase, and then a haunting whistle. It was a pied butcher bird and as I woke more fully to listen, I realised I was crying.

It was late when I came out the next day. Doug was already in the kitchen, wearing his robe and staring out the window as he waited by the kettle. I moved across the room to join him and as I did he was caught in a ray of light which accentuated the sharpness of his profile, the set of his narrow jaw. Still, when I coughed to alert him to my presence and he turned to me with a smile, he was the regal, if slightly more aged-looking, man of the night before in a robe that was pressed and clean.

He offered me tea and made me toast and we chatted and ate and made plans for the work of the day. It all seemed safe enough and I relaxed and enjoyed his banter. Even so, I watched him nervously as I asked about the promised accommodation.

‘You’d do much better here’ he answered gently to my query.

‘But the air conditioner is broken.’
‘Such things can be fixed,’ he suggested with a smile.

‘And the mine . . . .’

‘It only sounds a couple of times a day,’ he said. ‘Eventually you won’t hear it.’

And so it began. When he went to bed I wandered to the table, picked up the closest book, and wiped off the film of dust. *Creatures of the Coven* – I read it aloud to hear my voice handle the cadence. The book seemed brand new, as if it had never been opened. I picked up another and then another. The spines were cracked on none of them. I wondered how someone could live with so many books and yet never seem to read them. I shrugged away the question, cleared a space on the table, and started recording their details.

The soaring heat of the day set in. Hot gusts of wind blew sand under the door and every now and then I would look out the window to watch a goanna sunbathe or maybe a wedge tail eagle fly by. It was a long and silent day in which I had plenty of time to mourn for Rayah, but handling and wiping the covers of books – and hearing the flick of their pages as I read a paragraph here and there – put me into an almost trancelike state. And what with the heat, the aloneness, the grief and the almost hypnotic call of the books, the whispers I had heard the moment I entered the house seemed to emerge into almost audible voices competing for attention.

When Doug came out in the late afternoon I was still at the table reading. He made us tea again and asked about the books I’d read before starting to tell his story. Slowly the pieces began to fall into place. He’d owned an occult bookshop down in Melbourne, the first of its kind in Australia.
‘We’d sold books, of course,’ he said as he nodded to the piles of them. ‘But other things as well. Crystals, tarots, candles.’ He bristled with pride as he told me this. I could see how he could sell magic.

‘So,’ I asked. ‘What happened?’

He shrugged and turned away. ‘Betrayal, despair, a thwarted love. There was a woman we called Beth.’

It was then, just then, that the late afternoon stupor of the street was interrupted and a couple of brightly coloured panel vans pulled up in front of the house. I recognised them immediately and moved away from the window.

‘Doug,’ I said as lightly as I could. ‘Looks like someone’s here.’

‘Ah,’ he groaned. ‘The suitors.’

I drew myself back to the far wall of the kitchen and watched another of his transformations before he opened the door.

‘Boys,’ he said with a nod. His manner, his language, his stance were those of a miner again.

‘G’day,’ they responded jovially.

‘How’s it going?’

‘Blinking hot.’

‘Flaming take your tyres off.’

He looked past them into the glare. ‘Yeah, right. So what do you mob want?’

One of them acted as spokesman. ‘Heard you had a guest and wanted to say hello.’

Doug grunted. ‘She’s barely settled in yet.’
‘Come on, mate. She’ll need to know her neighbours. Maybe she wants a drink.’

Doug stood long and lean with folded arms and barred the door with a frown. The heat from the desert seeped in.

‘Come on, boss. Invite us in. You’re not keeping her prisoner, are you?’

He grunted again and then relented. ‘She’ll come out if she wants.’ He turned to where I stood. ‘Kayla?’

Panic flared up in me. I cursed myself for coming here and tried to think of some way out. I could hide, sneak out the back to the desert, lock myself in the bathroom. I could… No. There were no options. I breathed and prepared to pretend.

‘Hey,’ I said as I came to the door. I saw a flash of recognition immediately crossing their spokesperson’s face, the blondish guy from the pub, but it was gone as soon as it appeared. Like me, he pretended we’d never seen each other before and I wondered if that made him more or less of a threat. The others clearly had no clue. They’d obviously been very drunk, or more focused on Rayah than on me.

I stepped outside into the heat, leaned against the railing of the landing, and smiled at their introductions. Doug kept the door opened and turned on the TV. They welcomed me to Warrego.

‘Plenty to do round here,’ they laughed.

‘There’s the community centre and the mining store.’

‘Yeah, and the river’s not too far away. Good place for a dip when it’s not dried up.’

‘And, well blimey. is that it, mates? Can you think of anything else?’
‘Just the Abo camp up the road, but that’s not for her kind of entertainment.’ They laughed and jostled each other.

I looked off to the horizon, not wanting to be complicit.

‘Hey, Kayla,’ one of the younger ones said, ‘want to check out my sin-bin? Got her all decked out in velvet.’

There was no way I was going near those vans.

‘We can take you around. Show you the sights.’

‘Probably not now,’ I said, as I motioned over to where Doug was. ‘First day of work and all.’

‘Yeah, right. We work for him too and he’s a mean old fucker, that bastard.’

‘Worst of all the shift bosses for sure.’

‘You better watch out for him, Kayla.’

I shrugged. The sun was starting to set. ‘I’d better go in,’ I said.

‘Yeah, right.’ It was their spokesperson again, trying to draw them away like he had that night at the camp. ‘We’d better let her get on. But, hey, we’re three doors down if you want anything…’ And with a laugh, they were heading towards their vans again and I was leaning against the closed door and hearing their retreating dialogue.

‘Stuck-up bitch.’

‘Need to bring her down a peg or two.’

‘Get her in the screw-canoe.’

With my heart still beating wildly, I excused myself from Doug and headed to my room. I stayed there, curling into my pillow and breathing through my memory of the night they’d come to rape us, until the heat
became unbearable and I stood and went to the window. Opening it, I watched as the sun descended over the patchwork of desert and scrub and then, with the first of the evening’s subterranean explosions vibrating through my body, I remembered that it would be my birthday in a month. I’d be twenty-one, an adult. I wondered if it would mark a change.

On the second day I settled into my work in earnest. I committed to the task of the young fool with a teacher and listened to Doug as he went on with his story. It was the business of witchcraft first – the tarot readings and crystal healings for which he was renowned – and then it evolved to the coven of which he was the master. Beth was mentioned again, the high priestess of his coven. ‘The books,’ he said, ‘are hers. One day she’ll come to claim them.’

Transcribing tapes and typing up notes in the long and silent days, I tried to stay detached and focused on the writing, but I was both fascinated and repelled by the secrets of the occult that he had started to reveal and the whispers from the books that were trying to draw me to them.

Occasionally, even in that very first week, he’d make a gentle innuendo that perhaps I had some talent and that if only I would attune myself and open up to the forces – but remembering accounts I had read of the lost and lonely people who were preyed on by various cults I ignored or laughed him off. I was there to be a writer, I think I told him once. Not to be a witch. Still, it made me uneasy, that gentle pull, especially when thinking of all the voices that always seemed to choose me. Perhaps, I thought, it’s true. Perhaps I do have talent.

And there was other stuff that unnerved me. The long silences filled with competing echoes, so much time alone, and those panel vans either slowing down in front of the house or screeching past and doing doughnuts in the wide and empty street. And the heat! The heat was a part of it – the
glare and intensity of it – and the constant wail of the hot winds too, blowing in the dust all the time, so that I felt it in my pores, in my teeth, in my ears. All of that, yes, but more than anything, it was the nights.

It was so hot, so unbearably hot in my room without any air conditioning. I would wake bathed in sweat and needing to breathe, so in spite of my terror of the house just three close doors away I would go to the window and open it. If it was a quiet night, I’d lean out, hoping for a breeze. Often it was still, but if there was a breeze it would be filled with inaudible vengeful whispers that I couldn’t bear to hear. So I would close the window again, jamming it tight with a stick so that nobody could slide it open, and sit on the television couches wishing for late-night programming. Sometimes I’d sleep there and dream of powerful voices emerging from the books. One in particular would rise above the others, a husky breathy voice, an impervious voice of command. It would always seem to come with the underground tremors that shook the house. Waking, trying to understand it and quelling the dread I always felt whenever the earth would rumble, I would go back to my room again, and the restless breeze, or of the wild winds, would whisper or yell at my window trying to get in.

Looking back, I know I was spooked by being so alone and lost and by the weight of so much emptiness. Looking back, I see I was just a lonely, haunted girl, but I swear that those nights in the desert of Warrego were alive with the whispers and murmurs and memories of both the desert and the books and that I was a conduit for all of it.

Still, at the end of the first week, I had my pay and I was starting to feel a story playing on the edges of the one that Doug was telling. I drove into Tennant Creek to deposit my money at the post office then called home to check on the kids.
It was just the same. They were alive and kicking and clawing at each other. They hadn’t heard from Rayah. I tried the flat in Darwin next but there were new people there who didn’t even know her. I wandered around a bit after that, and coming across a community noticeboard I saw some postings for shared houses. I took down the numbers, put them in my purse, then drove almost eagerly into the vastness around Warrego.

The work continued. Impossibly, it got hotter, and my sleep became more scattered. I started hearing Rayah in my dreams, always laughing, always happy as she sang to her blooming belly. She had forgotten me entirely, which made me very sad when it didn’t make me angry. Beth too became a stronger presence in the work Doug was dictating. I realised she was the voice that came to me at night and as Doug recounted in his tapes some of the sexual rites that they’d conducted I began to understand snatches of the nightly invitation she offered.

Another week went by. In my own time, I was studying all the books she had bequeathed to me. Looking for news of Rayah, I started studying the tarot and I read the cards over and over, but they wouldn’t speak to me at all. Maybe they were the only thing that never did. In my loneliness I read all the books on palmistry too and examined my hands at length, wondering if they’d ever know love, ever touch and be touched with a tender caress. But my right hand was different from my left hand, so there was no answer there either. I did see I was destined to have three children, though, and at least that comforted me. But even with that, with all the reading and studying and typing up of notes and categorising books, the days were long and silent. And with so much pent-up energy, restlessness and frustration, the nights got impossibly worse.

As the heat increased, I forgot my fear of the guys down the road and kept the window open. Occasionally it was wonderfully still and the
comforting noise of insects would feel like an embrace. I would fall gratefully into the safety that sound offered and sleep in gentle dreams. But when, on those still and silent nights, the pied butcher bird sang, I would be lost in grief, uncontrollably so, and would cry on the floor, just mourning the fact that I was me. Mostly, though, it wasn’t still. Mostly there would be that breeze whispering in my ear – ‘I told you so, I warned you’. I would think of myself then, alone in this tremoring house of sound with nothing and no-one but voices to reach for, and I’d know that Rayah was the cause of it. And if the underground explosions started or I wandered into the other room to sit by the air conditioning, Beth’s voice would tempt me with offers of power and promises of revenge that I began to become attuned to.

I had to make something happen or I felt that I’d go crazy. I made another trip into Tennant Creek, put a little more money in the bank, called home to find there was still no word from Rayah. At the community notice board, I noticed more share-house postings and back in Warrego I asked Doug again about the promised accommodation. I said I couldn’t stand it there – the heat, the noise, the long and lonely nights – but he twisted what I said, and somehow it became a conversation about the way I was failing at work.

‘What do you mean?’ I stuttered. ‘I am doing everything you ask for.’

‘I didn’t bring you here as a live-in secretary,’ he said, ‘but as someone who could help with the book. We talked about that in the interview. You said that you could do it.’

‘But I can’t tell this story,’ I argued. ‘It’s not mine to tell. I don’t even know what happens. You haven’t even told me that.’

‘You have to channel your energy and feel what happens yourself. Write and it will come.’
It wasn’t what I’d thought I wanted, ghost-writing a story that wasn’t mine, but I was living an insane restlessness by then and felt that it might save me. Still without knowing the direction he wanted to take it, nor anything of the plot, I struggled.

Every evening, when Doug read what I had written, he told me I didn’t have it yet. ‘You’re not opening yourself to the forces. Not listening to the voices,’ he’d say.

He made me start over and over; suggested I clear my mind with a meditation or a chant so that the voices could come through me. The irony was that I was filled with voices by then. There were voices telling me that this was stupid, not to stay any longer, while others were reminding me that I had nowhere to go. ‘What will you do? You have to give it a little more time’, they chided. And still there were other voices, the calls of grief in every desert birds soaring through the skies, the dust that clung to my skin, the heat and glare that imprisoned me. They all seemed to have their own articulate sound that I couldn’t dust off or darken. And my mother’s voice was among them sometimes, asking, ‘Rayah, where is Rayah?’ And my father’s, and the aunts’, but most at all it was Beth’s and Rayah’s voices. And they both paralysed me with scorn.

I tried and kept on trying, but still he said I failed. He started pressing for initiation again, said that the story would come more easily if only I attuned to the voices. Having read the books and knowing the rites, I rejected him immediately.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’ll keep on trying.’

Beth’s voice joined him then, rising from the books around me and out of his very pores. ‘But we can teach you secrets. We can give you power. If only you open and let us in.’
‘I’m not going to let him touch me.’ I spoke directly to her.

And so I entered the final week and, with just six days till my birthday, I struggled to make a decision. Beth’s voice was inhabiting me by then but I couldn’t find a way to write her without giving myself over entirely to her so I stopped even trying, deciding it was time to leave. Her voice went strangely silent then and I dismissed her as a figment. It was all a dream, I told myself. The foolish desire to write. The belief my sister loved me. I had to leave to find myself. Still, having made that decision and claimed my body back from the forces that had filled me I was struck by an inertia so deep and so solid that I could barely move a limb. Instead I stood by the window. The panel vans pulled in and out in the midst of clouds of crimson dust, but I didn’t bother drawing back anymore. Occasionally, I’d catch the spokesperson’s eye and watch the movement of his back as he moved from his car to his house. He didn’t scare me anymore. Nothing and no one did.

And still the days went slowly by. Three days to my birthday. Two. My mother would have forgotten me, of this I was very sure, but she’d be frantic about Rayah now, calling every Territory hotline, tracing every broken lead. Listless in my room I remembered all those times we’d drawn Rayah down from one water tower or another and I wondered what had driven her. She was loved, she was beautiful, she was in the midst of family. She hadn’t had the right, I thought, but I – sitting in a heat-drenched room alone with only the tremors of the earth and the haunting call of bird – I had to make something happen. Is this what it should be? No, I said, not trusting the source of the thought that was slowly forming within me. I moved to pack up some clothes, then sat again and did nothing more.

Then, on the night before my birthday, something finally happened. It was Doug who finally did it. He had left me alone, not mentioning a thing about the work that wasn’t done or the stupor I was in, but the night before
my birthday he came out in his minor’s clothes and sat beside me on the couch and tried to take my hand. I drew it listlessly back.

‘Kayla,’ he said ‘I’m sorry. I know I pushed you too far. But really, you need to snap out of it now. It’s time to get back to work.’

I stared beyond him to the books and didn’t say a thing.

‘Really, Kayla, listen. I have thought of a way we can do it.’

‘Doug,’ I answered softly, ‘I’m not going to let you touch me.’

‘Okay, okay, but I have thought of a way that we can do it without any penetration.’

‘No,’ I said again. ‘I’m not going to get initiated.’

‘But we’ve spent a month preparing. The work is useless without it.’

‘No,’ I repeated simply.

‘But the book,’ he grabbed my arm and shook it. ‘The book,’ he said again.

I turned to look at him. ‘Can you please let go of my arm?’

He drew back, knowing he’d gone too far again. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. We’ll take it step by step then. Let’s begin again tomorrow.’

I stood and walked away from him, hugging myself as I looked at my reflection in the window. Superimposed on the moonless night, I seemed smaller and more alone than ever, but the tremor of the mine began again and this time as I stood absorbing it, it seemed to give me strength.

Eventually, I turned back to him. ‘I’m going to bed now, Doug.’

He nodded. ‘The new moon is tomorrow night,’ he said. ‘It is an auspicious time to start again.’
In my room, I locked the door. Moving quietly and quickly, I started to pack. There would be no starting again. I wouldn’t channel his book or Beth. I would just have to wait until he left and then I would leave and drive, just drive.

At close to eleven he knocked on my door.

‘I’m leaving now, Kayla. Will you be alright?’

I didn’t answer; just sat, listening to his movements. Some shuffling around the room, and then the door opening and closing. I waited a little longer, wanting to be sure, then crept from my room to peer out the window. The lights of his car broke the darkness near the highway and I stood watching them recede until other lights pierced our street. I stepped back from the window to let the panel vans race by. Then, moving by feel and the dimmest sense of sight, I checked the room for anything that could be mine, grabbed my handbag, pack and sleeping bag, left the key on the coffee table, and walked out of the house into the shocking orb of stars.

Three steps away from the house, I felt freer. A few more and I was totally alive again, all my inertia gone. I was going to drive, just drive, didn’t matter where. I put my stuff in the boot and walked round the car to the door. It was then that I noticed the tyres, both of them pancake flat. I bent beside them and saw the marks of a slashing but it only made me more determined. Okay, I thought, that’s not going to stop me. But still it did, for a while, as I stood looking at the wide, empty street and the moonless desert beyond. Not knowing what to do, I moved by instinct. I grabbed my bag and my pack again and, walking as quietly as I could, made my way to the back of the houses and to the clump of scrub down from Doug’s house. I pushed my bags under the foliage, covering them with extra sticks and grasses, and then walked off into the desert. I only needed to be away, just far enough
away, that he couldn’t find me if he came back in the night to check. Everything else would be okay. I would sort it out in the morning.

Thankfully it was quiet, a night of stars and space that opened up to embrace me as I started walking towards it. Behind me, a dim glow from the mines served as a marker, but in front of me, there were only stars and their shimmer on the sand and scrub. I moved into the scrub as if floating onto a tarnished sky with the sounds of the desert to support me. I went as deep as I dared and then found a place to sit. It was peaceful. I felt safe. I was far enough away and yet I knew where I was. Time bent and stretched like the galaxies above me. The insects’ songs ebbed and flowed. I was quiet and still in my watchful waiting.

But then I heard that fluted musical tone, a short melodic phrase, and a haunting whistle following it. The pied butcher bird was there to remind me of my grief and all that driven me here to this expansively lonely night. And next a very soft breeze began, softer than any teasing caress, but just enough to alert me to its constant, vengeful whisper. I sat alone in the desert and wondered if it was midnight yet. No, I decided, it wasn’t yet, but it would be soon. I wondered about Rayah and where she was that night. I wondered what she’d do to celebrate without her unnatural twin. At least, I thought, with a baby within and Eddie by her side, she wouldn’t be climbing towers. But maybe if she did... I pushed away the thought just as the pull of the desert, the sinking gravitational pull, began. It was the same pull, only stronger, that I had felt the other time, but like the rumble of the mine it didn’t scare me this time. I was twenty-one by then. I could feel it in the air. Twenty-one, which I knew to be a magical number, a special number, the number of destruction for the sake of a renewal.

I decided then to create my own ritual to mark my step into an unknown future. Standing, I looked around the star-soaked sand. Three
clumps of grass marked a triangle. I cleared the centre and then drew a circle around the outside, placing sticks at seven points. Three by seven for the mark of an adult, I chanted as I stepped within the circle. Three the number of optimism, for the past, the present, the future. Seven for the wisdom of the seeker. Within the circle, I slowly turned to the languid song of the butcher bird. The weight of the desert pulled down on me, the breezes skimmed my circumference, but I was entirely happy knowing what I must do. Slowly I walked to the edge of the circle and cast my sister out. I banished her from my centre and there, alone in the desert on the evening of my twenty-first, I forged a new life without her.

It was supposed to be a gentle goodbye, really just a way to mark the day. I swear that is all I had planned, but at the very last moment of my banishing ritual, the breeze picked up again and Beth’s presence came screaming in. You’ve abandoned me, she cried. You’ve doomed me to silence ever more. I struggled with her, I promise. I used all the strength I had garnered from the vibration of the mine and the gravitational pull of the desert, but by the time I’d cast her out the damage had been done. She had caught up my voice to add the curse, a spell that would do the damage. But it was her, not me. I swear. And the curse that I wish was never said… It was simply this – that she that had harmed would also be triply harmed and the weapon would be the childhood of the one that grew within her.

I didn’t think it would work. I thought it was just a desperate cry. So I sat within those markings all night, watching the shooting stars and listening to the wave of insects and the scattered calls of night birds, and I felt whole and complete and ready.

As dawn approached, I made my way quietly back to the row of houses, retrieved my bags and stood between the houses three doors down from Doug’s, waiting for the arrival of the vans.
He saw me immediately as he pulled up from his night shift. He walked quietly to me and took my pack and placed it into the back of his van. Then he drew me within and held me. He was so tender and loving, my spokesperson, so filled with longing and gentle caresses. Later he would take me into Tennant Creek and help me get settled into one of those houses. He would drive me to the RSL club and help me find a job, then fix my tyres, and get my car, and ask me not to leave him. But later, much later, when I aborted his child in a coastal town, I thought the price of my freedom from the desert had been paid. I’d forgotten that it came with a spell on you.
Brisbane, 1987

Days passed. I found my way into the Blue Mountains after Tennant Creek and to an acreage of flowering heath and eucalyptus forests on the edge of an escarpment.

A meditation centre was there, another place of silence, but this time it came with tools and techniques that helped me with my echoes. To learn, the teachers asked that I stay silent for ten days. They asked that I rise at four and meditate for two hours and then continue like that in blocks throughout the day until it was time for bed. And so I did. And I followed their instructions to simply observe the breath, to let it rise and fall away, and then to move to the body and examine fleeting sensations. After that all the students at the centre, were told to sit and not move, even though every part of us screamed to – to sit and watch the reactions of the body without feeding it with more.

It was very difficult, almost impossible, but slowly, slowly, the meditative instructions I was getting began to help things settle again. It was only the sounds, of course. I never came close to sustained meditation, but sometimes in the breaks between the meditation sessions, when I’d eat or walk or wash my underwear very slowly, I’d notice a certain calm. The birds were still there in their clamorous thousands, the noises of the insects and of distant bubbling water and other slowly moving humans, but they all lost a little resonance and began to just float through me as noise and perception and momentary experience that required me to do nothing.
I stayed at the centre for a couple of months after I had done my initial training, serving other students, then volunteering in the gardens and sitting when I could. After a while I found a job in a nearby bookshop, which was flexible enough to let me go to the centre to serve and sit whenever I felt my practice slipping. At the shared house where I lived with other meditators, I learnt to harvest wild honey, which I drank with my home grown lemongrass tea.

And yes, Rayah did eventually turn up again. She called home from Melbourne where she was living with Eddie, who was going to make it big there. I visited her just after you were born and kissed your perfect face. To my relief, there was nothing of the desert in you, no startling birthmarks of red and white, no tell-tale signs of a spell. You were just a normal baby who fusssed unless held and searched for the breast. Still, I thought, it was extraordinary the way that you focused on me with your turquoise eyes every time I sang a song. It was almost as if you recognised my voice. And I promise, I would have stayed there for you, to be around to help you, but after a couple of days my welcome wore out. So I returned to my community of quiet people in my mountain plateau of coolness and let the seasons roll gently by.

But then Aunty Gen started to fail and all I could think of was her smoky laugh. Baba had gone already. It had been during my travels in the Territory and what with being broke and unreachable most of the time, I hadn’t made it to her funeral, which I regretted later for my father’s sake.

So when I heard that there was little time for Aunty Gen, I packed up my stuff and headed home. I had no plans to stay, just to visit for a while, say hi to all the kids and goodbye to my crazy, storytelling aunt. I had hoped to hold her hand, to remind her of the canopy bed she shared with her sister in Ireland, but the drive was long and my car temperamental and in the end I
didn’t make it. I did get to go to her funeral, though, and that was something at least.

It was a nice funeral, a good Protestant one in our local church with many family friends and well-wishers crying into lace hankies and, except for Rayah, all the family was there.

I’d kept up with the news, of course. In the long and rambling phone calls with my mother, I’d heard about Martin’s medical studies and the progress of the kids in school. Still, it was a shock to see how much they’d grown in the two years that I’d been away. Martin was a man already and Claire at eighteen had grown into her loveliness. She’d had her ears pinned back and was tall and lean. Her hair, long and straight and blonde, fell down to her waist. She was even more beautiful than Rayah had been, but I could see she didn’t know it. Like me, the damage had been done, the self-image cemented under the tyranny of Rayah’s gaze, and she would grow old getting nervous rashes and putting herself down. I knew it.

However, while the kids had grown and become more of themselves, my parents had just aged. Dad looked like a worn-out storm. Under the pressure of trying to provide for his hoarding wife and many children, he’d made mistakes at work and was now battling his final court case. He’d lost his mother and faced losing his career. He was a humbled, broken man, not the tyrant I remembered. Mother was just Mother with fewer teeth. She wept when she saw me and clung to me. ‘You’ve been away so long.’

I let her cry and hugged her and when she finally caught her breath and asked, ‘Rayah, have you seen or heard from Rayah? She said she would try to get here,’ I replied as gently as I could. ‘No, Mother darling, I haven’t. But if she said she would come, I’m sure she’ll do her best.’
So, like I said, it was a nice funeral, a good Protestant funeral that would have made our Aunty Gen very proud, but it was my dream of the funeral and what came after that I remember and not the real one I attended.

In the dream that I had on the night of Aunty Gen’s funeral, I am a spider hanging from a thread. Aunty Gen is laid out on a tablet of stone with the living family around her. The girls are gathered around her head, the boys closer to her feet. I am very high above the scene, so I drop down to look at her more closely, and my other self, the one that is standing next to Rayah at the pyre, looks up to watch me descend. The Kayla below wears her hair long, like Rayah beside her and Claire on the other side. Even Lilly and Grace and our mother have their hair draping down to their waists. We all reach out to touch Aunty Gen’s spider web of silver hair, which has been arranged on the table beside her, reaches almost to her knees, and seems to repel our hands as if from an electric charge.

It is at that point that, from above, I see Aunty Gen’s chest start to rise and fall, a few gasps first and then a huge and heaving movement. A wild wind begins. Aunty Gen sits and screams and her hair blows wildly behind her. She wails. Her hair whips around, catching us in its strands. I clamber up my thread as I watch my own hair and that of my sisters start to blow in every direction at once. Then I notice, emerging from the corners of the room, my grandmother, Kathleen, and Aunty Bridge and Franny and Ramona. I watch in horror as their hair, too, loosens from their Irish braids to blow into the centre of the room and then Baba appears in the other corner and adds her black and wiry tresses to the mix that is trying to drown us. There is another wild wail and then I see a child appear behind Baba. It is the daughter she left behind and she is clinging to her skirts. And behind Kathleen are two others: Jimmy, the one who drowned, and my mother at the age she was before she was forced away. The children begin to walk towards
where I, the Kayla below, am struggling with Rayah to keep our heads above the web of hair. Then with clawing hands, they reach out to grab her.

‘No!’ I woke in terror. ‘No, no, not that!’

I sat up in the lounge room of my parents’ house where I’d been sleeping on the couch and in the dim light saw photos of all the children covering the wall. Then my fear began to form a face. ‘No,’ I cried. ‘Not that. I never asked for that.’

I ran to where the phone hung on the wall and begged it not to ring. It rang. Rayah was crying on the other end. ‘I was trying to get to the funeral. It was just me and her. It had been so far. She hated it. She wasn’t in her car seat.’

Do you know the rest? Do you remember it – those months in intensive care? Did you see your mother curling up under all the tubes and wires on the cot to be there always, holding you? And the frustration of all the doctors and nurses when she always asked and always pushed, convinced that she could keep you healing on the strength of her will alone – are you aware of any of that? No, probably not. You absorbed the narrative fed to the courts – the careless, reckless mother who didn’t keep you in a car seat. And so did your mother, even though she fought it. The blame she apportioned to herself was monumental and even when you recovered as much as you ever would, even when the marks on your perfect face became just that wandering eye, it paralysed her, so that when your father started to draw you away, slowly at first but then as fast as he could, she didn’t fight it, not immediately at least.

Your parents came home after the accident, of course. They needed the family then. And I stayed too for a short while, to do what little I could. So I watched it, was witness to it, all the pieces falling. Watched as your father’s love of your mother’s wildness turned first to blame, then to disdain and
finally to hate. Watched too as your mother let you go, gently to start with, by letting you stay with Eddie at his mother’s where you’d come to no more harm. Then a little more fully, by giving way to those inexplicable depressions that used to take her to the water tower. Finally, by not resisting when your father went on that two-week vacation to the States from which he never returned.

It was years before she found herself and you again, years that the court system turned against her, even though your father was the one who kidnapped you. But I wasn’t there for any of that. Knowing the real narrative behind your loss and the one who was really to blame, I disappeared. I sold my car as I had always planned and bought a ticket somewhere, anywhere. It was the ticket that took me to Japan.
San Francisco, California, USA, 1993

I only saw you once while you were growing up. It was in San Francisco where your mother moved to try to claim you back, though as you know the court cases were long and protracted and she was too argumentative and confrontational for them to ever go in her favour. You were six at the time I visited and I was newly pregnant, and nervous with my secret, but what I remember most is the desperate lengths Rayah went to, making up for stolen time.

We picked you up in my rented car outside the Mission police station, that one time that I visited. There, amid the bustle of newly released prostitutes and vagrants blinking in the morning light, you left your father’s car and entered ours. There was no other exchange. Only you. But I saw your father as he pulled past us in the traffic and he looked the same as I remembered him from the desert, just a little more fixed around the jaw.

When he was gone, Rayah climbed into the back with you. You didn’t return her hug or even say hello, but as I drove, your mother talked cheerily about the packages she’d brought you: a new dress, a horse-shaped bag filled with books, a pair of shoes and socks, and slowly you relaxed. Feigning reluctance, you changed out of the mismatched clothes you had on when your father delivered you to us. Your fingers lingered on the texture of your dress as you smoothed it over your knee and you smiled as you let Rayah comb your unwashed hair, which was as long as your mother’s and mine, and as she swept it off your forehead. You told her the latest on your
stepmother, a woman you loved with a hopeless unrequited passion, and your new baby sister whom you also adored. You told her about your best friend’s father now living in a jail. I watched you in the rear-view mirror. It was a different child reflected there, clean and neat and cared for. But still the little-girl smell of your dirty underwear filled the car. Your mother hadn’t thought of that.

I drove, following the directions that Rayah gave me. In the Castro we stopped, double-parking in front of a coffee shop, and Rayah dashed inside to get a friend of hers. You complained as she raced away.

‘Why does she always have to bring someone else along?’

I shrugged, knowing only that others dissipated tension and that Jeff was a photographer and was coming to document the day. With the ongoing battle over you still raging in the courts, precautions like that were necessary.

When they returned, we went on, first to our breakfast at the Japanese gardens, next to a children’s Asian festival at the gallery. Jealous of your mother, you wouldn’t speak to Jeff, but you posed continually for the camera. You twirled in your dress, holding its edges as you spun, and you looked up from between us as we helped you with calligraphy. Chin resting on your palm, you affected thoughtful, coy or provocative poses. You poked your tongue out, held your fingers up in the victory sign, made childish ugly faces. The camera caught it all, every smile and mood swing. In the photos, which I hold before me now, your eye looks almost steady, and your mother and I, well, we look like stylish older sisters – too young to be a mother and an aunt.

The day wore on. A picnic lunch. A trip to the beach. A shopping venture in second-hand shops. You were very busy and involved but by three, when Jeff left, you were asking for the time.

‘What time is it, Rayah? I have to be home at five.’
‘It’s only two,’ your mother lied.

‘Well, Daddy says it has to be five or else there’ll be trouble.’

Your mother nodded and ignored you. She’d told me already that for the six months she’d been living there and fighting for her rights, your father had ignored the court-appointed times and told you other times instead.

At the pet shop, buying food for your frog, you asked your mother again.

‘What time is it, Rayah? Daddy says you’d better not mess up this time. This time he says will be the last, so you’d just better watch out.’

Your mother responded by pretend-throwing the plastic bag of squirming flies. You giggled and ducked behind me.

At the ice-cream parlour, ‘What time is it, Rayah? Daddy says…’

‘Yes, well, it’s all right,’ your mother answered. ‘We have you for the day and that means until tomorrow.’

Your damaged eye turned inwards. You changed your mind about an ice cream and fell behind us as we walked outside.

Later, at the park, as you were climbing on the jungle gym, I whispered to your mother, ‘Well, if she wants to go home, then maybe you should let her.’

‘I am co-custodian. I have equal rights.’

‘It’s not the rights I’m worried about.’

‘Worry about her with a kidnapping lying bastard of a father and with the drug dealers that he calls his friends, not with me, her mother.’

Silenced by her fierceness, I joined you at the jungle gym. We swung monkey like from bar to bar and I followed you through the maze. You are
agile and decisive and, like your mother, you directed me. As with your mother, I obeyed.

Walking back to the car, your mother and you both told me separate secrets. Your mother took my hand and pulling me aside said, ‘Please Kayla, sorry. But she has to see that you love me. You’re the only one she knows that does.’

And a little further down the path, while we were gently blowing on a spider’s web, you said, ‘I wish that you could always live here. Rayah’s nicer when you’re here.’

Dinner was at a sushi place. ‘What time is it, Rayah? Daddy’s probably waiting.’

‘Your father’s busy, darling. Doesn’t he work tonight?’

Again your eye was wandering and you started to grind your teeth.

‘I hate this stuff. I want rice and beans. That’s what Jody always makes me.’

‘Just try it, darling.’

‘No, I want to go home like Daddy said. I hate having to hear you talk all the time. All you do is talk.’

You refused to eat or drink. Rather than make a fuss or deal in public with what your deep strained breathing may have become, we got the food packed up and headed towards the car. It’s not that we were overcautious; it’s just that your mother had told me that your fits can be extreme and sometimes trigger those other fits, the ones she was never sure your father was buying medication for.

It was dark and cold when we arrived back in the Castro. You were tired and upset and as your mother carried you from the car, your shoes
slapped against her thighs, creating a gentle rustling rhythm that echoed in the empty street. Your mother fumbled with the door key as she looked around and tried to keep hold of you and all your gifts. I took the key from her and let us in. She indicated that I should lock and double-bolt the door. The chain fell into place with a thunderous clap and we went upstairs. Your mother’s flatmates were away and there was so much wood in her apartment – wooden steps, wooden floorboards, wainscoting on the walls. Everything seemed amplified. Our footsteps were loud and they echoed.

We dumped our stuff in the living room. Rayah left us there and you and I looked down at the bay and watched the fog roll in. The moon rose as I was listening to your mother securing every window; outside, it fogged over quickly and the light turned ghostly grey. If you heard your mother’s noises and knew what she was doing, you did not react or indicate. You were upset but controlled with me.

We bathed. We all hopped in together and you whined again, saying to your mother, ‘I hate having baths with you. I hate looking at you naked.’ But Rayah and I, our mother’s daughters, talked about our breasts, about how mine are smaller and hers are larger than they used to be, and about the regularity of our breast examinations and about our periods. You were fascinated and couldn’t stay removed. We taught you how to check yourself. You giggled as we made you touch your contourless chest. Then you proved your maturity by raising your arm and showing us a single downy hair. When she bent forward to examine it, and sob-laughed about its beauty, you allowed your mother to kiss you.

Then, with our hair towel-dried, we wrapped ourselves in robes and sat on Rayah’s bed to comb it as we talked. We tried each other’s moisturisers and rubbed cream into your legs as well as our own. Then I told you a story I
used to tell to the little ones – the story Aunt Gen would tell us about combing her sister’s hair in their canopy bed in Belfast.

Finally you slept. Rayah got up and walked about the apartment switching off the lights. She came back and sat on the other side of you and we listened to you breathe. The fog cleared a little. The moon and the lights from the city filtered through the window and we watched your back as it rose and fell, watched the light as it caught at your soft brown hair, which was spread on your mother’s pillow. You smelt like Claire once did, clean and musty sweet, and I remembered the room we shared with her, remembered the way Rayah and I would whisper while she slept – but we did not whisper while keeping watch over you. We sat in the dark and waited. There was nothing to say to each other, only your soft gentle breath to listen to, only the waiting to be done.

The knocking started at eleven.

‘Open up,’ someone said. ‘Police.’

We watched over you, blanketing you with our presence. Neither of us looked at the other. Neither of us made a move. We concentrated, instead, on breathing as quietly as possible and on staying absolutely still.

The knocking kept on, more forceful and insistent. With everything that was in me I prayed you didn’t wake.

The knocking changed to pounding. A muffled, angry voice was carried up the steps and amplified by the wood.

‘She’s in there,’ the voice shouted. ‘The car’s around the corner where they thought I wouldn’t see it.’

‘Open up,’ the other shouted again. ‘Open up. Open up. Police!’
Rayah stood, moved over to the bedroom door. Quietly, slowly, she closed it. Then she returned and took up her post again. The voices were more garbled but the pounding was still loud. We kept watching you, kept monitoring you, kept praying you didn’t wake.

The knocking went on for several minutes and then suddenly stopped. There was silence now, and in that silence I noticed that our breaths were matched, that the windows had fogged with your soft warm pant and mine, that the lighting was more obscure. Still you slept your fragile sleep and I sighed, thinking the worst of it was over.

Then the phone began to ring. It blared so suddenly into our quiet room that I jumped and screamed a little. I recovered and covered my mouth as I turned to see if I had disturbed you. You rolled and muttered incomprehensibly. The phone kept ringing and ringing.

‘Rayah?’ I whispered at last.

‘Sh,’ she hushed me in reply.

‘Can’t you take it off the hook?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I can’t do that.’

You rolled again and this time looked as if you were really going to wake up. We held our breaths as if that could make a difference. Then your mother stroked your hair. You groaned and relaxed. Your mother lay down beside you and curled around your back. I saw her breathe you, smell you, take you into the inside of herself. I saw her lose herself to external sounds and concentrate on scent.

The phone kept ringing. Then it stopped.

Moments later, the pounding started again.

The voice called out your name.
The person behind the voice kicked at the door, rattled the handle, shouted with frustration and anger.

‘Tell her that you’re going home. Tell her to let you go.’

Silence while the voice waited for a response. Nothing happened, nothing at all. It was quiet on that street, as quiet as this room of breath, until he yelled again. ‘I’ll make you pay, you fucking bitch. I’ll make you pay, I swear.’

‘Rayah?’ I whispered loudly. The veins behind my eyes were pounding. ‘I think that he’s been drinking.’

‘Sh!’ she said and smelt you again.

More shouts, more curses, more abuse. From up and down the street the opening and closing of doors, the yelling of ‘Shut up already, would you?’

‘Rayah,’ I pleaded in fear.

‘Yes?’

‘He’s alone this time. There’s no police. What are we going to do?’

You tossed your arms. I kept quiet and tried to control myself. There was an interminable pause, a long extended silence, which the previous shouting only amplified.

Finally Rayah answered, ‘There’s nothing to do at all. Alone or not, we’re out of his reach. He always does something like this but he cannot get us tonight.’

The shouts started again. They went on and on, then suddenly stopped. I waited for the next assault, waited until it didn’t come. It was cold and silent then. The moon had sunk and the fog had cleared. The Bay Bridge glittered with reflected light.
‘Is she asleep?’ I asked.

‘Yes, thank God. We really wore her out.’

She sat up and reached for my hand. ‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘for being here.’

‘Hey,’ I shrugged, ‘it was nothing.’

We laughed nervously and then lapsed back into our silence. We held hands, linking them above you, and stayed there for a long, long time. At two o’clock, I let her go. I lay down, closed my eyes, and listened to your frog catch and propel, catch and propel, against the glass of the aquarium. Drugged by the Claire-like smell of you, I slowly fell asleep.

The next morning, after we had read to you through breakfast and you’d helped me pack my things, we changed you back into your other clothes. You were dirty and mismatched again, but you were happy to be leaving us, happy maybe believing that who we are is distant from the life you are currently leading. We returned you to his door. You tried to jump out of the car the moment that we got there, but your mother held your hand and kept you for an instant longer.

‘I want you to know I love you. I have always, always loved you. And I will always, always fight for you.’ You screwed your eyebrows up in response, then nodded and pulled away.

And that was it. Your mother and father went back to court and I went back to the desert I was still living in, knowing I would live in one desert or another until I had undone all the damage of the spell that I had set and the patterns I had activated.
Doha, 2008

It is my forty-second birthday today, which means you will soon be twenty-one. I have been waiting and preparing for this day for a very long time and know exactly what I will do. And, yes, I can hear you now as you read this saying this is silly, just silly, and maybe you are right. Maybe it has all just been a haunting, an echo only I can hear and whose reverberations are contained. Maybe. But still I want to be sure, not only for you but for my girls as well, who also lost a parent.

So I am almost ready. Ariana and Cadance are gone. They know I don’t like to celebrate my birthday and are happy to sleep over with friends. My hair is tightly tied and I have all the items I will need packed into the car.

This is what I will do.

First I will complete this narrative, my act of yoga and spell-breaking, and email it to you and your mother. Even if you scoff at it, I know you won’t forgive me, but that’s okay as I only want you to forgive each other.

Next I will drive to the Singing Dunes. I would’ve gone to the sand flats where I took my daughters driving in the dark and wrote our names in phosphorescent sand, but it is under construction now and access is denied. Still, the Singing Dunes will suffice. The sands that vibrate and trumpet in them have rolled long distances and been shaped by the wind, as I have been, and their unstable surface will hum as I cast a circle with three points in the centre, seven around the circumference and a fire in the middle. I will walk this circle forty-two times, chanting the truest told story that I can, which is this one, and then I will cut my hair, all of it, and throw it into the fire. Hopefully then, all the patterns that I
activated through my envy and fear of abandonment will burn away and the three of you – our daughters – will form a future that’s unburdened by them. This I pray.

After that there will just be one more thing to do. Rayah has asked for it for her coming child, her late child, her last possible child, who she is having difficulty conceiving. I have a brooch, a Cinderella coach brooch, the one Rayah and I used once to become blood sisters. I will prick every finger and let the blood fall free, flaming up the spitting fire. I will release her blood from my body then bless the child she is seeking. Even if she doesn’t ever come to us I will harness the whispers of the wind to form a song for her, a song as secret as this story once was. I will hum it, over and over, till it vibrates like a sacred mantra through every cell of my body. It is a blessing for the unborn child and the one I let slip away, a blessing for the children of my daughters and my niece and for all their future generations. May peace resound in your un tarnished bodies. May silence be a balm.

And as for me, I will rise at dawn tomorrow and in the expansive desert of my freedom will practise yoga, letting the sound of my breath inhabit me.
Family Tree and Map

[Text and diagrams related to family tree and map]
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abaya</td>
<td>Term for long black garment worn by Muslim women in the Arabian Peninsula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ahimsa</td>
<td>The practice of nonviolence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al nashrah</td>
<td>Colloquial Arabic term for spell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brahmacharya</td>
<td>Yogic term referring to the practice of chastity or sexual restraint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dish-dash</td>
<td>Term for long white garment worn by Muslim men in the Arabian Peninsula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>esky</td>
<td>Australian term for drinks’ cooler.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jinn</td>
<td>Arabic term commonly translated as genie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naqab</td>
<td>A veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pratyahara</td>
<td>Yogic term referring to the practice of withdrawal of the senses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ribena</td>
<td>A fruit based cordial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schoolies</td>
<td>Australian colloquial term for the week of celebration, often at the beach, that follows graduation from school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shalla</td>
<td>Arabic term for headscarf worn by women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shayteen</td>
<td>Arabic term for Satan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>souq</td>
<td>Arabic term for marketplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yalla yalla</td>
<td>Colloquial Arabic term meaning come on, come on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exegesis

The Acoustic Body: Towards a Reconfiguration of the Senses in the Romantic Novel
I am a house of sound, hearing and voice at once, black box and sounding-board, hammer and anvil, a grotto of echoes, a musicassette, the ear’s pavilion, a question mark, wandering in the space of messages filled or stripped of sense… I am the resonance and the tone, I am altogether the mingling of the tone and its resonance.

(Michel Serres, 1998, p 180-1)
Part 1: Listen. Can You Hear Me?
Introduction

This exegesis both contextualises the novel, *A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality*, and attempts to investigate the pathways of its construction. It maps the development of my creative work from its genesis as an inarticulate sensation to what it is now, and explores the ways in which I tried to keep sensual experiences as the core consideration of my writing process, and the overriding effect of my completed project. The possibility of a reconfiguration of the dominant sensual hierarchy, the application of this in a work of romantic fiction, and the space between, are the major considerations of this discussion.

To explore the hierarchy of the senses, creatively as I have done in my novel and exegetically as I will here, is to investigate their history, their cultural manifestations and the personal experiences we all have of them. It is to explore their place in the mediation of mind and body, idea and object, and self and environment, and the way they are produced by culture while at the same time limiting our cultural productions. Apprehending the senses in this way reveals the depths of the possible discussions that we can have about them, but in what follows I will be primarily concentrating on the link between the hierarchy of the senses and the visual representation of them in texts. I will consider where the dominance of the visual can fail a creative artist like myself, who seeks to convey perceptual experience from a different point of view, and where the given literary forms have potential to reflect such a perception. The place of the multi-sensorial and its relationship to the affect of a work will also be embedded into the discussion.

My novel, *A Sibling Romance: A Story of Sisters and Sensuality*, and the creative exploration I engaged in as I tried to articulate the story of a sensually gifted character, introduces these concepts in various ways. The most obvious is the narrator’s “clairaudient” abilities. Clairaudience can be
defined variously as “the power or faculty of hearing something not present to the ear but regarded as having objective reality” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), “the power to hear sounds said to exist beyond the reach of ordinary experience or capacity, as the voices of the dead” (Dictionary.com), or “the supposed power to hear things outside the range of normal perception” (The Free Dictionary). For Kayla, the protagonist in my novel, her clairaudient ability means she is able to hear bodily functions, the dreams and nightmares of others, encapsulated voices, environments and environmental phenomena, ghosts and memories, and the whispers of the silenced. She is also able to apprehend the affects of the various manipulations of sound and connect, at times, to the vibrational fields that produce it. As a character, she is both the person who hears and the one who listens. She is submerged in, and inhabited at all times by, noises and echoes and resonance, and while at some moments her ability to hear like this is a pleasure and source of power, at others times it becomes a form of isolation and torture. Regardless of whether it is torment or gift, sound is central to her perceptual field and the means by which she organizes and interprets all of her experiences.

With the experience of hearing as Kayla’s central perceptual principle, the novel is then divided into three sections. The first section concentrates on the sounds and sensations of the body and a family, and attempts to explore sensuality from a child’s perspective. The magical innocence of childhood is heightened by the relational quality of auditory experiences and the body becomes not just that of a single individual but of a family inhabited by trans-generational memories and experiences, and variations on their shared perceptual skills.

In the second section the focus is on the sensual experiences of an environment. As the narrator journeys towards “self-in-relation to
environment”, she is challenged by postcolonial experiences of displacement in unfamiliar and unknowable territories. She hears voices and encounters the occult, experiencing the uses magic has historically made of sound in the form of chanting, spells and perceptual manipulations.

The third section, which is interwoven into the previous two, deals with the remembered, reconstructed and reflected aspects of sensual experience. It is informed by the character’s sensual reconfiguration that results from her yoga and meditation practices as well as by her Middle Eastern context.

This brief summary of my novel introduces some of the major concerns that will be dealt with in this exegesis, those being sound and orality in relationship to written text, as well as the positioning of voice, the body, and the body in environment. But sound, orality and the sensual are also threaded into the novel in various other ways, including through the structure, the use of direct reader-address, the focus on breath, and the place of experience and memory in the rendered interpretation of sensual experience.

I came to this inquiry and approach to the novel through a series of personal sensual experiences and revelations. The novel began with sensation. I have never had tinnitus and plan to protect my hearing so that I never will, but it seems an apt metaphor for the unwritten novel and my perception of the writing process and product. I experienced the genesis of this project as a rock in my belly, a sensation that had energy but no form. Like tinnitus, it was a perception of an inner reality that had no external expression but that came, nonetheless, to dominate my reality. It was true but unreal, actual but unverifiable. It replicated, in ways, my engagement with story as a child. Fairy tales, the oft-told stories of my family, romantic made-
up stories on long car rides that were filled with quests and adventure, love and wish-fulfilment: these were the ringing in my ears that represented story.

But even coming from a family of gifted storytellers, it was not the actual stories that were told that captured my imagination and fuelled my passion. Nor was it the well-turned sentences and engaging characters. It was instead the effect these stories had on my body: the way they could shorten my breath and make my heart beat, induce fear, terror or relief.

Later, as an independent reader, it would be the same. The oral tales of my childhood coloured my expectation of story and drove my readerly preoccupation with the then-unknown qualities of orality and affect. I wanted the reading to transform to that singing-ringing in my ears and to work directly on my body.

As I transitioned from a listener to a reader and then into the writer of my first full-length work, *A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality*, I wanted to experiment with the romantic and fantastic forms I was initially exposed to, as a way to recapture these sensual experiences of childhood. My focus on sound then is directly connected to my idea of what a romance story could be. This is important, as by using sound as my method of approaching perception in literature and the multi-sensorial, I am not trying to simply invert a dominant sensual hierarchy. I am instead apprehending it as a tool that has some existing modes of attachment to the form that I am interested in exploring. My experimentations in this area, which I will discuss more fully later, were complicated by the way we remember, imagine and try to encapsulate and reconstruct the sensual, and by the fact that any changes in the presentation of the perceptual can be seen as trickery or magic. Playing with perception is, after all, the trademark of every street-side magician. Sound, as the survival sense of dark worlds, is also often associated with mystery, magic and the uncanny; so my experimentation with the sensual
hierarchy, fantastical and oral forms, and the porous qualities of the multi-sensorial, all contributed to a blurring of boundaries between form and content, transmitter and receiver, real and unreal, self and other, magic and the mundane.

With this, then, I approach the terrain of the research that my exegesis will develop. In the following I present my research question and the gap in knowledge and practice techniques that my research seeks to address. I will then discuss my personal exploration of my own sensual orientations in relation to the novel, before approaching the methodological experiments I made in exploring the modes of attachment between sensual experience and artistic forms. These considerations are followed by a review of relevant theorists in the area of sensual scholarship, and reflections on how their insights continue to enrich my understanding of my own creative process. I conclude with a study of the novel’s successes and failures as a sample of a reconfigured sensuality, before questioning its relevance to other art forms. In total, the work seeks to establish my place as a reflective participant in the practice of contemporary romance writing, to highlight the multiple theoretical frameworks woven into my practice, and to establish the need for a sensual reawakening on the part of creative artists.
Questioning the Romance and the Senses

As already alluded to, this exegesis engages with the discourse of contemporary sense-scholars and like them argues that our typically visual-literate Western world has privileged the visual over the four other traditional senses and that this privileging has inhibited the development of multi-sensorial approaches to being, thinking and expression. It develops the premise, now widely accepted in the field of sensual scholarship, that the senses are cumulative, accomplished theoreticians and cultural productions in themselves, with the intent of applying this understanding to creative practices, techniques and realisations in literary forms, especially the literary romance.

Much valuable work has been done in the appreciation and examination of the senses in recent years. In fact, dating back variously (depending on which theorist one cites) to the 1990s (Lauwrens J., 2012) or to the turn of the twenty-first century (Howes D., 2005), there has been a renewed trans-disciplinary interest in the senses that includes writers and thinkers from disciplines such as anthropology, history, visual studies, art history, sociology, literary studies, cultural and communication studies, philosophy and psychiatry. This “sensual revolution” (Howes D., Charting the sensual revolution, 2006), also referred to as the sensual turn, the sensual field, sensory culture and sensory studies, has spawned numerous conferences, publications, journals and centres: The Sensory Formation Series, released by Concordia University, the tri-annual journal The Senses and Society (Berg, Oxford) and the Amsterdam Centre for Cross-Disciplinary Emotions and Sensory Studies being only a few of the most significant ones1. The insights garnered

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1 A list of sensory scholars would include, among others, Francis Halsall, David Howes, Caroline Jones, Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas. Other noteworthy scholarship in this direction includes the contributions to Senses and Society, an academic journal dedicated to the sensory turn and The Sensory Formations Series published by Berg.
from this field are invaluable and wide ranging and have included the arguments that the senses, rather than being mono-sensual faculties, are interconnected and synaesthetic in nature (Lauwrens, 2012), that they are deeply involved in the imagination, that they can only be apprehended by an embodied body\textsuperscript{2}, and that the divisions between the perceiving subject and the perceived world are mutable.

These notions are incredibly important to my research and I will explore them at more length later but, suffice to say at this point, my review of this literature and other related fields has made it clear that there has been little self-conscious application of these concepts to the creative process. Nor have they been considered in terms of the specific literary genre of romance. This represents a significant gap as questions such as, “How can a practising writer comprehend and express the sensual spectrum of a literary form?” “How is praxis changed by a self-conscious awareness of these notions?” and “How can existing visual media be adapted to this knowledge?” have yet to be addressed. My research will attempt to address this gap by focusing on two of my creative strategies. One of these is the choice to work with sound and to place it within a new understanding of the sensual spectrum, and the second is to work with what is, arguably, the originally oral form of romance.

As indicated by the title of my novel, \textit{A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality}, the romance, as a literary form, is particularly important to my work. Although now most often associated with the formulaic bodice-rippers of such publishing houses as Mills & Boon, the term “romance” was originally drawn from its earlier association with the romance languages of French, Portuguese, Spanish and later German and English, as opposed to the scholarly and ecclesiastical literature written in Latin. The term now refers to four different forms of prose fiction: the Romances of the Middle Ages, the

\textsuperscript{2} Detailed definitions for the concept of the “embodied body” are provided in text on p. 322.
Gothic and Historical Romance, and the “True” romances we associate with the term today. It is also sometimes adopted by contemporary literary writers when exploring either a romantic theme or different novelistic tendencies.

As such a broad term, encompassing so many subgenres and time periods, it is difficult to provide a satisfactory definition for the romance as a genre. Notably, it is not the aim of this exegesis to do so as I engage with the romance as a creative and experimental artist rather than as a literary critic or historian.

Briefly then, in order only to sketch the field for my creative needs, a widely accepted approach (which I will, however, later dispute) is to posit the romance as either the precursor of, or the other to, the novel. Presented by such writers as Ian Watt (The rise of the novel, 1957) and Northrop Frye (The four forms of fiction, 1967), this approach suggests that romances reference prose narratives prior to the rise of empirical thought, rationalism and visualism, and that contemporary romantic forms include conventions that stand in contrast to the conventions of the standard novel. Walter Ong (1982), an early sense scholar, develops this argument from a sensual point of view by suggesting that the novel, as opposed to the romance, was from the start connected to the visual authority bestowed by the medium of print, and has evolved as a clearly visual genre, encapsulating many of the values associated with the stereotypically visual, including a deep interiority, a lack of heroes and a tendency towards irony. He also suggests that, as a child of the printed rather than spoken word, the novel adopted a visual epistemology, a linear structure, an interiorised subjectivity and a preoccupation with realism. He contrasts this to the oral roots of the romance, which he suggests continued to

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3 For example, Susan Sontag, (1992) The volcano lover: A romance and A.S. Byatt, (1990) Possession: A romance are both literary writers who self-consciously appropriate the term romance. Other works that have been interpreted as romances include Jane Austen’s (1813) Pride and prejudice, Emily Bronte’s (1847) Wuthering heights, the Harry Potter series and Tolkien’s (1954) Lord of the rings.
be affected by the aims and conventions of orality long after the advent of the alphabet and print, with the hand-drawn manuscripts of the Middle Ages, for example, being created to be recycled back into the community through oral recitation, and the prose verses of the Elizabethan age being composed primarily with a view to performance by the human voice (Ong, 1982, p. 156). The romance has, of course, evolved, but if we accept portions of the above we can, like Ong, see that as a form the romance remains heavily reliant on oral modes of thought and expression and thereby has the possibility to stand on the cusp of oral and visual expressions of narrative forms. This notion of the romance as a form of transcribed orality offers a rich opportunity for a practising writer interested in the reconfiguration of the senses in narrative.

This then outlines the three prongs of my research and exploration, those being: the work produced and inspired by “the sensual revolution”; the potential of the romance as a subversive oral/visual artefact; and my own creative explorations of the space and interplay between them.

The central research question that has emerged from the relationship between the three of them is simply this: How can a practise writer approach the possibility of a reconfiguration of the senses and apply it to a romantic novel, and what are the implications of this for our aesthetic forms and our broader understanding of sensual representation?

It is important to reiterate that this question, and my dual focus on the sensual and romantic, resulted from the creative impetus of the novel, my working process and my artistic needs, rather than defining and circumscribing them. In fact the inversion of the typical research method in favour of that of practice-led research was occurring even before I was aware that it was a possibility. The development of this understanding and the research question it later evoked are stories in themselves, yet important to convey now so as to further contextualise the topic.
Defying Deafness: The Story behind the Story

My story of sisters and sensuality and the questions it evoked began when, twenty-some years ago, I held my first-born child in my arms. She was three days old that day. I was alone with her in a suburban apartment, a reluctant immigrant to the United States with no family, friends or money, and a partner already halfway out the door; but as I held my infant and watched her miraculous reactions to the sensual world, it didn’t matter. It only mattered that I had a child, that she was safe and that one day soon I would tell her stories like the stories I’d been told.

At the time I’d already been working on one of those stories—a sad story about a family diaspora, repeated histories and trans-generational memories. The centre of that story, the hurricane eye-wall of the family storm, was the fractured relationship between two sisters—a relationship burdened by the loss of the sister’s child but one that was yet the mainstay of their lives. The story had been waiting, only I hadn’t known how to approach it in such a way that all the narrative lies I’d planned would end up true.

Watching my child respond to the world with a brand-new set of senses, I saw a possibility begin to emerge. As a three-day-old, my baby reacted by reflex to sound and touch and rocking movements, but when she opened her eyes to look, it was only where the movement of her feeble neck allowed her to. She absorbed my smell and tasted my milk, but her gaze, as lovely as it was, was short-lived and unfocused. Watching her, I wondered about these non-visual moments in her life and about how we (meaning, I suppose, all of us as agents of culture) trained the visual sense in ways we could not train, or did not think to train, the ready-made responses of touch and taste and hearing. I wondered also about what was lost in the transition from a dark internal world of sound and proprioception to the free and open one of light and air and striding movement, for as limited as her visual scope was, there
was a wisdom to her way of being. She seemed to close her eyes against the
light quite consciously, to turn away from outside distractions as if to catch a
glimpse of past lives that were receding, to read the messages of her DNA
and family history and consciously encode them. Squirming slightly as I
rocked her in my arms that day, she seemed an inspirational near-sightless
seer, an old soul of touch and taste, a Buddha baby as attuned to the subtle
sounds and movements of my presence as I was to the necessity of her
continuous breath. Like Oscar from *The tin drum*, she seemed to be “one of
those clairaudient infants whose mental development is complete at birth and
thereafter simply confirmed” (Grass, 2009, p. 35).

All of this I thought on the day that my child was three days old until,
at one point, she suddenly startled with a whole-body reaction and a cry. It
was a classic Moro reflex⁴, a reaching out and grasping for our species’ pre-
visual history, a plea for connection and care. I held her closer and rocked
her. “Sh,” I said. “There’s nothing there. I didn’t hear a thing.” And that was
it—the prick of the finger that stained the snow-white linen red, the shove of
the reed basket into the current. It took twenty years for the story to complete
itself, but it began in that moment with a startled response to an unheard
sound and a set of a-cultured senses.

The twenty years that passed between then and now were challenging.
With that first decision to focus on the experience of listening, my planned
semi-autobiographical family history immediately became a conceptual
novel, the writing of which seemed far removed from my experience and
expertise. At face value, my narrator, a child who hears what her mother
could not, had nothing to do with me or my past. Like most of my peers, I
was a visual child of the twentieth century, born in the decade of the first

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⁴ The Moro Reflex is an infantile reflex normally present in all infants up to four or five months of age
as a response to a sudden loss of support (Wikipedia).
colour televisions, educated in chalk dust, hating every minute of music practice, and missing every high note in the choir I was discouraged from returning to.

Musicians ran in my family. My great-aunt was awarded a Member of the British Empire (M.B.E.) for her service to music, another was a child prodigy who could play sonatas by ear at the age of three, and my father was a gifted violinist, yet even in ballet my teacher would say, “Move with the beat. Can’t you hear the music?” If, in those early days, I braved a mention of my sound-oriented project, the reaction was unanimous: “But you’re not a musician, are you? A dancer? A performance or sound-installation artist?” To think about sound was, in common opinion, to think about music, about producing, crafting or responding to it either creatively or critically, and it was apparent to both myself and others that this was not my field.

Believing then that I had no talent and little aptitude in the field of listening, I started to write with trepidation about a clairaudient child. I began by searching outside of myself for every reference to what she might hear. I thought, perhaps, that it was just about finding the right vocabulary, and of then creating the sound images and haunting soundscapes that would support my vision. I sourced what “sound poems” I could find, realising even then that the idea of a “sound poem” was questionable, and that written language itself often failed to “sound”. While some of the poems were beautiful, there was a paucity of “sound words” in their texts and they didn’t help my character, or me, to hear.

Next, I looked to appropriate language and concepts from other fields and experts. I read what I could of experimental and theoretical approaches to sound but, twenty years ago, sound theory was still in its infancy and concentrated on sound artists and sound technology, or as I felt, on sound manipulators and “objectifiers”. I felt like a fraud, stumbling about in a field
that neither interested nor engaged me, and that seemed to have little to do with what I thought my character would perceive.

My continuing struggle to develop a narrative of sound finally demanded that I look again at my own patterns of perception and sensation, and to really try to perceive them this time. Slowly, I started to acknowledge aspects of my experience that brought me closer to my topic. As a student, for example, I was myopic. Squinting from the back row of the classroom, I had to listen harder just to compensate. As a university administrator now, I tend to leave my emails and visual reports unopened on my desk, and work by walking and talking and thinking in movement instead. As the wife of my second husband, I focus on touch instead of our visible signs of age. These tendencies, along with my light sensitivity and increasing night blindness, have made it clear to me that I really don’t see so well, and that the visual thinking skills much lauded by designers and best-sellers that could have helped me to spell, remember my math sums and the faces I was supposed to network with, were never within my purview.

With this slow acceptance of my non-visual tendencies, I also started to own the labels we didn’t use when I was a child, particularly dyslexia, “a distortion and mistrust of what we see” (National Center for Learning Disabilities) and verbal apraxia, dyspraxia, “slow and laboured speech, characterised by sound reversals, additions and word approximations” (National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders). These disabilities may or may not have been a part of my not speaking until I was seven, but that developmental delay resulted in years of speech therapy, of listening to the sounds of speech and practising their production. Speech, a natural for others, was a hard-won skill for me and I still reflect on what perhaps I had been listening to before I was drilled in language.
When, as a young adult, I finally decided to write, it was for rhythm and alliteration, not as a poet, but poetically. I imagined myself as a storyteller labouring over writing as a means to find the fluency and clear-sighted intelligence previously denied to me, and perhaps to convey what I had heard, belatedly, in language.

There was another aspect of my acceptance of the non-visual in my life — my, at some stages, daily yoga practice, a practice of quiet motion in semi-dark rooms, of closing my eyes and of looking within, a practice of listening to my own breath and heartbeat and surge of blood. I became a dedicated practitioner of yoga in 1991, long before this project emerged, and when I started, I had no idea that the simple tools of observation and awareness that yoga touted could result in a totally different epistemology. At the time that I started this project, I was still adapting to the demands of a daily practice and not really thinking about the subtle ways it would infiltrate my life and consciousness. It was only with time that I began to comprehend the role of yoga practice, and also to understand that listening and proprioception are fundamental to the practice: that by waking each morning to practise yoga, I was, in a sense, also practising a disruption in the Western sensual hierarchy. And it was not only the experience of an alternative sensual hierarchy that my practice introduced but the yogic, or more specifically tantric, methodology of using the body as the tool for knowledge and transformation. Thinking about the senses, and practising the awareness and control of them each day, introduced the idea of an embodied way of knowing and thinking that, today, I can relate to discussions of embodiment and affect but, at that time, I still mistrusted. Instead I could only grasp the idea of the senses being that which must be slowly withdrawn from external distractions in order to find the inner senses, the inner sound, the connection with the underlying sacred vibration that is expressed by the sacred mantra “Om”.
So given my own perceptions and in spite of my missed musical gene, perhaps it wasn’t so accidental that I had fallen into this project of sound and hearing. Still, it took me many years to appreciate these things, and I discovered other challenges in my initial approach that halted my novel’s development. Voice, for example, and questions of the relationship between oral forms, print technology and reader address. The story I was writing was not an autobiography, but I wanted the perceptual awareness of a first-person point of view. My protagonist, Kayla, as a clairaudient listener, was that perceptual anchor ("hearer"), but she was simultaneously evoking sound as she imagined her story spoken to her absent niece. Her dual role as listener and "sounder" is paralleled by the various portrayals of other listeners and tellers in the story, as by exploring ideas of listening and hearing in the narrative form, I was also, by default, exploring the relationship between teller and told, confessee and confessor, first person and second person, and the relationship between different oral and visual forms of narrative. The focus on listening problematized the concept of voice as well, for while in contemporary literary discourses voice often refers to both a stylistic approach to writing and a political presence, for Kayla, as a listening character, it is rooted in her audible experience of it. That she is in her way a medium, someone who hears the voices of books and furniture and winds, further nuances the questions about perception and voice.

In the end, what I thought would be a simple narrative about a clairaudient child and her sister became an interrogation of perception, sensation, voice and embodiment and the strategies of conveying these in a work of cultural production. But during my initial approach to the work I didn’t really know this. I only knew that I had no confidence to broach these topics and that, if it was ever to be completed, it would have to be a research study as well as a creative work.
And so it happened, but life happened too.

I completed an MFA in creative writing at Arizona State University in 1996. My MFA served, for me, as my trade school—a valuable apprenticeship that helped me discover this story and develop the tools of my craft but did not facilitate the research that I needed to fully explore my topic.

Shortly afterwards I edited my first book, a book on craft and discipline and juggling cultural production with child rearing, which included a list of enthusiastic and famed contributors such as Grace Paley, Sallie Tisdale, Carol Shields, Elizabeth Berg and Janette Turner Hospital. A similar book was published just as we completed our first draft so the final work was never published, but it was a part of my apprenticeship and through it I explored the role of the ultimate listeners—our children and next generation—in the work of women writers.

Shortly afterwards, my second child was born. She slipped out quietly without the drama of the first, but she heralded the end of my focus on my writing work. I had to work to support my family so I moved across the country for a job at a well-known school of the arts. There, I edited my second book—How we live our yoga: Teachers and writers on how yoga enriches, surprises and heals us (Jeremijenko, 2001)—which was published and released on 10 September 2001. It was a commercial failure, though still a book that used the medium of the body and embodied knowledge to understand the human experience. My first marriage ended shortly afterwards and with it the eleven years that I had spent living as an immigrant in the States. Returning home to Australia and my dysfunctional family of origin was not an option, so instead I took a job in Doha, Qatar and established first a safe house for my two small children and myself, then a career and then a yoga studio to nurture my passion. I juggled my full-time job, a growing business teaching and training teachers for the studio, with being a single mother in a very foreign country. I
was alone with little to no time for writing but the project didn’t die; it just went very quiet.

But other things got louder. I became more and more embedded in the practice of yoga and as a teacher-trainer explored yoga anatomy and philosophy, particularly modern understandings of Tantra and Nada yoga—the yoga of transformation of the body through sound. I started dreaming of dissecting cadavers as a way to understand the body. I was close to India so travelled there frequently with my children to study and practise, learning in the guru tradition at the feet of a master, singing sutras, repeating mantras.

Living in an Arabic country introduced a whole other spectrum to my sound considerations. Unlike the mechanical drone of urban living in the West, life in Qatar is measured out in parcels according to the call to prayer. From dawn to dusk, it echoes five times a day, delimiting space as well as time, tribal relationships as well as religious ones. Every neighbourhood has its minaret that rises above the flat roofs, a visual peak significant for its aural role. As expatriates we are enclaved, often in the high-rise centre of town. We represent unwelcome forces of change and are largely excluded from the more traditional lifestyle, but still, for those of us who stay, it infiltrates us slowly and subtly. With time, we let go of our appointment books and treat deadlines more like lines in the shifting sands than drop-dead imperatives. As women, we don high heels to take advantage of our more gendered roles and spend much time on tea and conversation. The desert becomes a space within us and the sweeping skies a necessity. The smell of hot dust and spices welcomes us home after travels.

Stories start to work differently within and on our bodies as well. Qatar still resonates with its Arabic traditions and oral past and many of the story forms speak to this through their performative nature. The local tales begin with a prayer and end with a ritual, and warn against jinn and donkey
monsters that roam the streets at noon when all should be inside asleep. The folk form *siray*, epically long narratives which translate literally as “a traveling” or “a journeying” (Reynolds, 1989, p. 82), and alternate between vernacular prose and colloquial poetry. Remaining *hakawatis* (traditional storytellers) move rapidly between these sections of spoken prose, rhymed prose and sung poetry in their renditions of *siray*, some accompanied by musicians and other performers, some as soloists, but all creating a unique “sound” to the story, which is as important as the narrative itself. And, of course, these performance modes of storytelling are evoked in the famous frame stories of the region and remind us of the many frame stories of the medieval period, in which writers create a listening audience within the text and by so doing provide a bridge between the actual oral storytelling traditions and a written genre that aims to depict those traditions. The Scheherazades, Sinbads and Ali Babas are models for the creative transcribers at work in Qatar today. They act in defiance, are unreliable narrators, crooks and adventurers, telling and appropriating stories for ulterior motives, and by so doing they establish a free flow of influence between voice and text, performance and presentation. In Qatar’s rapid, almost desperate transcription of its oral past into a sustainable collection of “Qatari” stories, questions arise. Which part was spoken? Which part written? Which part was performed? Which part transcribed? Which story within the story within the story is true? And what does this contemporary experience of containing and recording orality offer to someone trying to subvert the sensual hierarchy?5

These questions and my experience of the oral/aural nature of Qatar were further complicated by the entirely contradictory sensual context I was experiencing at my work. As an Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at

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5Qatar Research Fund, Qatar Foundation, Bloomsbury Press Qatar and various branch campuses on the Education City campus have all sponsored numerous projects in support of the transcription of Qatari oral stories. One example is *The donkey lady and other tales from the gulf* (2013), edited by VCUQatar faculty Patty Paine, Jesse Ulmer and Michael Hersrud.
Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar, a branch campus of the leading public school of art and design in the U.S., I was continually bombarded with the visual. Prior to that appointment, I had worked for ten years in modern dance, not as a dancer but on the production, student advising, and education and management side. While the performance aspect of dance resulted in a different orientation from the non-performative and internal approaches of yoga and writing, there was (in dance) an appreciation of the body’s wisdom that I shared daily with my peers. It was never stated or discussed, of course, and at the time I was only just embarking on my sensual adventures, so I would not have ventured to define it, but regardless, there was an awareness that we inhabited disciplines where proprioception, the sense of balance, an appreciation of movement in and through space, tactility and the haptic were combined with an appreciation of the inner and outer impacts of space and muscular articulations. Within this shared context, the difference in our physical disciplines (yoga, dance) was like speaking the same language only with slightly different accents.

This was not my experience working in a purely visual arts school where visual and design thinking was lauded over all other approaches to knowledge and creativity. By the time I was working there, I had developed this project further and had claimed my sensual orientations, these being a “touchy-feely” yoga type and a “flaky, beset-by-voices” writerly type. While the negative stereotypes I adopted to describe myself reflect the prejudices of this environment, it also made me reflect deeper on the structures and paradigms of knowledge that were so unquestionably accepted in the academy and that were inflicted on students unilaterally, regardless of different cultural and sensory contexts.

And so the story of my story continued, becoming more and more layered by my personal encounters with sound and the sensual experience,
until I was finally ready to start piecing it together. It had been a long process and yet the time between the genesis of my project and my commitment to it had proven a gift. Not only had I claimed ownership of the material, gained a little wisdom and experience, and found the common threads between my divergent activities, but the field of sensual studies had developed. In fact, the “sensual revolution” had occurred and I now had access to sensual resources that encompassed the length, breadth and depth of cultural and social studies. Additionally, I had lived the embodied sensation of the story I wanted to tell for many years, and had a clear feeling of the associated psychological reality I wanted to convey. The inspiration I had received from my infant to use sound as my sensual strategy had evolved with the growth of both of my children and my journeys with them in different sensual territories, and in yoga, had made me confident in my choice to apply it to the sisters’ transformative encounters with their environment and each other. My narrator’s position as storyteller, confessor and spell-breaker had yet to be established, and would only fully emerge with considerations of method, form and sensual attachment, yet it was brewing in my considerations of the oral and romantic and in the semi-autobiographical nature of the protagonist’s encounter with the occult. With the novel-in-process so deeply embedded in my personal journey, yet so obviously testing the limits of the romance form I had chosen as my medium, I believed I had established a very clear need to engage in practice-led research.

It was at that point that I enrolled as a part-time external student in a PhD at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University and began to actively write again while simultaneously conducting a literature review. This placement of myself and my work at the artist/scholar, theorist/praxis cusp established the push and pull between creative and theoretical impulses that would define the rest of the process, and as I struggled to understand this
new position, it became necessary to question what I thought my practice-led research should or could be.

As far as I was concerned, my goals for engaging in this hybrid method were clear. I wanted to advance my creative project, to give myself the tools I needed to bring it to fruition, and to mine it for the implications it might lend to my future works, my own process and my positioning as a writer. I wanted, as Stephen Scrivener suggests of other artist/scholars, to engage in relevant research to enhance my practice, while “…not wishing to suspend my creative work or allow it to become separate from, or subordinate to, the research activity” (Arnold, 2005, p. 3). Yet even while keeping my own work and process at the forefront of my investigation, I simultaneously believed that my action-based investigation of the sensual could result in a significant new understanding of the role of our sensuality in our production of cultural artefacts, and not only because all art is, on some level, produced by an artist’s experience of the sensual. In this way, I felt the project already had elements of practice-based research built into it, but that mine was a very specific and particular “take” on the creative rendition of the sensual.

The difference between practice-led research and practice-based research provided by Alan Young in *Studies in Material Thinking* (Young, 2011, p. 7) was helpful as I tried to tease out the relationship of my work in process to the production of new knowledge and/or of new creative approaches. I quote here at length:

At a simple level practice-based research has been defined as “original investigations undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of practice” whilst practice-led research is “concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice” (Candy,
Biggs (2004) sees practice-based research as that which “prioritizes some property of experience arising through practice, over cognitive content arising from a reflection”. Biggs notes that practice-led research can be seen from a perspective of the limitations of language, for example, in the difficulties in explaining how to ride a bicycle, and cites Polanyi’s notion: “we know more than we can tell”. Practice-based and practice-led approaches have been taken up with different emphases and developed in diverse ways by different practitioners. (Young, 2011, p. 1)

With these definitions in mind, the degree to which my work became one or the other would depend not only on the methods I used, but on the outcomes and applications. The potential, however, of a reconfigured sensorium to inform both my work and serve as a model for the work of others, allowed me to hope that, in some ways, it could realistically be both.
On Methods and Material Souvenirs

Having established in the preceding pages that my project seeks to ask how a practising writer can approach the possibility of a reconfiguration of the senses, apply it to a romantic novel, and explore the implications of this for our methods of sensual representation, I have then offered a personal contextualisation and a mapping of my own informal sensual investigations, particularly in the realm of sound. I have suggested that the romance novel is a contemporary form on the oral/visual cusp, and therefore more inherently open to experiments in sound and telling and voice—all questions that arise when sound becomes central to a story—than other novelistic genres. The questions, however, of how to first position the sensual as the primary creative force and then how to materialize it in my work cannot be developed without a consideration of my methodological options and choices. An experimental workshop I conducted in collaboration with two of my PhD supervisors, Drs. Patrick West and Jondi Keane, was central in refining my approach. In particular, we looked at the process involved in producing cultural artefacts and materializing the writing process. I present the details of this workshop at length as it informed my methodological approach and helped me to finally bring my project together in such a way that it was both significant theoretically and, in my opinion, successful creatively as well.

Souvenirs of the Senses workshop for Doha, Qatar

The workshop we conducted—Souvenirs of the Senses—was part of *Tasmeen*\(^6\) 2013: *Hybrid Making*, the 2013 iteration of a biennial design conference held at my workplace, Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar (VCUQatar). The conference subtitle, Hybrid Making, invited a consideration of how undoing traditional modes of art-making can lead to the creation of more complex objects. A secondary subtitle, Made in Qatar, evoked a discussion of what it

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\(^6\) Arabic term for design.
means to be spending time in, and making things in, one place as opposed to any other place. The five-day pre-conference workshop period seemed an appropriate venue for us to work together and specifically offered the possibility of in-depth considerations of sensualised methodologies.

Recognising this potential, we proposed the Souvenirs of the Senses workshop objective:

Our collaborative team proposes to use the idea of suturing—of materials, spaces, words, objects and environments to memories, dreams, associations, sensations and impulses—in order to arrive at the synapse or juncture of new formations. These new formations will be inspired by the souvenirs or found objects sourced in diverse international places. (West, Keane & Jeremijenko, 2013)

Our proposal conjectured that places are woven into the fabric of other places through the inward and outward flows of the senses in travellers and in the dispositions and practices of their “foreign-travelling” bodies. It further suggested that souvenirs can embody the intercultural flows of people, ideas and interactions and have the potential to be the hybrid form par excellence.

Our choice to focus on the souvenir was not accidental. When considered carefully, a souvenir is more than a product or commodity. It is also a recollection object, an heirloom, fetish, gift or artwork. As an inherently trans-national object, it can also serve as a relic or artefact, or as a “radioactive fossil” (Marks, 2000, p. 80) laden with memory and emblematic of the process of meaning making and placement. Tied as it is to its definition of evoking memory, a souvenir can reference the ineffable remnants of sensual experience and fray the divisions between product design, art-making, place-making, meaning-making, engineering and writing. In short, the souvenir can be considered the perfect laboratory for place-making and hybrid cross-art-form makings and re-engineering. It can also provide a model methodology
for other cross-art-form experiments, including written texts and romantic novels, which have an interest in place, memory and the sensory.

Fortunately the proposal was accepted, and Drs. West and Keane travelled to Qatar in March of 2013 to conduct the workshop with me. This enabled us to work collaboratively on the development of a method that could serve both my project and the workshop. It also added multiple perspectives to the workshop, as with two of the three workshop leaders being Australia-based visitors and I as the third, being an Australian expatriate living in Qatar, and the five other participants, students from the States, Syria, Lebanon and Qatar, the workshop was able to start suturing place immediately. This diversity also enriched the discussions of souvenirs, as embedded in the concept of souvenir is the recognition that they are, like fetishes, “not the product of one culture but of the encounter between at least two” (Marks, 2000, p. 80).

We began the workshop with an invitation to explore the concept of place, in this case the place of Qatar, and with the suggestion that we approach it not as a given set of boundaries but as an interaction, a geography created by its relationship to the senses. This understanding was informed by Paul Rodaway who points out in Sensuous geographies: Body, sense and place that “the senses are not merely passive receptors of particular kinds of environmental stimuli but are actively involved in the structuring of that information and are significant in the overall sense of a world achieved by the sentient” (Rodaway, 1994, p. 3). “Geographical understanding”, he further suggests, “arises out of the stimulation of, or apprehension by, the senses” (Rodaway, 1994, p. 5) and the role of the senses in geographical understanding is “a kind of structuring of space and defining of place” (Rodaway, 1994, p. 4).
Nigel Thrift suggests a similar relational-based appreciation of geography when he argues that it is the process of the participants circulating within and between particular spaces that contributes to place-making. Every place, he argues, should be “regarded as a knot tied from the strands of the movement of its many inhabitants” (2006, p. 142). With this appreciation in mind then, our exploration of place-making with cross-art forms started with Qatar not as a static backdrop but as a porous networked space and active collaborator as apprehended by the senses. This awareness also reinforced our apprehension of place as a mapping designed and created by sensorial engagement with a series of sensual regions, which we opposed to the concept of place as a politically defined entity or an iconic sense of “country”.

However, as we were also interested in their place-making and transnational possibilities, we also suggested that instead of merely attaching sensations to objects, we could also explore ways in which the objects could continue to evoke that point of connection in other milieus. An example presented was a box of amber I travelled with for twenty years. Whenever this box was opened, its scent immediately evoked the sensual experiences I had had in India, but as it was transported first to the United States and then to Qatar, new layers were added to that experience, weaving the memories of India into the clothes it scented during an East Coast winter and later into the strangeness of Qatar when I first arrived. As a sensual experience, opening that box and smelling the amber evoked all places simultaneously, reminding us of the way the body brings its sensual memories to all other sensual experiences.

Given our emphasis on the role of the sensual in place-making and object-making, the pieces that resulted from the workshop all displayed a multi-sensorial response to Qatar. In our exhibition, the shelf displaying the work was divided into sensory clusters: proximity senses (scent and touch),
sound, and space and movement (see Figure 3). Other thematic elements ran through them all, including the folding of the horizon into and through the objects and the unusual use of written text. One piece, a long straight line spanning many sheets of paper, spoke to the horizontalism of Qatar, but hung vertically in the final exhibition, evoking not only the contrasting experience of the high-rise capital, Doha, but the layering of the desert’s prehistory. A series of photos of this line, caught by the wind and rolling through the expanse of an archaeological dig, accompanied it; the artist/visitor chasing his horizon also encapsulated the differences in our sense of movement and proprioception in strange spaces.

Another related response to the environment evoked the way that landscape is inscribed onto us and, at the same time, exists as the unexplored wilderness we are yet to become. In Keane’s Hand Dunes, clay was squeezed, scanned, then 3-D-printed. This experience of clay memories, transformed into digital information that could be transmitted and produced simultaneously in other places, introduced concepts of globalisation and mass production into our exploration of the layerings of place (see Figures 2 and 4). My piece, the Acoustascope, was designed as a “user experience prototype” evoking affect and the crystallised sand of desert roses (filigree-like pre-crystallised formations). Like all the other pieces, it had multi-modal, multi-sensory points of attachment that were re-engineered to produce a shell-like, echoic, 3-D print that not only caught the sound of the wind but the act of silencing to listen to it. A poem, Wind words/Sound shapes, was 3-D-printed into the surface, running words together, into and through the experience of listening. As stated in my exhibition description, my piece evoked a child’s toy and just as “the kaleidoscope manipulates visual geometric patterns the acoustascope captures and manipulates the experience of wind and the ambient noise of the immediate environment”, layering many sound experiences and environments together (see Figure 1).
A commonality between my piece and the tactic of 3-D printing explored by Keane was the focus on the materialization of writing, which became an important technique in addressing the numerous considerations on hybridity that our experimentations evoked. Within the context of the workshop, we imagined material writing as both object/word hybrid and the materialization of process, affect and attachment. We also saw material writing as a possible method for the very different types of artists, designers and fabricators involved in the workshop to develop a mutual process for problem solving. The relevance of this technique was apparent in other pieces in the exhibition.

As a writer, West saw writing materialized throughout the vistas of Qatar, in the sand swept in sandstorms over the tarmac, and in the fluttering of plastic unravelling from newly installed light poles. His split-screen video used the medium of video to suggest this materiality of writing: the plastic undulating against a dusk desert sky evoking a loose, disintegrating, run-on syntax. The video was complemented by his piece titled Qasmonauts, a poetic consideration, and a 3-D-printed rocket replete with falcon headgear, combining the lunar aspects of the environment, the notion of comings and goings, and the affect of a traveller’s displacement.

A final piece collapsed materialized writing with the sense of smell. One of our participants evoked the scent of the souqs and of women walking by in abayas, drenched with perfume, with scented silk pieces etched with the words “breathe before it is gone”. This connection of smell to the fundamental fact of breathing and the life of the body reminds us of the fragmentary, networked, performative and ephemeral qualities of space and of the self in relation to it.

Regardless though of the outcomes of the workshop, which were in fact beautiful, evocative and conceptually interesting, it is the methods that
we worked with that are of primary importance to this exegesis. As stated, our primary interest in the workshop was our sensual reactions to and experience of place, and our exploration began with the argument that our items of creative production should result from a clear focus on these. This resulted in the concept of “reverse engineering”: that is, the notion that instead of attaching meaning and experience to our given forms, we begin with the sensual and let objects and forms emerge from that. The applicability of this to my work is clear as, like in the workshop, my novel begins with the sensual and sound and its meaning-giving and affect-giving potential remains the central aspect of it. In fact, it was only through my engagement with the workshop that I came to understand that I was trying to reverse engineer the process of creating a romantic novel.

By using the idea of the souvenir, we also focused on the concept of layering place and meaning across space and time. This was also relevant to my process. As a long-term expatriate with no permanent home, I experience place from the mixed perspective of self-exile, banishment, economic migrant, itinerant worker and traveller. Given this broad mixture of self-concepts, I initially felt a personal disconnection from the sensual environments that I was writing about in my novel, and I spent many insecure hours trying to recreate and construct them from reading, YouTube audio tracks, research and imagination. The validation of the layering of sensual environments as a method in creative production enabled me to more confidently place my protagonist’s reflective voice. It also allowed the layering of sensual experiences to become a dominant technique in my novel. Thus, the winds of the Australian Simpson Desert and the shamals or northerly winds I experience in the Qatari fringe of the Arabian Desert are interwoven, as is the sound of water in a desert bathroom, the washing machines of Brisbane and Arizona, and tree frogs after a tropical rain. The richness of sensual experience when it is transferred, transported and
imaginatively recreated is thereby a central part of the novel, and my recognition of their heightened significance when layered (which evolved from the workshop process) informed the structural evolution of the novel.

The final methodological approach that emerged from the workshop and that I used to inform my praxis while writing *A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality* was that of material writing. To elaborate on this concept, I quote from one of the three articles co-written by Keane, West, Dr. Byrad Yvellard (a conference committee member) and myself, as a result of the Tasmeen workshop. In this one we assert that by writing materially we consciously enact the creative process and create situations in which language becomes a prompt in order to intensify the relationships between thought, feeling and perception. We explain material writing this way:

> [T]he creative manoeuvres involved in material writing foreground the connection between modes of engagement rather than modes of expression, since it is our assertion that the expressions always contain bundles and traits of other expression through the body’s contact with the materiality of its environment. When material writing can prompt a movement between conceptual processes of capture and recognition and move towards perceptual exploration and sensory engagement, then writers and printers become hybrid-makers who collaborate to reach into the materials of the world and recompose experience.

(Material writing: Towards hybrid-making, 2013, p. 2)

My own sensual experiences of the process of writing therefore became as important as the sensual considerations in the writing, and in the article I elaborate on how I define different types of writing in terms of the actual practice of writing:

For example, when I write a story (in this case a novel), I first write by hand into a book, and relive this writing as I walk around during the
day, with sentences being enacted into the rhythm of a walk. Re-
reading and editing of this work is done in zones of comfort. Other
types of writing are carefully outlined using a computer, at a desk and
with a bright light overhead, where the time of day, measure of light,
consumption of coffee to just that point of slight hysteria— are all a
part of the bodily enactment of writing. (Material writing: Towards
hybrid-making, p. 5)

The materialization of my creative process is, in turn, exemplified by Kayla’s
materialization of her storytelling/writing process through her layering of
remembered experiences and her focus on the sound of breath, that being the
bodily experience behind the language of her written orality. Her
interpretation of her story as both an act of yoga and of spell-breaking is also
in part her interpretation of the materialization of process. Not only does she
act from a material world with every experience and reflection dictated to by
the sensual experience of sound, but she expects that her words will
materialize in such a way that it undoes the damage she has done through a
misapplication of sound.

In a different way, Edward Dudley’s identification of one aspect of the
romantic novel as “the way the problems of retelling the story become part of
the story itself” (The endless text: Don Quixote and the hermeneutics of romance,
1997, p. 318) speaks to the materializing of the writing process. My own
difficulties in the telling of this story drew it out to a twenty-year process, and
it wasn’t only due to the conceptual and sensual problems I listed earlier in
the paper; for at the root of the novel, at its very base, even before sound as a
creative strategy had become a consideration, the story had lived within me
as a bodily sensation.

That sensation, which I experienced as a rock in my belly and a
restlessness behind my knees that set me to walking the moment I sat down,
was a fundamental sense of shame. This shame was all-encompassing, including the shame I felt as a child of my parents’ dysfunctions—their violence and hoarding, their unabashed sexuality and their many children. It also included the shame I felt at first being less than and reduced by my sister, and then at allowing envy and spite to make me in some way responsible for, and even happy about, her unhappiness. From there, shame extended into every part of my life and with it into my protagonist, Kayla. Kayla is ashamed of not being yogi enough, successful enough, smart enough, thin enough, or popular enough. Her sense of shame makes her believe that she is responsible for all the damage and despair she sees around her, including her sister’s car accident, her other sister’s borderline schizophrenia, her father’s rages and even the disenfranchised lives of the indigenous communities she encounters in the outback. Its all-encompassing nature inhibits her ability to connect with others and explains, in part, her choice to stay in the desert with Doug—as the isolation she experiences there provides her a place to hide while the invitation to magic offers the promise of power and transformation. The only hope she has to live with her shame is to tell a story that she knows will shame her more, but which she hopes will remove it as a sensation from her body. Having written the story she tells, I know—on many levels—that she is only partly successful.

Regardless of the cathartic possibilities of writing or telling a story, the process of encapsulating this sensation of shame and hopelessness was, without doubt, the most difficult part of my writing process, and my attempts to materialize it was probably what brought me more fully to the sensual experiences of the body. Shame, after all, is generally defined as being unhappy about who we are as opposed to guilt, which is usually seen as feeling bad about what we did (Barker, 2014). If we accept the notion that shame is about who we are, then we can suggest that it lives in the body in a very fundamental way, and by reverse-engineering the creative process and
materializing the process of the thinking—writing and resisting the writing of shame—we can confront the body, and along with it shame, more readily. I would also suggest that by using reverse engineering as a central methodology that we can find new forms for shame as a way of re-encountering writing novels, the body and shame itself.

In the third section of this exegesis, I explore the implications of this link between the bodily sensation of shame (which crosses over the bodies of writers and characters) and the perceptual, affective and bodily field of my character more fully. However, before I do, it is necessary to integrate the rationale, question and method I have already presented into current sensual theory.

Once done, I will be able to address the possibility of reconfiguring the experience of the senses in a romantic novel, and to access the success of my work as both a specimen and a model. In this way, I will also be able to reflect more deeply on my process as practice-led research as opposed to practice-based research.
Part 2: Beyond Binaries and Hierarchies

“The body, like the senses, has a history.”

(Thomas Csordas, 2014)
On Metaphors, Nature and Culture

As has been previously stated and will be argued here more fully, the typically visual-literacy world of Western academia has privileged the visual over all other senses. This emphasis has, on the one hand, proved invaluable as the basis of much scientific research, but an unquestioning acceptance of its dominance ignores the argument that the senses in themselves are cumulative, accomplished theoreticians and cultural productions in themselves. In the following discussion, I will develop this statement by first illustrating how vision serves as the root or model metaphor for Western cultures and then by summarising opposing arguments about the natural/cultural concepts of sensual evolution.

That the visual dominates as the root metaphor for knowledge in our Western culture is now widely accepted. Just a glance at the language we use in everyday life demonstrates the ubiquity of the visual metaphor. Our folk sayings, for example, are filled with such insights as “seeing is believing” and “believe half of what you see and nothing of what you hear”. We define our perspectives through our outlook or point of view and say such things as “I see” when we understand, or “I need to see for myself” when we want proof. We “see eye to eye” when we agree, say “let me see” and “there’s more to this than meets the eye” when we are thinking. Words such as “speculate”, “demonstrate” and “introspect” derive from the Latin specere, “to look at or observe” and “theory”, like theatre, means to “look at attentively, to behold”.

This permeation of language by ocular references is complemented by innumerable practices that privilege the role of vision and sight in our lives, including superstitions about broken mirrors and shattered images, light in religious thought, and the use of photography and video to document reality. It is also evident in our literature. Writers have available to them a language rich in visual nuance, “sound poems” are defined as something discrete and
different from normal poems (which are by default then visual), and perception is truth only when it is observed experience. In fact, it could easily be argued that the dominance of the visual metaphor in Western language and literature is so embedded that it is hardly noticeable. Mary Kinzie, in an essay on a more-or-less accidental sampling of contemporary perceptual poets, asserts that the poets she examines believe in seeing more strongly than they believe in anything else and that, as a topic and vehicle for many of their central metaphors, looking, seeing and the visible are considered as a good in themselves. On the basis of this conclusion, she argues that vision itself is the great literary cliché (Kinze, 1979, p. 3).

It could, of course, be argued that these visual metaphors and embedded ocular references are only poetical or symbolic devices; or, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) argue in *Metaphors we live by*, it could be suggested that metaphors are fundamental mechanisms of mind that structure our most basic understandings and shape our perceptions and actions. In their argument, metaphors are that which explains the unknown by comparing it to the known, and can therefore be read as embodying and configuring both the abiding and changing preoccupations of an age. Certain metaphors, specifically those that directly or indirectly evoke modes or forms of human sensory experience such as sight, sound, touch or smell, can be further defined as “modal” metaphors (as cited in Hibbitts, 2006). A tendency in a poet or individual to favour a “modal” metaphor reflects a broad cultural bias for that sense and/or an inclination towards values that that sense has been deemed phenomenologically to support or promote (as cited in Hibbitts, 2006). Defining the visual as the “great literary cliché” therefore becomes a more impactful statement.

The cultural bias towards the visual suggested above is sometimes linked to the evolutionary development of the human species, the argument
being that as we evolved into diurnal animals, standing first on our hind legs and then taking to the trees, we needed to replace a sensorium that privileged smell (so important for animals on the ground and at night) by one that allowed us to see long distances in daylight. This evolutionary argument is supported by references to the sophistication of, and high level of development of, the optic nerve, which has eighteen times as many nerve endings as the ear, the nearest competitor (as cited in Jay, 1993, p. 6). It is also supported by such psychologists as Michael Argyle and Mark Cook, who suggest that “the use of the gaze in human social behaviour does not vary much between cultures; it is a cultural universal” (as cited in Jay, 1993, p. 6).

Arguments such as these, which support a biological and evolutionary privileging of sight, can be countered by those who references to the many cultural considerations of sight. James Gibson, for example, who is cited in Martin Jay’s *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*, suggests that there are two basic visual practices which produce what he calls “the visual world” and “the visual field”.

In the former, sight is ecologically intertwined with the other senses to generate the experience of “depth shapes,” whereas in the latter, sight is detached by fixating the eyes to produce “projected shapes” instead. A plate, for example, will be experienced as round in the visual world, but as an ellipse in the visual field where the rules of perspectival representation prevail. The implication of Gibson’s argument is that vision is normally crossed with the other senses, but it can be artificially separated out. Thus, cultures might be differentiated according to how radically they distinguish between the visual field and the visual world. (p. 4)

Another argument that favours this cultural determination of sight is offered by Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle’s book *Deciphering the senses* (1985), in
which they argue that the development of sight and language is linked and that both emerge at approximately the same moment of maturation. To elaborate:

The ability to visualize something internally is closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental images... The link between vision, visual memory and verbalisation can be quite startling. There is therefore something revealing in the ambiguities surrounding the word “image” which can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental or verbal phenomena. (as cited in Jay, 1993, p. 6)

If, as they suggest, vision is mediated by language and by cultural refinements of the “visual world”, then the universality of vision is, in part, mediated by the experience of language and culture, and we are faced again with our earlier supposition that the senses, sitting as they do on the permeable boundary between nature and culture, are socialised to some extent or the other. The question here, although ultimately an impossible one to answer, might concern only the degree to which the senses are both natural and cultural.

There is, however, another approach to the nature/culture argument which suggests that our sensual arrangements determine culture rather than our culture acting as the determining factor on our senses. This position is represented by W. J. T. Mitchell, who states, “The study of visual culture must abandon the mantra that we see the way we do because we are social animals [and instead focus on how] our social arrangements take the form they do because we are seeing animals” (as cited in Erlmann, 2010, p. 16). Mitchell’s concern that perceived oppositions between the natural and cultural in the field of visual studies invite another dichotomy is entirely valid, especially when considering sound, which is frequently presented in a
static opposition to sight, yet his return to the natural and his call for a “dialogue with visual nature” (as cited in Erlmann, 2010, p. 16) should also be approached carefully.

In summary, I have suggested that our cultural forms are influenced by a root metaphor that is visual, which may be the result of either a natural or cultural evolution. This consideration now sets the stage for a further investigation of the hierarchy of the senses, that will suggest that the line separating what is said to be natural about the senses and what is said to be social has been constantly shifting, always evolving and more often than not running alongside and overlapping with each other.
Binaries Part 1: On Visual Epistemologies

Typically the favouring of the visual in Western languages, epistemology, and by association ontologies, is traced back as far as literacy itself to the hierarchy of the senses as first established by Plato and Aristotle. As Daniel Chandler points out, “Whilst ranking reason over the senses, amongst the senses Plato accorded primacy to sight and when Aristotle decided that we had five senses, he explicitly ranked sight over hearing” (1994, p. 2). This is borne out by the first line of the *Metaphysics*, in which Aristotle writes, “Of all the senses, trust only the sense of sight”, and then again later, “The reason for this is that, of all the senses, sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions” (as cited in Wolfe, p. 3).

This emphasis on the visual in Greek thought has often been linked to the light-drenched Mediterranean environment of Greece itself, and although there have been dissenting voices, the world of the ancient Greeks is generally considered one in which light reigned supreme and in which sight was the source of contemplation and the basis of philosophy. In line with this interpretation, the eye was equated to the window of the mind and geometry seen as a visual and spatial expression of mathematics. Opposed, more often than not, to its more verbally oriented Hebraic competitor, the art of the Greeks is said to feature its gods in idealised visual forms whereas the Hebrew god had a thousand names and no images.

Like all major philosophies, this interpretation of Greek (and Aristotelian) thought can easily be complicated, and touch is often cited as the competing sense of the epoch; regardless, the language of this bias in favour of sight and the eye as an epistemological tool has persisted in Western cultures over the centuries. It was replicated in theological terms from Augustine onwards and in new philosophical terms from the Enlightenment onwards. Francis Bacon “admits nothing but on the faith of
the eyes” (as cited in Erlmann, p. 7) and Thomas Reid states that “of all the faculties called the five senses, sight is without doubt the noblest” (as cited in Erlmann, p. 7). Leonardo da Vinci asserts the primacy of vision, and by extension of painting over any other kind of art or science, in his Treatise on painting. Thomas Aquinas, in Summa theologica, suggests the eye is the ultimate judge of aesthetics. Robert Hooke, like Galileo, Kepler and Bruno, links the sense of sight to the inner eye and mysticism, and Descartes contradicts his own mechanistic approach by asserting its primacy (as cited in Wolfe p. 4).

Significantly, the claim of Aristotelian thought that these philosophers all cling to is the view that “sight is privileged because it is ‘eidetic’: it is a grasping of essences” (as cited in Wolfe, 2009, p. 5), or as Wolfe explains it by citing Han Jonas:

….sight alone allows the distinction between the changing and the unchanging, whereas all other senses operate by registering change and cannot make that distinction. Only sight therefore provides the sensual basis on which the mind may conceive of the idea of the eternal, that which never changes and is always present. (p. 5)

This idea of essence, of static Being, as opposed to dynamic Becoming, remains one of the most fundamental claims of early visual epistemology. The argument follows that the idea of the fixed allowed for the development of the notion of the subject and the object as totally separate, independent entities, and the view that the presence of the observer would not affect the perception of or representation of the observed. With the later developments of the empirical scientific method, of realism and of notions of objectivity, it is suggested that the visual also became “denarrativized”, no longer “a book of nature” or “an image of the Word” but an object, an ultimate truth about an external reality. The senses were consequently ranked according to those
which could perceive this truth and those which couldn’t. Vision having the easiest access to this construction was seen as the highest, followed by hearing, smell, taste and touch. As an “organ” of the intellect and an essential element of speech and language, hearing ranked over the feminine “proximity senses” such as taste, smell and touch. However, as a sense, the ear and the auditory imagination was also the “other”. On the one hand it was the historic “other” representing a pre-literate, pre-rational, religious past. On the other hand, the sense of sound represented all that was non-visual, non-empirical, non-Western. As suggested above, the Hebraic rather than the Hellenic.

Although, as I suggest in this very brief synopsis, there is evidence that the privileging of the visual was a prevalent epistemological force from as far back as the start of literacy itself, Walter Ong, a prominent “sense scholar” from the 1980s, argues that it was the shift from oral to print forms that was fundamental to the privileging of the visual. Focusing only on the opposition between literacy and orality, he argues that, with the development of print in the late Middle Ages, Western culture moved away from a hearing-dominated sensory world to one governed by sight, and that the further entrenched writing became as a mode of expression, the more humans moved from the pre-platonic oral/aural-based sensory world to one where vision reigned supreme (Ong, 1982, p. 80). This argument became the basis of what is sometimes referred to as the Toronto School of Communication and at other times as the Great Divide theory and includes such scholars as Harold Innis, Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye. Basically these theorists argue that changes in communication technology have far-reaching effects and that the alphabet is a technology that has restructured human thought and extended visuality to the detriment of all the other senses. They furthermore suggest that, with the advent of print, words
became fixed in a visual space, situated in time, and thought became interiorised and distanced from the changing needs of the body.

It is often argued that this development of the Western visual epistemology has begotten a visual ontology that is based on the idea of the eye as the centre of the world and that situates us as individuals working from that centre as a single point of view. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the Western sense of sight, which is determined to be the less temporal and more objective sense, has enabled us to establish a subject based on distance, differentiation and dominion. The ancillary belief to this paradigm of Western visual culture is that visualism has evolved hand-in-hand with the technologies that have shaped it. This argument proposes that our senses and our consciousness have evolved with our sciences and technologies and that these technologies have been primarily visually based—from the technology of the alphabet to the “detached eye” of photography and film; from the evolution of perspective and the commodification of visual art, to the rapid expansion of television and digital technologies.

All the same, this perception provides a starting point for the problematization of visual culture as it was never really so simple. Throughout the same cultural history that I have just presented in terms of visualism, other polemics have always existed, particularly those advocating for the role of touch and hearing. Many of the same philosophers who advocated for visual epistemologies backtracked and contradicted themselves when they argued for empiricism. Wolfe states that Aristotle, for example, claims that “the organ of touch is the least simple...[and therefore] the most corporeal of the sense organs” (2009, p. 10) and he regularly gets described as an empiricist. A string of other historical Doubting Thomases have likewise insisted that only touch could verify what the eye could see. Diderot, for example, says, “if you want me to believe in God I would have to touch Him”
and Feuerbach suggests that “the sense of touch is atheist from birth” (as cited in Wolfe, p. 11). Touch, in this reading, becomes the materialist and empirical opposition of the disembodied visual—a current of thought present throughout history. Significantly, it has also become important in current understandings of embodiment and proprioception and achieved centrality in both sensual studies and the understanding of the embryological development of the perceptual system.

Consider also what Susan Sontag calls “the archaic gap between Hebrew as opposed to Greek culture, ear culture as opposed to eye culture, and the moral as opposed to the aesthetic” (1980, p. 196). In fact, much of the thought between the Middle Ages and the modern era can be interpreted as a pulling between the senses of sight and sound, with Christianity being the central playing field. This is an extended debate with some asserting that the gospels are filled with light, that the central tenant of the faith is the corporeal and visual incarnation of the divine in human form, and that the expansion of Christianity into non-Hebraic territories depended on adapting to the existing pagan cults of the sun. On the other hand, there are those who argue that the Middle Ages were an oral period in comparison to non-religious modernity, and that the reformation reinforced it through the Lutheran recourse to the Hebraic traditions of privileging the ear and banishing icons and representations of the holy from Lutheran places of worship. This argument in particular enjoys widespread currency. Roland Barthes, for example, states, “in the Middle Ages, historians tell us, that the most refined sense, the perceptive sense par excellence, the one that establishes the richest contact with the world was hearing: sight came in only third, after touch. Then we have a reversal: the eye becomes the prime organ of perception” (as cited in Jay, 1993, p. 35). Similarly Lucien Febvre in *The problem of unbelief in the sixteenth century* states:
The sixteenth century did not see first: it heard and smelled, it sniffed
the air and caught sounds. It was only later, as the seventeenth century
was approaching, that it seriously and actively became engaged in
gometry, focusing attention on the world of forms with Kepler (1571–
1630) and Desargues of Lyon (1593–1662). It was then that vision was
unleashed in the world of science as it was in the world of physical
sensations, and the world of beauty as well. (as cited in Jay, 1993, p. 34)

Robert Mandrou also says of the Middle Ages, “The hierarchy [of the senses]
was not the same [as in the twentieth century] because the eye, which rules
today, found itself in third place, behind hearing and touch, and far after
them. The eye that organizes, classifies and orders was not the favoured
organ of a time that preferred hearing” (as cited in Jay, 1993, p. 35). All this
problematicizes contemporary thoughts on a hierarchy of the senses based on
the dominance of the visual.

Another factor that complicates the development of Western visualism
is the realisation that not only did philosophical and religious debates occur
throughout the ages but also the realities of daily life, including economic
inequities, gender dynamics, illiteracy rates, the presence and movements of
cultural minorities, trade, diseases, medical advancements, industrialisation
and so on. All of this had an impact on sensual understandings and
hierarchies and it is probable that many sensual cultures were evolving
simultaneously outside the intellectual circles that wrote about them. Yet in
spite of the doubt of the empiricists, the questioning of the visual
interpretation of different epochs of history, and the interweaving of
alternative sensual relations, visualism did seem to become the
epistemological tactic of the elite and educated from at least the late
eighteenth century. As a result, chemists (who were not cooks) stopped
tasting their experiments, doctors (who were not midwives) were no longer
trained to smell their patients’ urine, and touch was denigrated into a feminine sense: “nurturing, seductive and dissolute in its merging of self and other” (Classen, 2005, p. 70). Similarly, sound and voice became associated with garrulous women who did not have access to the literary technologies that promoted silence and the visual processing of written texts.

While obviously a significant force in Western history, the countercultural distrust of the ocular referred to above was not fully explored until the mid- to late twentieth century when the predominantly French “critics of vision” emerged as an intellectual force and challenged vision’s alleged superior capacity to provide access to the world (Jay, 1993). In Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought, Martin Jay suggests that virtually all the twentieth-century French intellectuals reacting to visuality were extraordinarily sensitive to its importance but no less suspicious of its implications. Martin Jay develops this argument by suggesting that virtually all the twentieth-century French intellectuals reacting to visuality were extraordinarily sensitive to its importance but no less suspicious of its implications. He argues that, although their definitions of visuality differ, it is clear that ocular-centrism aroused a widely shared distrust. Examples Jay cites include Jean-Paul Sartre’s “depiction of the sadomasochism of the ‘look’, [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty’s diminished faith in a new ontology of vision, . . . [Michel] Foucault’s strictures against the medical gaze and panoptic surveillance, [Guy] Debord’s critique of the Society of the Spectacle, . . . [Jacques] Derrida’s double reading of the specular tradition of philosophy, and [Luce] Irigaray’s outrage at the privileging of the visual in patriarchy” (p. 588). All these, Jay argues, evince a palpable loss of confidence in the hitherto “noblest of the senses”.

Referred to collectively in some quarters as the anti-visualists, these thinkers, like the anti-ocularists of the Toronto school, tended to associate the
visual with objectification, distancing, a reductionism to static essences, and a flattening point of view. Furthermore and perhaps most significantly, vision was identified as an ideology for oppression and a means by which to enforce the opposition between the powerful and the dispossessed. Thus, all the attributes that had made the visual sense attractive as an epistemological tool in previous eras now come into question.

But this denigration of the visual is not to imply that the cultural constructs of the other senses, in particular sound, have not fallen into these traps of objectification, distancing and the setting up of polarities, nor been immune from the influence of the various technologies used to manipulate and transform the experience of them. If we consider, for example, sound in its relationship to vision and objects, then we can argue that the objectification of sound has been an overwhelmingly successful twentieth-century project, with environmental sounds and sound art like music being transformed into sheet music, records, CDs or MP3s: that is objects, recordings and representations that distance us from the actual experience. This is in part due to the work of Murray Schafer and his invention of soundscape studies and the sound mark in the 1960s. The work was inspirational to many, including the Toronto school, but remains deeply problematic for others, for as anthropologist Tim Ingold argues, the term *soundscape* “places the listener at an objectified distance from what may be in fact an immersive experience and so reinforces the artificial divide commonly erected between mind and matter” (as cited in Toop, 2010, p. 37).

Similarly, but from the perspective of a different discipline, the current work of several “sound archaeologists” including Penelope Gouk, Wolfgang Scherer, Jonathon Stern and Siegfried Zielinski, has identified audio devices dating back to the seventeenth century that speak to the cultural conditions surrounding the act of listening. These technologies, which include music
boxes, phonographs, stethoscopes and early radios, reflect the value we place in certain aural phenomenon over others. To cite Veit Erlmann (2010):

While it is through techniques of listening that people “harnessed, modified and shaped their powers of auditory perception in the service of rationality,” such techniques (and the technologies on which they were based) were culturally embedded. “If the phonograph changed the way we hear,” [Stern] says, it did so only because many of the “practices, ideas, and constructs associated with sound reproduction technologies predated the machines themselves”. (p. 18)

In other words, in ways not dissimilar to the systemisation of visual information, sounds that were and were not worthy of hearing were identified, technology was designed to capture them, and then these sounds were objectified and fed back into the community as that which had value and worth to human experience. A key point in the quote above, however, is that auditory experience was adopted to a visual epistemology and in the service of rationality prior to being technologized and objectified. This reinforces the concern expressed earlier by Ingold about the “artificial divide commonly erected between mind and matter” (as cited in Toop, 2010, p. 37). It also evokes a colonisation of other sensory spectrums by visual epistemologies.

The most obvious example of the objectification and manipulation of sound is, of course, music. As so emblematic of the sense of hearing, music has provided theorists with another opportunity to oppose nature to culture. Jacques Attali in his work Noise: A political economy of music describes music as a cultural process by which noise is captured, socially ordered and then transformed into a tool to order social life. He argues that “our musical process for structuring noise is our political process for structuring community” and goes on to suggest that “more than colour and noise it is
sound and their arrangements into music that fashion society” (Attali, 1985, p. 6). This colonisation of noise and sound by music channels the primitive sounds of the body, of tools, of objects and of the relations between self and others, and consolidates them into a manageable form. Each era has its own score, with earlier times being equated with community building for production purposes and later eras focused on the creation of an artistic elite, or the mass-produced phenomenon that we know better today; regardless, the result is an objectified home for noise and sound.

Recognising this, perhaps, in his book *A year from Monday*, John Cage (1967) argues that listening to the world as opposed to music opens us up to a more real, essential experience:

I sometimes wonder what the real music is… The reason I am less interested in music is not only that I find environmental sounds and noises more useful aesthetically than the sounds produced by the world’s musical cultures but that when you get right down to it a composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do. (p. ix)

Cage’s questioning of music’s dominance of the sense of hearing also introduces the notion of attention and distraction and the “aesthetization” of sound experience, the argument being that our approach to, in this case, music, is as much the result of the historical conditioning of our attention and aesthetic sense as it is to ideas about the sensual in itself. Thus we either listen attentively or hear distractedly. In both cases attention, or lack of it, is the means by which we define the two modes of apprehending sound. In this, the potential richness of the sensual is lost.

Attention, and the social structure around what we decide to give attention to or not, also becomes critical in the interiorisation, privatisation and commodification of sound experience. An example of this can be seen in the transformation of concert halls during the French and German
Enlightenment from noisy places of socialisation and entertainment to silent auditoriums where works of arts are to be appreciated. Interestingly, this *aesthetization* of sound experience follows a similar trajectory as the development of hushed gallery “viewing” spaces, with both becoming emblematic of the bourgeois experience of “culture”.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s analysis of Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens in *The dialectics of enlightenment* (1973) is useful here. In their discussion, they suggest that Odysseus’s attempt to pit his wits against the Sirens’ song of “irresistible pleasure” is not only an early example of the *aesthetization* of sound experience but that it also exemplifies the class relations embedded into aesthetic experiences, for in order for Odysseus to have this experience safely he must have the oarsmen block their ears (p. 33).

Michael Bull builds on this argument by examining the aural and spatial nature of the encounter, and suggests that the soundscape created by the Sirens and the transformation of space they invite, by beckoning the ship to its destruction, “becomes the first description of the privatisation of experience through sound” (2004, p. 179). The Sirens’ song is the exotic and the forbidden and the story of Odysseus’s attention to it and his strategy to outwit the Sirens through having his oarsmen block their ears becomes emblematic of the technologies adopted to experience sound, in addition to the conceptualisation of sound as interior, private, aesthetic and objective.

In the previous pages, I have briefly mapped the demarcation and objectification of the visual and aural. Before moving to a more focused discussion of the possibilities of sound in the romantic novel, however, I would like to reflect again on the binaries encountered and their artificial or constructed nature. These binaries have included the opposition of sight and hearing, visual and aural, natural and cultural, the ocularists and anti-ocularists, and by association the opposition between attentive and
distracted, internal and external, the subject and the object. Jonathon Stern in *The sound studies reader* (2012) suggests that many scholars writing about sound begin by writing about vision (as I have done) and then either fall into the trap of, or confront the reality of, what he calls “the audio-visual litany” (p. 9). The audio-visual litany is basically a list of the many binaries so often associated with this topic. He enumerates the list as follows:

- hearing is spherical, vision is directional;
- hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective;
- sound comes to us, but vision travels to its object;
- hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces;
- hearing involves physical contact with the outside world, vision requires distance from it;
- hearing places you inside an event, seeing gives you a perspective on the event;
- hearing tends towards subjectivity, vision tends towards objectivity;
- hearing brings us into the living world, sight moves us towards atrophy and death;
- hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect;
- hearing is a primarily temporal sense, vision is a primarily spatial sense;
- hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, while vision removes us from it. (2012, p. 9)

In this litany, sound and vision are set in opposition to each other as if they were biological opposites, but it must be noted that there is nothing in our biology that sets them up as opposite. Again, as Stern puts it:

*The boundary between vibration that is sound and vibration that is not-sound is not derived from any quality of the vibration in itself or the air that conveys the vibration. Rather, the boundary between*
sound and not-sound is based on the understood possibilities of the faculty of hearing—whether we are talking about a person or a squirrel. Therefore, as people and squirrels change, so too will sound—by definition. (2012, p. 7)

Furthermore, it needs to be understood that in reality both sound and vision depend on touches on tissues and receptions by nerve cells rather than fundamentally different ways of perceiving, for just as light waves pass through and touch the fascia of the cornea, soundwaves brush (touch) the seteocilia of the cochlea, which leads to the excitation of the auditory nerve. Given this, it would be more appropriate to think of these two senses as synergists instead of antagonists.

Another problem that Stern identifies with the audio-visual litany, and which is important to my considerations, is that the opposing types of epistemological and ontological frameworks it suggests are linked to the notion of static sensory cultures and the notion that the “dominance of one sense by necessity leads to the decline of another sense” (2010, p. 14). From what has been argued above, I hope that I have demonstrated that this need not be the case. Although it may be fairly well established that we live in a visually dominated culture, I have argued that both sound and vision, in addition to the other three traditional senses and the host of other perceptual possibilities, have all been subject to the same historic forces of opposition, objectification and privatisation. I have additionally shown that they have co-evolved within our cultural framework and suggested that, outside of the academic milieu, the paradigm has often been non-visual.

Before exploring the multi-sensorial approach that seems to naturally follow on from this line of thinking, I will now examine concepts and historical appreciations of sound as apprehended within a visually dominant culture. This will include an overview of the uses of sound in literary forms,
including supernatural and modernist fiction, in postmodernist thought and film criticism, and the possibilities these latter two suggest regarding aural/oral ontologies. I will then move well beyond this discussion of binaries into the multi-sensorial.

My creative work, while (almost necessarily being) embedded in the binary debate, will be both the laboratory and the specimen of the possibility of moving beyond it.
Binaries Part 2: And What of Sound?

So what then of sound—sound as it is, sound as we experience it in our Western lives and Western arts? What of the vibrations, the sonic field, the elusive weather like element, which, like perfume, mist and smoke, moves phantom like around us?

The Western auditory sense is less culturally sharpened than the visual and our aural descriptive terms less complex but what we have is still evocative. Sound resonates, reverberates and pierces the permeable membranes of our skin. Spine-tingling, jaw-rattling, it makes us jump, gives us goose bumps, rings in our head, vibrates in our bones. When banging, barking, babbling or blaring, it echoes its own nature, but as a breath or a vapour or a whisper, it invites a hush, a stillness, a pause. Sound settles only briefly on our bodies, touching, caressing, both inside and out, more powerful in its pathos for its impermanence. Sound is both a duration in time and an expanse in space. As a gentle lapping noise, sound can envelop, emerge and soothe us, enfolding us in an echoing chamber, reminding us that it—sound—was our very first sensual experience, when earlike we curled within our mothers. There is an intimacy and romance in sound. We fall through sound into the unconsciousness of sleep and emerge from the lapse between dream and waking through noise. We whisper to our lovers, “There is no sleep so deep I would not hear you there” (Becket, 1976, p. 239). Our ears never close. Sound is a charm, an incantation, a spell binding. As a subtext it is always present, a sonorous envelope even in the silent world of visuality, haunting the muted picture, the ghost of the black-and-white page.

But sound poses danger too and is often the precursor of strange adventures. Those things that go bump in the night make us question the sanity of our own perceptions. Sound, as our survival sense in dark places, must be trusted but can’t be trusted, so we always hang on the edge of an
auditory hallucination. The siren’s songs, the call of Pan, a blood-curdling scream. Sound hearkens the uncanny, in-dissolute, auditory nightmare knowing no boundaries, omnipresent, non-directional, mobile, impossible to pin down. Sound is powerful in its capacity to disturb, to unsettle and to install dread. Ambiguity and mystery lie at its very heart. It is never clear and plain by itself; it always brings questions. What was that? Who was that? Where did it come from? Was it me? Those of us who listen are mediums—interpreting unseen worlds, humbled by what we don’t perceive, filled with the uncertainty of audition.

In a visual world, sound is the ultimate destabiliser, the other, but by its very nature, it is multi-sensorial. It can never exist by itself, but only as a whole-body experience, seeking verification through all the other senses. “The sound asks ‘where?’ the image responds ‘here’” (Conner, 1997, p. 213). The sound asks “what?” the touch says “this”. If there is no answer, sound hangs as a question. David Toop, in Sinister resonance (2010), suggests that, partly because of its mysteriousness, sound often functions “as a metaphor for mystical revelations, instability, forbidden desires, disorder, formlessness, the unknown, unconscious and extra-human, a representation of immaterial worlds” (p. xv). Unnamed sounds, sounds heard in darkness or quickening light, or unnatural silences, are seen as an archetype of the “earie”.

The otherworldliness of sound is utilised over and over in classic myths and works of literature. Consider this passage from Moby Dick:

At last, when the ship drew near to the outskirts, as it were, of the Equatorial fishing grounds, and in the deep darkness that goes before the dawn, was sailing by a cluster of rocks; the watch—then headed by Flask—was startled by a cry so plaintively wild and unearthly—like half-articulated wailings of all the ghosts of all Herod’s murdered Innocents—that one and all, they started from their reveries, and for
the space of some moments stood, or sat, or leaned all transfixedly
listening, like the carved Roman slaves, while that wild cry remained
within hearing. The Christian or civilized part of the crew said that it
was mermaids, and shuddered; … Yet the grey Maxman—the oldest
mariner of all—declared that the wild thrilling sounds that were
heard, were the voices of newly drowned men. (as cited in Toop, p. 3)

Ahab later explains to the men that the sound they heard was made by seals
who had lost their cubs, but the rational light-of-day explanation does not
dispel the dread. The ghosts of dead sailors and their “long in dying call”
(Joyce, *Ulysses*, as cited in Toop, 2010, p. 4) hangs over the rest of their
voyage.

There are many other examples of the auditory element of the uncanny
in myth and literature. Again, Toop argues that “The interpretation of sound
as an unstable or provisional event, ambiguously situated between
psychological delusion, verifiable scientific phenomenon and a visitation of
spectral forces, is a frequent trope of supernatural fiction” (p. 130). Bram
Stoker’s *Dracula* is filled with howling wolves, bats flapping, low piteous
cries of dogs, and vampire ladies with silvery, musical laughter. Supernatural
writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Algernon Blackwood and Shirley Jackson
similarly use sound images such as creaking floors, echoing footsteps,
faraway bellowings, and sounds that wake the dead. In the dimness of these
narrative environments, hearing, which is nothing if not a sense of half-lights
and darkness, is our key to survival and thus becomes hypersensitive,
verging on animalistic in acuity.

But a number of modernist writers are also known for the sound
quality of their work and their approach is totally different from writers of
the supernatural. These writers, including Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, James
Joyce and Samuel Beckett, focus less on the haunting of sound, the disconnect
between sound and verification, and more on the act of listening, the low-
level auditory environment, the sound between spaces, the interiority of 
sound, and the role of sound in the creation of, and of disturbances in, 
atmosphere.

Through their intensification of the perception of hearing, these 
modernist writers have presented the paradox that the more silent you 
become, the more you hear, the emptier the space of sound, the greater the 
apparent volume of sounds, the lower the level of auditory background, the 
more intense the listener’s awareness of minimal interferences. Quiet, when 
you listen, is loud. Consider Joseph Conrad, for example, in Heart of darkness: 
“The jungle’s silence did not in the least resemble peace” (1978, p. 48); or 
Virginia Woolf in The waves: “One must have patience and infinite care and 
let the light sound, whether of spider’s delicate feet on a leaf or the chuckle of 
water in some irrelevant drainpipe, unfold too” (1931, p. 112).

With these writers, we breathe sound and listen to air, feel audition as 
much as hear it. Intuitively, we understand their exploration of what is 
technically referred to as comfort sound, the ambient noises without which 
things feel unnatural, stilted. The slightest alteration in our comfort noise, a 
pressure shift or a change in temperature from an unheard opening of a 
window, and we are altered. A terse passage from Cormac McCarthy’s novel 
The crossing (2002) encapsulates this mystery:

What woke you? he said.
You did.
I didn’t make a sound.
I know it. (p. 326)

And some of these writers, particularly Joyce, confront us with the physical 
interiority of sound. In Ulysses (1922), bodies are shells that hear themselves, 
instrumens to resonate sound. “Her ear, too, is a shell” he writes of Miss
Douse as she presents a shell to Lidwell. “(T)he peeping lobe there... The sea they think they hear. Singing. A roar. The blood it is. Souse in the ear sometimes. Well it’s a sea. Corpuscle” (p. 269). And later, “Play on her lips and blow, body of white woman, a flute alive. Blow gentle. Loud. Three holes all women. Bodies are instruments and instruments bodies” (p. 272).

Here we are invited to consider that, if eyes are the windows to the soul, then ears must be tunnels to some other place, some darker zone, an entrance perhaps to a labyrinth filled with sonic explosions. Heartbeats, breath entering and exiting the nose, contractions of the throat, the pop of joints and muscles, all these physical functionings of our body and the auditory experience of listening to them begin to disintegrate and reconfigure our sense of space as a divisible in here/out there phenomenon. Sound is both from us and internal, and to us and external. Through a process of osmosis, the boundaries mutate. This permeable boundary is important, as sound exists in space. It is experienced as events in the duration and expanse of it, and so by listening to the mutability of bodies in space, we start to radically change the architecture of the visible world. Or to use Jean Luc Nancy’s words, “The sonorous ... outweighs form. It does not dissolve it but rather enlarges it: it gives it an amplitude, a density and vibration or an undulation whose outline never does anything but approach” (2007, p. 2).

The unstable boundaries and multi-sensorial references implicit in the uses of sound in modernist literature move us from a consideration of the uses of sound as a literary technique, to its possible application as a central sense for epistemological and ontological concerns. A variety of postmodernist theorists offer interesting insights here. Thomas Docherty, for example, defines postmodern thought, as it applies to an aural approach to ontology, as a prioritisiation of the aural over the visual, and more specifically, “as a mode of hearing, which will not allow an easy slippage into
understanding” (1990, p. 145). Docherty’s perception is important, for while we, like he, could suggest a self, defined in terms of hearing rather than of sight, it would be a self imagined not as a point but as a membrane, not as a picture but as a channel through which voices, noises and music travel. Given this it is important to question if a definition of the self through sound is practical.

Stephan Conner explores this question in his essay *The modern auditory I* (1997). In it, he suggests that when cognitive and psychological theorists of the auditory self posit sound as the potentially radical and deviant force in an ocular society, they are doing so from a visualist’s paradigm. An aural, desultory self is, after all, only radical if we accept the stable, visual one. He further suggests that the idea or ideal of a self, structured around the experience of hearing, encounters a serious problem inasmuch as sound events are “hard to consider as autonomous” (p. 213), for he claims that in sound there is an insufficiency and insubstantiality, a diffusiveness and disintegrating power, an absence of boundaries and a lack of concreteness, which, if applied to the construction of a subject, would result in a subject based on deficit. He therefore argues that “it is impossible to have a self created around the ear like it was around the eye” (p. 214). He does, however, offer the multi-sensorial aspects of sound and hearing as a possible way forward towards an alternative ontology. The act of hearing, he argues, takes place in and through the body and through interactions with other senses. As auditory subjects, we are in the midst of the world, not taking aim at it; we are open, responsive and of the world, rather than alienated and in control of it. An auditory self, therefore, invites us to consider the embodied self and thus simultaneously prepares the way for the disintegrated self in that “the instability of the auditory self is such that it dissolves [its] very autonomy” (p. 220).
Hence, while Conner and others may reject the notion of a unitary optical self, they have also hesitated to offer a strong alternative. Such an alternative is, however, offered by the film critic Michel Chion in *Audio-vision: Sound on screen* (1990). Chion begins by examining the relationship between the ear and the eye and argues that sound is always secondary in film and yet it is that which transforms the image. According to Chion, this transformation occurs not because of any “natural harmony” between image and sound, but owing to the “audio-visual contract [wherein] the two perceptions mutually influence each other, . . . lending each other their respective properties by contamination and projection” (1990, p. 9). More specifically, however, in terms of our consideration of alternative ontologies, he presents and defines what could be a substitute modern subject based on the haunting qualities of the disembodied voice. As discussed previously, sound requires verification, and more so for the human voice than for any other noise. There is a scandal and a magic and a horror associated with the unattributed voice. So long as we can’t see to whom it belongs, the voice is ascribed with all-seeing power, but once located in the visual field, it loses its aura and power to shock (as in the wizard of *The Wizard of Oz*, HAL in *2001: A space odyssey*, or Norman Bates’ mother in *Psycho*). In literary terms this “acusmetre” exists between sound and vision and is fully identified with neither but rather with a complex and fascinating process of transfer and interchange between them in which we must see their sounds and hear their physical shape, location and movement (Conner, 1997, p. 222). Thus the multi-sensorial and synaesthesia become embedded in the process.

Still my challenge remains—how to make sound so pervasive as to interfere with the processes of visualisation that are otherwise always predominant in reading.
Such are some of the perceptions of sound in supernatural and modernist literature, in film and ontological postmodern discussions, but it is important to note that as evocative and appealing (and perhaps as even culturally appropriate, given our visual context) such descriptions and experiences are, these descriptions still evoke or are based on the audio-visual litany of The Great Divide.

So while it has been important to recognise the cultural characteristics and histories of the different sense modalities, and while it has also been central to my creative praxis to consider ways in which alternative (non-aural) modalities could be “heard” more readily, it is also important to find ways to theorise and creatively explore beyond the litany of oppositions. Notions of embodiment, emplacement and affect are useful here, as they have the potential to elevate us above dichotomous ways of thinking and draw us closer to a truly fluid sensorium.
Beyond the Binary: Embodied Technologies

Within the visual framework of our cultural context, the lived experience of listening challenges the clear and bounded distinctions between self and other, inside and outside, past and present, human and technology. Sound, as that which permeates and binds, can be seen as the source of relational knowledge, which forms the connection between self and other. Likewise, the way that the auditory invites completion by the other senses introduces concepts of the multi-sensorial spectrum. The felt noise, the gut-wrenching stench, and the sense of self-perceiving—all start to complicate the concept of five distinct senses serving a rational mind in the neatly divided Cartesian body. For this reason, the auditory self has been an important part of phenomenology's attempt to describe subjectivity in terms of embodiment.

Conversations about embodiment have been evident since Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* (1962), and possibly before, but have now been developed in fields as far ranging as the natural and human sciences, cognitive psychology, philosophy, cultural theory, computer science, robotics and so on. The definitions of embodiment vary from what some call trivial embodiment, being the notion that cognition and the mind are directly related to the biological structures and processes that sustain them (Nunz, 1999, p. 8), to ideas of full embodiment, being the thought that the body is involved in all types of human cognition, including the abstract, which are brought forth through specific, human, bodily grounded processes (Nunz, 1999, p. 9). Susan Gallagher expresses the concept of full embodiment this way:

Nothing about human experience remains untouched by human embodiment; from the basic perceptual and emotional processes that are already at work in infancy, to a sophisticated interaction with other people; from the acquisition and creative use of language, to higher
cognitive faculties involving judgment and metaphor; from the
exercise of free will in intentional action, to the creation of cultural
artefacts that provide for further human affordances. (2005, p. 247)

As a paradigm of thought, embodiment suggests that the body is the
biological, material entity, whereas “embodiment” is the understanding of
“an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and
the mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas, 2014, p. 12).

Specifically relevant to my argument is the suggestion, embedded
here, that sensory experience lies beyond the realm of individual
physiological or psychological responses and occurs within a culturally
elaborated field of social relations and sensory experience, and that this
embodied mesh of experience should be the starting point for analysing
human participation in the world. This begins to evoke the work I have done
novelistically, as by placing my protagonist, Kayla, within the aural field of
experience, I approach her not as a character, but as a chamber of experience
and sensual relationships. Similarly, by reverse-engineering her sensual
experiences, I am, in fact, defining her by her perceptual experiences.

These notions of the perceptually embodied subject are further
developed by thoughts of “emplacement”, which are explored in my
character’s perceptual reactions to her environment. While the paradigm of
embodiment suggested by Merleau-Ponty implies an integration of mind and
body and allows us to perceive and feel “presences,” the paradigm of
emplacement that Howes suggests in Empire of the senses, (2005) enriches this
understanding by suggesting the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-
environment (p. 7). The environment of emplacement theory is both physical
and social, as is illustrated by the bundle of sensory and social values
contained in the idea of home (p. 7). By examining this complex of experience
and values we not only re-examine the nature and mores of our perception,
but we also reposition ourselves as bodies in relationship to the sensuous materiality of the cultured and natural environment.

Emplacement also emphasises the need for sensory multiplicity and the futility of countering or opposing one sense with another. Emplacement theorists claim that we must experience the whole sensescape. Only by listening to the sounds around us, and by smelling, tasting and touching the dirt, can we really know where and who we are. This type of participation creates the “sentient subject”, which not only incorporates the “embodied subject” of phenomenology but also rejects both the “detached observer” of Western visualism and any discussions of the singular auditory subject.

All the same, I would suggest that with recent developments in embodiment and emplacement theory, as well as in the emergent field of affect and body studies, concepts of subjectivity themselves are questionable. Within the framework of affect theory, bodies are radically reconceptualised and reconfigured, and the solidity of the singular subject gives way to a focus on processes, flows, practices and affect. No longer viewed as “natural” or even distinctly human, “bodies are seen to always extend and connect to other bodies, human and non-human, [and to] techniques, technologies and objects which produce different kinds of bodies and different ways, arguably, of enacting what it means to be human” (Blackman, 2012, p. x). These ideas have evolved from the notion of distributed cognition and machinic perception, both of which impute perception and “sense-making” to the relationship across bodies rather than between them. In this view, the guiding principle is “the assumption that what defines bodies is their capacity to affect and be affected” (Blackman, 2012, p. x) and what defines sensation is the creative, multi-modal and non-conscious attunement of a body to a milieu (Blackman, 2012, p. 173). This argument is further developed by the interpretation of the brain not as a “thing” but as “a set of potentialities which
are co-produced and co-constituted according to the setting” (Blackman, 2012, p. 173), and by an idea of our human sensory apparatus not as a set of reified abilities but as one of the key drivers in the formation and development of organism-environment, person-place and community-collective. If, in keeping with this concept of distributed bodies and perceptions, we interpret bodies as spaces, processes or permeable membranes, ideas of skin-bounded, more-or-less integrated universes are replaced by co-relational subjectivities that have no reference to an interior truth, identity or essence, and the paradigm of entanglement and co-production replaces the language of interaction or influence. Lisa Blackwell argues that:

> Interaction implies two (or more) objects or entities that pre-exist the encounter or setting. The kind of approach that is more attentive to the coupling between milieu and body starts from the position that all we can ever document and analyse are entanglements, and in that sense the questions of what is biology, what is culture, what is economy, politics, the social and so forth are impossible to determine. (2012, p. 172)

A focus on the affective also emphasises the role of all that is non-conscious and visceral, in the process of connecting bodies and forming a collective consciousness. This linking can promote generational connections and an understanding that affects, including the trauma, shame and desires of others, can be shared. In such a setting, listening can realistically be about voice, hearing, telepathy and hauntings, as it simultaneously places us in the multi-dimensional spectrum of human experience and in the arena of threshold experiences.
Romance and the Sensual Spectrum

Before considering how some of these notions were applied to and have enriched my understanding of process and outcomes in *A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality*, I want to consider the form of romance yet again. In an earlier section of this exegesis, I suggested that whereas the novel is linked to the advent of the printing press, the rise of rationalism and individualism, as well as to a visual epistemology, the romance is equated to earlier forms of the narrative, and to the sensual spectrum associated with sound and orality. Here again we see the presentation of a binary that can be challenged and problematized.

That there is a perceived opposition between the novel as literature and the romance as entertainment, and that this opposition is still prevalent today, is evident by a brief review of the contemporary marketplace. In 2012, for example, the romance novel, in the form of formulaic love stories, outsold every other form of literature, including crime, mystery and science fiction (which are all arguably linked to derivatives of the romance) as well as literary novels (Hall, *The new romance*, 2011). This evident popularity, however, does not equate to respect, for whereas writers of romance frequently appear in the *New York Time Book Review*’s bestsellers list, they are seldom, if ever, reviewed by that same publication. This dismissal of an entire genre is mirrored by the reported habit of romance readers to hide their covers if reading in public, and reflects a tendency of both literary institutions and the reading public to view the romance negatively, as suspect, and less than, the novel. It can, of course, be argued that formulaic love stories (which I have in mind here) are very different to romances in the broader sense of the word, or certainly to literary romances in a narrower sense, but as a subset of the same genre these (formulaic love stories) share elements with the wider application, all be it in a constricted form. I would argue that it is these
common elements, as much as the formula itself, which are dismissed. These elements, in their contemporary expression, can include: the tendency for the protagonist to be female, for the plot to be centred on emotional realities, for the action to be set in an idealised world where the fabulous and the manipulation of reality can result in wish-fulfilment, and for the setting to be idealised. These common elements are opposed to the prevalent tendencies of the realistic novel, which include male and individualistic protagonists, a fidelity to reality, and an action-oriented as well as emotional, as opposed to only emotional, plot.

Of course, it takes little experience of actually reading novels and romances to reject such dualism and to argue as Margaret Doody does in her book *The true story of the novel* (1996) that “the romance and the novel are one” (p. 15). Her argument, which she sets up in opposition to the conventional Anglo-Saxon distinction between the romance and the novel posited by such writers as Ian Watt, in *The rise of the novel* (1957), and Michael McKeon, in *The origins of the English novel, 1600-1740* (1987), suggests that the British claim to inventing the novel as a replacement of previous literary forms was “a literary lie” (back cover) designed in part to restrict the literary canon from anything foreign to the Empire. She further suggests that the proposition that “the novel replaces the romance just as reason replaces superstition and as the Model-T Ford replaces the horse and carriage” (p. 3) indicates a very parochial view of the genre and history, plays down the inconvenient fact that other European literary languages make no such distinction between romance and novel, and exhibits a tendency to identify past literature with the static and the unchanging in opposition to the ebullient developmental change exhibited by the novel (p. 3). Instead of a dichotomy between novel and romance, Doody suggests that narrative developments are as much an issue of continuity as of difference; that the novel has multicultural and much earlier historical influences then realism; and that theories of the novel serve
as discursive sites for advancing cultural agendas. She also argues that important causes of the cultural left were first promoted in ancient “romantic” narratives; and furthermore, that modern elements such as intertextuality, self-reflexivity and irony were all evident in these forms from the beginning. By focusing on these elements of continuity instead of difference, she collapses the term romance into novel and both are interpreted as “rich muddy messes” (p. 485) through which human experience is explored.

If, however, for the sake of paradigmatic ease, or in my case imaginative appeal, we emphasise the idea of difference within continuity, and yet retain the term romance rather than novel, it is still possible to focus on the genre-collapsing, boundary-crossing elements of romance novels and to emphasise their potential for subversiveness. An example of this can be seen if we turn our attention to the love focus of the dominant romance subgenre. Often interpreted as a means of control and of reasserting Western cultural mores, and as of very little interest to the modern reader (Gornick, 2001, p. 297), love can also be approached as a platform for revolt, particularly if we acknowledge that the notion of love’s natural progression to marriage and children is in fact fairly new to both literature and life, and that there are alternative forms of love. David Shumway elaborates on this idea in Modern love: Romance, intimacy, and the marriage crisis (2013), when he points out that “marriage in most cultures has been understood mainly as a social institution and a property relation … [and that the romances of old] emerged as a counter discourse representing at least a theoretical alternative to the repressive character of officially sanctioned marriages” (p. 13). With this in mind it is possible to suggest that, although the current romance novel has become almost synonymous with the marriage narrative, there is still within it the potential to explode it and subvert it.
Pulitzer Prize–winning author Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) provides a quintessential example of this. A short romantic story that collapses the division between western, romance and literary fiction, *Brokeback Mountain* became an enormously popular and critically acclaimed film winning an Academy Award, BAFTA and Golden Globe. Branded as a romance by the producing studio, the narrative deals with the tragic love story of two men who, as in the romances of old, are unable to live their love. As both a novella and a film, it is extremely traditional in its treatment of love, encapsulating key elements of the romance such as the portrayal of a pair of subjects and an excluded third subject, a union thwarted by obstacles, an element of fantasy (the beautiful mountains where the couple’s love is born), the representation of love as an overwhelming and natural passion, and the death of one of the lovers. Yet, in spite of this traditionalism, this story’s portrayal of a homosexual couple totally upends the ideology of the romance novel. By also aligning itself with the ongoing political issue of the legality of gay marriages in the United States, it exhibits the romance’s potential to move towards “more sophisticated love narratives that invokes socio-political commentary or at least advanced critical thought” (Hall).

It is this potential of the romance as, in a sense, both literature and entertainment that interests me. My own novel evokes a taboo in its very title, *A Sibling Romance*. It complicates and perhaps even eroticises it, with its subtitle *A Story of Sisters and Sensuality*. In an era of disintegrating families, single parenting and temporary partnerships, it looks at the love between sisters as the sustaining, grounding, lifelong force, and when that fails, how the trans-generational connections between women in a family take over. It is a love narrative—a sad, if not tragic, one—but there is no boy meets girl, only girl meets boy, has a baby, and loves the child but not the man. Every heterosexual relationship portrayed in my romance is fractured by violence and misunderstanding and power plays for children; yet love for her sister, as
an overwhelming passion, fills the protagonist’s life from three months old to the novel’s conclusion, when she is forty-two. Like Brokeback Mountain, A Sibling Romance – A Story of Sisters and Sensuality upends the expectation of romance yet is filled with the conventions of romantic novels, broad though they may be. These include the idealised romantic landscape of my protagonist’s childhood and the outback of Australia; a gothic castle, albeit in the form of a miner’s fibro house in the desert; a magical imagination with the evocation of a spell running through the book; and the idea of quest and adventure. All of these are played out in various ways in my novel, but most significantly it is the sensual spectrum of telling—almost a singing or reciting—that I use to evoke a sense of orality and listening. Rather than a visual dictate, or the sensuality associated narrowly with sex, it is the spectrum of sound and story that inhabits it. This has been my experiment with the form that I made with my novel, and as I now try to draw all the preceding strands of argument together, I will suggest that the romance as “the most malleable of narrative forms” (Hall, 2011) can subvert and problematize, not just the expectations of love relationships, but of the sensual spectrum as well.
Listen. Do you hear me?

Sh. Try again. Listen harder. Can you hear the voice in the black and white, the lift and lilt of my weary breath?

No? Adjust your seat then. Come closer. A story of sensation follows. I swear that if you listen well, the pit of your stomach will bind in knots, your skin will crawl, and chills will go up and down your spine. You will wake in terror at night sounds and hold your children close by day. I will play your body with my voice till you beg to be released to sleep and eat and live in light again—but hush, hush—you must hear me first.

There. Do you hear me now? Are the words lifting and transforming yet? Is the transfiguration of print to sound, of the wine of words to the blood of narrative working?

No? Stop then. Slow down. Now start again.

You cannot speed read to listen. Each word must sound in your head, echo there distorting time, repulse you even with its sour scent. It is the contract of this page that you believe in the echo and the breathing body that resonates yet from its suffocating chamber of life and death. You must sign the terms and start again.

Have you done it yet?

Good. Now start again—and listen.

One of many unused prologues for
A Sibling Romance–A Story of Sisters and Sensuality
Intermingling Bodies and Materializing Shame in the Romance Genre

My project, *A Sibling Romance: The Sound of Romance Reimagined*, has been an epically long, unmapped journey, and like both the character in my novel and the arguments of my exegesis, I have been moving back and forth through the terrain of the senses and the romance, and the mire of my creative process, to try to plot this journey. As I move now into examining how my new appreciations of the sensual spectrum were evoked by and in my creative work, it is important to note that this same developmental exploration was, in fact, vital to my process.

When I began this project I was, without knowing it, firmly entrenched within Jonathon Sterne’s audio-visual litany. As I first identified the sense of hearing as the means through which to express the relational bond between two sisters, and the bodily sensations of shame that my character lived with, I thought the challenge was merely about learning how to hear: thus, the process of trying to define myself as one who could, if push came to shove, listen. My initial approach to the romance as an oral form, though first motivated by the notion of a subverted love story, was also coloured by my unknowing acceptance of the litany and the subversive elements I believed were implicit in the romance form. But as I wrote—with the bodily experience of shame, the sensual experience of hearing and the methodology of reverse engineering dictating to my process—I quickly discovered that I was pushing the limits of this litany and I found myself unconsciously exploring a more nuanced approach to the senses.

This evolution can be seen in my understanding of my method of reverse engineering itself. As suggested earlier in this paper, I approached reverse engineering as a creative method where the sensual experience defines the form, rather than the form defining, and more often than not,
limiting the sensual experience. In my initial experiments with this method during the Souvenirs of the Senses workshop, I approached sensual experience in terms of the traditional five senses and I worked with the multi-sensorial as a reconfiguration or nuancing of the dominant sensual hierarchy. The pieces I created during that workshop offered an opportunity to create, from this somewhat limited perspective, postcards of the sensual that emphasised and explored the relationship between place, perceptual experience and person.

However, when the same method was applied to a full-length novel, the sense of hearing offered an invitation to explore the intrinsic interdependence of the senses. The novel was written over many years so I had the time to incubate and evoke a creative exploration of entangled bodies, threshold experiences and generational memories. To this extent, instead of just reverse-engineering a single sense, that single sense became the tool to express an encompassing and embracing sensuality of self, other and place, as well as the experience of intermingled bodies.

An early instance of how this was applied can be seen in the bodily entanglements between the mother and the sisters. As a three-month-old, nursing at her mother’s breast, Kayla is an almost perfect example of the entangled character, as it goes almost without saying that the biological processes between mother and child imply a symbiotic, sensual relationship. Also, as a three-month-old baby, listening to her mother’s body,Kayla is barely defined as a singularity within the triad of her parents before she becomes aware of her gestating sister and begins to define herself in relation to their (her and her sister’s) comingled sensual experiences.

The scene with Galina develops this further by demonstrating the linkage between bodily entanglements and trans-generational memories. The sound anchors of this section are the chickens in Galina’s backyard, Kayla’s
own crying, and the silences that permeate from Galina into the valley where she lives. I used the chickens’ constant clucking to both structure and provide a rhythm for the action. In fact, during an early first draft of this piece, I sat with my husband’s free-range chickens and allowed their soft noises to calm my anxiety about writing the scene and to inhabit my language and process. In this instance then, it was very much a case of reverse engineering (senses leading back to form). However, there is also in this scene the presence of unnatural silences, the smell of Galina’s cheap perfume and diet of cabbage, and the sinking sensation of moist mud, filled with chicken shit and rotten mangoes, that the child experiences as she becomes more attuned to Galina’s secrets. The combination of all these sensual stimuli was designed to bring Kayla into connection and awareness of those perhaps murderous, certainly unspeakable, secrets, and I emphasised these undertows through metaphorical associations to witchcraft and rituals of child sacrifice, and also by transforming the chickens from softly clucking domesticated animals by day, to vaguely threatening familiars by night. The question then is how reverse engineering evolved in this scene. Was it just an initial point of jump-off? Or did it provide the means, in itself, to access the transpersonal, multi-sensorial spectrum that I was trying to capitalise on?

One other scene that can be cited as an example of the transition from reverse-engineering a single sense to reverse-engineering a transpersonal, multi-sensorial spectrum is the storytelling, object-oriented scene of the hoarding Aunty Gen. Here again the points of sensual entry are linked with the aural, this time in the form of language and of stories, however they are complicated by the voices that are embedded in the house, in the furniture—in the very grain of the stories—as well as by the appearance of the voice of young Kathleen, Kayla’s grandmother. These aural presences result in Kayla’s perceptual reality being distributed across both human and non-human actors. They relate not only to Kayla’s immediate sensory stimuli, but
to her apprehension of her aunt’s sensual memories of trauma, the emotions stored in the furniture, and the intergenerational connection she has with her grandmother. One could suggest, perhaps, that this, like the scene with Galina, is an enactment of the notion of “machinic”, for the sensual experience is here distributed across other bodies and objects and is meaningful only because of the relationships between them. Alternatively, it could be read as Kayla’s engagement with a sixth sense (that is, an extended approach to the sensual spectrum), or simply as a result of her already established clairaudient abilities.

I would suggest that all of these responses apply. The openness of the romance form allowed me to investigate a somewhat fantastical extension of Kayla’s sensual abilities, and by so doing I was able, if unknowingly at first, to investigate the sensorial experiences of flow, entanglement, distributed perception and affect. As already suggested, Kayla’s clairaudience also allowed for my initial engagement with, and attempts to invert, the sensual hierarchy, and later facilitated my creative explorations of the trans-generational, trans-personal processes embedded in the sensorium. So whereas the process of developing my character, Kayla, was entirely intuitive, the creative process of exploring her extended sensual abilities in the realms of hearing, and the way that this overturned the ubiquity of visual imagery in narrative forms, enabled me to collapse the sensory prejudices of the traditional five senses and to approach a more open, possibly holistic sensorium. By doing so, I believe that Kayla as a character was also able to become more emblematic of notions of an entangled, embodied “singularity amongst others”, rather than of a stable subject.

7 Machinic: A Deleuzian term that “denotes the type of working relationship among the heterogeneous elements and relations defined by an assemblage” (Johnson, 1999).
The magical nature of Kayla’s clairaudience evokes another aspect of my reverse-engineering experiment. As discussed, her clairaudience was stimulated by the notion of the relational that hearing and listening implies. As my project evolved and I happened upon the romance form I was, at first, deeply impressed by Northrop Frye’s argument that fictions can be classified by the power of a protagonist’s actions: that is, if the protagonist is superior in kind to others, the action is a myth, whereas if the protagonist is superior in degree to others and to his environment, the mode is that of romance (1957, p. 33). I had originally found in this a justification for the appeal of the romance as a form, as by developing a clairaudient character I was indeed creating a protagonist superior in degree. As I moved deeper into my examination of process, however, I came to understand that, in fact, this pre-existing definition of a romantic characteristic was only applicable on one level. Although my character does evoke it, the romance was also attractive as a form because, through it, I was able to enact her clairaudience as a method of reverse-engineering the storytelling environment of my childhood—that is, to try to live the sound and affect of story on and through my body. Kayla’s attempts to speak her story, her constant reference to a second-person child and her adaptation of oral framing techniques resulted from this. Simultaneously, however, my focus on the sensual experience of the body of the writer allowed me to reimagine and revitalise the romance as a form and return to the concept of being different “in degree”. By using reverse engineering to infuse my character with the orality and bodily rationality that I felt the romance had lost in many of its current manifestations, I was able to reimagine the genre in such a way that clairaudience as a difference in degree had edged closer to the realm of plausibility that included a reconfigured sensuality.

Having thus explored some applications of reverse engineering in my novel from a multi-sensorial, trans-personal and oral perspective, there is a
need to return to my process of trying to materialize this same reimagined sensorial spectrum in the work. Earlier in this argument, I cited an article written by West, Keane and myself as a response to our Souvenirs of the Senses workshop, in which we suggested that by writing materially we consciously enact the creative process and create situations in which language becomes a prompt in order to intensify the relationships between thought, feeling and perception. I also suggested that such a materialization is evident in my creative process through Kayla’s materialization of the sound of her breath into her storytelling/writing process, which she enacts through her story. This not only exemplifies the materiality and sensuality of her experience but speaks to her belief in the power and materiality of words.

Throughout the novel there are numerous other enactments of this process. For example, when Kayla and her children write their names in the sand, beside the names of the family themselves they are also materializing the notion of indelibly linked bodies and histories. Similarly, Kayla’s inability to materialize the voices around her during her writing apprenticeship speaks to the struggle every writer has in trying to materialize their ideas and concepts. What is interesting in both of these examples, however, is not only the way they exemplify the process of a writer or storyteller struggling to materialize words, but the effect these words can have on the body of the “other”. In the case of the names written into the sand, Kayla’s unnamed fear is that these patterns have been written into the destiny of her children’s bodies. In the case of the voices she fails to capture in Warrego, the struggle is related to the way she resists having her body written on and claimed by another.

As above, this evokes an awareness of the transpersonal and distributed perceptual field. Interestingly, Elspeth Probyn, in her article “Writing Shame”, states: “Writing is a corporeal activity. We work ideas
through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers” (Probyn, 2010). She further suggests that we try to dissolve the boundedness of bodies through the affect our writing has on the bodies of others. Exploring this notion that we write to affect other bodies is difficult for any practising writer, as it speaks to the success and/or failure of our work, and by so doing evokes yet another apprehension of shame—that is, the shame of being a fraud, of being unequal to the task of writing, of caring about the writing more than about the subject and the people. Ultimately, it speaks to the shame of failing to engage and/or to affect the bodies of our readers.

Given this then, my own task as a multi-sensorial writer of shame was to try to materialize the sensation of shame, through a medium implicitly filled with the potential for shame (that is writing), onto the body of the reader. To do this I used a form—the romance—that is, in itself some ways shameful. While the ultimate judge of my outcome is, of course, the bodies of my readers, I illustrate this process and metaphorically try to materialize it, in the writing of the novel. My attempt to materialize the spell and the patterns of a family into the bodies of the character’s sister, children and niece and thereby bind them all together is just one example of this. Furthermore, I use the somewhat suspect techniques of romance writing, including a manipulation of the sensations of fear, grief, suspense, pathetic fallacy and the fabulous, to attempt to materialize sensation and affect in a process that is reminiscent of the romantic subgenre of Sensation Novels\(^8\) popular during the Victorian period.

But there is one more aspect of the writing of shame within the transpersonal realm that I try to evoke and materialize. That is the recognition that shame is not an individual characteristic. We are all implicated by it—all

\(\text{\textsuperscript{8}}\) Said to preach “to the nerves instead of the judgment” (Allingham, 2013).
bound into a unified body by it—and this too can be seen over and over in
the novel, but most particularly in the unspoken shame, which verges on a
fear and terror, that the sacred valleys, the whispering desert winds, and the
song lines that we seek to follow as we adventure in the outback, are not
necessarily ours to exploit in stories.

The considerations above of my attempts to materialize a romance of
the senses, through the application of reverse engineering and a new
appreciation of the transpersonal aspects of the multi-sensorial, lead us back
to the consideration of practice-led versus practice-based research, and how
what I have achieved can be of value to other artists. Whereas earlier I
hesitated to establish if my project was practice-led or practice-based, I now
believe that as a writer engaged in the process of producing a romance of the
senses it was crucial to be operating within the practice-led paradigm. I was,
as per the definition previously cited, concerned primarily with the nature of
my practice and the new knowledge that I garnered was designed to have
operational significance for my practice (Young, 2011, p. 1). My exegetical
considerations, however, have made it apparent how that new knowledge
can be transcribed into other forms of practice, thereby collapsing the division
I had initially set up.

The major features of my process I reference for this purpose are the
identification of a single sense to lead into an awareness of the multi-sensorial
transpersonal and distributed perceptual field and the use of that sense in the
reverse-engineering methodology I advocate. Additionally, I investigate what
materialization means for the abstractly material form of writing; what new
approaches to materialization are possible for established material forms,
such as sculpture and dance; and how both approaches can consciously work
towards materializing their forms across the duality of self/other onto the
body of the receptor.
In the two experiments I conducted to pursue this line of thinking I took older iconic forms—in one case the souvenir, in the other the romance—and re-encountered both through a new methodological approach. In the Souvenirs of the Senses workshop, the material form of the souvenir was radically transformed by the application of the sensual reverse-engineering technique. Significantly, this workshop drew from a traditional understanding of the sensorial spectrum but still allowed for a materialization of the sensual experience onto the body of the receptor by evoking a new set of experiences of the sensual while simultaneously layering it with a past evocation. When experimenting with the romance I capitalised on its roots in the oral/aural sensorium to access and reverse-engineer experiences of distributed bodies and perceptions. By transforming these into a material document of black-and-white text I again approached a transformation of the form, imbibing a historic form with contemporary understandings, and layering the genre into the established novelistic form. I would also suggest that the creative access to affect and the trans-personal that this method allowed me invoked in my reader a powerful engagement with the boundary blurring nature of sound.

Both examples show how reverse-engineering the sensual spectrum, either from a traditional perspective or a radically reconfigured one, can be a transformation tool within the framework of practice-led research. Taken together they demonstrate an approach that can be applied to any creative materialization of experience.
Conclusion

There are no foregone conclusions in a work of creative discovery. If there were the work would not be creative, nor one of discovery. As I stated earlier, this project, and my twenty-year novel, has unfolded like a meandering voyage though the senses, the romance and the methods of practice-led research to bring me here, to where I can summarise my journey and my findings.

For all the numerous segues these are actually quite simple.

I began with the desire to write out a sensation that sat like “a rock in my belly” and which, with time, I came to understand was a sensation of shame—shame for the envy of my sister, the unreasonable demands I made of her, and the way I tried to avenge myself for her eventual abandonment of me. This resulted in the idea of the novel as a lifelong romance of two sisters who are intertwined from the moment of the second sister’s conception. The tool I chose to approach this story was sound, as I believed that by linking the two characters at that very first instant of conception, through the act of listening, I would root their romance—their love—in a very tangible and bodily way. This invitation to listening evoked the idea of orality and a story that is almost spoken, sometimes sung, which in turn dovetailed and enriched the choice of the romance as my medium, as romances were originally an oral form and still hold within them the possibility of encapsulating aspects of the oral imagination, albeit in the visual form of the novel.

These early decisions and my creative efforts to make them work demanded an investigation of the ontologies and epistemologies associated with the different senses and the way they continue to influence our creative forms—making my work a classic example of practice-led research. I began by exploring the concept of the visual as a root metaphor in Western culture
and traced its influence in dominant epistemologies and ontologies. Recognising that the privileging of the visual was never as exclusive as sometimes thought, I yet suggested that it limited the possibilities of the romance genre and my creative process, due primarily to its emphasis on a singular ontology, its propensity to distance and flatten, and its incapacity to really hear the cadence of a thought.

I then explored the sensual spectrum of sound to examine what could be offered in terms of an alternative approach, and found that the aural, which like the visual can always, inevitably, be objectified and aestheticized, was typically presented as an “other” and was implicitly multisensory. While this understanding continued to inspire my creative process, it also became apparent that the very qualities of insubstantiality, permeability and instability, that made it attractive, also meant that it could not be posited as an alternative ontology, primarily because sound as a sense cannot stand alone. It is dependent on verification by, and relationship with, the other senses and the body.

Furthermore, my recognition that this line of investigation was placing me within Jonathon Sterne’s audio-visual litany demanded that I go beyond these simplistic arguments of binaries and oppositions. Hence I began to approach the sensual in relationship to self, other and environment through ideas of emplacement, embodiment and affect, and thus proposed that Kayla, rather than being a sound-oriented character, was instead a chamber of experiences and sensual *relationships*—a reconfigured body defined not by the singular self but in relationship to her sister, her environment and to the haunting voices that passed through her, and over which she has no control.

Thus I realised that I needed a double approach: one founded in the possibilities of sound, and another in the possibilities of relationship with self-place-other through sound.
Inspired by the experiments I conducted with my supervisors and others in the Souvenir of the Senses workshop, I then began to experiment with reverse engineering, which I imagined as a creative method by which one could make the form fit the sensual spectrum of experience, rather than reducing the sensual spectrum to fit the form. As stated, the central emotion/sensation I wanted to reverse engineer was shame, but given the interplay between my creative process and research, and the double approach mentioned above, I tried to access the bodily experience of shame from the broader perspective of the destabilised sensual hierarchy and trans-personalised body. Sound, then, became the tool that I used to apply this to the romantic novel. My investigation of sound not only allowed me to foreground a sensual spectrum that is implicitly multi-sensorial, but also to approach a historical form and revitalise it. Structurally, I capitalised on the oral nature of the romance form and flowed between past and present, memories and hauntings, reality and the uncanny experience of distributed perceptions, in only a loose chronology that was designed to evoke the immersive sensation of listening. Emotionally, I subverted traditional ideas of love normally associated with the form, and presented instead the love between sisters. Further, ontologically, I combined the pre-individualistic roots of the form with mainly contemporary concepts of the destabilised body and distributed perceptions, and by so doing created an almost mythic protagonist with trans-personal characteristics, who evokes a reconfigured sensual spectrum that seemed, almost, entirely natural.

The materialization of all of this, but most particularly of shame, was grounded in (among other things) the writing of linked bodies; my ongoing attempt, through the use of sound imagery, to disrupt the tendency of readers to visualise in response to text; and, most particularly, in my attempt to materialize the affect of the work on other bodies. While I accept the proposition that all writing is a material representation of cognitive processes
and the movement of the hands and body to produce it, I suggest that it only succeeds when it engages the reader’s body. I metaphorically play with this process in a number of ways, the most important of which is the representation of the novel as the struggle that the protagonist has in the materializing of her story as a document, due to the belief that she has already materialized her words into the destiny of her sister and her niece. Her struggle to materialize the shame she feels about this not only becomes part of the story but speaks to the process of writing, foregrounding her role as the teller of shame and mine as the writer of a semi-autobiographical novel. The story, which is designed to be read as something told, is finally presented as a materialized document of shame, which Kayla emails to her sister and her niece, transforming the oral approach into a textual one. The hope is that its final rendition will materialize in the affect on the reader in the process of reading.

This materialization of my act of reverse-engineering of sound and shame was then presented as a model for other art forms. While it was suggested that the literary form of romance is particularly ripe for such an approach due to its roots in an alternative sensual spectrum, I suggested that this notion of a reconceptualised body could also be adopted, in a way involving the methodology of reverse engineering, to materialize it in other art forms. Such a process demands a vigorous awareness of the body of the artist, and a self-conscious engagement with the senses, but as these are always already the tools of most creative artists, perhaps all that is required is a nuancing of the process.

This then was my journey and the novel was my process of my exploration, and is now an in-process specimen I put on display. It remains a story of sound, but of sound that seeks to delve into the breath of the body, of sound that examines what is felt by and through the body, as it opens itself to
listening. It is also a story of thwarted love, but like so many of the tragic love stories I admire, it strives to leave us with a glimmer of hope—not only the hope that the children of the story may be free from the damage done by a voice that was sent into a desert night, but that our work of cultural production may yet benefit from a more self-conscious approach, from greater engagement with material processes in a world that often suggests an increasingly de-materialized virtuality, and from an awakening to the multi-sensorial spectrum of the senses.
Appendix

Figure 1: Acoustascope: 3-D reverse-engineered piece by Valerie Jeremijenko

Wind Words
Wind spoken, wind written, wind wept, wind swept, wind driven, wind whipped, wind beaten, wind carved, wind sung.

Sound Shapes
Ear shaped, shell shaped, cone shaped, mouth shaped, fetus shaped, web shaped, storm shaped, echo shaped, song shaped.
Figure 2: Hand Dunes by Jondi Keane

Figure 3: A selection of work from the Souvenirs of the Senses workshop
Figure 4: Materializing Writing

3D printing
UV printing
Vacuum forming
Wood, acrylic, clay,
Fabric, paper, smoke
Movement of words & sounds

Hybrid making...
Works Cited


